



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Written Submissions

Consultation on
Draft specification
for Junior Cycle SPHE

JANUARY 2023

Contributors

Contributions from organisations

1. ACCORD Dublin
2. Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools
3. Atheist Ireland
4. Barnardos Empower Kids Project
5. BeLonG2 Youth Services
6. Catholic Education Partnership
7. Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association
8. Children's Rights Alliance
9. Comhairle na nOg National Executive
10. Comhairle na nÓg (Fingal)
11. Concerned Parents Network
12. Council for Catechetics, Irish Episcopal Conference
13. Donegal Pro-Life Group
14. Drug and Alcohol Task Force (Western region)
15. Educate Together
16. Education and Training Boards Ireland
17. Foróige
18. Genspect
19. GOSHH (Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health, HIV)
20. HSE Health and Wellbeing division
21. Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission
22. Irish Education Alliance
23. Iona Institute
24. Irish Council for Human Rights
25. Irish Freedom Party
26. Irish Heart Foundation
27. The Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS)
28. National Women's Council
29. Network of Rape Crisis Centres
30. Ombudsman for Children's Office
31. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
32. Rockbrook Park School
33. Sexual Health Centre, Cork
34. ShoutOut
35. Transgender Equality Network Ireland
36. The Teresian School
37. The Countess
38. Teachers' Union of Ireland
39. Women's Aid
40. Youth Work Ireland

Individual contributions



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Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

ACCORD Dublin

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is 'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

We agree the aim summarises the purpose as it reflects the foundation of all good relationships.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

We do believe the four strands and three cross cutting elements reflect a positive sense of self and a capacity to care for themselves and others, however in our experience of working with Junior cycle students we believe that most of them are not in romantic/intimate relationships and we think the "Potential sexual relationships in the future" should be emphasised. This would also reflect the state requirement for the legal age of consent being 17 years of age.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

We welcome the opportunity to engage in this process and wish the NCCA well with the implementation of changes to the curriculum and look forward to the next step in updating the senior cycle



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National Council for
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Contributor

Association of Patrons and
Trustees of Catholic Schools

Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools

Introduction

The Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools (APTCS) is established for the advancement of education in accordance with the Catholic Ethos, through promoting best operational practice in the exercise of Trusteeship and Patronage of schools.

Our Vision

As Patrons and Trustees, we are diverse in terms of individual histories and founding intentions but we are united in the belief that the education of the whole person must include deep questions about the purpose and meaning of life and that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus guide the answers we offer. We support freedom of educational choice where the state provides funding for education while parents of faith can choose those faith schools that reflect their own spiritual beliefs and their hopes and aspirations for their children.

Education Act (1998)

Very significantly, the Education Act 1998 recognises the rights of schools to govern their own affairs and states that the Minister would have regard for the traditions of existing schools

In the carrying out of his/her functions, the Minister shall have regard to the practices and traditions relating to the organisation of schools or groups of schools ... and the right of schools to manage their own affairs in accordance with this Act and any charters, deeds, articles of management or other such instruments relating to their establishment or operation. [Education Act 1998, Part I, Section 7 (4)(a)(iv)]

It recognises the right of the Patron to establish the characteristic spirit of the school and the responsibility of the Board of Management to uphold this characteristic spirit

(b) uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school (S15 (2)).

The draft SPHE curriculum, as currently presented, ignores these rights by not making any reference to the characteristic spirit of the school or the right of the school to be a faith-based community with a particular set of beliefs and values which underpins its educational endeavour.

Constitution – Bunreacht na hÉireann

The State too values education as a holistic endeavour and recognises the central role that parents play in the education of their children. Article 41(1) of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* states that it is the “right and duty of parents to provide ... for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical, and social education of their children.”

Article 42 of the Constitution acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and provides a guarantee that the State will respect the “inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual physical and social education, of their children”.

The role of parents is also confirmed in Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the *European Convention on Human Rights*:

“... In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching is in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

In the address by Archbishop Eamon Martin to the AMCSS/JMB Conference in 2018, he set out three of the ways in which the leaders and managers of our Catholic post-primary schools can support families by:

- Helping to develop in young people a responsible use of freedom,
- Establishing a sound ‘morals and values framework’ for life, and
- Learning to form healthy and life-giving relationships.

The proposed SPHE curriculum can help schools to provide this support, provided the role of parents is adequately considered.

In the NCCA report (Feb 2022) on the previous consultation process, this comment was made: ‘*When reviewing the 88 individual submissions, a common set of concerns was evident which mainly focused on the right of parents to have a say in curriculum developments related to SPHE/RSE, the need for Catholic morals and school ethos to be accommodated within SPHE/RSE and the desire to see SPHE and RSE as separate (as opposed to an integrated curriculum).*’ There is no evidence that this draft curriculum specification has sought to address any of these concerns. It appears that the rationale underpinning the curriculum does not in any way recognise or attempt to accommodate the ethos of faith schools or the religious convictions that shape that ethos.

This programme should, therefore, take account of the constitutionally protected right of patrons to run their schools from a faith-based perspective and include:-

- Flexibility for the schools to adapt or mediate the programme according to their ethos
- Recognition of the role of parents in their children’s education
- Recognition that morality and spirituality are important aspects of education
- Acknowledgment that religious beliefs can make a very important contribution to wellbeing
- Appreciation that education includes a search for truth and meaning

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is 'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

As a representative of patrons of Catholic schools, the values that we promote in our students are very important. We see self-awareness and self-worth as very important aspects of young people's development. Our educational philosophy is based on the respect and dignity of each person, as they are created in the image and likeness of God.

We agree with the statement as a summary of the purpose of SPHE but would like to see the addition of some reference to spiritual development based on the requirement that schools "*promote the moral, **spiritual**, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school*". (Education Act 1998, Section 9(d))

Without reference to the spiritual dimension, we are offering the programme in a vacuum as the SPHE classroom is the interface between the students' lived experience (imbued as it is with values, spirituality and relationships) and the syllabus content and delivery.

The addition of the word "meaningful" to the phrase ... "lead meaningful, fulfilling and healthy lives" would reflect a deeper understanding of the education we want to provide for our young people. Part of their education quest is, we contend, a search for meaning in life. For some students (not all), this will be found in their religious beliefs. This should be acknowledged in the programme.

There needs to be recognition that religious beliefs and faith are central to the lives of some people and of how these beliefs influence their life choices and, in many cases, contribute to their wellbeing. Considerable research has been invested in the importance of students and young adults 'having something to believe in' thus providing a focus and direction for their lives, particularly in times of crisis. This is often a factor in parental choice of school as indicated in the Genesis Report (2019)

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The four strands are fine but within them there is an absence of exploration of *meaning and self-worth*. These concepts could be included in either of Strands 1 or 4.

There is also scant or no reference to developing a moral compass (one of the elements of education valued by parents as found in the Genesis research 2019) and there is no place at all given to spiritual values in relation to sexuality, even though 'being spiritual' is listed under the Staying Well section of Key Skills for the Junior Cycle. In excluding moral and spiritual dimensions, the programme presents a very limited view of the human person.

Across the strands, recognition of family values and context is important. The role of parents in bringing up their children is fundamental to their self-development. The influence of family is obviously central to a child's development and, while acknowledging that this can on occasion be a negative or even harmful influence, the centrality of family needs to be respected and fully acknowledged within these strands. The importance of family cannot be over-estimated and students need to be enabled to explore what they have learned in the home in terms of ways of thinking, speaking, and acting. They need to arrive at an understanding of the many written and unwritten rules and roles in their homes so that they can interpret the good and the not so good in their own relationships: *'If you don't understand your family, you are likely to repeat it, whether it makes sense of not'* (Rob Ruhnke).

RSE is a very important strand of the SPHE programme - a strand that cannot be value-free. As seen from the Genesis research, parents expect that schools will assist their children to develop a moral compass. Schools, therefore, must be allowed to situate RSE within their ethos. For Catholic schools, the moral framework will be derived ultimately from the life and teaching of Christ and transmitted through the teaching of the Catholic Church. This means that RSE should be given a place of importance on the curriculum and address all aspects of this proposed programme. Catholic schools should seek to promote a positive self-image and attitude to our bodies, and an appreciation of the gift of sexuality. They should help educate young people in taking responsibility and in making well-informed decisions regarding their choices, including being aware of their own values and those of others who may differ from them.

"A sound relationships and sexuality programme, developed in consultation with parents, will include age-appropriate information, debate and discussion about contraception, sexually transmitted infections, same sex attraction and unions and the full meaning of consent. In choosing to send their children to a Catholic school, parents will want schools to help young people develop what Amoris Laetitia describes as a 'critical sense in dealing with the onslaught of new ideas and suggestions, the flood of pornography and the overload of stimuli that can deform sexuality (AL 281)'". (Archbishop Eamon Martin 2018)

As it stands, the programme takes an overly individualistic and rights-based approach, effectively delegating a person's natural responsibilities towards others to a lower tier of concern. Using a rights-based approach must be balanced by recognition of the responsibility that comes with rights.

The three cross-cutting elements

- Awareness
- Dialogue
- Reflection and Action

provide, in our view, a very good framework for the exploration of the themes within the strands. The points outlined in the preceding paragraphs above should be incorporated into the programme's learning outcomes. In Strand 3, there should be reference to spirituality and religious beliefs that impact on sexuality and sexual activity. In addition, the programme should make explicit the reality of the pastoral practice provided by teachers, chaplains and others in faith-based schools (and, indeed all schools) that provides sensitive support to those with sexual identity questions and issues of sexuality. By so doing, students will be made aware that the school provides an experience of inclusion, belonging and support as part of its ethos.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Reflection and formative assessment are key to the assessment of this programme.

Critical thinking is also important and should be demonstrated in the assignments chosen.

Sensitive feedback is essential – this course is not about facts and figures, it is about the person and the feedback from the CBAs should be helpful to students as they develop as people. This will be value-laden which requires an understanding of the different values which will be held by individual students and their families.

The potential is there for this assessment to be meaningful and beneficial.

Teacher resources should include materials that reflect the pluralist world in which we live but should not ignore the place of faith and religion in people's lives. Similarly, assessment guidelines provided to teachers should ensure that teachers give recognition to and respect the plurality of the cultural context in which students live – and this must include faith, family and the school ethos.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

The key to the implementation of the SPHE programme will be the skill of the teacher to situate the course in the lived experience of the student, otherwise, it will be vacuous without reference to his/her physical, social, emotional, spiritual and moral development to date. It must take cognisance of the values transmitted, the spiritual context of the home and the experience of relationships and social development. Once this bedrock is there, the course will be on a sound footing and it will encourage a critical thinking ability which will question assumptions and social norms, enable engagement with a diversity of viewpoints and provide a point of personal insight. Students will need to work with their parents and teachers to clarify their thinking together and to ensure that the learning outcomes take cognisance of their holistic development. This might be a core element of the reflection and critical thinking process.

While we are in agreement with a robust and comprehensive specification for SPHE, we strongly suggest that, in order to take account of the individual ethos of each school, there must be flexibility within the programme to allow the school adapt the programme to suit the particular characteristic spirit and context of each school.

From a planning perspective in school, a team approach will be essential to ensure there is congruity between the messages transmitted. This particularly applies in faith-based schools where morality is explored in R.E. class as part of faith development, and where the curriculum demands that 'big' philosophical questions be explored in very different ways in other subjects such as English and Biology. The message must also be aligned with such policies as Anti-bullying, the Code of Behaviour and the Whole School Guidance plan. It is recognised that it will be the responsibility of the Board of Management to ensure that this 'congruity of messaging' happens. The engagement and support of the senior leadership team will be essential. Boards of Management share a responsibility to ensure that the content and delivery of the programme is in keeping with the mission and vision of the school and that parents are consulted from First Year to Third year. This communication will need to be timely and authentic.

High quality continuous professional development will be important and it will need to instil a confidence in the teachers who deliver the programme.



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Contributor

Atheist Ireland

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

The aim should be extended to include

“...through a course delivered in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner and not taught through the ethos of the school.”

This is in line with Article 11 of the Social Charter, human rights law, the rights of parents under the Constitution.

Article 42.1 of the Constitution obliges the state to respect the rights of parents in relation to the religious, moral and social education of their children.

Article 42.4 of the Constitution obliges the state to have due regard to the rights of parents in relation to religious and moral formation of their children.

If the course is taught through the religious ethos of schools, it will undermine the rights of parents with philosophical convictions.

In the recent *Burke v Minister for Education* case at the Supreme Court¹ the court upheld the rights of parents in relation to the religious and moral formation of their children. The court found that parental authority was a foundational pillar of the constitution and that an overall saver in the constitutional text was that the state must have 'due regard' for the rights of parents in relation to the religious and moral formation of their children.

The Supreme Court went on to say that this provision reflects a concern for upholding parental authority; a foundation pillar of the Constitution that accords with Article 41 recognising the family as “the natural primary and fundamental unit group of” Irish society. This is a condition of the state funding of schools.

As part of the aim of the course is to 'develop values', it is parents under the Constitution who decide what is or is not suitable 'values' for their children. The state is constitutionally obliged to have 'due regard' for the rights of parents in this regard.

If the course is not taught objectively but through the religious ethos of schools and parents are not informed that this is happening, it will undermine the rights of parents under the Constitution.

¹<https://www.teachdontpreach.ie/2022/10/burke-v-minister-for-education/>

We appreciate that the NCCA have no legal control over 'ethos'. However, the NCCA are obliged to:

41-(3) - In carrying out its functions the Council shall-

"have regard to the desirability of achieving equality of access to, participation in and benefit from education (Section 41-3(c) Education Act 1998) and "have regard to the practicalities of implementation of any advice which it proposes to give to the Minister. (Section 41-3(d).)"

Section 6 (a) of the Education Act 1998 obliges every person concerned in the implementation of this Act to have regard to:-

"give practical effect to the constitutional rights of children...."

(l) - to enhance the accountability of the education system, and"

"(m) - to enhance transparency in the making of decisions in the education system both locally and nationally."

Notwithstanding the fact that the NCCA have no control over 'ethos' (Section 15-2 (b) Education Act 1998), it cannot just ignore that it will have an impact on the updated course and this consequently will have consequences for the constitutional rights of parents and their children. Enhancing accountability, enhancing transparency in the making of decision and giving practical effect to the constitutional rights of children puts the NCCA in the position that it cannot continue to ignore its legal responsibilities.



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Contributor

Barnardos Empower
Kids Project

Barnardos Empower Kids Project

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is 'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

As you can see in feedback in next answer, the children and young people highlight that feeling supported and cared for by their teachers as an important feature of their school life. So we feel that feeling supported along the SPHE curriculum journey is an essential aim of the programme.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Below are direct quotes from the children and young people in the Empower kid's project, a childhood domestic violence and abuse children's participation project. All of the children and young people who participate in this project, have lived with and experienced domestic violence and abuse.

The children have placed schools and teachers as having a central role in their lives, especially in relation to their learning and development, which influences their future decision making, and life choices. They also place a high value on the schools ability to provide stability and a sense of safety in contrast to the violence and abuse that they experience at home.

They acknowledge that teachers should feel comfortable to engage students in conversations around their relationships, equality, sexuality and feelings. They are also in agreement that teachers need to be trained, educated and supported in responding to matters relating to domestic violence and abuse – especially in relation to responding to childhood domestic violence and abuse.

"It should not be down to the individual teacher and their comfortability on the subject".

It is also of note, that the children and young people, have an incredible sense of agency over their own safety and emotional well-being, and have some excellent suggestions on what they need from schools in relation to this.

We have categorised their feedback to the strands of the curriculum. The following quotes are unfiltered:

Strand 1: Understanding myself and others

1.3

- "To protect girls we should try to make them feel powerful enough to speak up for themselves because most of them would be too scared too".
- "to empower them so that they themselves feel good enough and not as if they don't have a voice to speak which might be getting pushed down by other people who have different opinion on the topic and they should be able to believe that they can make a difference in a lot of people's lives and that they're not a nobody"

1.5/1.6:

- "Also think we should try and get as much equality as we can and that there should be no discrimination no matter what".
- "Important to teach about equality and same rights in schools as some children can be negatively influenced by family at home"
- "Boys and girls do not have the same rights. Men think they are "on top". It's in boys' personality to tease girls and think they are way better. Girls do tease boys, but boys do it all of the time".

Strand 3: Relationships and Sexuality

3.1:

- "Know what signs to look for to be more aware of what they need to feel safe".
- "Schools don't teach about violence and abuse at all".
- "I would like to have been more educated on what's ok and not ok".
- "For all girls to be educated about safety in schools as there is no talk around protection or safety for young girls in educational settings".
- "Boys in Primary and Secondary schools should be educated on abuse and the effects and impact it has on women and girls".
- "Children to learn what is right and wrong in relationships through images/ simple words in schools".
- "In school domestic violence was never really spoken about, in SPHE. Students weren't being taught it".
- "Some people in school did not want to talk about it, teachers had a barrier. Or they were maybe afraid to upset students"
- "Children should be taught in school from first year onwards and it should be spoken about a little in primary school".

- That more awareness around this should be taught in school as there is nothing at all talked about or taught”

3.10

- “Schools need to be more involved with supports/ agencies in the community to give young people information - invite agencies into the schools i.e. Pieta House, CAMHS etc”
- “People need to be educated so they can lend support when they need, more conversation about domestic violence in schools and trainings for school staff and programmes for the students to attend”
- “Teachers should always be open to talking to students and not be afraid of upsetting them”
- “I would like to have been noticed more in school by teachers when upset”
- “For school to be more understanding (guidance councillor)”
- “Guards or bringing someone in to make children feel safe”.
- “Educate teachers as to what the young person is going through”
- “Teachers to be aware of the vital role they play in children’s lives”
- “The School should be briefly informed about what is happening in case the young person needs them to know”
- “If a teacher notices something is off in our behaviour – to talk to us about it comfortably”
- “A student may be given out to by a teacher, try to understand what might be happening, cause behind, not label children as bold”.

Strand 4: Emotional Wellbeing

4.3:

- “Teach us to listen to the good person and not listen to the bad person. Teach us to live happily”
- “Sometimes children can look happy – but really they are hurting – so I wish for people to ask them how they feel – even if they look happy – and tell them you will help them feel better”

4.7:

“It is not ok to bully in school”

- “Teachers should teach kids that bullying and hitting is not good so when they get older they know better than that”
- “Sometimes children are bullied over several years on and off and the schools are totally unaware”
- “Have signs not to bully, push, kick, punch. Eg Signs in playgrounds saying not to be bold or bully”

4.8

- “That self-defence classes should be taught in schools”.
- “Self Defence classes in school either instead of P.E or for a half an hour of Lunch once or twice per week”.
- “To educate young girls about abuse and to tell them to try not to be on their own to always have someone to be with but if they do have to be on their own, then to know what to do to protect themselves, whether it is to run away or if they grab you to be able to defend yourself by knowing self-defence”

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

No answer here

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

No answer here



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Contributor

BeLonG2 Youth Services

BeLonG2 Youth Services

Questions to consider:

1. Having read the above, what stands out for you as the most important consideration in updating the junior cycle SPHE curriculum?

The importance of SPHE/RSE in the formal junior cycle education system cannot be understated. Research shows between 6–10% of any group of young people may identify as LGBT+¹ and 2% identify as Intersex². The 2016 LGBTIreland Report states that the average age a young person realises they are LGBTI+ is 12 and the average age they tell someone for the first time is 16³. LGBTI+ young people experience twice the level of self-harm, three times the level of suicidal ideation and four times the level of extreme stress and anxiety when compared with their non-LGBTI+ peers³.

The absence of opportunities to discuss LGBTI+ issues in a positive and respectful way, especially in junior cycle, can perpetuate negative beliefs and attitudes; whereas raising the issue in class in a positive way provides opportunities for teachers to challenge negative beliefs and attitudes, and promote respect and dignity for all. According to the 2019 School Climate Survey carried out by BeLonG To and Columbia University, more than two thirds (68%) of LGBTI+ students report they were not taught anything positive about LGBTI+ identities in school⁴. It is unsurprising then that 73% of young LGBTI+ people in Ireland do not feel safe at school, 77% of LGBTI+ students are verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation, gender, gender expression or ethnic origin, and the majority of LGBTI+ students (86%) felt deliberately excluded by peers with 74% experiencing being the focus of rumours or lies³.

Including LGBTI+ identities in the curriculum is a great way to include positive representation of LGBTI+ identities and help all students learn about diversity. Including LGBTI+-related issues in the curriculum in a positive way may make LGBTI+ students feel like more valued members of the school community and LGBTI+ students are 26% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, 20% more likely they belong at school, and 9% more likely to not miss days of school due to feeling unsafe³.

With this research in mind, BeLonG To strongly recommends the aim, rationale and learning outcomes for the SPHE short course is revised taking into account the current context. The background paper notes we are still dealing with the legacy of separate curriculum and guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the mid-1990s. This is still evident in the 2016 SPHE short course and in the reported implementation issues identified in the background paper. The Life skills survey (DES, 2017), reported that almost 50% of schools provided just one to two RSE classes per year or none, and ‘that they give less emphasis to: teenage pregnancy, sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections and contraception.’

