

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

3rd Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
22 February 2023

PE1991: Develop an educational resource on abortion

Petitioner	Gemma Clark
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to work with Education Scotland to develop a health focused and stigma challenging educational resource on abortion, and make it available to all secondary schools in Scotland.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1991

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 30 November 2023.
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.
3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. While not a formal requirement, petitioners have the option to collect signatures on their petition. On this occasion, the petitioner elected not to collect this information.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.
6. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe D**.
7. The Committee has also received submissions from Humanist Society Scotland, British Pregnancy Advisory Service and Back Off Scotland, and Scottish Teachers for Positive Change and Wellbeing. These can be found in **Annexe E**.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1991: Develop an educational resource on abortion

Petitioner

Gemma Clark

Date lodged

30 November 2022

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to work with Education Scotland to develop a health focused and stigma challenging educational resource on abortion, and make it available to all secondary schools in Scotland.

Previous action

Written to MSPs, tweeted MSPs and decision makers calling for policy reform. I have also written blogs on abortion education and submitted a motion to the EIS union.

Background information

I believe it is essential for all young people to receive medically accurate and health focused education on abortion. I believe that challenging the stigma surrounding abortion is also essential for a well-rounded sexual health curriculum.

Research carried out by the Educational Institute for Scotland (EIS) teacher's union in 2013 found that in many of Scotland's local authorities, abortion is either not discussed in schools or is only discussed as part of an RE lesson. This could be a direct violation of the United Nations Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The UNCRC applies to everyone under 18, and children under 18 can and do get pregnant. Articles 3 and 17 are particularly relevant.

Article 3 – “the best interests of the child must be a top priority”

Article 17 – “every child has the right to reliable information from a variety of sources...”

Annexe B

The logo for SPICe (The Information Centre) is a purple rounded rectangle. The text 'SPICe' is in white, with 'SPIC' in a larger font and 'e' in a smaller font. To the right of 'SPICe', the text 'The Information Centre' and 'An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh' is written in white.

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE1991](#): ‘Develop an educational resource on abortion’, lodged by Gemma Clark

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

The petition is asking that Education Scotland develop “a health focused and stigma challenging educational resource on abortion”.

Under the Curriculum for Excellence, teachers and schools are expected to develop the curricula that are learned and experienced in the classrooms. In developing their curriculum, teachers are expected to: apply their professional knowledge and skills; be aware of statutory duties and guidance; use the Curriculum for Excellence’s [experiences and outcomes](#) to plan learning, and benchmarks to understand their learners’ progress; work collaboratively with colleagues.

Teachers will use a variety of resources to support their planning and delivery of learning in classrooms.

Education Scotland is an executive agency which aims to support quality and improvement in Scottish education. It does produce resources which schools may choose to use in the classroom, and it also hosts the sharing of resources on GLOW.

Abortion is likely to be considered in the context of relationships, sexual health and parenthood education (RSHP). In [September 2019, the Scottish Government launched](#) an online resource covering this area of education, <https://rshp.scot/>.

This resource includes activity plans and slides to support education about [abortion aimed at lower secondary pupils](#). Teachers and schools

are free to use their professional judgement whether to use resources from <https://rshp.scot> or indeed another source.

Ned Sharratt
Senior Researcher
6 January 2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 24 January 2023

PE1991/A: Develop an educational resource on abortion

Thank you for your e-mail of 30 November 2022 on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee regarding Petition PE1991 seeking to develop an educational resource on abortion. I am replying as I am responsible for relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education policy in the Scottish curriculum and I apologise for not meeting the Committee's deadline.

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring all children and young people receive high quality RSHP education, an integral part of the health and wellbeing area of the Scottish curriculum, which has been in place since 2010. The curriculum is not mandatory, it is up to teachers to decide which resources they use to deliver relevant and engaging learning. However, we are specific about the need for children and young people to gain knowledge appropriate to their age and stage of education. The aim of RSHP education is help children and young people build positive, safe and healthy relationships as they grow older. Young people should experience learning which is factual, objective and enables them to make informed choices that promote and protect their own and others' sexual health and wellbeing. Content should be delivered in a non-judgemental manner, within a framework of sound values and an awareness of the law, including that on sexual behaviour.

