

# Introducing sensitive topics to the classroom

Supporting teachers across Wales

May 2026



Made for Wales.  
Ready for the world.

# Guidance on delivering sensitive topics

## 1. Purpose of this guidance document

- 1.1 This guidance document has been developed to support practitioners delivering WJEC National 14-16 Qualifications in Wales. It highlights considerations for practitioners in supporting their learners' development of knowledge, understanding and skills relating to sensitive topics within our qualifications in an inclusive and safe way.
- 1.2 The document is aimed at practitioners delivering WJEC's National 14-16 Qualifications across centres in Wales, including maintained schools, further education colleges and other learning providers. Senior leaders (for example, heads of department and senior leadership teams) should also be familiar with this document in the context of wider curriculum planning.
- 1.3 It should be considered alongside relevant legislation, guidance and school policies, such as those relating to safeguarding, diversity and inclusion, equality, Prevent duty and any internal policies relating to teaching sensitive topics.
- 1.4 Teachers should also refer to the relevant qualification-specific Guidance for Teaching.

## 2. What we mean by sensitive topics

- 2.1 A topic could be sensitive for different learners and/or teachers for different reasons and at different times. Whilst open to individual interpretation, for the purposes of this guidance, a sensitive topic is any topic that:
  - a learner and/or teacher may experience as sensitive, challenging or emotionally charged
  - raises ethical or moral questions
  - involves contested viewpoints
  - relates to learners' personal identities, values, beliefs or experiences
  - involve partisan political views
  - relates to a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010.
- 2.2 Sensitive topics could therefore include a range of political, ethical, personal, social and religious issues.
- 2.3 We recognise that teaching and learning linked to our qualifications involve engaging with sensitive topics. Some qualifications may include specified content that could be sensitive for learners and/or teachers. In other qualifications, sensitive topics may emerge naturally and spontaneously during teaching and learning although not explicitly part of the qualification content.

### 3. Curriculum for Wales

- 3.1 The Curriculum for Wales establishes that the aim of a school's curriculum is ultimately to support its learners to become:
- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
  - enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
  - ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
  - healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.
- 3.2 As part of these purposes, learners are expected to:
- engage with contemporary issues based upon their knowledge and values
  - understand and exercise their human and democratic responsibilities and rights
  - be knowledgeable about their culture, community, society and the world, now and in the past
  - respect the needs and rights of others, as a member of a diverse society
  - have secure values and are establishing their spiritual and ethical beliefs
  - build their mental and emotional well-being by developing confidence, resilience and empathy
  - form positive relationships based upon trust and mutual respect.
- 3.3 This means that learners are therefore likely to be exposed to sensitive topics, as such topics can support learners in understanding the world in which they are living and make progress towards realising the four purposes as set out in paragraph 3.1.
- 3.4 Supporting these four purposes, schools and practitioners are expected to design a curriculum which embeds cross-cutting themes. Consideration of the cross-cutting themes should allow learners to consider local, national and international contexts, and develop understanding of relationships and sexuality education, human rights education, and careers and work-related experiences.
- 3.5 We have developed our National 14-16 Qualifications to support the Curriculum for Wales; this has influenced the inclusion of specific topics and has led us to ensure that there are opportunities for schools and practitioners to embed aspects such as the cross-cutting themes into the delivery of our qualifications. Our qualification specific Guidance for Teaching documents highlight these opportunities.
- 3.6 This is in line with Qualifications Wales' expectation of National 14-16 Qualifications that there should be opportunities for learners to engage with and consider the cross-cutting themes, and for qualifications to reflect a diverse range of perspectives, contributions and experiences.