¹Dooley, B, O’Connor, C, Fitzgerald, A, & O’Reilly, A (2020). My World Survey 2: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland. Jigsaw and UCD School of Psychology

² Blackless, M., Charuvastra, A., Derrtyck, A., Fausto-Sterling, A., Lauzanne, K. and Lee, E. (2000), How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis. *Am. J. Hum. Biol.*, 12: 151-166

³ Higgins A. et al. (2016). The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland. Dublin: GLEN and BeLonG To Youth Services

⁴ Pizmony-Levy, O., BeLonG To Youth Services (2019). The 2019 Irish National School Climate Survey Report. Research Report. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Our work with schools and the education sector over the past decade as part of Stand Up LGBTI+ Awareness Week has focused on bringing conversations and information on sexual orientation, gender identity, and equality into classrooms across Ireland. In 2021, some 68% of second-level schools nationwide took part in the week-long event. Young people have been calling for improvements to RSE for many years now. They are frustrated with the lack of information available to them and eager to see significant improvements.

With this review process, we hope that the implementation of RSE will be mandatory for all schools, and that schools will receive the resources, encouragement and support they need to talk about sexuality and relationships. We look forward to the next generation of LGBTI+ young people receiving relevant, realistic information about relationships and sexuality to better equip them for the real world.

2. How should the course be organised and will it continue to be structured around its existing four strands, associated topics and learning outcomes?

BeLong To **strongly agrees** with the following assertions and suggestions from stakeholders contributing to the 2016 SPHE Junior Cycle Short Course Review:

- a. ‘..the name of Strand 3 (Team Up) be changed to reflect the focus in the learning outcomes in that strand on relationships, including a broad range of sexual relationships.’
- b. ‘..the design and layout of a new specification merits consideration so that the integrated nature of the learning across the strands can be visually depicted (in contrast to the current layout of the four stands and learning outcomes in a linear fashion).
- c. ‘..the approach to RSE needs to be one that is grounded firmly in the needs and rights of young people and should be age and developmentally appropriate, culturally and contextually relevant, inclusive in its approach and holistic in addressing all aspects of relationships and sexuality.
- d. ‘The learning outcomes that relate directly to RSE should make explicit the topics that teachers are expected to address, such as contraception, consent, pornography, the impact of social media on self-esteem and relationships, and sexual and gender-based violence.’
- e. ‘..students who participated in a student consultation meeting want SPHE lessons to be:
 - a. relevant – ‘Talk to us about real life problems’.
 - b. inclusive – ‘Sexual education NOT only for heterosexual couples’.
- f. ‘..the revised specification embed the need for greater consultation and collaboration with students in planning relevant teaching and learning in SPHE?’ (DE Inspectorate)
- g. The majority of students consider their experience of RSE within schools to be poor and summed up their experience as ‘too little, too late and too biological.’ (NCCA, 2019, p.71) Across all ages, students felt that lessons were often out of touch with their needs.
- h. Many students also said they would like opportunities to learn about the diversity of relationships and sexual identities that exist and would like to see LGBTQ+ lives recognised within SPHE lessons.

3. What adjustments might be needed in relation to the Classroom-Based Assessment for SPHE?

2021 sees the 12th year of BeLonG To's Stand Up Awareness Week in Ireland with almost 70% of post-primary schools in Ireland taking part. BeLonG To would be happy to work with the NCCA to share a wide variety of student work and CBAs based on LGBTI+ related topics which could be made available on www.curriculumonline.ie.

4. How can the specification empower students and teachers to adopt a collaborative, dialogical, and reflective approach to teaching and learning in SPHE?

- a. BeLonG To welcomes the idea of including a glossary of action verbs as an appendix in the revised short course specification (in line with what has already been done with the latest (2021) version of the Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) short course and other junior cycle subject specifications.
- b. BeLonG To recommends that young people have the opportunity to engage in reflective practice and outline their needs when planning how the content meets the short course learning outcomes. Active learning methodologies which empower teachers to elicit student voice should be included in the resource supports for the revised course www.curriculumonline.ie toolkit.

5. How can the specification be flexible and sensitive to accommodate a range of school contexts and student needs while providing clarity on what is the important knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that students should gain during the three years of SPHE within junior cycle?

- a. BeLonG To welcomes the commitments to include specific mention of topics identified by the NCCA's Report on the Review of RSE as important for young people's learning today, as follows: consent, healthy, positive sexual expression, the effects of the internet and social media on relationships and self-esteem, pornography, gender and sexual discrimination and violence, social and cultural norms and expectations as they relate to relationships and sexuality and LGBTI+ matters.
- b. While flexibility is important, BeLonG To are keenly aware that 'it is important that all students have the opportunity to engage with core learning and that teachers don't 'cherrypick' safer topics or those they consider to be important and leave out others. The Life skills survey (DES, 2017), reported that almost 50% of schools provided just one to two classes per year or none and 'that they give less emphasis to: teenage pregnancy, sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections and contraception.'
- c. Educators want increased specificity and clarity around the intent of the learning outcomes, particularly those that relate to relationships and sexuality. 'The LOs are way too broad and not directive enough considering no initial teacher training and not sufficient ongoing CPD'. (Teacher)

6. Are there further suggestions or considerations that you would like the Development Group to consider when updating junior cycle SPHE?

a. Teacher Education:

SPHE/RSE modules should be provided in all initial teacher education programmes and should be delivered by experienced practitioners with an explicit focus on the four neglected areas mentioned in the DES 2017 Life Skills survey (included sexual orientation, sexual transmitted diseases), and those requested by young people who fed into the NCCA review of RSE in 2019. BeLonG To also propose that all student teachers engage in wellbeing area of learning with an overview of the place of SPHE/RSE as a core curriculum component.

Joined up SPHE/RSE capacity building for teachers is needed in order for teachers to recognise and capitalised upon the various opportunities for embedding RSE throughout the revised short course - – with an explicit focus on the four neglected areas mentioned in the DES 2017. Life Skills survey (included sexual orientation, sexual transmitted diseases), and those requested by young people who fed into the NCCA review of RSE in 2019.

b. SPHE Status:

BeLonG To would like to see a guaranteed move to the 400 hours of wellbeing at junior cycle from Sept 2022. There should be no further delays and there should be clear and timely communication to schools about SPHE/RSE.

BeLonG To also recommend that the Department of Education issue a circular specifically for SPHE/RSE to include:

- i.** A statement about the important/valuable place of SPHE/RSE in the wellbeing area of learning.
- ii.** A strong recommendations on the need for capable and interested SPHE/RSE teachers and stability for those who teach across the three years of junior cycle.
- iii.** Sufficient time for planning and collaboration.
- iv.** The importance of school management support (especially in terms of facilitating attendance at SPHE/RSE CPD events).

c. Resources

Resources and supports for short courses, especially SPHE, should match those that are in place for other junior cycle subjects. The online toolkit on www.curriculumonline.ie should be maintained in line with the revised short course. BeLonG To would be happy to work with the NCCA to create :

- i.** sample units of work based on learning outcomes with both explicit RSE content and learning outcomes which can be used as pathways to RSE related issues. BeLonG to has reviewed 14 junior cycle subject to highlight opportunities and give suggested way to integrate LGBTI+ relationships, families, identities and history.
- ii.** 'champion' teachers videos which could be made available on NCCA/curriculum online.
- iii.** 'Growing Up LGBT' is an excellent SPHE/Resource which needs to be updated and available on www.curriculumonline.ie.
- iv.** BeLonG To have launched a revised 90-minute version of their E-learning module – Supporting LGBTI+ Young People. It is suggested that this is available on www.curriculumonline.ie and promoted to all school staff. Almost 4,000 educators have engaged with this resource with some describing it as 'the best CPD they have completed in their professional career'. This can be accessed here: <https://training.belongto.org>

d. Supporting SPHE Across the School:

BeLonG To welcomes the Junior Cycle review and greatly values the integration of RSE into formal education and the SPHE curriculum, but we do agree with the assertion from the background paper that there must be an awareness that this aim cannot be the exclusive remit of the SPHE class and that every class teacher can and must contribute to this learning.

In August 2021, the report from the research 'LGBTI+ Youth in Ireland and across Europe: A two-phased landscape and research gap analysis'⁵, commissioned by Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, recommended the following:

- i. 'there should be explicit school-level policies and adequate teacher and school personnel training before LGBTI+ issues are added in the curriculum. These findings highlight the importance of a holistic, whole-school approach. Ad-hoc, tokenistic actions will not have the same effect as interventions that are rooted in evidence and
- ii. implemented on the basis of consensus of all stakeholders, with all of them actively being involved.'
- iii. 'Ideally, development of school curricula and implementing other inclusive school activities do not simply seek to raise LGBTI+ inclusivity but recognise that the oppression of sexual and gender minority individuals (just like other marginalised groups) is part of a more general cultural and societal pattern which needs to be challenged (Formby, 2015).'
- iv. 'Issues of gender expectation, non-conformity and gender roles are relevant to all youth. Besides teaching about sexual orientations and sexualities, including gender identity development in curricula can help students better understand gender diversity (Boskey, 2014).'
- v. 'Teaching LGBTI+ issues alongside concepts like compassion, empathy and social justice (Riggle and Rostosky, 2012) may have an added pedagogical value.

e. The LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools Project

The 'LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Whole-School Community Model' was developed by Michael Barron and Lisa O'Hagan for both BeLonG To and Health Promotion and Improvement (Health and Wellbeing Division - Health Service Executive). It is informed by national and international good practice. The Model comprises of six key areas that overlap and interlink to provide a comprehensive approach to developing an LGBTI+ safe, supportive and inclusive school that includes:

- Ensuring that staff are LGBTI+ aware and equipped to address LGBTI+ issues and support vulnerable students.
- Creating a supportive school culture and environment for all students, including LGBTI+ students. Developing and implementing effective school policies and plans.
- Implementing a curriculum that supports diversity and respect.
- Providing direct supports to LGBTI+ young people through the appropriate school structures.

⁵ Költő, A., Vaughan, E., O'Sullivan, L., Kelly, C., Saewyc, E. M., & Nic Gabhainn, S. (2021). LGBTI+ Youth in Ireland and across Europe: A two-phased landscape and research gap analysis. Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

- Working with the community outside the school gates, including any local LGBTI+ youth projects/ groups, parents and community organisations to promote a wider LGBTI+ inclusive community

The Model was intensively piloted in two post-primary schools in Donegal and comprehensively evaluated by National University Ireland, Galway. The learnings from this pilot were integrated into a revised version of the SASS Model in 2019. LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools Model Accreditation: LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools (SASS) Project The LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools (SASS) Project 2020 was established to develop and pilot the revised Model as a Whole School Community approach, designed to create schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people.

In December 2020, this scaled-up second phase of the LGBTI+ SASS pilot was launched in 20 ETB post-primary schools across Ireland, aiming to create a practical and sustainable format that can be rolled out across Ireland. The impact of the LGBTI+ SASS Project is being assessed by Dr Seline Keating, Assistant Professor in Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Wellbeing, and Research Fellow with the National Anti-Bullying Centre.

For the purposes of the LGBTI+ SASS Project, BeLonG To has created minimum requirements within each of the six key areas of the Model that schools must meet to become accredited LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools. The Project integrates all-staff training (teaching and non-teaching) along with implementation of key actions in each area of the Model.

In the Curriculum area, schools are asked to deliver lessons from the resource 'Growing Up LGBT' and include LGBTI+ representation in at least five subject areas. The BeLonG To Junior Cycle Resources support this whole school engagement.

Funding for the national roll out of this model in all post-primary schools, would ensure that RSE is discussed across the whole school environment and community. It would open the door to normalising discussion around RSE and provide support for fully inclusive policy and practice.



NCCA

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National Council for
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Contributor

Catholic Education Partnership

Catholic Education Partnership

Introduction

“The glory of God is men and women fully alive” – St. Irenaeus

This simple statement captures the essential reason that Catholics value the education as a holistic endeavour, with the full totality of the person, physical, moral, intellectual, emotional, and social, being brought to flourish. If God’s glory is in the full expression of human life, then human life must be a noble thing. A holistic education seeks the revelation of the full nobility of human life.

The State too values education as a holistic endeavour, recognising in Article 41(1) of Bunreacht na hÉireann the “right and duty of parents to provide ... for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical, and social education of their children.” The State gives life to this in the Education Act, 1998, Section 9(d) in mandating schools to “promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school”.

SPHE forms an important part of a child’s holistic education. Any such course, properly conceived, should seek to address the whole human person, particularly given that the stated aim is *“to nurture students’ self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.”*

The nurturing of a sense of meaning and purpose is also essential to anything pertaining to a person’s capacity to lead a fulfilling and healthy life. The spiritual aspect to the human person will be essential to this.

Taking the above into account, any SPHE curriculum will have to provide for the context of the course within a school’s particular ethos, as this will inform the moral, spiritual, and intellectual world view the curriculum is situated within. Schools exist within a pluralist society, and within themselves contain a plurality of world views. The curriculum, while situated within the ethos of

- 2 -

the school, should encourage dialogue and encounter with that plurality. This is pluralism properly conceived, that seeks engagement with difference, rather than seeking to ignore it or to pretend that an ethical ‘view from nowhere’ can exist.

For schools with a Catholic ethos, this means that the curriculum will be taught within the context of the Church’s teaching and with Gospel values. This is not to be understood as exclusionary. The Roman poet Terence’s famous line, *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto* (“I am human, I consider nothing that is human alien to me”), applies also to Church teaching, grounded as it is in the full humanity of Jesus Christ. A Catholic school, holding to the fore the essential dignity of all men and women, created as they are in the image and likeness of God, can address questions of human sexuality and gender in all its manifestations in individual human persons.

Within a school having a Catholic ethos, the Church’s teaching will be presented with confidence, in accordance with the requirements of the Education Act (Sec. 15), and in line with the moral duty owed to parents/guardians, and in a spirit of respectful encounter and dialogue with other philosophies of life, inside and outside the school.

The course will also need to provide, in a practical way, for the role of parents as the primary educators of their children to be respected. This is a fundamental legal and moral right, protected by the State through Article 42(1) of Bunreacht na hÉireann, confirmed also in Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 to the European Convention on Human Rights:

“... In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions.”

Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 applies to all subjects and not only religious instruction. Sexual education and ethics thus falls within the scope of Article 2 of Protocol No. 1, as confirmed by *Jimenez Alonso and Jimenez Merino v. Spain*; *Dojan and Others v. Germany*; and *Appel-Irrgang and Others v. Germany*.

Finally, any SPHE course must ensure flexibility for the professional judgment of the teacher, in consultation where necessary with the student's parents/guardians, to determine the age and stage appropriateness of its provision. Supports and guidance will be required to make the curriculum accessible to students with special education needs, or to those with barriers to learning. This touches on the need for specialised training and support for teachers engaging with SPHE. Other school supports may be required with respect to issues that may arise for particular students or their families in light of the curriculum. A whole of school approach, supported by the Patrons, Trustees, and the State will be an essential element to achieve the full potential of SPHE.

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

CEP supports the aims of the proposed SPHE short course, and recognises the evident engagement with young people that informs it.

However, we believe the aim should include the spiritual dimension of the human person, the particular religious and philosophical world views that inform how individuals judge their lives to be fulfilling and healthy. A holistic approach will require that this important aspect of the human person be explicitly acknowledged.

Students do not develop "knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values" from a vacuum – they are informed by their familial and more general cultural and social contexts, including the ethos of their school.

This too touches on the question of meaning and purpose of life. As Nietzsche put it, "He who has a why to live for, can bear almost any how." Educators accompany and guide students to develop that 'why'. They do so alongside the student's family, friends, and culture and this task is much greater than can be encompassed within an SPHE course, but the course should none the less reference it, and the course aim should give explicit acknowledgement of same.

Similarly, the content of the course will play a part in the student's development of their own sense of who they are. The ancient Greek poet Pindar wrote that our most important duty in life is to become who we are. This is an essential part of any fulfilling and flourishing life. It is important that the course take in questions of meaning and purpose, acknowledging their role in that 'becoming'.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The course structure, with four strands and three cross-cutting elements, having an integrated character, is welcome and is a sign of the continuing development of SPHE pedagogy within schools.

The three cross-cutting elements are well judged and are rightfully laid out as an ongoing process of interaction between the three. The thinking on dialogue between contrasting perspectives, values and behaviours is welcome, but fails to recognise the role the school's ethos necessarily plays as a stepping off point for such dialogue. Every school, of any ethos type, appropriately, in

line with their moral and legal duties, has a fundamental ethical point of view. Catholic schools, rightfully, will seek to propose the Catholic view matters of morals and meaning, but will, in accordance with the Church's thinking, seek to encourage positive encounters and dialogue with the plurality of views within and without the school. The curriculum needs to give guidance to schools on the need to inform the programme with the school's ethos, and to provide sufficient flexibility for them to do so.

The formation of the ethical character of students as they grapple with the topics addressed in the course should be explicitly addressed. The proposal speaks of students developing self-awareness of their values in a manner that seems to be grounded in a Platonic idea of learning by remembering, rather than on the role of the school, in line with their ethos and on behalf of and informed by the students' parents/guardians, in the development of the moral character of the student. A dialogic approach, grounded in the school's ethos, and encouraging encounters with different perspectives and values, seems both to respect the role of education in character formation, while also respecting students' agency in developing their own moral character.

The 'awareness' cross-cutting element rightfully emphasises that we share a common humanity, dignity and rights, and this will be entirely in keeping with the importance within the Catholic ethos of the essential dignity that all persons hold as having been made in the image and likeness of God.

Strand 1.6 reflects the Catholic commitment to respecting the essential dignity of all individuals. However, explicit acknowledgement should be made of the Traveller community in this. While that community is encompassed by "ethnicity", discrimination against that community is one of the more deeply seated prejudices in Irish society, and would benefit from being directly addressed.

Rights are mentioned in both the 'awareness' and 'dialogue' elements, and a rights-based approach is mentioned in one of the strands. CEP are, needless to say, fully in favour of the emphasis on rights, but we note that in the absence of a corresponding sense of the duties we owe others, a rights-based approach can risk an 'I' centred approach to the topics covered in the course. With respect to relationships, sexual relationships, and topics such as pornography, a sense of other persons as fellow-experiencing-subjects-of-life is an essential component of inculcating a moral obligation to treat others as ends rather than means, as subjects, not objects.

With respect to the relevance of the course to 12-15 year olds, the four strands certainly appear to have been informed by student feedback and the NCCA are to be commended for this. The course addresses challenges arising from social media, including cyberbullying, self-management skills, alcohol and addictive substances, sexual orientation, well-being, gender norms and stereotypes, and consent.

Of particular welcome is the emphasis placed on healthy non-sexual relationships. These form the majority of the relationships we have in life and can be healthy or unhealthy, or even harmful, and the course encourages a fuller exploration of this topic beyond a discussion of bullying or abusive behaviour.

The importance, legally and morally, of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships is rightfully recognised, but this should explicitly be acknowledged as a base-line idea, as an essential but not sufficient condition for appropriate sexual relationships. We acknowledge that this is in part addressed in strand points 3.5 and 3.6 but requires a fuller treatment in choice and decision making.

There are references to what we understand to be elements of CBT in Strands 1.8, 4.2 and 4.3. These are welcome, but it should be appreciated that CBT itself drew its techniques from Stoic philosophy, which itself located those techniques within an ethical framework (itself located within a broader physics and metaphysics). These techniques certainly aid in a fulfilling life, but without an ethical grounding they will not realise their full potential. One common criticism of CBT and more generally resilience based approaches, lies in the emphasis being placed on the individual's response to trauma or injustice. This is worthwhile, but misses the broader challenge of addressing the source of the trauma or injustice. Stoic philosophy placed a strong emphasis on improving the world for others, on justice. Similarly too, schools with a Catholic ethos would be expected to address issues of justice that may arise when discussing this area.

The integrated approach may pose a challenge for schools to properly respect the role of parent/guardians as the primary educators of their children, in that withdrawal of students may become areas of contestation. It would be preferable if the RSE elements could be presented as discrete elements, making withdrawals practicable, as otherwise some parents/guardians may simply seek to opt their children out of the course entirely.

The full potential of the course, will require informed parental engagement that empowers parents/guardians to make informed decisions with respect to their children and to support the learning outcomes through the home.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

CEP believes the proposed CBA is suitable, providing as it does for student's to critically reflect on their learning. The respect for student agency in selecting topics is welcome. The inclusions of some form of assessment pays proper respect to the significance of the course.

The assessment and feedback will need to be handled with sensitivity and necessary supports and guidance provided to inform same.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

For this SPHE course to be successful it will need to take account of the ethos of schools and how the course will interact and respect that ethos. Similarly, the primacy of parents/guardians as educators requires recognition. Parental involvement will necessarily have to form a key part in the planning of the introduction of the course.

A whole of school approach will be required and integration of the course with the policies of the school, and with other subjects, including in Catholic schools, religious education.