There are many resources available to teachers to help them deliver meaningful RSHP learning, a summary of some of these are available on [Education Scotland's National Improvement Hub](#). One of those resources, www.rshp.scot, was developed and published by a collaborative partnership of health boards and local authorities, to help improve delivery of the existing curriculum. It provides teachers with a valuable resource to support children and young people's learning and understanding in RSHP education. The resource provides teachers with factual information about sexual and reproductive health, in a non-judgemental manner, to enable children and young people to make informed decisions about their lives. In developing the resource, it was

ensured learning outcomes remained age appropriate in all Curriculum for Excellence levels.

All of the content available from this online resource was quality assured and peer reviewed by a partnership of educators, health professionals and third sector organisations. The resource was also informed by extensive feedback over the 2018/19 academic year. Draft content was posted online during 2018 and educators, parents and carers were encouraged to comment and use the drafts. This allowed for a process of review and refinement until final content was agreed and the resource was published in September 2019. As well as an open process that allowed anyone to contribute, a number of schools were recruited as pilot settings. During this period the resource was informed by over 1,000 primary and secondary teachers and piloted in 38 schools across the country.

In terms of the area highlighted in the petition, the resource contains an age appropriate learning activity covering this area at third/fourth level (S1-S3) at <https://rshp.scot/third-fourth-level/#abortion>. This is designed as part of a progressive learning experience where children and young people will develop their knowledge around their sexual health and which services they may access in the future to support their sexual health.

However, the use of this resource remains a matter for individual schools and the professional judgement of teachers, based on the needs of the pupils in their classroom.

I hope the Committee find this letter helpful in considering the petition.

Annexe D

Petitioner submission of 27 January 2023

PE1991/B: Develop an educational resource on abortion

I would like to submit some supplementary information in support of my petition.

A recent investigation found that many schools in Scotland have been visited by SPUC (Society for Protection of Unborn Child). SPUC have been known to spread concerning disinformation such as wrongly suggesting that abortion could cause breast cancer.

They have also promoted 'abortion reversal pills' on their website. The promotion of such medication led to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists issuing the [following statement](#):

"It is concerning that some organisations and individuals are recommending progesterone as an abortion reversal medication despite the lack of evidence of effectiveness and the likelihood of side effects. This is an off-label prescription and is not licenced for abortion reversal. The people recommending abortion reversals are associated with anti-abortion activist groups, and they have no access to the range of services that NHS services can provide. They are unlikely to offer impartial, non-judgemental advice or discuss your full range of options. We wish to stress that this practice is not supported by medical evidence and is not endorsed by any authoritative national or international best-practice guidelines.

All drugs have side-effects and by suggesting progesterone can reverse an abortion without evidence to support this, these people are providing false reassurance to vulnerable women and girls which could be distressing and confusing for the women involved."

While consideration of anti-abortion views may be a reasonable aspect of an RE lesson, it is essential that young people get factual information regarding their healthcare as per their human rights.

If groups who spread misinformation can enter schools, it is important that the young people are also presented with accurate information from reliable sources on abortion care.

Further information:

“Anti-abortion group has carried out dozens of school visits”, The Herald, 19 December 2022

[“Secret recordings reveal anti-abortion group spreading falsehoods in schools”](#), Humanists UK, 23 March 2012

Annexe E

Humanist Society Scotland submission of 1 February 2023

PE1991/C: Develop an educational resource on abortion

I am writing to you today with regard to petition 1991, titled 'Develop an educational resource on abortion,' presented by Gemma Clark.

Humanist Society Scotland supports the petition's aim to ensure that students in Scottish schools receive accurate and meaningful education regarding abortion care.

Humanist Society Scotland believes that children and young adults have a right to a scientifically accurate education about medicine and the human body and should be able to access medically sound advice on pregnancy services.

Recently, we have been contacted by a variety of members raising concerns regarding the school visits of SPUC Scotland (Society for the Protection of Unborn Children Scotland), an openly anti-abortion organisation. As reported by the Herald¹, members of this organisation have been visiting schools in at least eight different local authorities across Scotland, with 33 different visits to one specific school since 2017. The group has even visited primary schools to present oppositional 'education resources' relating to abortion.

