

Shout Out UK

On behalf of a coalition of organisations from the political education and democracy promotion sectors



An open letter to the Department for Education concerning the censorship of 'extreme' political content in schools

Dear Mr Williamson,

We write this joint open letter as a coalition of organisations in the political education and democracy promotion sectors to raise our concerns about the Department's guidance on relationships, sex and health education (RSE) issued on Thursday 24th September 2020. We acknowledge that this guidance has been issued to schools in the context of RSE, not the PSHE umbrella it sits within, but we are nonetheless concerned about the precedent this may set for other aspects of the curriculum, and the impact it may have on teachers' confidence to cover political topics.

The guidance states that: "Schools should not under any circumstances use resources produced by organisations that take extreme political stances on matters", and provides a non-exhaustive list of examples. Our concerns revolve around this point in particular.

As advocates for widening access to education about political issues, we implore the government to consider that this regulation has the potential to censor the already minimal discussion of politics in schools. **The guidelines serve to deny students the opportunity to engage with material from 'extreme' sources in a classroom environment, precluding informed debate and discouraging critical thinking.** Political education continues to be either inadequate or completely absent for most students in the UK; we want to ensure that any window of opportunity to discuss politics is as wide as possible.

With respect to this guidance, which is non-statutory implementation guidance, we seek urgent clarification on the following points:

- a) How schools are to facilitate a sufficiently diverse dialogue on topics within the RSE curriculum without limiting themselves unnecessarily for fear that the resources they wish to use could be interpreted as being in breach of the guidelines;
- b) Whether the Department can assure educators that these stark restrictions will not be extended to other subjects in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, leaving schools free to continue to teach an array of contested ideas and viewpoints without fear of recrimination;
- c) Whether schools can continue to work with, and draw on the resources of, civil society organisations and education providers who embrace open dialogue and diversity of thought to achieve a nuanced approach to complex social and political topics.

Students must be armed with the Political and Media Literacy skills to ensure that they can understand and discuss political issues with a critical mindset. 'Extreme' political organisations will exist whether or not schools are allowed to discuss them in the classroom, but this guidance deprives students of the chance to tackle them head-on. Politics necessitates dialogue and the continual contestation of ideas. Schools should be a safe place for this to happen without fear of recrimination or censorship.

Signed By

1. Matteo Bergamini, CEO & Founder of Shout Out UK
2. Kate Harris, CEO & Co-Founder of VotesforSchools
3. Caroline Hunt, Equal Education Spokesperson, Women's Equality Party
4. Tom Franklin, CEO, Young Citizens
5. Harriet Andrews, Director, The Politics Project
6. Klina Jordan, Co-CE, Make Votes Matter (personal capacity)
7. Tom de Grunwald, Co-founder, Forward Democracy
8. Ayesha Garrett, Director, Sortition Foundation.
9. Sarah Matthews, Director, Sortition Foundation
10. Philipp Verpoort, Director, Sortition Foundation
11. David Jubb, Director, Sortition Foundation
12. Tom Lord, Project Manager, Sortition Foundation
13. Mete Coban, My Life My Say
14. Greg Sanderson, Smart School Councils
15. Keith Garrett, Leader, Rebooting Democracy Party
16. Peter Dunphy, Director, Unite to Reform
17. Dr James Weinberg, Political Scientist, University of Sheffield (personal capacity)
18. Dr Andrew Mycock, University of Huddersfield
19. Matilda Lawrence-Jubb, Director, Split Banana
20. Anna Alexander, Director, Split Banana
21. Molly Scott Cato, Professor of Green Economics, Roehampton University
22. Steve Williams, Education Consultant, former headteacher and schools inspector
23. XR Citizens' Assembly Working Group
24. Neal Lawson, Compass
25. Liz Moorse, Chief Executive, Association for Citizenship Teaching
26. Loic Menzies, Chief Executive, The Centre for Education and Youth
27. Shelley Metcalfe, Founder and Director, The Digital Life Skills Company
28. Peter Tatchell, Director, Peter Tatchell Foundation
29. Professor Matthew Flinders, Founding Director of the Sir Bernard Crick Centre, University of Sheffield
30. Emily Evans, Chief Executive of The Economist Educational Foundation
31. John McGowan, General Secretary, Social Workers Union

The views expressed in this letter represent those of the signatories and not necessarily their organisations or employers