As the NCCA is aware, significant supports in material and professional development for teachers, and in supports to school leadership teams and boards of management, will be required.

Taking a longer view, the aim should be to create a cohort of teachers trained for and with experience in SPHE, and this present proposed course should be seen as something that will be subject to revision once we have a suitable cohort of confident practitioners, representative of the variety of ethos present in schools, available to provide feedback to enhance and improve this course in the future.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
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National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Catholic Secondary Schools
Parents Association

Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association

Response to NCCA Consultation on JC RSE/SPHE Curriculum

I write as President of Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association, the long established and recognised national body representing parents in Catholic Secondary Schools, attended by approximately 50% of second level students.

A few years ago CSSPA undertook a very comprehensive survey of parents on questions relating to RSE. There was a wide range of differing views expressed by parents and we submitted these at the time.

Three years ago CSSPA was invited by NCCA to nominate a member to the RSE group and this was duly submitted. We were very surprised that our extremely well qualified nominee was rejected by your staff selection panel. He was not one of the 13 exclusively female members appointed. We later learned that he was the only rejected nominee. When enquiries were made no reasons for his rejection were offered by the selection panel of Annette Honan and Paul Knox.

Like others I remain baffled that an organisation frequently rejoicing in the use of hashtags #inclusivity and #diversity should exclude the only male nominee.

Throughout the intervening period no efforts were made by any of the 13 members to engage with CSSPA.

For my own part I made a submission to the NCCA Consultation on Background Paper for the redevelopment of the Junior Cycle SPHE/RSE on 27 October 2021. Several of the points made were omitted from the final report.

At this stage we at CSSPA would want to share with you some of the concerns that have more recently emerged from parents:

1. The fact that your proposals that place RSE firmly within a SPHE curriculum cause considerable difficulty for those of our parents who may wish to exercise their constitutional right and remove their sons or daughters from a curriculum that they consider to be at odds with their home values and the teachings of their religion.
2. There is unease that NCCA is seeking to promote an ideology that refuses to acknowledge basic biological facts in favour of a new gender self-identity doctrine.
3. Many believe that what is being suggested is an over sexualised outlook on life and one that is Epicurian in philosophy/ideology.
4. Many are concerned at the possibility that through a new curriculum their young teenagers will be exposed to classroom pornography.



NCCA

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National Council for
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Contributor

Children's Rights Alliance

Children's Rights Alliance

1. Introduction

The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 140 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children by making sure their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services. We also provide legal information and advice to children, young people and their families through our legal information line and nationwide legal advice outreach clinics.

The Alliance welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) draft Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum for Junior Cycle in post-primary schools. The publication of the draft curriculum is an important milestone when it comes to the social and emotional development of young people in Ireland.

The focus of the proposed curriculum on the inclusion of 'all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs/worldviews, social classes and abilities/disabilities'¹ is welcomed. It is also encouraging to see the addition of resilience as one of the six core indicators of wellbeing underpinning the draft proposal and locating the curriculum within the broader junior cycle wellbeing programme. It is extremely positive that it is intended that the curriculum is to be delivered using the spiral teaching approach which acknowledges the vital importance of 'revisiting important themes over the three years in order to allow for deeper engagement relevant to the students' evolving needs and stage of development.'²

To deliver on its stated aims, it will be important that the curriculum uses explicitly inclusive language to represent all identities and minority groups, and to improve visibility. Consideration needs to be given to how to ensure the interconnectivity of the strands so that topics are not taught in isolation. It is of critical importance that the resources are put in place to ensure the full implementation of the new curriculum and ensure it is rolled out across all schools in the State, regardless of individual ethos. Aligned to this it will also be important that supports are embedded for teachers into the framework including dedicated training so that teachers feel confident and enabled to provide the programme in schools and create a safe and judgment free environment for young people to engage with the curriculum.

This submission sets out some ways in which the proposed curriculum could be strengthened.

2. Ireland's Commitments under International Human Rights Law

Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) obliges all State Parties to "recognise the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health," including sexual health and mental health. Additionally, in Articles 28 and 29, concerning the right to education, the UNCRC obliges State Parties to "recognise the right of the child to education," which includes "the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," and "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society."

¹ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, "Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course Curriculum" (2022) p.2 <https://ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

² *ibid*, p12.

In 2016, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (the Committee) expressed concern at the “lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education” for young people in Ireland and recommended that it should be included as a mandatory part of the school curriculum as well as the adoption of a sexual and reproductive health policy for young people.³

The Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted that children’s education should be designed “to provide the child with life skills, to strengthen the child’s capacity to enjoy the full range of human rights.”⁴ The Committee further sets out that:

Education must also be aimed at ensuring that [...] no child leaves school without being equipped to face the challenges that he or she can expect to be confronted with in life. Basic skills should include [...] the ability to make well-balanced decisions; to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner; and to develop a healthy lifestyle [and] good social relationships.⁵

A child’s education should be accessible to all children, enable self-awareness, knowledge of the body, and should be designed in a children and young person friendly manner through which young people are “able to gain knowledge regarding reproductive health and the prevention of gender-based violence, and adopt responsible sexual behaviour.”⁶

The State is obliged, as part of its international legal obligations on education to ensure that adolescents have “access to essential information for their health and development and have opportunities to participate in decisions affecting their health (notably through informed consent and the right of confidentiality).”⁷ Children and young people have the right to “acquire life skills, to obtain adequate and age-appropriate information, and to make appropriate health behaviour choices.”⁸

Sexual health education should be, “based on scientific evidence and human rights standards and developed with adolescents.”⁹ The Committee further sets out that with this education, “attention should be given to gender equality, sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible parenthood and sexual behaviour and violence prevention, as well as to preventing early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.”¹⁰ Information should be available in alternative formats to “ensure accessibility to all adolescents, especially adolescents with disabilities.”¹¹

³ UNCRC ‘Concluding Observations: Ireland’ (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 58.

⁴ UNCRC, “General Comment No.1 (2001) Article 29(1): The Aims of Education” CRC/GC/2001/1 paragraph 2.

⁵ *ibid.*, paragraph 9.

⁶ UNCRC, “General Comment No. 15 (2013) on the Right of the Child to the Enjoyment of the Highest Attainable Standard of Health” CRC/C/GC/15 paragraph 60.

⁷ UNCRC, “General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child” CRC/GC/2003/4 para. 39(b).

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ UNCRC, “General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child During Adolescence” CRC/C/GC/20 Para 61.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*

The Committee has further recommended that States take a holistic approach to addressing the risks posed by digital media, including pornography.¹² It bears noting that the Committee is not the only international human rights entity to call for mandatory sexuality education. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education has recommended comprehensive sex education as mandatory, available to all without discrimination from the early stages of life, and that this education should take a holistic, scientific and pluralistic perspective.¹³ Both the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the World Health Organisation have similarly found that sexuality education leads to improved sexual and reproductive health outcomes.¹⁴ Furthermore, the UN Committee on Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, have observed that, “States parties should provide a safe and supportive environment for adolescents that ensures the opportunity to participate in decisions affecting their health, to acquire appropriate information, and to receive counselling.”¹⁵ The realisation of the right to health of adolescents is dependent on the development of “youth-sensitive health care, which respects confidentiality and privacy and includes appropriate sexual and reproductive health services.”¹⁶

3. Ireland’s Commitments under National Law

Under domestic law, the Equal Status Acts 2000 – 2018 set out a duty to protect against discrimination on the basis of nine protected grounds. Discrimination on the basis of gender,¹⁷ sexual orientation,¹⁸ disability,¹⁹ race and ethnicity,²⁰ disability,²¹ and membership of the Traveller community²² is expressly prohibited. Additionally, all public bodies in Ireland including schools are statutorily required to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect the human rights of their members, staff, and the persons to whom they provide services.²³ Given the national legal obligations owed towards certain protected groups mentioned above and the public sector duties public bodies are bound by, it is of crucial importance that the proposed SPHE curriculum reform includes specific accommodations for protected groups.

Traveller ethnicity was recognised in Ireland on 01 March 2017 enacted through a Dáil statement made by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny T.D.²⁴ This step further solidified the protected status of Traveller people as an ethnic minority in Ireland and the need for special protections and freedom from discrimination for this group.

¹² UNCRC, “General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment” CRC/C/GC/25 para. 54

¹³ UN General Assembly, “Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education: Sexual Education” A/65/162 https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/UNSR_Sexual_Education_2010.pdf accessed 21 September 2022.

¹⁴ UNESCO, “Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A Foundation for Life and Love” <https://en.unesco.org/themes/education-health-and-well-being/cse-campaign> accessed 21 September 2022.; World Health Organisation, “Sexuality Education: What is it?” https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/379043/Sexuality_education_Policy_brief_No_1.pdf accessed 21 September 2022).

¹⁵ UN Committee on Economic Social, and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 14: The Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health (Art. 12)” E/C.12/2000/4 para. 23

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Equal Status Act 2000, s3(2)(a).

¹⁸ *ibid.*, s3(2)(d).

¹⁹ *ibid.*, s3(2)(g).

²⁰ *ibid.*, s3(2)(h).

²¹ *ibid.*, s4.

²² *ibid.*, s3(2)(i).

²³ Irish Human Rights and Equality Act 2014, s42.

²⁴ Department of An Taoiseach, Speech by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny TD on the Recognition of Travellers as and Ethnic Group, Dáil Éireann 01 March 2017, <https://www.gov.ie/en/speech/d29014-statement-by-an-taoiseach-enda-kenny-td-on-the-recognition-of-travel/>.

4. Strand 1 Understanding Myself and Others

Strand 1, Understanding Myself and Others, builds on the learning experiences young people have had in primary school and bridges the developmental step up to post primary education. The explicit inclusion of the concepts of gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as being core to our human identity and the acknowledgment that each is experienced along a spectrum is extremely positive and vitally important to ensuring an inclusive curriculum. This has been acknowledged by the Committee on the Rights of the Child which has noted that attention should be given to gender equality, sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights in such curriculums.²⁵

It is welcome that, within this strand, the curriculum explores how “sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum” and reflects on gender equity and on “how gender stereotypes impact on expectations, behaviour and relationships” as well as “experiences/situations of bias, inequality or exclusion based on race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.”²⁶

The UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (IESOGI) has made clear the need for comprehensive and inclusive gender and sexuality education in order to deconstruct the stigma at the root of violence and discrimination based on gender identity and sexual orientation.²⁷ The IESOGI further noted that despite receiving complaints that comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), “sexualizes children, “normalizes” and “promotes” sexual pleasure and non-procreative sex acts”²⁸ as well as equating it to “pornography”,²⁹ CSE is documented to have the opposite effect. CSE can “reduce the rates of sexual activity, sexual risk behaviours, sexually transmitted infections, and adolescent pregnancy.”³⁰

Schools are important sites for fostering inclusion. The Committee on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (CEDAW) has acknowledged that “limited education and cultural taboos are among the factors that prevent lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex students from achieving social mobility and increase their vulnerability to violence.”³¹

An important aspect of creating inclusive and comprehensive sexuality education is responding to the needs of neurodivergent students. Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2018. Under Article 24 of the UNCRPD, Ireland is obliged to “ensure an inclusive education system at all levels.”³² The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has further outlined that when guaranteeing the right to an inclusive education all parts of the education system must be accessible to persons with disabilities including textbooks and learning materials, and teaching methods and assessment.³³ In practice, in terms of the proposed SPHE curriculum, this means ensuring an inclusive

²⁵ UNCRC, “General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child During Adolescence” CRC/C/GC/20 Para 61 <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsqlkirKQZLK2M58RF%2f5F0vH%2bg0BeHNYSXI2ulaeIW9Y1nEBWXdUgC9p%2fn2WzRfn3f2OKbLTV6FLd00z6ETEbfBgqtoQYQXmaXbNvVxfHrK5F> accessed 06 October 2022.

²⁶ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, “Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course Curriculum” (2022) p13, <https://ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

²⁷ Independent Expert on Protection Against Violence and Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, “Reports on Gender – Comprehensive Sexuality Education Summary” (2021) p1, [Summary-Comprehensive-Sexuality-Education.pdf \(ohchr.org\)](https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/hq-ecr/summary-comprehensive-sexuality-education) accessed 14 October 2022.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ CEDAW, General Comment No.36 (2017), para. 45.

³² UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), Article 24.

³³ CRPD, “General Comment No.4 on Article 24 – the right to inclusive education” (2016) CRPD/C/GC/4 at p5.

curriculum which responds to the lived experience of all groups through puberty not just the neurotypical experience and is delivered in an accessible manner for all.

Equally, ensuring diverse groups and ethnicities are recognised under this strand will be important. Traveller ethnicity was recognised by Ireland in 2017, while this was a great step forward, decades of segregated education has had a profound impact on the potential for integration and the continued discrimination of this group.³⁴ There is the potential within the 'Understanding Myself and Others' strand to tackle issues of historical and modern abuse and discrimination of both diverse and indigenous groups within modern Irish society.

Recommendations

- **Objective 1.1** Recognising and responding to the emotional and physical development of certain groups of children and young people such as transgender and neurodivergent students who develop at a different pace and in different ways to their cisgender and neurotypical peers would be an important addition.
- **Objective 1.5** could be strengthened by encouraging and enabling students to engage with this type of reflection on gender equity and stereotypes in their day to day lives.
- **Objective 1.6** The inclusion of gender and sexual orientation is welcomed but this could be strengthened by also including gender identity. It would also be important to specifically include disability when discussing intersectionality. The explicit inclusion of Traveller and Roma ethnicity and culture in this objective could inform a more inclusive strategy around encouraging understanding of different cultures within modern Irish society and more broadly the place of the self in relation to other groups within the mainstream environment. Acknowledging the complexity of identity and the way multiple identities can inhere in the one individual will be important.
- **Objective 1.7** could be strengthened by examining the different ways in which empathy is expressed by neurodivergent young people as well as their neurotypical peers so as to avoid the perpetuation of masking behaviours.
- **Objective 1.8** shines an important light on expectations of self-management and self-regulation, but these expectations tend to evolve with age. It would be important that this objective be revisited at various different stages throughout the curriculum in accordance with the spiral teaching approach outlined in the draft.

5. Strand 2 Making Healthy Choices

Strand 2, Making Healthy Choices, clearly acknowledges that SPHE is a praxis that involves an ongoing process of age-appropriate critical reflection and action, nurtured by dialogue with others.³⁵

The explicit objective on the online world is extremely welcome in the draft curriculum. Children make up one third of global online users.³⁶ Results from a National Survey of Children, their Parents and Adults regarding Online Safety conducted between December 2019 and October 2020, found that 62 per cent of children and young people in Ireland, aged nine to 17 years, use social media.³⁷ This rises to 90 per cent of

³⁴ The Irish Times, "State Apology to Travellers must be made for decades of 'profound harm', conference to hear" 13 October 2022, [State apology to Travellers must be made for decades of 'profound harm', conference to hear - The Irish Times](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/state-apology-to-travellers-must-be-made-for-decades-of-profound-harm-conference-to-hear-2022-10-13) accessed 14 October 2022.

³⁵ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, "Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course Curriculum" (2022) p11, <https://ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

³⁶ UNICEF, Children in the Digital World (UNICEF 2017).

³⁷ National Advisory Council for Online Safety, Report of a National Survey of Children, their Parents and Adults regarding Online Safety 2021 (2021) 8.

15 to 17 year olds.³⁸ The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has noted that ‘[t]he digital environment is becoming increasingly important across most aspects of children’s lives, including during times of crisis, as societal functions, including education, government services and commerce, progressively come to rely upon digital technologies. It affords new opportunities for the realization of children’s rights, but also poses the risk of their violation or abuse.’³⁹ It will be important that this objective includes education on what it means to be a safe and responsible digital citizen as recommended by the Law Reform Commission.⁴⁰

The inclusion of intimate image abuse is also a welcome addition in this strand. Women’s Aid reported at the end of 2020 that 3 in 5 young people in Ireland have experienced or know someone who has experienced intimate relationship abuse, 1 in 6 young women have experienced coercive control by a partner, and fifty-one per-cent of young women affected experienced the abuse under the age of 18.⁴¹ The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act (Coco’s Law) was enacted in 2021 in Ireland which makes it an offence to share intimate images (with or without the intention to cause harm) and the new online media regulator under the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill is due to hear individual complaints from 2024.⁴² In the first five months of the operation of Coco’s Law, 144 incidents of intimate image abuse were reported.⁴³ These are important developments in the space but it will be essential that the curriculum tackles attitudes and behaviours towards intimacy online in the classroom.

Objective 2.3 focuses on making healthy choices, which is welcome. However, achieving a balance between the behaviours, self-management and regulation areas that young people have control over at each stage of their development during the course of the three-year cycle and those that they do not yet have full control over such as food choices will be vital. Categorising foods in a binary ‘healthy’ or ‘unhealthy’ can cast them in a good vs. bad opposition which has been shown to have detrimental effects for those struggling with disordered eating.⁴⁴ It is important to create a space in the proposed curriculum for discussion of so-called unhealthy foods and behaviours free of moral judgments which may further stigmatise those affected and perpetuate the cycle of disordered and addictive behaviours.

Recommendations

- **Objectives 2.1, 2.2, and 2.6** could benefit from consultation with Bodywhys. It is important to convey the necessary message behind the objectives without potentially reinforcing a binary view of ‘healthy/good’ vs. ‘unhealthy/bad’ which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours.
- **Objectives 2.8 and 2.9** must ensure a non-judgmental approach and language to support young people. Women’s Aid have recently conducted research which demonstrates that victim blaming and stigmatism are still huge issues that resonate more with young people as one of the primary barriers to seeking help.⁴⁵

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment no 25 (2021) on children’s rights in relation to the digital environment, CRC/C/GC/25 at para 3.

⁴⁰ Law Reform Commission, Report on Harmful Communications and Digital Safety (LRC 116 – 2016).

⁴¹ Women’s Aid, “One in Five Women Report” (2020) at p5, [one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf \(womensaid.ie\)](#) accessed 14 October 2022.

⁴² RTE, “New Online Media Regulator to Hear Individual Complaints from 2024” [New online media regulator to hear complaints from 2024 \(rte.ie\)](#) accessed 14 October 2022.

⁴³ RTE, “144 Reports of Intimate Image Sharing Since September” [144 reports of intimate image sharing since September \(rte.ie\)](#) accessed 14 October 2022.

⁴⁴ Eric A. Friedman, “The Food Minority: Food Labels, Eating Disorders, and People Who Need More Food” O’Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law Georgetown Law, [The Food Minority: Food Labels, Eating Disorders, and People Who Need More Food - O’Neill : O’Neill \(georgetown.edu\)](#) accessed 14 October 2022.

⁴⁵ Women’s Aid, “One in Five Women Report” (2020) at p33, [one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf \(womensaid.ie\)](#) accessed 14 October 2022.

6. Strand 3 Relationships and Sexuality

The main strand of the SPHE curriculum concerning sexual health is Strand 3 on ‘Relationships and Sexuality’. Strand 3 provides that the curriculum will examine “family relationships, friendships, romantic/intimate and potential sexual relations in the future.”⁴⁶ Within this strand, students are to, inter alia, “explore human sexuality - what it means, how it is expressed, what healthy sexual expression might look like and the difference between sexuality and sexual activity [and to] appreciate the importance of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring interpersonal relationships and from a legal perspective.”⁴⁷ Additionally Strand 3 will explore “the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs).”⁴⁸

In light of the concern expressed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2016 over the lack of access to sexual education and reproductive health education for young people in Ireland,⁴⁹ it is welcome that the Junior Cycle Draft Curriculum introduces sexual health education into the mandatory curriculum.⁵⁰ This complements the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015-2020, which acknowledged the State’s responsibility to ensure that children and young people receive comprehensive sex education and recognised the need for a “partnership approach between parents, statutory and non-statutory organisations.”⁵¹ According to a review conducted by the NCCA in 2019 of the RSE programme, international research is “unequivocal in identifying confident and competent teachers as the key enabler to quality Relationships and Sexuality Education.”⁵² This view was shared by both principals and teachers alike.⁵³ It is concerning that when asked to comment on the RSE curriculum teachers in post-primary schools showed “little awareness or familiarity with the curriculum itself.”⁵⁴ The most critical enabler identified by teachers in terms of delivering the SPHE and RSE programmes was professional development and training.⁵⁵ Teachers who had had the opportunity to attend RSE training affirmed its value, and post-primary teachers strongly asserted that only those teachers who express a strong interest in teaching RSE and are trained for this purpose should teach it.⁵⁶ Many teachers expressed a lack of confidence in managing questions and were unsure of the boundaries in relation to teaching sexual and reproductive education while those who were confident in these areas had attended training.⁵⁷ It will be important in the roll out of the curriculum that teachers are trained and supported to deliver the material.

In a 2017 consultation on young people’s experiences of relationship and sexuality education (RSE), young people in Ireland reported negative experiences of RSE in schools.⁵⁸ They recommended that RSE should be ‘taught fully and comprehensively, where teachers are not allowed to pick and choose’ topics covered and a

⁴⁶ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, “Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course Curriculum” (2022) p10, <https://ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

⁴⁷ *ibid*, p. 15

⁴⁸ *ibid*.