SPUC's views on abortion are based on faith principles and perspectives. It is of course the right of a private organisation to hold such views. But the group is presenting its positions in schools as 'healthcare' advice in the context of PSE lessons. The materials they present are not supported by expert medical practitioners such as the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. These materials rather reflect a faith-based perspective that would be better presented within the RE, RME, or RMPS strands of the curriculum.

¹ Herald (2022), Anti-abortion group has carried out dozens of school visits, https://www.heraldsotland.com/business_hq/23198924.anti-abortion-group-carried-dozens-school-visits/

We welcome giving students the chance to learn about differing perspectives on abortion and other health-related ethical issues such as assisted dying. Students should be able to consider different faith or belief-based positions alongside non-religious responses to ethical issues, and should be encouraged to develop critical thinking skills in response. But this kind of education is best delivered by appropriately trained and resourced RME/RMPS teachers. It is concerning that schools are conflating faith-based arguments with the kind of sound, evidenced, robust healthcare information that should be offered within PSE and healthcare lessons.

The vision of SPUC, as stated on their promotional materials, is: “A world where abortion is unthinkable.”² This is clearly in conflict with the Scottish Government submission (PE1991/A) to the committee on 24 January 2023, which holds that information should be objective and non-judgemental. In its submission, the Government states (emphasis ours): “Young people should experience learning which is **factual, objective** and enables them to make informed choices that promote and protect their own and others’ sexual health and wellbeing. Content should be delivered in a **non judgemental** manner, within a framework of sound values and an awareness of the law, including that on sexual behaviour.”

As an example of the organisation promoting non-factual information, SPUC currently host information on their YouTube channel which promotes the use of progesterone for ‘abortion reversal’³. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), the Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare (FSRH), the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), and the British Society of Abortion Care Providers (BSACP) have all condemned the promotion of such use of progesterone as having ‘no reputable evidence’ in use for ‘abortion reversal.’⁴ Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) says in its recommendations for progesterone that it is ‘not applicable in other circumstances, such as after the use of mifepristone.’⁵ A 2019 randomised control trial on the ‘reversal’ pill had to be stopped after 12 patients had used the pills because three of them

² Our Vision, About Us, What We Do, SPUC: <https://www.spuc.org.uk/About-Us/What-We-Do>

³ Uplift: Episode 1 w/ Dr Dermot Kearney, SPUC Pro-Life YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E5LYrsVuhYw>

⁴ <https://www.rcog.org.uk/news/no-reputable-evidence-for-progesterone-use-in-abortion-reversal-say-medical-organisations/>

⁵ <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng126/chapter/Rationale-and-impact>

suffered 'severe' haemorrhages and needed emergency care.⁶ Indeed, it was reported by The Times that Dr. Kearney, who is interviewed in the SPUC YouTube video, admitted that two patients he had prescribed progesterone as an abortion-reversal had to have blood transfusions after taking the drug.⁷ Students and teachers should have access to non-biased, informative, and educational resources about pregnancy.

Furthermore, regarding the data provided in PE1991, carried out by the Educational Institute for Scotland in 2013, we find it unacceptable that, in the vast majority of schools, no specific evidence-based abortion-related resources are provided in the sexual-health curriculum.

We believe that the current situation could constitute a violation of Articles 3 and 17 of the UNCRC. These articles state that a lack of access to 'reliable information from a variety of sources' would not only breach children's rights but also have a detrimental effect on their education, livelihoods, and in some cases their health and wellbeing.

Humanist Society Scotland agrees with the petition that the Scottish Parliament should ask the Scottish Government, through appropriate agencies, to create a non-biased, health-focused educational resource around abortion and pregnancy-related services for PSE purposes.

We also urge the Parliament to ask the government to urgently review what material is being promoted by schools that does not meet the stated requirements in their submission to the committee. This review should result in clear guidance to schools where such material is more appropriate for discussions within RME/RMS curricula on ethics rather than within unbiased healthcare education.

I look forward to seeing the outcome of this petition.

⁶ NPR (2019) Safety Problems Lead To Early End For Study Of 'Abortion Pill Reversal'
<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/12/05/785262221/safety-problems-lead-to-early-end-for-study-of-abortion-pill-reversal>

⁷ Times (2022) Call to investigate doctor offering 'unethical' abortion reversal drug
<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/call-to-investigate-doctor-offering-unethical-abortion-reversal-drug-009wbw2mr>

BPAS and Back Off Scotland submission of 2 February 2023

PE1991/D: Develop an educational resource on abortion

We are writing to you today with regard to 'PE1991: Develop an educational resource on abortion' as presented by Gemma Clark.