## 4. What the law says<sup>1</sup>

- 4.1 Schools are required under section 78 of the Education Act 2002 to make arrangements with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all pupils and to follow a curriculum that promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society, and prepares pupils for later life.
- 4.2 Moreover, there are duties under sections 406 and 407 of The Education Act 1996 on local authorities, governing bodies and headteachers and by extension teachers:
- they must not promote partisan political views,
  - schools shall forbid the pursuit of partisan political activities by any of those registered pupils at a maintained school who are junior pupils
  - schools must ensure a balanced presentation of opposing views when political issues arise.
- 4.3 The term “partisan political views” is not necessarily limited to views held by a particular political party and is rather viewed as being synonymous with “one sided” views, although this is subjective.
- 4.4 These duties apply to the teaching of any aspect of a curriculum provided in the school including in relation to delivering qualifications.
- 4.5 These duties do not mean teachers cannot address political issues, but that they are taught fairly and accurately, and that they do not encourage or promote a particular political position.
- 4.6 Schools in Wales are required by the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 to design and implement a curriculum that enables learners to develop in the four purposes. The Act also requires schools to have regard to statutory guidance (Curriculum for Wales Framework), which elaborates these purposes. While those purposes form part of the statutory educational framework, they may not be universally held and may be subject to political and societal debate.
- 4.7 Schools owe a duty of care relating to pupils' education and wellbeing, along with general safeguarding duties. They are also bound by obligations imposed by the Equality Act 2010 and the Human Rights Act 1998.
- 4.8 Under the Equality Act 2010 it is unlawful to discriminate against a learner on the basis of a protected characteristic, and teachers should be mindful of this when dealing with issues that relate to such protected characteristics. No protected characteristic takes precedence over or overrides another.
- 4.9 Schools in Wales are also subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) under the Equality Act 2010, and must have due regard to (i.e. giving acting consideration to, not just having an awareness of) the need to:
- eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act
  - advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

---

<sup>1</sup> Although the school-related legislation specifically refers to pupils, we use the terms “pupil” and “learner” interchangeably and that they have the same meaning for the purpose of this guidance document

- foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

4.10 Under the Equality Act 2010, public authorities and service providers, including schools, have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people are not placed at a substantial disadvantage in accessing services compared with non-disabled people. Reasonable adjustments may include changes to policies, practices, procedures and staff training to ensure that services are accessible and effective for people with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities.

4.11 The above will influence how practitioners deliver certain topics.

## 5. Preparation and planning

5.1 Engaging with sensitive topics is sometimes necessary (see paragraph 2.3). Careful preparation and planning can ensure that such topics are handled in a way that minimises any potential distress.

5.2 Start by reviewing the specifications and other qualification materials to identify topics, themes or texts which could meet the description of sensitive topics in section 2.

5.3 Some topics are very likely to be sensitive and need to be treated as such. Make sure you're confident that you have a firm grasp of the topic by reviewing the specification, Guidance for Teaching and any relevant resources in detail, and consider whether there have been any recent developments within the school community, locally, nationally or globally relating to this topic that could potentially have an impact on your teaching and on learners.

5.4 You will need to use your professional judgement to consider whether any other topics you will be addressing, or which could potentially arise out of teaching other topics, have the potential to elicit a sensitive response from any of your learners. This needs to be done carefully, and not on the basis of assumptions, stereotypes or simplistic considerations.

5.5 Based on the topic and your learners, consider whether you need to:

- Approach a lesson in a particularly structured manner in order to support balance and participation
- Consider if any pre-teaching is required and if so, the manner in which it is undertaken.
- Prepare learners in advance for any potentially sensitive content.
- To guard against introducing your unconscious bias into your teaching, consider risk areas and your own assumptions and beliefs.
- If you find a topic sensitive, you may need to ask for support within your school.
- Offer opportunities for learners to opt out and provide suitable alternatives if appropriate, and sign-post to post-lesson support for those who do not opt out.

5.6 Select any supporting resources carefully to minimise any potential distress, and ensure they are balanced where possible, reliable and age appropriate.

## 6. Handling sensitive topics

- 6.1 Clarify why you are discussing a potentially sensitive topic; this could be an opportunity to explain the knowledge, understanding and skills that are being developed and the link to the qualification requirements, and to clarify that the discussion is educational and not ideological.
- 6.2 Explain your role in the lesson, explaining that that you are not discussing the topic to share your own views, but to develop learners' knowledge, understanding and skills.
- 6.3 Establish any discussion ground rules at the start of the lesson so that you can ensure that all learners can engage with the topic in a safe way. You may wish to co-create ground rules with learners to foster a safe, respectful and inclusive environment. This could include clarifying what constitutes discriminatory behaviour and language.
- 6.4 Support your learners in handling complex issues at a level appropriate to their age and abilities. Manage disagreement calmly and model respectful dialogue.
- 6.5 Encourage all learners to offer their views if they wish, responding without judgement or surprise. Maintain a neutral tone.
- 6.6 Teaching should promote mutual respect and understanding across learners, irrespective of their identities and experiences and any protected characteristic.  
  