⁴⁹ UNCRRC ‘Concluding Observations: Ireland’ (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4 para 58.

⁵⁰ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, “Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course Curriculum” (2022) <https://ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

⁵¹ Department of Health, National Sexual Health Strategy 2015-2020 (2015) at 3.2 <https://www.sexualwellbeing.ie/about/corporate-publications/national-sexual-health-strategy/national-sexual-health-strategy.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

⁵² NCCA, Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post primary schools, December 2019 at p43, [RSE-FINAL-REPORT-NCCA-Review-Report-2019-12-11.pdf](https://www.ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf) (fingalwitness.com) accessed 06 October 2022.

⁵³ *ibid* p42.

⁵⁴ *ibid*.

⁵⁵ *ibid* at p47.

⁵⁶ *ibid*.

⁵⁷ *ibid*. 58 Report on Consultation with Comhairle na nÓg on Relationships and Sexuality Education (2017 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) at p6.

set curriculum should be followed “so students are all informed equally and correctly’ and ‘free from biased teacher views.”⁵⁹ A 2020 survey found that twenty-nine per-cent of females, ten per-cent of males and eighteen per-cent of non-binary students reported non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force or threat of force while they were in college.⁶⁰ The Citizen’s Assembly have recommended that the draft curriculum should promote gender equality and explicitly cover sexual and gender-based violence both offline and online.⁶¹ This is supported by the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence and the views of stakeholders including teachers and parents in the 2019 review of RSE in post primary schools that suggested gender and sexual discrimination and violence ought to be included on the new curriculum.⁶²

The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that States take a holistic approach to addressing the risks posed by digital media, including pornography.⁶³ With this in mind, it is welcome that Strand 3 will also “investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people’s understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression.”⁶⁴ Research conducted by NUI Galway in 2019 shows that Irish children and young people view porn for the first time at a very young age with fifty-eight percent of young men reporting seeing porn for the first time under the age of thirteen.⁶⁵ Fifty per-cent of both young men and women surveyed reported watching pornography in order to learn about sex.⁶⁶ This is a problematic and worrying statistic given that “condom use, sexual negotiation and verbal consent communication are seldom portrayed” and the primary concern for parents, policy makers and educators is that “young people will think that porn is a realistic portrayal of real-world sex and will seek to replicate it.”⁶⁷ Perceived porn realism is at its highest during early adolescence⁶⁸ at a time when Irish young people are beginning to become sexually active.⁶⁹ Teachers surveyed as part of a 2019 review by the NCCA agreed that the RSE curriculum needed to be updated to include topics such as pornography and that they would appreciate guidance in terms of how to approach this topic in the classroom.⁷⁰ For these reasons it is essential to retain the segment in the proposed curriculum around the risks posed by pornography and ensure proper training and support for teachers to deliver the curriculum.

⁵⁹ *ibid* 10.

⁶⁰ L Burke et al, *The Active* Consent / Union Of Students In Ireland Sexual Experiences Survey 2020: Sexual Violence And Harassment Experiences In A National Survey Of Higher Education Institutions* (NUIG and USI 2020).

⁶¹ Recommendation 27, Report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality, June 2021.

⁶² NCCA, Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post primary schools, December 2019 at p56, [RSE-FINAL-REPORT-NCCA-Review-Report-2019-12-11.pdf](#) (fingalwitness.com) accessed 06 October 2022.

⁶³ UNCRC, “General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment” CRC/C/GC/25 para. 54.

⁶⁴ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, “Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course Curriculum” (2022) p.15 <https://ncca.ie/media/5611/draft-junior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe-short-course-curriculum-specification.pdf> accessed 21 September 2022.

⁶⁵ Kate Dawson, Saoirse Nic Gabhainn & Padraig MacNeela, “Dissatisfaction with school sex education is not associated with using pornography for sexual information” *Porn Studies* Vol. 6 2019 Iss. 2, 245-257 [Dissatisfaction with school sex education is not associated with using pornography for sexual information: Porn Studies: Vol 6, No 2 \(tandfonline.com\)](#).

⁶⁶ *ibid*.

⁶⁷ RTE, “The Importance of Porn Literacy for Young Irish People” [The importance of porn literacy for young Irish people \(rte.ie\)](#) accessed 14 October 2022.

⁶⁸ Paul J. Wright and Aleksandar Stulhofer, “Adolescent Pornography Use and the Dynamics of Perceived Pornography Realism: Does Seeing More Make it More Realistic?” *Computers in Human Behaviour* 2019.

⁶⁹ Department of Health, “The Irish Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children (HBSC) Study” 2018 p59 46026_7fa9176e0c5440b0a39fad54911a6872.pdf.

⁷⁰ NCCA, Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post primary schools, December 2019 at p46, [RSE-FINAL-REPORT-NCCA-Review-Report-2019-12-11.pdf](#) (fingalwitness.com) accessed 06 October 2022.

Recommendations

- **Strand 3** could include an overarching focus on gender equality and the links between gender inequality and violence against women and girls.
- **Objective 3.1** could be strengthened by analysing how human sexuality is portrayed in the media, culture, and pornography.
- **Objective 3.7** could be strengthened by explicitly acknowledging that consent is cross-cutting and does not only apply to intimate relationships.

7. Strand 4 Emotional Wellbeing

Strand 4, Emotional Wellbeing, is a cornerstone of the entire strategy that underpins and interlinks deeply with each of the individual strands. The focus of this strand on resilience and building a strong base of self-regulation strategies is pragmatic and suited to real world application for young people. Preliminary results of a qualitative case study being undertaken at UCD's School of Education from 2020-2023 is showing that student voice and participation in the decision-making process around wellbeing is a key enabler of positive student experiences of wellbeing.⁷¹

Approximately one in three young people in Ireland will have experienced some type of mental disorder by the age of 13, with this rate rising to more than one in two by the age of 24 years.⁷² While mental health problems are not selective, certain groups of children are at greater risk of poor mental health, including; children who have experienced abuse or neglect,⁷³ including domestic abuse;⁷⁴ children living in poverty;⁷⁵ children who have experienced discrimination; including homophobia or transphobia;⁷⁶ and children with chronic physical health conditions.⁷⁷ Ireland owes an obligation to “implement measures for the prevention of mental disorders and the promotion of mental health of adolescents”⁷⁸ and to “ensure that adolescents belonging to especially vulnerable groups are fully taken into account in the fulfilment of [its] obligations.”⁷⁹

⁷¹ Andrea Maynard and Jennifer E Symonds, “The Impact of Social Innovation Education on Wellbeing – Qualitative Case Study Findings ” UCD School of Education 2022 at p6, [The Impact of Social Innovation Education on Wellbeing: Qualitative Case Study Findings \(researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361111111).

⁷² Cannon and Coughlan et al, *The Mental Health of Young People in Ireland: a report of the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research across the Lifespan (PERL) Group* (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland 2013) p.7.

⁷³ Norman and Byambaa et al, *The long-term health consequences of child physical abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect: a systematic review and meta-analysis*, PLoS Medicine, 2012; Schaefer and Moffitt et al, Adolescent victimization and early-adult psychopathology: Approaching causal inference using a longitudinal twin study to rule out non-causal explanations, (2018) *Clinical Psychological Science* 352.

⁷⁴ Roberts and Campbell et al, *The role of parenting stress in young Children's mental health functioning after exposure to family violence* (2013) 26(5) *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 605.

⁷⁵ Wickham, Whitehead, Taylor-Robinson, Barr, *The effect of a transition into poverty on child and maternal mental health: A longitudinal analysis of the UK millennium cohort study* (2017) 2(3) *The Lancet Public Health*, 141.

⁷⁶ Tina Dürrbaum, Frank A. Sattler, *Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: A meta-analysis* (2020) 17(3) *Journal of LGBT Youth* 298; Liu & Mustanski, *Suicidal Ideation and Self-Harm in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth* (2012) 42(3) *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 221.

⁷⁷ Vanessa E. Cobham, et al., *Systematic Review: Anxiety in Children and Adolescents With Chronic Medical Conditions*, (2020) 59(5) *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 595.

⁷⁸ UNCRC, “General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child” CRC/GC/2003/4 para. 39(i) <https://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2fPPRiCAqhKb7yhsiQql8gX5Zxh0cQqSRzx6ZfAICbDzm5DUreYo1tIYOkZcPE%2bQh98dgWJknr%2bF7jm8Gj6iAJrcNX5Si7IU8lv0aykfsQrKYbxtZATWk0oeej> accessed 17 October 2022.

⁷⁹ *ibid* para. 39(h).

Under the Sharing the Vision: A Mental Health Policy for Everyone Implementation Plan 2022-2024, one of the core deliverables for the strand entitled 'Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention' is "enhanced referral pathways will be developed for children and adolescents to mental health services from educational settings."⁸⁰ Schools have been identified in this policy document as centres for a dynamic "Wellbeing Promotion Process"⁸¹ due to be commenced in 2023 and Recommendation 10 states the need for the development of a protocol between the Department of Education and the HSE on the liaison process that should be in place between primary/post-primary schools, mental health services and supports such as NEPs, GPs and mental health specialists.⁸² It is important that this information is communicated through the curriculum so that students are aware of all available services with schools acting as a central link. In line with Recommendation 7 of the Sharing the Vision Implementation Plan, including an exploration of the role played by stigma as a barrier to young people seeking mental health support would facilitate plans for a "National Stigma-Reduction Programme (NSRP) with a 'whole community' approach to reducing stigma and discrimination for those with mental health difficulties."⁸³

Recommendations

- **Strand 4** locates wellbeing in the person, but it could be strengthened further by including environmental and social determinants and societal expectations on mental health.
- **Strand 4** could address the stigma surrounding mental illness and the role it plays as a barrier to young people seeking mental health support.
- **Strand 4** should seek to acknowledge the fact that certain groups including children who have experienced abuse or neglect, domestic abuse, children living in poverty, those subjected to discrimination including transphobia and homophobia, and those experiencing chronic physical health conditions are at a greater risk of poor mental health.
- **Strand 4** should ensure the voice of the child and young people is heard in decision making around wellbeing by including active collaboration and participation of students in all aspects of the wellbeing curriculum.
- **Objective 4.3** could be strengthened by considering the physical and psychological impacts of stress and the inclusion of an exploration of certain levels of stress being considered healthy and normal tying in with the focus on resilience in the draft.
- **Objective 4.9** could be strengthened by acknowledging the school environment as a centre for wellbeing with greater co-ordination between schools and referral services and communication of these facilities with students.

⁸⁰ Government of Ireland, "Implementation Plan 2022-2024: Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone" at p15, file:///C:/Users/MargaretGallagher/Downloads/219435_7a8c78e1-98ad-4542-9a61-a13195a727d6.pdf.

⁸¹ *ibid*, Recommendation 9, at p35.

⁸² *ibid*, Recommendation 10, at p36.

⁸³ *ibid* Recommendation 7, at p33.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Comhairle na nOg
National Executive

Comhairle na nOg National Executive

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

The National Executive thinks that the aim of the updated short course is going in the right direction. However, the overall feeling from the group is that the aim is too vague, especially in respect to Relationships and Sexuality Education.

The suggestions below from the group aims to enhance and focus the aim:

- The aim of the curriculum should be to uphold all Young People's Human Rights in relation to SPHE.
- The aim only mentions part of the curriculum.
- When it says "knowledge" it could say "knowledge surrounding gender and human sexuality".
- Needs to specify that all four strands must be covered in entirety (i.e. a teacher shouldn't be allowed to pick and choose what parts to teach the students).
- Need to ensure the actual curriculum is not vague.
- "Relationships" is too vague: should discuss sexual and platonic relationships and should be expanded to "To create, maintain and end sexual, romantic, platonic, familial relationships in a respectful and caring manner" (for example).
- Purpose of SPHE: become aware about yourself, your rights/RSE and how to sustain healthy relationships.
- We feel that it should be made clear that the course should offer fact-based information, not opinion-based information.

The group would like to reiterate that the curriculum or the aim of this short course needs to be very clear to both teachers and students.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Overall observation is that parts of the four strands are very similar, and the NCCA should look at them to avoid duplication. We understand that the four strands will be progressed simultaneously by a teacher rather than consecutively, and we welcome this as it will flow better this way.

It is noted that the language in each learning outcome should be very well considered so that the teacher can easily know if they've met each of them.

Strand two:

It is noted that there needs to be a first objective here that looks at health in a holistic way and recognises all forms of "being healthy". This strand is very focused on physical health. There is also a sense that the tone of these learning outcomes are judgemental and this could lead to some teacher taking on a very particular slant of prohibition, for example, rather than a public health perspective which is a health-led, harm-reduction model.

We would like to see an outcome about adolescent hygiene. This should deal with how hygiene changes as you grow. Menstrual hygiene, caring for intimate areas, etc. should be covered.

Strand three:

- "Explore human sexuality" – while we really welcome the inclusion of this on the curriculum, we feel that this section needs more detail. It should be expanded as this is too vague. Teachers could say they "explored" human sexuality but might not have. We suggest that the NCCA expands this into the following to ensure all aspects of sexuality are explored: "explore the full spectrum of human sexuality to include all LGBTQIA+. This should be gender-equality based, with an explanation on what sexuality is, as well as how it is different to sexual activity".
- The sections on 3.3. and 3.4. could be similar enough to have as one learning outcome.
- We welcome that consent is learning outcome 3.7. This is a fundamental issue for young people and it links up so much with forming positive relationships and positive communication with peers. The concept of "consent" can feel daunting, it should be age appropriate and relevant. There needs to be positive resources developed to help teachers communicate simply what consent means, how you get it and how to continue that conversation throughout sexual activity and relationships.
- In relation to learning outcome 3.8 – the group feel that there's a need to look at the stigma around it, give resources and information. There should be information on the effect of contraception (for example mood swings, physical effects, etc.).
- Reproductive/fertility education is not in the specification. We feel it should be as some behaviours that some young people engage in are directly linked to fertility issues in later life. As such, education on this is important for this age group

- Menstrual education is of concern to young people and should be included in the curriculum. Its stigma is a concern amongst young people, and it should be an emphasising part of the strand
- In relation to learning outcome 3.10 there should be confidential places to get free condoms and STI testing. There needs to be access/information to/about health care professionals.
- LGBTQIA+ needs to be more explicitly mentioned – more emphasis needs to be placed on this as we know that young LGBTQIA+ people feel very unrepresented in their schools and especially in their SPHE classes.
- We think it's important to include Gender Based Violence, Intimate Partner Abuse and Sexual Harassment in one of the learning outcomes. Noting signs of abusive relationships in all its forms and in all kinds of relationships. This needs to be addressed in a classroom setting. All young people need to learn about it.
- We welcome the inclusion of learning outcome 3.9 “investigating the influence of digital media” as we do feel that young people need to look at the impact of social media and pornography on their expectations around sex and sexual expression.

Overall, we welcome the progress made in the curriculum learning outcomes, especially in relation to Strand three: RSE. We think that ensuring LGBTQIA+, gender-based violence and consent are emphasized in the learning outcomes will enhance the SPHE Curriculum and overall experience of SPHE for young people.

We note that this is a short course and therefore only given 100 hours over three years. This we know equates to approx. one 40 minute class per week. We feel this is too short for any significant discussion or lesson plan to be put into action by a teacher in order to meet these learning outcomes. A minimum number of hours needs to be carefully considered to give these excellent learning outcomes the chance they deserve.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

We welcome the creation of a CBA for this course, and we feel that a lot of thought has gone into it.

We think it would be stronger to suggest that students pick one piece of work for each strand of the course totalling four pieces of work instead of three. If only three pieces of work are required, there is a risk that RSE will be left out. We would like a guarantee that students will do RSE as part of their CBA, so that no one will shy away from any awkwardness felt by either teacher or student.

We feel that maturity levels of some Junior Cert students could be an issue. In order to mitigate issues arising from this, we have some suggestions

- Young people need to feel that this assessment is fair
- It needs to be an assessment and not a test
- It could be done through small groups or presented online just to the teachers to put students at ease
- Young people should be involved in the development of the assessment format

Features of quality should be focused on in order to make SPHE a more serious subject. It could be considered to introduce a grading system instead of just a descriptor. NCCA should address the challenge of subjects not being taken seriously because they are not graded while supporting students to learn.

At the end of the CBA, there could be a reflection piece on each strand where students can list their strengths and weaknesses. This reflection piece could be brought into the Leaving Certificate as a starting point for the students' senior cycle reflection.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Rights-based approach to RSE

It is the National Executive's view, which is reinforced by international bodies like UNESCO and WHO, that every young person has a right to quality, factual Relationship and Sexuality Education. We believe that we as children and young people have a right to comprehensive, accurate, scientifically sound and culturally sensitive RSE and that all children and young people living in Ireland also have that right. We would draw your attention to the comment: "[Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society](#)" from the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights who sets out in detail what our rights are based on and provides useful resources. This comment reinforces our belief that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and, at European level, the European Social Charter and Lanzarote and Istanbul Conventions, safeguard our right to RSE education. We draw your attention to Article 12 of the UNCRC, which guarantees our right to have a say in relation to this proposed Curriculum and for our views to be listened to and acted upon.

We strongly feel that it should not be left to the discretion of each school to implement this important subject. While the new draft specification for the SPHE curriculum is a huge improvement, we feel that building in clear goals and guarantees that the implementation of this new curriculum is completed in a timely and full manner, will ensure that every child and young person will have their right to RSE upheld. We would welcome reassurance from the NCCA and the Department of Education that this curriculum will be delivered in full to every child and young person in Ireland.

We further direct the NCCA to these resources, which we believe will strengthen the proposed curricula:

World Health Organisation/BZgA (2010). Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. Cologne: BZgA https://www.bzga-whocc.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BZgA_Standards_English.pdf

World Health Organisation/BZgA (2017). Training matters: A Framework for core competencies of sexuality education. Cologne: BZgA https://www.euro.who.int/__data/assets/pdf_file/0003/337593/BZgA-training-framework.pdf

UNESCO (2018). International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence informed approach. Paris: UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>

UNFPA (2014). Operational guidance for comprehensive sexuality education: A focus on human rights and gender. New York: UNFPA https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_OperationalGuidance_WEB3_0.pdf

Stronger inclusion of LGBTQIA+

We would like to see that more inclusive LGBTQIA+ education is implemented throughout the curriculum. The need for expansive education on LGBTQIA+ is well established through consultations including the RSE consultation in 2019, the Belong To School Climate surveys amongst others. It is important that asexual and aromantic education is included when looking at human sexuality.

We feel that LGBTQIA+ should be incorporated through the whole curriculum rather than just one strand. It is a part of everyday life.

Continuous Consultation

We also urge the NCCA to continue listening to young people and invite the NCCA to work with us in the National Executive. We are 31 young people aged 13 - 17 who represent the 31 Comhairle na nÓg (Youth Councils) around the country. The need for better RSE was voted as the priority issue for young people at Dáil na nÓg 2022. 47% of the 202 delegates at Dáil na nÓg voted for the National Executive to work on the topic of “a more inclusive relationships and sexuality education”.

This is not the first time that the National Executive has chosen this issue to address. This is a recurring issue of major concern to young people across Ireland. It has been voted as the key issue for young people across a number of Local Comhairle throughout the years and was voted as the key recommendation at Dáil na nÓg 2009. From their research in 2009, the group launched the finding of their survey on SPHE and RSE in a report called “Life Skills Matters”. The main recommendations given by young people in relation to improving RSE classes were: for RSE classes to be mandatory; for the curriculum to be wider and to cover more topics in detail about relationships and sexuality; for teachers to be better trained to deliver RSE classes. The 31 Comhairle na nÓg also took part in the RSE review in 2019 through a national Consultation held in the office of the DCEDIY (then DCYA).

We strongly feel that the learning over the last number of years is that this is an evolving space and there needs to be continuous review mechanisms in place to keep the curriculum relevant for young people.

Teacher training

We strongly believe that curriculum reform alone is not the solution to the many issues highlighted in the 2019 RSE review. It must be accompanied by better teacher training and a whole-school holistic approach. Students need to trust their teachers, and teachers must also feel comfortable delivering the course if the aims and objectives of this curriculum are to be fully implemented.

2018 Toolkit for Teachers – we emphasize the need for the toolkit for teachers to be consistent. The National Executive is offering their guidance and collaboration on this. The idea of bringing in expertise from outside the school to assist in the delivery of aspects of the curriculum could also be explored. Experts in RSE delivery might add value and compliment the classroom experience but should not replace classroom teaching.

We would like to see further information on how SPHE/RSE will be taught using “skilled teachers” as outlined in the rationale of this specification.

Reform Agenda

From our research and discussions, the National Executive has highlighted the need for curricula reform. We urge the NCCA to continue to develop and expand on the progress made with this Junior Cycle curriculum by reforming the Primary and Leaving Certificate curricula as soon as possible.