The British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS), along with Back Off Scotland, supports the petition's aim to ensure that Scottish students receive medically accurate and health-focused education on abortion.

As the largest provider of abortion in the UK, BPAS along with Back Off Scotland, a grassroots campaign focused on removing barriers to accessing abortion healthcare in Scotland, we are concerned that relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) education in the Scottish curriculum is not mandatory⁸.

Following research undertaken by the House of Commons Education Select Committee on the value of including sexual education in the curriculum, we believe that the UK Government's decision to put relationships and sexual education on a statutory footing in England is crucial for young people to make informed decisions about their own sexual health.

In an amendment to the Children and Social Work Act 2017, it became a legal requirement in England on 1 September 2020 for⁹:

- All primary schools to teach relationships education
- All secondary schools to teach relationships and sexual education
- Reformed statutory guidance for schools
- The right of parents to withdraw their children from sex education, with new rights for a child approaching age 16 to 'opt-in'
- Schools to remain flexible in their approach, including faith schools being allowed to teach within the tenets of their faith

As a result of the amendment to the Act, guidance states that pupils should know "*that there are choices in relation to pregnancy (with medically and legally accurate, impartial information on all options,*

⁸ https://www.parliament.scot/-/media/files/committees/citizen-participation-and-public-petitions-committee/correspondence/2022/pe1991/pe1991_a.pdf

⁹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06103/>

including keeping the baby, adoption, abortion and where to get further help)", as well as being aware of the relevant legal provisions relating to abortion¹⁰.

Similarly, the Welsh Government has made Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) a mandatory element of the Curriculum for Wales Framework, supported by statutory guidance and the RSE code. As part of the Code, it is a mandatory for over 11s' education to include "Understanding how contraception can assist with reproductive choices, including awareness of abortion."¹¹

In light of these requirements in England and Wales, we believe that the Scottish Government is failing students across Scotland by allowing individual schools discretion in teaching such core elements of sexual and reproductive healthcare. Awareness of contraception and abortion, and the rights of women and girls to make decisions about both, are not discretionary or faith-based issues – they are fundamental rights which all students should be empowered to learn about.

In line with PE1991, we believe that Scotland's lack of mandatory education on abortion constitutes a violation of Articles 3 and 17 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). These articles state that a lack of access to '*reliable information from a variety of sources*'¹² would not only breach children's rights but also have a detrimental effect on their education, livelihoods, and in some cases their health and wellbeing.

BPAS and Back Off Scotland support the petition and call for the establishment of mandatory sex and relationships education which includes specific requirements on inclusion of education about abortion and reproductive health services across all schools in Scotland, including faith schools and independent schools.

Scottish Teachers for Positive Change and Wellbeing submission of 2 February 2023

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education/relationships-and-sex-education-rse-secondary>

¹¹ <https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/421e40ad-dbc6-4d6c-ba38-7d49433a1019/2-sexual-health-and-well-being-strand-mandatory-content.pdf>

¹² <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2017/01/Summary-of-the-UNCRC.pdf#:~:text=Every%20child%20has%20the%20right%20to%20reliable%20information,them.%20article%2018%20%28parental%20responsibilities%20and%20state%20assistance%29>

PE1991/E: Develop an educational resource on abortion

We are writing to you today regarding petition 1991, titled 'Develop an educational resource on abortion,' presented by Gemma Clark.

We are a group of over 3400 teachers in Scotland. Scottish Teachers for Positive Change and Wellbeing support the petition to ensure young people in Scotland get accurate education on abortion care.

We understand that groups such as SPUC (Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child) hold religious views on abortion which may be appropriate to religious education lessons, and consideration of different perspectives is to be encouraged. However, it is important that children and young people also have access to accurate information regarding their health and wellbeing, particularly if there is a possibility that they have been exposed to disinformation.

We agree that Articles 3 and 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),

- 3 – “the best interests of the child must be a top priority” and
- 17 – “every child has the right to reliable information from a variety of sources...”

should entitle young people to accurate information on abortion care.

We look forward to hearing the outcome of the petition.

Co-founders of Scottish Teachers for Positive Change and Wellbeing.