Remember the Public Sector Equalities Duty as outlined in section 4.
- 6.7 In discussion, prevent discriminatory behaviour or language, challenge prejudice and ensure that teaching does not reinforce stereotypes or marginalise protected groups. For instance, if a learner shares a harmful stereotype, acknowledge their contribution, provide correct information, and guide the group back to respectful discussion whilst ensuring no learner feels targeted.
- 6.8 Respect your learners' right to privacy, and do not make them feel that they have to share personal information that they may not want to.
- 6.9 Some learners may not want to verbalise their thoughts and feelings, particularly in front of a large group. Consider methods of supporting emotional processing through reflective practices such as journaling, reflective writing or smaller group discussions, or by offering structured discussion formats.
- 6.10 Try to offer a balanced range of appropriate perspectives (see paragraph 6.9 below) and ensure that learners are not encouraged to adopt a particular view.
- 6.11 Ensuring balance in the context of delivering sensitive topics does not mean that you need to give equal time to all views. It also does not mean that you need to teach about dangerous and discriminatory views, unsubstantiated theories and conspiracies.

- 6.12 You may encounter strong opposing views from learners, including views that some find acceptable, but others experience as harmful. You should be prepared to challenge factually inaccurate claims if necessary, in accordance with your legal responsibilities as outlined in section 4. You could acknowledge that different views exist, but that that you cannot allow harmful or factually inaccurate claims to be amplified. Where learners express views that risk causing harm, remain calm, challenge the view rather than the individual and guide the discussion back to respectful dialogue. This approach supports open discussion while prioritising safeguarding and equalities duties.
- 6.13 When teaching a topic or text that reflects a particular viewpoint, make clear that this represents the perspective of the author or source, not the teacher. Reinforce that learners are free to hold different views and encourage respectful expression of alternative perspectives.
- 6.14 If you are delivering material such as a text that, for example, includes challenging language or could potentially reinforce a stereotype, you should acknowledge this explicitly, contextualise if appropriate, provide alternative perspectives if appropriate, facilitate debate and model respectful discussion and ensure that teaching does not reinforce prejudice or discrimination, in line with the Equality Act 2010.
- 6.15 In relation to avoiding the promotion of partisan political views, you do not need to avoid using partisan materials entirely. Where such materials are used, they should be contextualised and accompanied by a balanced presentation of alternative perspectives.
- 6.16 Prioritise the safety and wellbeing of learners in accordance with your safeguarding duties. You should be prepared to pause and redirect discussion if it becomes emotionally charged or unsafe. Monitor student reactions and look out for signs of distress (such as silence, agitation or withdrawal) or adverse emotional impact; provide opportunities for them to step back or to access support if necessary.

## 7. Follow-up actions (post teaching)

- 7.1 If you have any concerns about a learner, either from the point of view of a concern that they may be attempting to pursue partisan political views or if you feel that a learner would benefit from further support, escalate in line with your statutory responsibilities in accordance with your Prevent duty as set out in Part 1 of Schedule 6 to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (CTSA 2015), section 26, as well as the Prevent duty guidance: England and Wales (2023) and Keeping learners safe guidance and your school's policies and procedures.
- 7.2 Sign-post other resources that the school's pastoral support or safeguarding offering may have.
- 7.3 Allow follow-up opportunities for learners to reflect or ask questions privately.
- 7.4 If at any point you feel you would benefit from support relating to delivering a sensitive topic, please reach out for support from relevant colleagues within your school that are there to help you.

## 8. Links to other documents

8.1 The documents below are relevant in the context of delivering sensitive topics to 14 to 16 year olds in Wales:

- [Curriculum for Wales | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Curriculum for Wales -curriculum-design-and-the-four-purposes | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Curriculum for Wales -cross-cutting-themes-for-designing-your-curriculum | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Curriculum for Wales -humanities/religion-values-and-ethics-guidance | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Curriculum for Wales -relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse-code | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Guidance for practioners on remaining impartial | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Keeping learners safe | GOV.WALES](#)
- [Supplementary Guidance | Estyn GOV.WALES](#)
- [Respect and resilience: developing community cohesion | GOV.WALES](#)