Implementation of curriculum

It has been well stated over the course of the SPHE/RSE review since 2018 that many fear the main issue with young people’s experience of the subject is the varied implementation of the subject across different schools. Regardless of the ethos of the school, young people have a right to quality SPHE/RSE teaching and learning.

Furthermore, we feel that parents shouldn't be able to withdraw their children's participation in the RSE module. It's developed in an age-appropriate way. All genders should learn about all genders. We feel it is inappropriate that some schools choose to split classes by gender.

One way to overcome this would be to include the delivery of SPHE/RSE on the inspectorate checklist as part of the whole school evaluation.

The National Executive would like more information on the implementation plan for this new curriculum. The National Executive would like there to be a guarantee that all 4 strands are implemented.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Comhairle na nÓg (Fingal)

Comhairle na nÓg (Fingal)

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

We agree that this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE. We conducted an online survey earlier this year with a sample size of around 32 secondary school students. 62.5% of those surveyed felt that the content covered in the course, from their own experience, did not positively contribute to their personal lives, with a further 25% having no strong opinions on the subject. A clearer aim and a clearer framework to achieve said aim could reduce the amount of students who feel this way.

In our survey It was mentioned that there is often a focus on informing students of issues of emotional health or mental health however, a student mentioned skills to cope with these issues are not taught with the same value as the teaching of the definitions of these health issues. We agree that skills should be featured more prominently in the SPHE short course.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

In our survey, we asked students, “Do you feel as though there are important topics not included in your SPHE curriculum?” 60% of respondents clicked yes. When asked to elaborate further, some students reflected on how they wished they had learned more about the LGBTQIA+ community and sexuality, health, mental health and how to care for their emotional wellbeing. These issues are addressed in strands 2, 3 and 4 of the proposed draft, proving their relevance to the lives and interests of Junior Cycle students.

Last month, we invited secondary students to two in-person workshops to discuss this NCCA consultation and receive feedback. In one with four participants, young people ranked the topics in Strand 1 with varying degrees of importance: Sexual identity & sexual orientation and gender identity were deemed ‘very important’; Changes during adolescence was deemed ‘important’; Communication skills was deemed ‘not important’ and the rest received neutral responses.

Strand 2 was, overall, considered being of greater value: Food, physical activity, sleep & hygiene as well as addictive substances & addictive behaviours were thought of as ‘very important’ and the rest ‘important.’

When discussing strand 3, participants ranked human sexuality and relationship difficulties as ‘important,’ pornography as ‘neutral’ and the rest as ‘very important.’ All topics in Strand 4 were regarded as ‘very important’ bar managing one’s thoughts, feelings and responses.

The learning outcomes provide clarity on the expectations for learning. Each strand is categorised neatly and links between each strand and how they fall under SPHE is evident.

Despite the disparity in the manner the old SPHE curriculum was taught, all teachers surveyed found that the SPHE class was an invaluable opportunity to bond with their students, this space to bond and speak with their students, we believe, contributes very valuably to this aim of the New SPHE short course as well as the crosscutting ‘discussion’ element. “Showing students that we all face problems no matter how big or small. We learn how to cope with them. Listening to others, some students realised that they are not alone.” - An anonymous contribution by an SPHE teacher in a secondary school.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

We addressed this topic in in-person workshops. Students were initially shocked, and held the opinion that Junior Cycle students are swamped with enough CBAs in the course as is from their exam subjects. Adding yet another to the list would only add stress in a subject that is currently viewed as a break from said stress. The idea of being marked high or low by teachers on their personal development felt uncomfortable and overbearing. People's relationships with themselves should not be subject to the critical examination of others and should not be forced to be shared. Participants did not make comments regarding any other type of CBA they thought would be suitable, instead suggesting they did not think the idea of a CBA suitable at all. This additional workload on teachers along with the nature of having to correct or judge a student's personal and private development may make many teachers uncomfortable or unhappy. In a survey on teachers regarding the SPHE curriculum some teachers express discomfort teaching certain topics and occasionally seek peer support. This also may be a very difficult undertaking for some more rural schools which already struggle with staffing, some of which have issues fulfilling their guidance counsellor positions. Due to this discomfort and the nature of the SPHE short course it may be unreasonable to ask teachers to assess students.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

During our experience in consultations, surveys and in meetings on this topic it is talked about that on paper, in the books and in principle the SPHE curriculum provided a very valuable education and it is clear that the updated short course would provide for an even better curriculum. However, where the old course was limited and where we believe the updated short course may encounter some obstacles is the application and the standardisation of application across schools. Quality standardised training for SPHE teachers could aid with the consistency of SPHE throughout schools. When asked if they felt they had received enough training as teachers of SPHE, a majority of our respondents replied that they felt they did not receive adequate training or resources.

In our surveys to teachers it was mentioned that there was a large lack of resources for Irish speaking teachers and teachers in Irish speaking schools. We would suggest an improvement of Irish language resources or the development of new Irish language resources in collaboration with Irish schools, Conradh na Gaeilge or schools in the Gaeltacht for wider use in Irish speaking schools across Ireland.

Throughout our experiences we are also finding secularism to be a very upfront issue. When asked 'If you attend a religious school, how do you think this affects the SPHE / RSE /non-Exam Religion course' 75% of students replied that they believed the course was affected by the denomination of their school. When Junior cycle students were asked the same question it was found that 55% of students in junior cycle believed that their SPHE / RSE was affected by denomination. Knowing that there is respect needed for schools to be able to act independently to a certain degree, we strongly believe that high quality training for SPHE teachers would prove to be very valuable for both students and teachers.

Furthermore we would suggest incorporation of mental health disorders, recognition and action on mental health disorders. Education pieces on neurodiversity, mental disorders and resilience are being readily provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). The incorporation of these really valuable resources and skills to the short course, even as an elective module teachers could cover if they assessed the class or community could benefit from such a module being delivered, we believe would be incredibly beneficial. This type of resourcing and training would seem to fit very well in Strand 1 though it does relate to every strand of the short course.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Concerned Parents Network

Concerned Parents Network

Dear Members of The SPHE Development Group

Below are our comments concerning the Junior Cycle SPHE/RSE Curriculum Specification developed by the NCCA which has been issued for consultation. Please be advised that we have considered the following documents in coming to the conclusions outlined below

- Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education Specification
- Background Paper and Brief for the Redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE
- Consultation Report on the Background Paper and Brief for the Redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE: and
- Questions and Answers on Relationship and Sexuality Education (Primary and Post Primary)

It is our view that the sexuality education content in the Draft SPHE Specification for Junior Cycle is very radical. We “Concerned Parents Network” are opposed to the highly sexualized content being taught to our children. The draft specification includes –

1. Transgender Ideology

Gender identity in the RSE Curriculum is defined as ‘a person’s felt internal and individual experience of gender, for example, cisgender, transgender, non-binary, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth’ (Glossary section – Appendix 2). This is transgender ideology – **a boy can become a girl and a girl can become a boy**, regardless of their biological sex. The NCCA RSE resources promote gender ideology, transgender children, same sex relationships and families – (e.g., Picture Books - ‘*The Boy in the Dress*’, ‘*My Princess Boy*’), and attack identification with biological gender and heterosexual couples/families – dismissed as hetero-normative ‘gender stereotypes’.

There are several teacher training videos referenced in the NCCA RSE resources for the Junior Cycle showing teachers how to promote transgender ideology in the classroom – that a child’s gender identity as being different from their biological sex. This includes training videos showing teachers how to socially transition a primary school child from a girl to a boy – ‘*Lucy becomes Liam*’ (and vice versa) in the classroom – this is confusing if not disturbing for young children. **The Junior Cycle curriculum should not be promoting a confusing message about their gender to school children.**

2. Classes on Pornography

The curriculum will ‘investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography)’- Strand 3: RSE point 3.9). The NUIG Active Consent team, **who believe in using pornography with school children** as part of sexual consent workshops, have been co-opted by the NCCA and the Department of Education to devise and deliver Consent education as part of the new RSE Curriculum. The Active Consent team includes Dr. Kate Dawson of NUIG who has said - ‘...watching porn can be useful as it has ‘very detailed imagery’ (interview on Ray D’Arcy show on 14/02/2019). She [wants school children to be shown porn videos](#) to help them understand such films are “[scripted and dramatised](#)” and to “[reduce the shame](#)” of [watching porn](#). The WISER programme on ‘porn literacy’ delivered by Kate Dawson in schools in the West of Ireland familiarized students with the slang words for the disgusting sexual practices in pornography; Kate Dawson along with another member of Active Consent is co-author of *The Porn Report 2018*, which stated that ‘it’s healthy and ok to watch the porn you want’. As NUIG sex researchers are involved in drafting the new RSE Curriculum, there can be little doubt that this could be a wholesale introduction to pornography, and not a precautionary approach. This is completely inappropriate for school children – **the promotion of pornography must be removed from the Junior Cert SPHE Curriculum.**

3. Excessive Emphasis on sexual activity

The Overview of the draft short course specification “is designed to support students in developing a positive sense of self”, whereby in the first strand “Understanding Myself and others” 1.4 students are asked to “appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum”: surely this cannot be the learning outcome to develop a strong sense of self. **The NCCA has developed a highly sexualized RSE programme** with an almost obsessive focus on sexual orientation and sexual identity - not a way of developing a strong sense of self. There is an excessive emphasis on sexual activity. Eg – Strand 3: RSE - point 3.8 ‘explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs)’. The glossary definition of **Sexual activity/sexual intimacy** in the Curriculum document states – ‘Sexual activity/sexual intimacy: a range of activities from kissing, touching, fondling to sexual intercourse (in all its forms) which involve giving and receiving sexual pleasure. These activities can be solitary or involve other people.’ This is promoting sexual license and the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake without a focus on the relationship aspects – the pre-occupation with sex is the wrong emphasis to be giving school children. **The Curriculum should reduce the excessive focus on sexual activity** and emphasize instead the importance and quality of relationships in the RSE programme.

4. School Ethos not respected in delivery of new SPHE/RSE Curriculum

The NCCA proposes to make highly sexualised RSE education compulsory in all schools, as it is combining RSE (sexuality education) with SPHE (health education), a compulsory subject. An article by Senan Moloney in the I. Independent on 13 July 2022 quotes a source as stating that ‘Every school, irrespective of ethos, will have to deliver it’. This is in line with statements made by senior figures in Government over the past year or so. This means that schools with a Christian ethos will be forced to deliver the highly sexualised RSE programme, which goes against Christian teaching on sexuality, marriage and the family – sexual activity is presented as a focus on pleasure without this wider context. The then Minister for Education Joe McHugh, when he launched the RSE Review Report in Dec 2019, stated on behalf of the Government that the **new RSE curriculum would not be imposed on schools**, as hundreds of parents had made submissions to the RSE Review upholding the ethos of schools. Making highly sexualised RSE compulsory overrides the ethos of schools and parents’ constitutional rights in their children’s education as vindicated in the Supreme Court judgement earlier this year about home schooling. **It’s unacceptable that highly sexualized RSE classes should be imposed on all schools, regardless of their ethos and values**, and this would go back on the promise made by the Government in Dec 2019.

5. Teacher to Student focus – parents cut out

The focus in the development and consultation of the new curriculum is teacher to student – ‘The NCCA has engaged with the student voice and listened carefully to what they have said’ (Press Release). Parents, who, under the Irish Constitution have primary responsibility for their children’s education, have been almost cut out of the development and consultation process: while the Irish Independent article states that ‘National parent bodies have already had an input’, we are not aware of any consultation with parents of Catholic schools or Catholic parents’ bodies. The Catholic Secondary School Parents Association (CSSPA), which represents almost half the nation’s secondary schools, was excluded from the consultation process. The National Parents Council (Post Primary) only represents around 15 percent of second level parent associations and does not represent the CSSPA. This is an unfair and undemocratic gap in the consultation process, excluding the parents of the vast majority of school students, to launch a highly sexualised RSE programme which is not compatible with the Christian approach to sexuality.

6. Feedback

While there is a belated addition of a parent's survey to the consultation templates – initially there were only teacher and student feedback surveys - it's in a question-and-answer format which limits the feedback that can be provided. This speaks volumes about the exclusion of parents from what is to be taught to their children about the sensitive matter of sexuality education.

Many people want to voice their opinion but find it very difficult to manage the online survey on your website, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) website. They also have difficulty sending emails to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie. So cognizant of this , this letter drafted and signed by parents reflects the opinions of parents on the draft SPHE Junior Cycle Specification which can be used for your feedback.

Summary and Conclusion

We Concerned Parents Network believe the new SPHE/RSE specification would lead to the sexualization of school children with undue focus on sexual identity, sexual orientation and sexual activity. We as parents, grandparents and members of the public wish to object in strong terms to –

- exposing children to classes on pornography.
- the promotion of transgender ideology to young students – that a child's gender can be different from the biological sex of a child.
- the excessive focus on sexual identity and orientation – as though sexual preferences define who children are and are the most important aspect of their lives.
- excessive promotion of sexual activity to young school students – 13–15-year-olds.
- the lack of consultation with or input by parents of children in Christian schools in the development of the Curriculum.
- the overriding of the ethos of schools, especially catholic and denominational schools, by the new Curriculum despite an undertaking to the contrary given by this Government in December 2019 when the RSE Review report was launched.
- The integration of Relationships and Sexuality Education in the SPHE specification will make it more difficult for parents to remove their children from such classes.

We are appealing for the sake of our children to address the above issues concerning the SPHE/RSE Junior Cycle Curriculum and the RSE Resources, to avoid imposing radical sexuality education which would have a confusing and harmful effect on young teenagers in our schools.

Yours sincerely,

Concerned Parents Network



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Council for Catechetics,
Irish Episcopal Conference

Council for Catechetics, Irish Episcopal Conference

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

The Council for Catechetics supports the aims of the proposed SPHE short course, and recognises the comprehensive and engaging pedagogical approach that underpins it. The work of the NCCA is to be lauded in this regard.

However, we believe the aims are deficient in not recognising the spiritual dimension of the human person, the particular religious and philosophical worldviews that inform how individuals judge their lives to be fulfilling and healthy. A holistic approach will require that this important aspect of the human person be explicitly acknowledged. Being spiritual is one of the key skills for Junior Cycle. Indeed, any course that does not encompass spiritual dimensions would not meet the Department of Education's own criteria!

Students do not develop *"knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values"* from a vacuum – they are informed by their familial and more general cultural and social contexts, including the ethos of their school and wider community. The book of Johann Hari on Lost Connections on anxiety and depression shows the importance of social networks and communal bonds in fostering positive mental health and wellbeing: <https://thelostconnections.com>

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The course structure, with four strands and three cross-cutting elements, having an integrated character, is welcome and is a sign of the continuing development of SPHE pedagogy within schools.

The three cross-cutting elements are well judged and are rightfully laid out as an ongoing process of interaction between the three. The thinking on dialogue between contrasting perspectives, values and behaviours is welcome, but deficient in failing to recognise the role the school's ethos necessarily plays as a stepping off point for such dialogue. Every school, of all ethos types, appropriately, in line with their moral and legal duties, has a fundamental ethical point of view. Catholic schools, rightfully, will seek to propose the Catholic view on matters of morals and meaning, but will, in accordance with the Church's teaching, seek to encourage positive encounters and dialogue with the plurality of views within and without the school. The curriculum needs to give guidance on schools on the need to inform the programme with the school's ethos, and to provide sufficient flexibility for them to do so.

With respect to the relevance of the course to 12-15 year olds, the four strands certainly appear to have been informed by student feedback and the NCCA are to be commended for this. The course addresses challenges arising from social media, including cyberbullying, self-management skills, alcohol and addictive substances, sexual orientation, well-being, gender norms and stereotypes, and consent.

Of particular welcome is the emphasis placed on healthy non-sexual relationships. These form the majority of the relationships we have in life and can be healthy or unhealthy, or even harmful, and the course encourages a fuller exploration of this topic beyond a discussion of bullying or abusive behaviour.

The integrated approach may pose a challenge for schools to properly respect the role of parent/guardians as the primary educators of their children, in that withdrawal of students may become areas of contestation. It would be preferable if the RSE elements could be presented as discreet elements, making withdrawals practicable, as otherwise some parents/guardians may simply seek to opt their children out of the course entirely.

The full potential of the course, will require informed parental engagement that empowers parents/guardians to make informed decisions with respect to their children and to support the learning outcomes through the home.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

The Council for Catechetics believes the proposed CBA is suitable, providing as it does for students to critically reflect on their learning. The respect for student agency in selecting topics is welcome. The inclusions of some form of assessment pays proper respect to the significance of the course.

The assessment and feedback will need to be handled with sensitivity and necessary supports and guidance provided to inform same.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

For this SPHE course to be successful it will need to take account of the ethos of schools and how the course will interact and respect that ethos. Similarly, the primacy of parents/guardians as educators requires recognition. Parental involvement will necessarily have to form a key part in the planning of the introduction of the course.

A whole of school approach will be required and integration of the course with the policies of the school, and with other subjects, including in Catholic schools, religious education.

As the NCCA is aware, significant supports in material and professional development for teachers, and in supports to school leadership teams and boards of management, will be required.

Taking a longer view, the aim should be to create a cohort of teachers trained for and with experience in SPHE, and this present proposed course should be seen as something that will be subject to revision once we have a suitable cohort of confident practitioners, representative of the variety of ethos present in schools, available to provide feedback to enhance and improve this course in the future.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Donegal Pro-Life Group

Donegal Pro-Life Group

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

I disagree and consider that your statement of aims does not encapsulates the purpose of SPHE for Junior Cycle. The proposed statement above **has failed completely in its aim** to nurture students with values that will help them **to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships**, as the students have not been encouraged to engage with their parents/ family in the consultation process, in such an important issue. Teaching Relationships, Sexuality Education (RSE) should never be made mandatory in our classrooms and should never be integrated with SPHE. This proposed short course OR SPHE/RSE curriculum changes cannot meet all their stated aims because they promote an ideological standpoint that assumes all students, parents and teachers believe in gender identity ideology which is far from the reality and inaccurate from the onset.

The word mandatory should be immediately removed from all printed content relating to SPHE/RSE documents where religious views and opinions are undermined or challenged as our Constitution allows for freedom to practice all religions.

Access to smart technology in schools easily allows that all parents and children 12 years and older currently in the education system should have been notified and emailed a link to one comprehensive document which outlined all proposed changes, with examples of teaching materials/ toolkit.

A printed version of a single comprehensive document should have been made available at every public library where one free copies could have been made per household.

An independent public survey should have been conducted to form unbiased opinions from all interested parties. I believe the scale of the enormous flaws in this report would be highlighted further had those steps been taken.

This short course on SPHE **FAILS** in many other areas which includes the following.:

1. Your Aim and course content does not correctly cover the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle students because a human person is a physical and spiritual being and both aspects must be respected and accommodated for with-in the SPHE syllabus for 12-15 year olds. The Irish have always been and still are a spiritual people. I demand that you reinstate **'Spiritual'** as a value which was previously present in the 2016 RSE curriculum. By including Spiritual values, you will provide an holistic education for all young people. I also note that 'spiritual values' continue to be included in your international examples of RSE/ SPHE provided in your referencing from England, Scotland and New Zealand etc... Why was the importance of the Family Unit underplayed or omitted as this should also be included.

2. This consultation process is seriously flawed in that it never engaged directly with Parents and No effort was made at any stage to organise information evenings in the schools with the Board of Management and Parents so they could be informed and discuss the proposed changes to the curriculum for RSE. The NCCA/ course developers have actively ostracised any parental involvement and this SPHE/ RSE short course content/ curriculum is actively encouraging students to disrespect and ignore their parents and their advice.
3. Young Students under 16 years in Ireland have traditionally been taught and encouraged in our schools **to maintain a respectful and caring relationships with their parents/ guardians/leaders in society**. This course I believe, will remove healthy engaging consultation between young students and their parents/teachers/elders in determining what is a 'respectful and caring relationship'.
4. I have no confidence in the consultation process employed as we believe it was formed using a flawed and biased process.
 - i. A pilot project discussing Pornography was carried out in schools without parental knowledge or feedback. We believe Teachers are in breach of their child safeguarding obligations if they deliberately conceal the use of sensitive trials dealing with sexually explicit topics with children/ minors without parental consent.
 - ii. One of your NCCA contributors to this SPHE course is on video actively advising teachers on how to reduce/remove parental involvement... This is biased behaviour in favour of forcing an attitude through in our schools and this must be investigated immediately. Such behaviour has totally jeopardised a fair and balanced consultation outcome.
 - iii. Another advisory group used in preparing this course "BeLongTo" advises teachers to evade answering parents about the use of pronouns by a student. The handbook supplied to deliver their Universal LGBT+ awareness and skills training, advises professionals working with young people in community or education settings to not;

"Out them to their parents. Ensure you use whatever pronouns they wish you to use if you are communicating with their parents about or with the young person." Pg. 23

This is a breach of trust and promotes child/parent alienation. Teachers are in breach of their child safeguarding obligations if they deliberately conceal the use of preferred pronouns by a student from the child's parents or if they use pronouns without the parents' consent.
5. The aim of this document has failed completely as it has totally disregarded establishing 'respect and values' **by not consulting first and foremost with parents, then the board of management/ patron of the schools**.
6. The Irish Constitution upholds the right to practice your religion in Ireland and to have faith based schools and to have your voice heard.

