

To: Petitions Committee
From: Endometriosis UK
Date: February 2020
Subject: **Petition P-05-925 Don't leave Wales behind – teach menstrual wellbeing in schools**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the letter from Kirsty Williams AM to Janet Finch-Saunders AM, Chair of the Petitions Committee, dated 4th February. Please find below our responses to the questions suggested.

What are your thoughts on the attached document?

We are disappointed with the response, which does not address the issues we had raised.

The proposed Curriculum for Wales guidance contains no mention of menstrual wellbeing, nor even any mention of puberty. Whilst we did try and identify areas where menstrual wellbeing *might* be included in the curriculum, these could easily be overlooked as there is no explicit mention. We are concerned the new curriculum could easily be implemented by schools with no inclusion of menstrual wellbeing education.

There are areas where menstrual wellbeing could be easily included explicitly and avoid a situation where learners in Wales miss out on a key area of knowledge. For example:

- Under RSE, the *Bodies and body image* section (p39) does include a reference to how the human body 'changes over time' but no reference to puberty nor menstrual wellbeing. Adding in 'puberty and menstrual wellbeing' here would clearly show this is an important area to cover. The sentence would read:

"Learners should develop an understanding of the human body and how it changes over time, including people's feelings about their bodies, puberty and menstrual wellbeing, and their sexual and reproductive capacities and functions."

However, if menstrual wellbeing is only included in RSE, it is signalling it is only important in relation to reproduction and in relationships with others. This does not support learners to believe that menstrual wellbeing is of value to their own health and wellbeing.

- It is good to see the link between Health and Wellbeing Areas and Science and Technology Areas, which would be an excellent place to explicitly mention menstrual wellbeing. We request that the following sentence is inserted into each of the relevant paragraphs under 'Key links with other Areas' for both Health and Wellbeing and Science and Technology Areas:

"Learning how hormones including the menstrual cycle work can help learners understand their thoughts, feelings and emotions."

This would help the large number of learners who will experience menstrual issues by providing them with the language, knowledge and understanding what they are experiencing is not normal and to seek help

We were concerned that the letter refers to the inclusion of a statement of what matters which includes personal care, hygiene and protection from infection, with the implication that this is where menstrual wellbeing would best fit into the curriculum, although with no explicit mention of this it is

hard to see how schools developing their curriculums would know this. We have concerns that menstrual wellbeing is an important area that has not been included to support learners previously, and including here would reinforce historic cultural stereotypes that periods are 'dirty' and 'unclean', one of the roots as to why many think the menstrual cycle is to be hidden away and not talked about. Labelling anything menstrual as 'hygiene' or 'sanitary' implies that periods – the visible output of the menstrual cycle – are unhygienic and unsanitary, reinforcing cultural labelling of periods as dirty and something to be ashamed of.

Does it adequately address the issues that you raised?

No. The issues that we raised have not been addressed. We see this as a step backwards in terms of giving learners the information and knowledge they need to support their health and wellbeing.

We request inclusion of the following which we see as the minimum needed to support the 51% of the population that experiences menstruation:

1. A statement should be included in that issues which may affect learners, such as puberty and menstruation, should be engaged with sensitively and before the onset of physiological changes, and knowledge developed age appropriately through their education.
2. "Learning how hormones including the menstrual cycle work can help learners understand their thoughts, feelings and emotions." To be inserted into Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning, Key links with other Areas, Science and Technology; and Science and Technology Area of Learning, Key links with other Areas, Health and Well-being.
3. The RSE *Bodies and body image* section (p39) should include a reference to puberty and menstrual wellbeing, as detailed above.

Do you have further questions in response?

We have the following questions given the response:

How will the Welsh Government ensure that learners understand the menstrual cycle before they experience it, and can identify and seek help should they have menstrual issues or concerns?

How is the Welsh Government going to ensure that a vital area of learning - menstrual wellbeing - is included by schools, when it is not mentioned in the new curriculum and is rarely taught at the moment?

What consideration has been given to the implication that could be conveyed to the 51% of female learners that their menstrual cycle is related only to reproduction and of value only in terms of relationship with others, if included only in Relationships and Sexuality?

Is there anything additional that you would like the Committee to know at this stage, either in response to this document or as an update to the Committee?

There are many myths around menstruation and menstrual health, with sometimes even severe and debilitating symptoms normalised, such as chronic pelvic pain, heavy menstrual bleeding and mood swings, and this is exacerbated by lack of open and consistent education. If learners are not taught

menstrual wellbeing at school, this will be perpetuated rather than overcome. It should be noted that:

- nearly half (48 per cent) of girls aged 14 to 21 in the UK are embarrassed by their periods; one in seven (14 per cent) girls admitted that they did not know what was happening when they started their period and more than a quarter (26 per cent) reporting that they did not know what to do when they started their period (Plan UK, 2017).
- menstrual diseases and conditions are not rare, they are common: of the female population, 20% have fibroids, 20% have Heavy Menstrual Bleeding, 10% have endometriosis, 10% have adenomyosis, 10% have Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, 5% have PMDD. Yet many suffer for years without a diagnosis, missing school and then employment, and taking a toll on their mental health.

With periods starting younger and menopause starting later, not to mention fewer children at a later stage and with less time breast feeding, females are having many more periods than previous generations. Given this, menstrual issues are likely having more of an impact than in previous generations.

There is an opportunity with simple, short inclusions in the new curriculum to rectify this situation for future generations in Wales, by ensuring age appropriate menstrual wellbeing is taught at key points in the learners development. To not include this is letting down future generations and allowing old cultural prejudices and taboos to continue to impact on girls, young women and those assigned female at birth to reach their potential.

We thank the Petitions Committee for considering this issue.