ARTICLE 40 - 1. All citizens shall, as human persons, be held equal before the law.

*This shall not be held to mean that the State shall not in its enactments have due regard to differences of capacity, physical **and moral, and of social function**.*

ARTICLE 40 – 6. 1° The State guarantees liberty for the exercise of the following rights, subject to public order and morality: –

i. The right of the citizens to express freely their convictions and opinions.

This shall not be held to mean that the State shall not in its enactments have due regard to differences of capacity, physical and moral, and of social function

ARTICLE 41. 1° The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law.

2° The State, therefore, guarantees to protect the Family in its constitution and authority, as the necessary basis of social order and as indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.

ARTICLE 42. 1 The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.

42. 2 Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.

42. 4 The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.

Article 44. 2. 3° The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious profession, belief or status.

Among others...

The NCCA must not allow RSE and SPHE to be integrated as the proposed SPHE course removes the rights to teach according to faith based values for Catholics and the Islamic faith.

The 12 -15 year old Junior Certificate students in SPHE must be primarily taught the values and morals of their own professed religious beliefs. The Junior cert. students should not be encouraged to undermine or contradict or challenge those students with religious morals or values. The proposed SPHE course will teach students to challenge moral or faith views held by others. Students with a set religious moral value should not be mandated to partake in classes in SPHE or RSE that they do not wish to participate in.

All religious faiths aim to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values to help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives within the teachings of their faith and in society.

7. The SPHE draft specification in **Strand 1 - 1.4.** appear to set out an ideological commitment to sex and gender identity that are '**owned by the developers of this consultation process**' and are **NOT reflective of all in society**.... This course states that students should be able to 'appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression **as core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum**'. **In my opinion your** 'Gender' or being Male/ Female has nothing to do with the colour wheel spectrum and teachers or adults encouraging children to explore manipulation of their gender between 12 and 15 years are in breach of their child safeguarding obligations.

8. The SPHE draft specification in **Strand 1 - 1.4.** appear to set out an ideological commitment to sex and gender identity that **are 'owned by the developers of this consultation process'** and are **NOT reflective of all in society...**

This course states that students should be able to 'appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression **as core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum**'. **In our opinion your** 'Gender' or being Male/ Female has nothing to do with the colour wheel spectrum and teachers or adults encouraging children to blend or explore or to manipulate their gender between ages 12 and 15 are in breach of their child safeguarding obligations.

What adults do, adults do with full knowledge but our children must be protected. It is extremely dangerous to promote a biological sex as something fluid and malleable and we have seen the recent closure of the Tavistock clinic .

When adults believe children have a gender identity query, it is a personal belief and this must not be presented to pupils as fact. In relation to students being taught what are 'Sexual orientation, Gender identity and expressions ' this curriculum is attempting to rewrite the complete Biology course and the individuality of men and of women. It attempts to rewrite scientific facts regarding Male / Female chromosomes.

Gender questioning children have specific needs that those parents responsible for their care and welfare must address and the classroom for 12 to 15 year olds is not the place to do this. I believe that children can be unduly influenced with such ideology being presented in the classroom as biological facts and this may cause harm or damage to children. We have many examples of copycat behaviour among children in both primary and secondary school.

9. There is no respect shown on the course for the extremely rare condition when children are born with true hermaphroditism or Differences in Sex Development (DSD).

The term 'Intersex' as used in the document is inaccurate and is controversial. It is not universally accepted by those very small number of people living with Differences in Sex Development (DSD). When the NCCA uses the term 'intersex' is it referring to people without a DSD who choose **to identify as intersex or those with a DSD, who may not use or even like the term?**

It must be acknowledged that while some people believe that "trans girls are girls" and "trans boys are boys", **this is not a belief that is shared by everyone**, and it is not reflected in law. The reality is a "trans girl" is a boy and a "trans boy" is a girl and each deserves to have respect in society.

10. By telling pupils they are behaving in an exclusionary or homophobic or bigoted manner for expecting or wanting to retain their views on these issues is wrong.

In 2022, after a five year legal battle The Rowe family has now been awarded £22,000 in legal costs and a commitment from the English government to reform transgender policies in primary schools. Nigel Rowe, 49 and his wife Sally, 47, had taken legal action against the Department for Education (DfE) after they and their six-year-old son were labelled 'transphobic' by a Church of England primary school for refusing to 'believe' in transgender affirming policies.

The Rowes presented to the court Expert evidence including that from Graham Rogers, Distinguished Service Professor of Psychiatry at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. From 1975 until 2011, he was the Henry Phipps Professor of Psychiatry and the director of the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Science at Johns Hopkins. At the same time, he was psychiatrist-in-chief at the Johns Hopkins Hospital with overall responsibility for the proper care and treatment of patients with, among other issues, sexual disorders who in his report stated several relevant facts that support the concerns I have raised.

Examples quoted below from Professor Rogers report affirm the concerns I have raised here about delivering this SPHE course curriculum to 12 -15 year olds. If we truly have the best interest of our children at heart, we need to respect Professor Rogers findings when he states:

“(142) Developmentally, young people are more impulsive than those who are older, due to maturational processes; one specifically refers to the role of the pre-frontal cortex and its role in impulsivity and risk taking behaviour where this part of the brain does not fully mature **until the late teens through to early mid-twenties. It is an area of the brain intimately connected to decision-making.**

(154) ‘Transition’ does not alter ‘gender,’ but alters some of the external signs of such.

(181) More specifically, “Persons with transsexualism, after sex reassignment, have considerably higher risks for mortality, suicidal behaviour, and psychiatric morbidity than the general population.”

(427) “It is acknowledged by the Endocrine Society that a young person under the age of 16 may not have sufficient psychological maturity to commit to such a lifelong and life-changing decision, and no evidence is available to understand the effects of giving gender-affirming hormone treatment before 16 years. A systematic review of the available evidence has been published recently by NHS England Clinical Commissioning Policy,” p 635. Butler et al (2018)

(428) However, there is evidence to suggest that many 16-year olds are not sufficiently psychologically or developmentally mature to be able to make such treatment decisions. Indeed, statistically speaking, that would, at a minimum, be one in every two 16-year olds; though this therefore leads to greater concern regarding pre-pubescent children.

(819) The social harm that may be done to relationships, the damage to the self, the damage within families, would all need to be considered, especially as research shows that the majority of those ‘self-diagnosing,’ no longer identify as transgender as they mature.

(835)# However, allied to informing schools and parents, the figures for the developmental change that occurs need be set out. That is, 4-in-5 children as they progress into puberty and through adolescence will no longer identify as gender dysphoric. The schools and families need to understand that this figure comes from the GIDS, Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust, and is internationally recognised.

The English government has decided to settle the case after the Rowes won permission at the High Court for a judicial review of the government’s transgender affirming policies. The recent comments of Attorney General Suella Braverman KC align closely with the reasoning behind Nigel and Sally’s legal case and this should be of significance in considering the concerns I have raised here in my submission and in the potential for litigation here in Ireland.

We have also recently seen an increase in the number of sports organisations eg: Rugby who have stopped permitting trans men in sport because of the danger it can pose to the individuals as the biological males strength is far greater than any woman’s strength.

Parents need to know: Will school junior sports teams allow trans girls to play ladies rugby or Basketball or tennis or swimming with their girls under 14’s? Who will be allowed in the ladies changing rooms or communal showers. Will a trans-girl be allowed into the ladies communal showers after a match. Or will a trans-boy be allowed into the boys shower after a match?

This SPHE short course in its current format is totally flawed and dangerous for our children in that it promotes an ideology of perceived biological sex/ sexual preference which is at a very early stage of development in society and much has yet to be learned of the outcome and effects on those impacted.....

Consider the current 'mothers and baby home' court cases and the residents ongoing litigation for psychological and physical damage these residents say they received in the care of the state. Now jump down the road 10 or 20 years to 2032 Or 2042 and Consider if/when children want to initiate legal action for psychological or physical damages resulting from such teachings or conditioning in years to come, who is to be held responsible? Teachers personally, school(they don't have funds), State?

Have you considered or identified Who will those children 'sue' if they believe they have been damaged by these proposed teachings? Is it the NCCA or the Department of Education, Minister Donnelly or those individuals that developed this programme. We would like clarity on who has the final say in pushing this ideology over the line and into the schools and exactly who will be held legally liable?

11. Children attempting to get counselling or psychological supports or services in our current education system and Health Service in CAMS and YAMS or basic educational assessment are not having their needs met in a timely or adequate fashion or not met at all in some cases. We believe professional counselling supports and assessments should be made available and financed for children on an individual basis if they do present with any needs in a timely manner outside the classroom.
12. This course document is inconclusive/ unclear about the meaning of words. The glossary of key terms for SPHE defines 28 terms but does not define the term 'sex' or 'gender'. Without a definition of the term 'sex' what does 'sexism' or 'sexual harassment' mean in law, in the staff room or in the workplace or classroom? Where is there no examples of pornographic material for contributors to review in the document?? What is the definition of the Pornography that will be shown to children.
13. Who is responsible if subsequent to be taught and shown PORN in school children then decide to look up PORN on the family computer? If the family computer is repaired in a certified computer workshop and Gardai arrive and remove the computer because the images stored or viewed are illegal?
14. I believe teaching and promoting controversial gender ideology and PORN to children will lead to a significant weakening in the legal protection of women and all children in the future.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

We must remember this SPHE syllabus is for our children from age 12 to 15 years and according to the Irish constitution. How many parents do you think understand or know what these SPHE strands and their contents feature? As a priority, In advance of any further changes to the SPHE or RSE curriculums all parents need to be fully engaged with and comprehensively informed about what the NCCA's gender ideology is, and its implications for now and in the future, clearly stating both sides of the argument. Let's look for the best outcome for all our children.

We need to ask the NCCA and parents and children and all teachers and others with interest who really believes this SPHE/RSE course which is additional to what is already taught in RSE or SPHE is relevant to improve the sense of security and values of children today and into the future. Learning First aid, Rules of the road and issues Preparing for life's like running a home and budgeting on wages might be better suited.

Nurturing self-worth and self-esteem and respect is relevant to all children and all people. The mandatory teaching of a transient gender ideology, an ideology which contradicts natural science and biology running through your Strands is totally wrong and may leave children very vulnerable or anxious. Some of the most concerning proposals in the draft are those relating to 'gender identity', 'consent' and 'pornography' and promotion of contraception for 12 to 15 year olds.

How can NCCA support teaching:

Pornography

The abuse and exploitation of women and children that go hand in hand with making Pornographic images is dangerous according to the RAPE crisis centres literature can never be describes as a positive experience for teaching 12 to 15 year olds we believe. Teaching and promoting PORN material is extremely dangerous and will can cause great harm, upset and confusion and potential addiction for children.

Strand 3 (3.9)Learning Outcome states that students should be able to "investigate the influence of digital media -in particular, the influence of pornography- on young people's understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression".

How will it be accomplished and using what material? The '[Active Consent Unit](#)' at NUI Galway which works in partnership with the Department of Justice and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science need to be challenged on their influence here. An example of this is evident in a [submission](#) made in 2019 to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills about RSE, two members of the team, Pádraig MacNeela (a senior lecturer at NUI Galway) and Siobhán O'Higgins (who has worked for AIDS West, also State-funded) said: "pornography can have a positive impact in assisting with learning about sexual activity", although they accept that "the scripts [from pornography] for sexual activity and role models that young people are exposed to do not map well on to the WHO definition of positive sexual health".

In 2018, a document called 'Porn Report' was launched by then Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor. It was written by Kate Dawson and the aforementioned Pádraig MacNeela and Siobhán O'Higgins.

Commenting on the report, Dawson said: "it is not good enough to just say that 'porn is bad' because it is not, people really enjoy watching it, there are a lot of positive uses, but people need to have the skills to make their own mind up about the content they see because porn is so varied." So what skills does Kate Dawson suggest 12 year olds should be taught to assist them view porn. Are you really accepting this advice? I have not seen them listed. What PORN will be accepted for viewing hard /soft/ group sessions/ using animal PORN????

Unicef take a different opinion of the reality of the impact of porn on children. "Pornographic content can harm children. Exposure to pornography at a young age may lead to poor mental health, sexism and objectification, sexual violence, and other negative outcomes. Among other risks, when children view pornography that portrays abusive and misogynistic acts, they may come to view such behaviour as normal and acceptable." Ref: Unicef.org

Again, we ask, will parents be properly consulted about this? What do the NCCA want? What do Parents want?

Gender identity

It appears from this draft proposed SPHE course that the NCCA is now rewriting science of the male, female anatomy and they believe that biological sex and gender are separate?

Will our Junior Certificate Biology class also be taught that sex and gender are two separate definitions and that to be 'male' or 'female' is simply a matter of self-identification and has nothing to do with your biological body?

Does NCCA believe that schools should continue to define the definition of a woman as biologically female and a man as biologically male or will this be removed from science books and dictionaries?

How will the NCCA and the SPHE teachers now want the words 'woman' and 'man' defined in our textbooks?

How much detail about sexual preferences are the NCCA prepared to introduce to the classroom syllabus in their toolkits and how much will the SPHE class illustrate of those various possible sexual unions?

If the NCCA believes that gender is a choice as promoted by some in society and has no intrinsic relationship to our bodies, then it is taking sides on this issue in a way many parents might find unacceptable.

The NCCA have clearly firmly supported the decision to push this gender ideology with no expenses spared and yet they have not supported the mental health crisis observed by teachers in the classroom among students, nor provided adequate educational assessments for those with learning difficulties or physical difficulties, or mental health issues Why not?

Consent for children under 15 years

Strand 3 (3.7) states students should be able to “appreciate the importance of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring interpersonal relationships and from a legal perspective”. Will there be a text book chapter on sexual consent stating what is acceptable, defining how to have “safe” sex and at what age and in what situation? Will there ever be an occasion of the NCCA recommending abstinence or chastity or patience for children to wait. Legal age of consent does not define an age of maturity to find a secure relationship and family planning? Or is it automatic that an abortion will be recommended if a student under 15 gets pregnant? Are young kids having sex in the school or disco toilet or out at the back wall approved?

Will the NCCA also teach that a couple does not have to be in a romantic relationship before having sex? What will be on the course? Does the NCCA consider all sexual unions irrelevant of gender or number of sexual contributors for all children both heterosexual and those stating “other” or non-binary preferences is fine as long as you are using contraception? That is the message that I am getting from this document. Will religious schools be allowed to teach that the ideal setting for sexual relationships, in their view, is marriage? The HSE website, b4udecide.ie suggests reasons why young people should wait until they are older before having sex (although it only encourages they wait until they have reached the age of consent).

Parents must be consulted about what they want their children to be taught. Is it ok to teach consent-alone approach is enough? Do they want them taught about the importance of being in a relationship first, or even being married first before engaging in sex or having multiple sexual partners?

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

We totally disagree with students completing or presenting a class based assessment covering any strands. Having to address 3 out of 4 strands leaves students little choice about their CBA and it will have to include Porn / Gender identity and then you want them to stand at the top of the class and do a presentation about it. Who wrote this course ...Kate Dawson? There is absolutely no consideration for the mental impact this will have on students under 15.

Pornography and discussions on Sexual relationships and various sexual partners and gender ideology are mentioned throughout this short course. The course content is not clear if you intend to discuss in great detail the various sexual relationships .You state students will analyse and critique sexual behaviours between a man and a woman, in a heterosexual relationship in the content. Will the NCCA also allow discussion on all various sexual positions or techniques?

Will you discuss or show visuals or use films to show heterosexual, lesbian sex or Gay sex between males?

Again, Unicef website states that *“Pornographic content can harm children. Exposure to pornography at a young age may lead to poor mental health, sexism and objectification, sexual violence, and other negative outcomes. Among other risks, when children view pornography that portrays abusive and misogynistic acts, they may come to view such behaviour as normal and acceptable.”* Ref: Unicef.org

- As a result of Unicef’s findings and advice I wish to object to pornographic discussions or images/ visuals of various sexual partners and sexual positions being offered or shown to junior cert classes.
- Again: I recommend RSE is not combined or integrated with SPHE but must be offered as a stand-alone subject that is age appropriate and subject to parental consent and parental discussion.
- RSE must also reflect the ethos and the faith values of the school and the children in the classroom in consultation with the children’s parents.
- Under no circumstance should Class Based Assessment happen or include content derived from RSE (Relationships and sexuality) modules on SPHE.

Additional/ sensitive RSE professional counselling could be offered to children who request it in ‘after school’, as an elective subject, that students can opt in or out of, with parental consent.

Toolkit (a toolkit is make what of our children?)

I have grave reservations about the toolkits and the resources used in delivering this programme and these should be shown to parents at a public information evening.

In CBA's should a child decide to do a project on PORN? Or on sexual preferences?? what visuals and images and what media are appropriate to use to display Pornographic material or videos for their Class based assessment (CBA)?

With the expanding technology now available on even the cheapest of smart phone could students make or create their own videos of any subject matters dealing with Relationships or Sexuality or Education or a combined version and say it's for my project in school? Could they sexual images taken by youth also be declared as "for a school project" Could a student who was blackmailing or exploiting a former boyfriend girlfriend be left unchallenged if they say they were not intending to intimidate or bully or blackmail the other person in the picture as it was with consent for school???

Will students and teachers be allowed freedom of conscience and freedom of speech to express their knowledge that sex is binary and immutable? Will students be marked down if they do not conform to the tenets set out in the Section 1/1.4 of the draft course and in the toolkit resources that teach gender identity as fact?

All students and teachers must be allowed freedom of conscience and freedom of expression to uphold their own beliefs and values. I believe forcing children to participate in Class based assessments of a sensitive nature will put pressure on many young students in the school environment, leading to bullying and peer pressure thus causing undue anxiety.

Will the impact and affects from exploring multiple casual sexual partners be discussed and how such behaviour can damage confidence for young people and lead to physical and mental health difficulties?

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

- 1) We must remember this SPHE syllabus is for our children from age 12 to 15 years and according to the Irish Constitution (42.1) the Parents are still the primary educators of their children.
 - 2) As such parents should have full access to the 'Toolkit' resources and complete access to lesson content and methodologies in advance of anything being used or taught in the class- room. Children at any given age may not display the same maturity and will not all process sensitive information in the same way. This SPHE course content may be disturbing and confusing for many children, so parental involvement is vital.
 - 3) The consultation process is complicated and there should only be one submission form to complete.
 - 4) 400 hours to teach SPHE over the three years is too much and 100 hours (Short Course) per year is much too long.
 - 5) SPHE should be kept separate from RSE so that Students should have a personal choice to abstain from RSE
 - 6) LO 1.4 states that recognise how sexuality and gender identity is part of what it means to be human and has biological psychological , cultural, social and spiritual dimensions must be removed as it is in contravention to the ethos taught in faith schools and the Irish constitution (42.1) enshrines the right to religious freedom.
 - 7) Activity 4: This definition is illogical. A person's sexual orientation is based on sex not gender. If sexual orientation is based on an individual's perception of themselves this gives license for a male person to describe themselves as lesbian because they have a female gender identity and a female person to describe themselves as a gay man because they have a male gender identity. This is a logical fallacy.
 - 8) It must be taught that Heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation as dictated by evolution for the survival of the human species and being heterosexual should be acknowledged as the normal relationship.
 - 9) In the current excessive support projected in our media to allow everyone to be anyone or anything as a gender, even to allowing very young children to be encouraged to think that its ok for them to change sex, if they feel they want to, or be a trans boy or girl at a whim is dangerous to the mental health and physical health of some of these young people using the research for Professor Rogers earlier in this submission. A child who identifies as a different gender to their sex has not legally changed sex. It must also be taught that evidence suggests the same level of support for people reversing a transition process is not evident or supported medically or in the media. Ref: Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust (TPHT) in supporting transitioning children at the school has been now **shut down** over safety concerns for thousands of children who have been referred to the clinic. Encouraging or promoting gender transitioning is particularly worrying as research conducted by statsforgender.org shows that gender dysphoria recedes in 80% of cases if not actively affirmed.
1. Strand 3 Relationships and sexuality. The choices and behaviours of adults in their sexual lives and attitudes should not be foisted on to 12-15 year olds with immature minds and little experience of life. Parents send children to school to be in a safe secure and protected learning environment.

2. This parental trust should not be violated as LO 3.1 in Strand 3 would attempt to do.
3. We must be clear as to what is meant by sexuality in your LO 3.1 // The Definition of sexuality in 2022 has become estranged from science.
4. These are children we are discussing not adults.
- 10) Schools have an obligation to ensure all teaching materials, policies and external facilitators are appropriate and meet child safeguarding standards. See Department of Education Circular 2018/43
- 11) No bullying and harassment of any child/teacher, for any reason, should be accepted. This includes bullying of staff and students who do not believe in promoting any gender identity ideology and staff and students who wish to learn or teach according to their school ethos or Faith values.
- 12) Schools and teachers must understand that 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' are not protected characteristics in the Equal Status Acts. Gender is a protected characteristic and for the purpose of the Equal Status Acts gender means to be male or female.
- 13) Marriage and any engagement in sexual activity is illegal under the age of 16 years in Ireland. These laws are put in place to protect growing and developing children.
- 14) RSE must be stand alone...
- 15) **The positive Benefits of Religious faith and values, Chastity, Marriage, commitment must be included in RSE.**
- 16) **Advice on positive pregnancy support and groups that help pregnant women keep their babies should be taught in SPHE/RSE.**
- 17) If you teach Respect for all people to all children this will permeate through society and also include those from marginalised communities.....without accepting that those in the marginalised/ gay communities and their life styles are being promoted by those of differing views.
- 18) We believe those people who offered expertise to develop this short course and its contents and structure should be held personally legally accountable, should a child or their parents subsequently claim damages as a result of this teaching.
- 19) This proposed short course OR SPHE/RSE curriculum changes cannot meet all their stated aims because they promote an ideological standpoint that assumes all students, parents and teachers believe in gender identity ideology which is far from the reality and inaccurate from the onset.



NCCA

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National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Drug and Alcohol
Task Force
(Western region)

Drug and Alcohol Task Force (Western region)

The WRDATF sought input from the committee representatives and those working with a prevention/ education focus within the region. This committee found this critique difficult for various reasons;

- They are not qualified health & wellbeing experts and were conscious of that when making this submission.
- They also assume the nominated committee who put this submission together are highly skilled professionals in this sector.
- Finally, they assume all links between 'key skills' and 'health& wellbeing outcomes' are evidence based and validated thus making it difficult to comment on.

The WRDATF found the document positive overall but not without critique. See below our observations and comments.

Overarching positive comments:

The curriculum covers a wide variety of topics that will support the physical and social wellbeing of young people.

The four strands within the curriculum cover fundamental areas to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and values that will support them in finding their own identity, making positive choices and providing them with an awareness and understanding of other people.

I particularly commend the cross-cutting elements of dialogue, awareness, reflection and action that support effective teaching and learning in SPHE. These underpinning methods will allow young people to actively engage in the learning process. The promotion of dialogue in the classroom sparks engaged learning through open discussion that strengthens a student's understanding of an issue or topic. The inclusion of both reflection and action allows young people not only to reflect on a topic or issue but allows young people the opportunity to apply this skills or knowledge in the real world.

Overarching Critique:

The programme does not tackle how young people can make social change within society. Young people can look at issues in the existing curriculum such as healthy choices, relationships and sexuality and emotional wellbeing and examine the causes of such issues in society (reflection on issue) and take steps to bring about change (action on issue). One of the fundamental teaching methodologies within the plan is named as 'praxis': this teaching methodology requires young people to reflect on a topic and take action to address the issue on some level. This method of applying what is learnt in the classroom to the real world would provide tangible learning outcomes for young people. An example of this action could involve the young people developing a campaign to raise awareness around mental health or supporting primary school children to get active and healthy. This provides more relevance to the topic and how it applies to the real world rather than just a theoretical understanding.

Specific positive comments on the proposed learning outcomes

Strand 1 Understanding myself and others: There is a good blend of outcomes that cover both personal and social development. I welcome the outcome that focus attention on changes that occur during adolescence, as this can be a turbulent time for young people during this developmental stage in their lives. There is also a significant effort across the outcomes to respecting others in society regardless of their religion, race, sexual orientation and gender. This understanding of pluralism is vitally important in relation to social cohesion in society. The focus on self-management skills is also beneficial to the programme particularly the self-regulation of thoughts, emotions and impulses. This ability to self-regulate will benefit young people throughout their lives in relation to their relationships, work and personal mental health.

Strand 2 Making healthy choices: The outcomes cover key challenges to making healthy choices for young people. There is a strong focus on ensuring young people abstain from smoking, alcohol and addictive substances. This can be a high-risk time for young people who are heavily influenced by their peers, marketing and advertisement. It is also a time of experimentation and concern around self-image that may result in unhealthy choices being made. I also praise the outcome that focuses on developing strategies to make positive decisions when experiencing peer pressure. I also laud the emphasis on young people's use of the internet and the benefits and challenges it entails. Young people spend a significant part of their lives on the internet, it is essential that educators teach young people to put into context the content they are exposed to when online.

Stand 3: Relationships and Sexuality: It is important young people are aware of what healthy relationships and healthy sexual expressions looks like. Young people can be influenced by social media, pornography, misinformation from peers or may have witnessed unhealthy relationships within their family. This can result in young people having a distorted understanding of what a healthy relationship looks like and misleading expectations of sexual expression. I also acknowledge the inclusion of the topic of sexual consent: this need to be discussed and understood by young people.

Strand 4: Emotional Wellbeing: The outcomes place attention on raising the awareness of young people to how their thoughts, feelings and behaviours are interconnected, this will be particularly beneficial to emotional wellbeing. The prominence of online and face to face bullying and the steps required to address these issues is greeted in this section. Bullying can have a significant impact on young people that impacts their mental health, confidence, relationships and academic life. It is also comforting to see that the outcomes also include where young people can seek support if required around these issues.

Specific critique/ suggestions on the proposed new learning outcomes:

Understanding myself and others: One recommendation would be to include the influence on peer pressure on a young person's identity. As young people transition through adolescents they strive to move away from the influence of their parents and are more influenced by their peers. Another recommendation for the curriculum is to examine the personal boundaries of young people so that they are clear around what they are comfortable with and what they are not.

Strand 2: Making Healthy Choices: One proposal would be to place more of an emphasis on the benefits of nutrition. A healthy nutritious diet can have a significant impact on a young person mental and physical health and academic performance. Statistics have shown there has been an increase of young people experiencing overweight and obesity in Irish society. Although it is vitally important to deter young people from addictive substance, the food they eat daily should be considered as a priority within the curriculum. As addiction is covered in this module in depth perhaps an outcome that outlines ways to seek support for young people if this issue gets out of control. Again, as mentioned in the previous section more of an emphasis on the influence on peers as this has a significant influence on young people's decision making at this age.

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality: One suggestion would be to warn young people of the risks of

building relationships with people online. Young people are using a range of social media platforms and online gaming consoles that can be shared with people around the world. This access to young people can attract adults with deviant sexual intentions. Young people should be warned of the dangers of people on the internet with fake profiles that have ulterior motives to building relationships with young people online.

Strand 4: Emotional Wellbeing: One suggestion is to examine emotional wellbeing as an ongoing practice that needs to be maintained by everybody, and not to be considered only when you are experiencing a stressful situation. Emotional wellbeing should be a preventative measure that we do every day, therefore outlining an outcome that explores preventative measures to maintain emotional wellbeing maybe required.

Other comments

2.2 investigate how unhealthy products (cigarettes, e-cigarettes, alcohol, and snack and diet foods) are marketed and advertised to appeal to young people

a) 'Vaping' is the term more commonly used term, especially by young people. It would also be a term that extends more easily to cover products that are vaped but are not nicotine-based.

b) 'snack and diet' foods seems to be an 'uneasy' phrase to use, in that a 'snack' could be healthy (e.g. fruit). In a similar way a 'diet' food may also be healthy. It would also seem to avoid recognising the health risks posed by some of the products of food manufacturers and convenience outlets. Perhaps the term 'processed foods' would more accurately reflect the area of concern.

2.3 analyse the supports and challenges for young people when it comes to making healthy choices about smoking, drinking alcohol and other addictive substances/behaviours, and discuss how the challenges can be overcome in real-life situations

Whilst e-cigarettes (or 'vaping') as been referenced in 2.2 it has not been included in 2.3. Such products are also clearly part of the picture in this area.

Another comment:

Having reviewed the information my general perception is positive. I have noted that they have used some of the Planet Youth information which is positive. There may be other relevant documents that have been developed by WRDATF (other Task Forces) that you may wish to include and I support their inclusion.

In conclusion the feedback is overall very support of the SPHE Curriculum as presented. The WRDATF are particularly interested in the implementation of the curriculum, and particular the Healthy Choices 1 programme. We would like to see the plans for teacher training on this element and would support this training within the region. Overall, the outcomes of the curriculum and the programmes within it are only effective when the young people/students are given the opportunity to actively engage with them and we advocate that all junior cycle pupils are afforded this opportunity, through effective teacher training and implementation in all schools.



NCCA

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Contributor

Educate Together

Introduction

As a management and patron body operating a network of 96 primary and 21 second-level schools in Ireland, catering to over 37,000 students, Educate Together welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to NCCA on the Draft Specification for Junior Cycle SPHE.

In preparing this feedback we have consulted with our second-level schools whose responses have informed this submission.

Before responding to the specific questions requested in this phase of the consultation, Educate Together would like to commend the NCCA on the development of this comprehensive and inclusive draft curriculum and the related SPHE/RSE Toolkit.

Educate Together strongly welcomes the Draft Junior Cycle Specification for SPHE in general and considers it to be a learner-centred, equality-based curriculum that is also modern, dynamic and strongly aligned with Educate Together's vision for second-level schools as outlined in [Taking the Next Step: A Blueprint for Educate Together Second-Level Schools](#)

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

Educate Together agrees with the summary above as to the purpose of the draft SPHE curriculum for Junior Cycle.

The purpose of the draft curriculum is fully in alignment with the values of Educate Together and its specific commitment to:

- Placing the young person at the centre of the educational process;
- Respecting and celebrating the different and unique identities of all;
- An educational philosophy that promotes the values of justice, equality and human rights for all young people, and challenges injustice and unfair discrimination;
- Providing young people with the knowledge, skills, dispositions and attitudes that they need, enabling them to make informed moral decisions and preparing them to become caring members of society;
- Empowering young people to take an active role in society and in the stewardship of the environment;
- Working in a democratic way that embraces the input from children, parents, teachers and supporters to enable the highest level of partnership and participation;

Some quotes from feedback we received from our network which reinforce this view include;

"Yes, I agree with this statement, SPHE is a subject that allows students to explore their skills and values which in turn offer them the chance to make good decisions and choices which will influence their relationships and personal lives." Wellbeing Coordinator

"I agree with the above statement, because positive communication skills and the skills needed to build and maintain respectful relationships will be of huge benefits to students throughout each stage of life." Teacher of SPHE

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Having considered the four strands (Understanding Myself & Others; Making Healthy Choices; Relationships and Sexuality and Emotional Wellbeing) and the three cross-cutting elements (Awareness, dialogue, reflection and action) Educate Together, in general, considers that the learning outcomes are clear. More significantly, Educate Together considers that the learning outcomes are relevant to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Feedback from the Educate Together network stressed that attention should be given to ensuring that teachers take account of the age and stage of the students and their life experience, consequently, Educate Together supports the spiral approach which *allows students to revisit important themes over the three years in order to allow for deeper engagement relevant to the students' evolving needs and stage of development*. Educate Together recommends that supporting CPD for this curriculum will need to clearly focus on the need for the SPHE teacher to revisit learning outcomes to ensure that there is a progression of learning. *It is also important to consult regularly with students to ascertain how to plan teaching and learning using the learning outcomes so that the learning is responsive to students' particular needs, questions and concerns. Such consultation will ensure that SPHE is relevant and responsive to the reality of students' lives in diverse contexts and classrooms*. Consultation will need to be done in a meaningful and authentic manner in order to allow students to shape the content and focus of learning units.

Some feedback from our network raised a concern that the learning outcomes “...are very broad and open to interpretation...” This teacher was of the opinion that sample reflection journals would help establish clearer expectations around the standard/depth of content related to learning outcomes.

Educate Together makes the following points related to suggested amendments to about specific learning outcomes/supports:

- Educate Together suggests the learning outcome 1.6 under strand 1: Understanding myself and others, should be expanded to provide the possibility for bias, inequality or exclusion based on a broader range of identities than those listed, for example at minimum the nine grounds of the Equal Status Act (2000-2018).
- The description provided on page 10 related to Strand 3: Relationships and Sexuality states that “*This strand explores the cognitive, physical, emotional and social aspects of relationships and sexuality through a positive, inclusive and rights-based approach. The focus is on family relationships, friendships, romantic/intimate and potential sexual relationships in the future*”. Educate Together recommends that this description is amended to include the word ‘sexual’ in the list of domains that the strand explores, to omit the word implies that sexual relationships will not be explored, which we consider to be an unintended omission. Further, Educate Together considers that the words ‘*in the future*’ ought to be omitted from this description as the learning outcomes as written refer to the present, not hypothetical relationships *of the future*. To ensure relevancy to students’ lives, stages of development and life experiences the specification needs to acknowledge that students have relationships of differing types.

- We suggest that some of the wording within Strand 2 learning outcomes might be revised as some learning outcomes have language that perhaps unintentionally, attaches a value to activities or choices. For example, 2.2 investigate how unhealthy products... the word unhealthy places a value on such products whereas the emphasis should be on how the products are used and it is their abuse that makes them unhealthy. Related to this learning outcome we suggest consideration is given to including vapes to this list given the reported increasing levels of vaping by young people.
- Similarly, we suggest that learning outcome 2.7 (assess the benefits and difficulties associated with their online world) is reviewed again. As it is stated currently there is an implicit judgement that 'their online world' is framed negatively when the fact is that societal operations have become increasingly digitized and the vast majority of adults, young people and children alike are spending large amounts of their waking lives in the 'online' space (at least in the advanced market economies). Increasingly schools, and many in the Educate Together network, utilize digital devices as key learning tools and while we fully support an exploration of the benefits and drawbacks of such an approach, we are simply stating that the wording of this learning outcome might be reviewed and rephrased.
- Educate Together welcomes and supports the sample resources and methodologies provided in the linked [SPHE toolkit](#). Such resources are essential to the effective teaching of this curriculum and therefore we suggest that the learning outcomes might be linked to areas of the toolkit that are most relevant. The link to the toolkit is on page 12, which may be missed if it is not made more prominent in other parts of the curriculum.
- Educate Together notes that the listing of learning outcomes is done without suggested hierarchy or sequence, however there may be an implied hierarchy read into how they are listed, therefore we suggest that the final specification may utilise a different format which excludes such an implication being made by the teacher.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Educate Together supports the suggested CBA for the draft curriculum and affirms the use of portfolio work to provide the opportunity for student-based reflection on their own learning outcomes. Educate Together promotes a model of combined summative and formative assessment methods and approaches that positively impact on student learning outcomes.

Specific feedback from the network on this includes the following:

“I think this CBA can be a good indication of their work over the three years of Junior Cycle. Students can showcase pieces of work they enjoyed or felt they completed to a high standard, giving student voice and choice in their assessment.”

“I feel that this will work well as it gives students a choice, allows for flexibility, differences in interests and isn't a high-pressured scenario such as a presentation which many students find stressful.”

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Suggested areas for improvement have been made earlier related to the specific questions posed. One final point around the need for ongoing review and update of the curriculum, not surprising given that the existing curriculum dates back over twenty years and a period of unparalleled change in Irish society and mores.

"It is great to see a modernisation of the SPHE curriculum, but I think it is important to acknowledge that life as a teenager is constantly changing, social situations, social media etc have influence on student's lives and it is therefore essential that the curriculum is regularly reviewed and updated to reflect the challenges of teenage life and ensure this subject is relevant for students.

For this curriculum to be implemented successfully, high quality CPD will be required for teachers. The draft specification recognises the importance of skilled teachers in this area: *"...having the opportunity to think about and discuss relationships, sexuality and healthy sexual expression within a safe classroom setting with a skilled teacher is vitally important"* (P2).

The toolkit is very welcome and recognises the need for teachers to be skilled in participative and dialogical teaching methodologies. However, given that research has shown that teachers lack confidence and skills in teaching many aspects of SPHE, especially RSE, there is a real danger that the potential of the curriculum will not be realised without significant investment in this area.



NCCA

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Contributor

Education and Training
Boards Ireland

Education and Training Boards Ireland

Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) welcomes the invitation from the NCCA to contribute to the consultation on the draft specification for SPHE.

ETBI is the national representative body for our member Education & Training Boards (ETB) and negotiates on behalf of the ETB sector at various forums both within the education sector, the wider public service and at EU level. Our mission is to harness the collective strength of Education and Training Boards to advance the development of education, training and youth work in Ireland. Our vision is for a lifelong learning society, where people have access to the education and training required to fulfil their potential and to meet their personal, social, cultural, economic, and civic needs. ETBI is guided by the principles of people, partnership and potential in all its activities.

Education & Training Boards provide quality co-educational, multid denominational education supported by robust governance to over 100,000 students and pride themselves on catering for students from diverse backgrounds. All ETB schools are state, multi-denominational schools underpinned by the core values of: **Excellence in Education, Care, Respect, Equality and Community**. ETB schools aim to provide quality learning and teaching environments that are inclusive, learner-centred, and holistic. Central to this philosophy is full access and engagement with the curriculum using approaches and methodologies that ensure optimum outcomes for young people.

ETBI have consulted with the sector to compile this submission.

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

The ETB sector welcomes the proposed aim of the draft SPHE specification. It is recognised that although the aim of the specification places significant demands on teachers and students, aims should be aspirational by nature. As the aim is achieved incrementally over the three-year cycle, it is achievable. The prominence of the 'self' in the aim is key to keeping learner voice at the centre learning and teaching in SPHE which should be commended. ETB schools will recognise of some of our own core values of care and respect within the aim which they will welcome. Overall, the aim captures the purpose of the SPHE specification very well.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The structure of the SPHE specification is welcomed by ETBI. The four interconnected strands and three cross cutting elements which bring the SPHE specification in line with other junior cycle specifications allow for it to be accessible to teachers and students alike. This is very welcome.

The cross-cutting elements allow teachers to dig deep into the learning outcomes. The flexibility of the learning outcomes allows for great richness in the SPHE classroom, igniting the key skills and principles of junior cycle. The movement from 'self' to 'others' in the learning outcomes gives students the opportunity to reflect on themselves and their wider community. ETBI is of the view that this specification is learner centred and responds to the needs of students in an ever-changing social environment. However, ETBI has significant concerns about the implementation phase of this subject specification. The demand in relation to facilitatory competencies and confidence tackling controversial issues in the classroom that this specification places on teachers cannot be underestimated. ETBI welcomes recent developments in terms of funding for new postgraduate upskilling programmes for post-primary SPHE/RSE teachers. However, it is unlikely in the short to medium-term that all teachers of SPHE/RSE will have undertaken such qualifications. Providing all teachers of SPHE/RSE with the high levels of expertise, confidence and competence required to effectively deliver such an ambitious and sensitive specification is essential. This consideration should be central to the specification's implementation plan. Many of the learning outcomes reflect and are symbiotic with the ethos which underpins the ETB sector. Therefore, the specification will be welcomed in ETB schools.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

ETBI welcomes the proposed CBA. However, it is important to flag some concerns over the proposed approach to the CBA. SPHE, in its current format, is viewed by many schools as a respite from the heavy assessment load faced with students. Therefore, the introduction of assessment in this area may be resisted initially. However, the choice of a portfolio approach may alleviate such concerns as they are reflective in nature and developed over time. The portfolio approach should allow for students to reflect on their work rather than perceive it as an extra assessment. CPD and support materials for teachers to reinforce this will be essential to ensure that the CBA does not become another assessment that is approached as a whole class project with little individual reflection.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

ETBI welcome the draft SPHE specification and is of the view that it will allow for rich learning experiences for all students. It is imperative that a robust teacher CPD schedule accompanies the specification. Access to the CPD programmes will be key to its success in the classroom. Current teachers of SPHE are eager to access more training. Gaps in content knowledge and confidence will need to be identified and addressed in order for students to get the most from this specification. The training should include information giving but also be of an experiential nature to allow for the development of the skills needed by the teacher in eliciting and facilitating learning, which is very different to the approach or methodology used in other subjects

Consideration should also be given to whole school professional development in the area of SPHE as many topics can come up across a wide variety of subject areas and everyday interactions between teachers and students. Consistency of message and approach is important to ensure that students receive the best possible outcomes in relation to these important areas of learning.



NCCA

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Contributor

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Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is ‘to nurture students’ self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.’

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

We are delighted to see the mention of how the purpose of the SPHE short course focuses on developing the “knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values” of young people with regards to maintaining respectful and caring relationships and leading fulfilling and healthy lives.

This seems very fitting as based on the specification draft, the curriculum does seem to be heavily focused on the individual with small elements regarding interpersonal relationships woven throughout and this is captured in the above.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

To pre-empt the following response, we find it difficult to provide a comprehensive response to Question 2 without seeing an accompanying curriculum so that we can evaluate whether the learning outcomes are achievable or realistic. What we do note is how relevant they are to the 12-15 year old cohort.

In addition to this, we would like to highlight that without a formal curriculum, the outcomes are open to interpretation to teachers, and as noted in the recent TEACH-RSE research by DCU, teachers need to be supported, trained and/or qualified to teach SPHE/RSE as required in all other subjects.

To provide as comprehensive a response as possible to the NCCA, we provide below feedback on each of the four strands:

Strand 1 – Understanding Myself and Others

- 1.1 – We believe that the explicit mention of ‘puberty’ should be included.

- 1.4 – In an effort to be as inclusive as possible, we would encourage the specific mention of pronouns alongside this point.
- 1.4 & 1.5 – We believe that these are very important elements to include in this strand and very happy to see these outcomes as they are written. We would also suggest there be mention of “my role in upholding respect/inclusion or addressing these challenges”.
- 1.6 – We appreciate the inclusion of the groups mentioned but note there doesn’t seem to be any mention of disability. We would also note that exclusion or bias does not need to be explicit or overt to be addressed. This outcome/curriculum lesson should focus on developing a culture/environment of inclusivity towards all peers and members of society regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or disability.
- 1.7 – We would encourage the explicit mention of “assertive communication” under this point. We also note the inclusion of empathy at the end of this outcome. Empathy is a key skill for young people and has significant relevance to the aim of this course. We strongly recommend that a new outcome is included that aims to support young to understand, develop and demonstrate empathy.
- 1.8 – We recognise the importance of this outcome but are unclear what “delaying gratification” is intended to refer to in this context. Without having sight of a specified curriculum, we would also query how students will be able to demonstrate the skills mentioned in this outcome, such as self-regulating thoughts and impulses.

Missing from Strand 1 that we would recommend covering in Junior Cycle SPHE is the inclusion of “influences” in our lives and how this plays a role in shaping us as individuals as well as the knowledge we gain. Alongside this, an introduction to the topic of ‘privilege’, being able to recognise one’s privileges and explore how our privilege plays a role in relationships with others.

Finally, we believe that in line with the aims of this strand, there should be a particular outcome focusing on personal boundaries (identification of student’s own) and respecting the boundaries of others. This topic would also be a good foundation to further conversations across strands 2 – 4.

Strand 2 – Making Healthy Choices

- 2.1 – Foróige acknowledges the importance of and appreciates the focus of hygiene as a specific outcome. We would note that period hygiene needs to be covered by students of all genders, to address the stigma attached to it.
- 2.5 – Best practice in substance misuse education would be to emphasise short-term (Darcy, 2021) (and in particular, social) consequences for young people engaging in substance use as this is most relevant to them. We would suggest that in the proposed curriculum, the lesson should focus on immediate and short-term consequences in line with best practice guidance.
- 2.6 – We believe that this outcome should be rephrased. Firstly, we would recommend removing the mention of scenarios from the outcome and solely focus on the development of coping mechanisms/skills. Scenarios can be covered in the methodology but this should not be the focus for an outcome but rather the means of achieving such. We also believe that the various addictive or harmful habits mentioned as coping mechanisms are very different from each other, with different considerations and consequences, and each should be explored in detail without conflating them with one another. As such, we would recommend separating these into 3 topics for discussion (substances, diet/exercise, online/screen time). These topics should be addressed sensitively and with due regard for the potential of close personal experiences among students, for instance with substance use in the family, or disordered eating or exercising.

- 2.10 – Foróige strongly commends the NCCA for the inclusion of how to “access appropriate and trustworthy information” in this final outcome. This is a very important skill that young people need to have from a young age. As such, we would recommend a specific reference to recognising the difference between accurate information, misinformation and fake news along with developing the skills to be critical consumers and researchers.

We would recommend the inclusion of information around age-appropriate health screening (e.g. HPV vaccination, breast and testicular self-examinations) and developing skills to identify and seek early intervention for symptoms of physical and negative mental health.

We would also recommend that the NCCA discourage schools/teachers from seeking testimonials from ex-users in line with best practice and research;

- [Darcy \(2021\) Drug Education Best Practice for Health, Community and Youth Workers: A practical and accessible tool-kit](#)
- https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/12161/1/Drugnet_29.pdf (pg. 12)
- https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/mini-guides/schools-and-drugs-health-and-social-responses_en

Strand 3 – Relationships & Sexuality

- 3.1 – We believe that this outcome is missing references to Gender Identity & Expression, which we see as crucial to be included in any discussion of relationships and sexuality. We would also highlight that either in the outcome or lesson plans that ‘sexuality’ should be divided into physical and romantic attraction. To also note, teachings should highlight that ‘sexual activity’ does not define someone’s sexuality – reference to how gender and sexuality is a spectrum and how clear definitions to categorise people cannot always be found. We believe this is what the end of the outcome is hinting towards, but if so, to make this explicit.
- 3.3 – We would recommend having two headings only - healthy and unhealthy relationships as ‘abusive’ falls under unhealthy. Separating unhealthy and abusive can be seen to contribute to a culture of minimising abuse and victim blaming. We would also recommend the inclusion of coercive control in any curriculum. We also believe that the issue of ‘victim blaming’ should be explicitly addressed here to clarify where responsibility for abusive actions lies and to highlight the importance of disclosure and/or reporting of any form/signs of an unhealthy relationship.
- 3.4/3.5 – As mentioned in Strand 1, the mention of ‘boundaries’ should be included in these outcomes or addressed in any designed lesson plans which should underpin any and all conversations addressing these two outcomes.
- 3.7 – We believe that young people need to have more than an appreciation of the importance of giving and receiving consent. Young people should be confident to be able to give/get consent in real situations, particularly in times of pressure/influence. This could be achieved through the use of scenarios. Alongside this, the outcome, as written, infers that young people would already have knowledge of sexual consent. An additional outcome should be created exploring what consent is and what consent looks like in a sexual encounter.
- 3.8 – Foróige welcomes the mention of both contraception and protection which acknowledges various methods of protecting against STIs. However, this outcome should include the mention of protecting against HIV and the prevention of an unplanned pregnancy since ‘contraception’ has been referenced. We would also encourage the NCCA to reference “in all types of sexual activity” in this outcome, with relation to protection methods.

- 3.9 – As it is referenced to in outcome 3.1, for continuity and clarity, we would recommend changing the mention of ‘sexual expression’ to ‘sexuality’. Alongside this, the outcome or curriculum itself should include elements from outcome 2.9 (i.e. child sexual exploitation material & Coco’s law)

N.B. – Foróige advocates that the NCCA lead by example and use the term “child sexual exploitation material” throughout any designed curriculum and never “child pornography” (alongside a note as to why this is and explain terminology and importance of such). Foróige has done this in the most recent update of our RSE programme, REAL U and note how many other organisations are beginning to do so including our REAL U supporting partners, Rape Crisis Network Ireland, and in line with the newly proposed (Child Trafficking & Pornography) amendment Bill by Senator Eileen Flynn.

We note that there is no longer any reference to reproduction in the relationships and sexuality module. While we commend the shift in focus to be on relationships, reproduction is an important element of sexual relationships and should be discussed. This should be done however in an inclusive manner (i.e. using appropriate language such as “sex assigned at birth”, to discuss alternative methods of reproduction (such as surrogacy and IVF) and to explore the genital regions that have no function of reproduction (i.e. vulva area, penis shaft, glans and foreskin)).

Strand 4 – Emotional Wellbeing

- 4.7 – Include reference to “identify signs of distress” as you may not directly see the bullying taking place. We would also recommend including a reference to identifying the “actions of a perpetrator” as not all bullying actions are seen as bullying to a perpetrator and the identification of such behaviours is an important topic to explore with young people.
- 4.8 – We would encourage the inclusion of ‘what to do if you are the victim’, not just how to help others. Young people need to be supported with the knowledge and skills of how to respond to bullying if they are the victim as helping someone else is a different response from that individual’s actions.

Foróige would see emotional wellbeing and mental health as the same. We would recommend calling this strand “mental health” so people understand the spectrum of mental health and not associate mental health as solely negative or medicalised - this will also help to reduce stigma for mental health and encourage greater openness. If not, this needs to be explained as to why different phrasings are used and how they’re used interchangeably throughout the outcomes.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

- Students should complete a short portfolio of learning on EACH strand. If students need to only complete a portfolio based on three strands as currently recommended, students can opt out of one which may be very important. Similarly, if the portfolio requires evidence from 3 strands only, and the curriculum is not set, some teachers may opt out of an entire strand of the curriculum based on their knowledge, preferences, individual beliefs or level of comfort with teaching certain aspects of this course. This will most likely be Strand 3 due to the potential lack of confidence in teaching RSE; teachers will require support and in-depth knowledge of these topics to successfully teach SPHE.
- A portfolio should include any class notes, worksheets etc. as well as a formal reflection at the end of each strand/topic. This can be on-going throughout their classes as well as a more in-depth reflection at the end of term/year also.
- At present, there is no guidance on the number of pieces to be worked on over the cycle or how exactly the topic for assessment is chosen. The summary is not clear. There are 40 outcomes, do students focus on 3 of these or 3 strands or 3 topics?
- We would strongly discourage the planned implementation of students making judgements about each other's work. Given the nature of the topics covered in an SPHE curriculum, portfolios could include reflections of a very personal/ sensitive nature to an individual student and any assessments should respect student's right to privacy and should be kept to themselves and their teacher(s) - page 17, paragraph 2
- A portfolio should not be completed in the second year as currently allowed in the specification - there is still learning to do and incorporate in the third year. Students should start a portfolio in the first year and add to it throughout the duration of the SPHE Junior Cycle.

As such, based on the above, we would recommend that an on-going portfolio of class notes and curriculum worksheets is kept throughout the entire short-course and is accompanied in third year with a larger research project (individually or in groups) to complete their learning. Projects can be based on a particular strand that students have completed across the three years.

We also recommend inclusion of recognition for course completion such as a certificate.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Appendix 2: Glossary of Key Terms for SPHE

- **Consent** – Is OMFG an appropriate tool here as a definition? Should the legal definition be included and the OMFG tool as a supporting resource included in the curriculum/lessons?
- **Homophobia & transphobia** – At present, we would note that this definition is incorrect and highlight that these terms are not the same – as such, they should be separated. Homophobia is not an umbrella term for all in the LGBTI+ community who experience discrimination of any kind. There are specific terms for each. On your references of the above, Foróige’s current working definitions (developed alongside BeLonGTo) are below:
 - **Homophobia** – Discrimination against and/or dislike of lesbian and gay people (including those perceived to be gay or lesbian). This also includes the perpetuation of negative myths and stereotypes through jokes and/or through personal negative thoughts about lesbian and gay people. (A related term is biphobia, which describes the discrimination experienced by bisexual people.)
 - **Transphobia** - Discrimination against and/or dislike of someone based on the fact they are trans, including denying their gender identity or refusing to accept it. This can result in individual and institutional discrimination, prejudice, and violence against trans, non-binary, or gender variant people. This may be targeted at people who are, or who are perceived to be, trans.
- **Sexuality** – We would note that the NCCA definition does not match with the general understanding of ‘sexuality’ and is confusing in its current phrasing. We would also strongly encourage the removal of ‘biological sex’ which is currently used to weaponise/demonise the trans community. The more appropriate and inclusive term is “sex assigned at birth”. We do commend the mention of how this can “alter/change”. Foróige’s current working definition (developed alongside BeLonGTo) of ‘sexuality’ is as follows;
 - A person’s sexual, emotional and/or romantic attraction to other people. It is distinct from sex, gender identity, and gender expression.
- **Sexual activity** - We commend this definition and appreciate the mention of “in all its forms” and mention of solitary sexual activity. We do note that at present, there is no explicit mention in the curriculum about masturbation, apart from the mention of ‘solitary’ here.
- **Sexual orientation** – remove example. We would separate asexuality from a discussion of sexual orientation as we feel it is confusing in this context and deserves to be clarified in its own right. .
- **Spectrum of sexual orientations** - remove examples

Curriculum

Foróige highly commends and appreciates the work of the NCCA in reviewing and updating the SPHE curriculum to meet the needs of young people in today’s world. While this specification gives some insight to topics to be covered by students in the Junior Cycle, without an accompanying set curriculum, we are still left guessing about the curriculum in its entirety and unable to support its true effectiveness.

At present, there are no guidelines included for how the curriculum can or should progress through the Junior Cycle and how best to implement a spiral curriculum as is intended – while it is designed to be ‘broad and flexible’, we would suggest that teachers would benefit from some guidance on what topics should be completed in the initial stages, to build a foundation for more sensitive or complex topics that would more appropriately fit with 2nd or 3rd year pupils.

Having a fully non-prescriptive curriculum, there is a strong likelihood of the curriculum being taught and received significantly differently and inconsistently within and between schools given that teachers have full autonomy for planning what to cover and how best to do so – this will promote differentiation but may risk some topics being neglected.

Using a learning outcomes approach without set lesson plans places a greater burden of planning on teachers. Given that SPHE is not an exam subject, this may be unrealistic given limited time resources in many schools and may reduce the emphasis placed on SPHE and the quality of lessons received by pupils. Foróige strongly advocates that the NCCA should provide a set curriculum that ALL young people should be receiving regardless of the school they attend or teacher they have. Without a clear set curriculum, this is not a “spiral approach” as referenced in the specification.

The accompanying online SPHE/RSE Toolkit has the potential to be an extremely useful reservoir of resources for teachers to assist with lesson planning and preparation for SPHE teaching, but as it currently stands it is difficult to navigate and the layout does not easily correspond to the 4 curriculum strands or the learning outcomes. The layout of the toolkit should be reviewed to make much clearer which activities, lessons and units are more appropriate to meet each learning outcome or which strand they fall under.

Lastly, we are concerned that the planned 100 hours of SPHE is not enough, but also that schools will not meet this requirement. Schools, on average, have class blocks of 40 minutes and would likely only be able to facilitate/timetable one SPHE class a week (especially with this not being an examinable subject, there is a lack of urgency to schedule more time). Post-primary schools are required to operate a minimum of 167 days in an academic year, this adds up to 33.4 weeks and at 40 mins per week across three years, schools would need to make up an additional 33 hours across the Junior Cycle to accommodate this plan. The NCCA alongside the Department of Education need to review how this is possible and implement strategies to allow the deserved time for SPHE to be incorporated nationwide.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Genspect

Contextual Background

Genspect is an alliance of professionals, parent groups, trans people, detransitioners, and others who seek to promote high quality information about sex and gender. We want to see schools, colleges and higher education establishments hold neutral space for students as they explore their gender, sexual orientation and identity formation. We value supportive environments for students, so they feel neither encouraged nor discouraged to follow certain paths.

We raise public awareness of the issues facing gender-questioning children and young people in schools and seek to inform schools how to support gender non-conforming children with compassion and integrity. We note that gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are often gender non-conforming and rather than supporting an approach that seeks to suppress hormonal urges with medication, we support an approach that allows adolescents to explore their sexuality with freedom and acceptance.

We are a non-partisan, independent organisation, with members hailing from across the political spectrum and holding a range of personal beliefs. Our interest relates exclusively to the well-being and safeguarding of children and young people and does not extend to party-political or religious allegiance. We welcome people of all faiths and none.

Genspect has members all over Ireland and from 20 countries across the world. Since launching in June 2021, we have gained thousands of members and we have provided training to schools in Ireland, UK and USA .

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

We disagree that this course meets its stated aims because the course promotes a narrow-minded gender affirmative approach and assumes that everyone – students, parents and school staff – believes in the gender identity belief system.

There are many other ways to understand gender and many other approaches which take a more holistic view of the individual - for example, some people have a developmental understanding of gender issues and view it as an integral aspect of a wider exploration of gender that occurs in young people; others view gender dysphoria through a trauma-informed model which asserts that gender distress comes about as a result of past trauma. We at Genspect view gender issues with a bio-psychosocial lens and believe that gender dysphoria happens as a result of a range of different reasons. We believe the gender identity belief system is narrow-minded and regressively based upon stereotypes.

Identity formation, including awareness of sexual orientation, is an important psychosocial stage of development for young people, usually between 12 and 25 years old (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968). It is not helpful for schools to concretise a young person's identity while they are in the midst of identity formation as this can foreclose opportunities for ambiguity and future change. Schools can best respect their students' search for meaning and personal identity by creating space for uncertainty and exploration and remaining supportively neutral as to outcome or direction.

We represent parent groups in Ireland who report that schools are inadvertently contributing to the growing incidence of gender dysphoria which inexplicably increased by 2000% in Ireland over the last decade (Keena, 2021). This is in part because education policies have become one-sided, repositioning gender non-conformity as a "transgender" identity and teaching children that gender identity ideology is the only way to think about gender.

Gender identity theory is a theory, no more scientific than the ideas of creationism and we believe it is completely inappropriate for the toolkit to state "students learn that everyone has a gender identity and that, for some people, this might be different than the gender they were assigned at birth." This is factually incorrect. We are born in and as our bodies. We are born as either male or female: sex is binary and immutable. The sex of an individual is based on their reproductive anatomy and is determined by the type of gamete this anatomy is organized, through natural development, to produce. For over 99.9% of people, the sex of a person as female or male is unambiguous and determined at conception (Lee, Houk, Ahmed and Hughes, 2006), and observable, whether prior to birth (by chromosomal analysis or sonogram) or at birth. Two of Genspect's team members were not only born with intersex conditions but advocate for people with intersex condition. We believe that your toolkit misrepresents intersex conditions as if the phrase "assigned at birth" and will lead to a good deal of further distress.

Although some activists have leveraged the phrase "assigned at birth" to describe what happens when a woman gives birth, this is not accurate. Doctors don't "assign" an individual's sex – they observe and record it. Using phrases like this invalidates the binary nature of sex in humans and is an unscientific stance.

Although individuals are free to subscribe to any set of beliefs, schools must not misrepresent a belief – no matter how passionately held – as science. Gender identity theory disregards the impact of biological sex and, as a result, disregards the specific needs of girls and boys in favour of addressing their gender identity rather than their sex.

Girls, for example can have challenges pertaining to periods, pregnancy and unwanted sexual attention. Boys can face other issues. Favouring gender identity over biological sex does not accommodate these needs.

References:

- Erikson, E., 1968. *Identity, youth and crisis*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Arnett, J., 2000. Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), pp.469-480.
- Keena, C., 2021. Gender distress treatment in young people: a highly charged debate. *Irish Times*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/gender-distress-treatment-in-young-people-a-highly-charged-debate-1.4602455>> [Accessed 11 October 2022].
- Lee, P., Houk, C., Ahmed, S. and Hughes, I., 2006. Consensus Statement on Management of Intersex Disorders. *Pediatrics*, 118(2), pp.e488-e500.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Clarity

There is a distinct lack of clarity in the resources presented in the SPHE draft specification (cannot find mentions of lack of clarity, the issue is that it teaches gender identity theory as fact). According to this document “students should be able to appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum”. This is an ideological an unscientific statement. If we are to help gender-distressed children, then we need to make sure to highlight what is a belief and what is factually accurate.

There is no definition.

Relevance

The SPHE draft specification is relevant to only one group of gender-nonconforming youth and it does not include the needs of desisters or detransitioners.

In our [Beyond Transition programme](#). We work with both desisters and detransitioners at Genspect. Desistance is the process of reversing a transition which was only social (e.g. by reverting to their birth name and pronoun). Desistance typically implies that an individual who was once seeking medical transition is no longer doing so. This can be very difficult in schools as the student can be very vulnerable to bullying at this point. Detransition is the process of changing a person’s gender presentation back to his or her biological sex, by seeking to reverse an earlier medical transition. This is a harrowing experience and the needs of detransitioning students must be acknowledged by the NCCA.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

While we believe the CBA seems suitable, we do not think the resources offered are appropriate for these CBAs for these reasons:

- The decision to present the gender identity belief system as a fact rather than a belief will lead to confusion.
- The decision to only apply the gender affirmative approach will create further problems for gender distressed young people.
- Most importantly, the inadequate use of resources and the misinformation contained in these resources need to be urgently addressed.

For example, the 'toolkit' contains many mistakes and misinformation. The definitions for words and phrases such as 'sex', 'intersex', 'gender identity', 'cisgender' and other terms used in these documents are misleading and in some cases offensive and even harmful. On p.18, the 'toolkit' directs teachers to a video produced by BelongTo that is particularly egregious. BelongTo advises teachers to avoid telling parents about the use of pronouns of their child. This is completely inappropriate and will create a lot of unnecessary problems between parents, students and schools. Schools should always liaise with parents. If a member of school staff has a concern about the safety of a student they should follow the correct procedures and protocols. Suggesting that teachers should insert themselves between parents and students will create a triangulation and is reflective of the inappropriate nature of the advice handed out by gender affirmative organisations.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

We note that the NCCA have decided to use only gender affirmative organisations and resources. This decision has resulted in documents that will provide ideologically driven misinformation to vulnerable students. All of the organisations listed on the SPHE Draft Specification follow the guidelines offered by WPATH (World Professional Association of Transgender Health). These guidelines have received widespread criticism for being inaccurate, badly referenced and ideologically driven: <https://www.irishtimes.com/health/2022/09/27/new-transgender-guidelines-no-longer-have-age-thresholds/>

We urge the NCCA to take some time to read other resources that offer alternative views on sex and gender. For example, Genspect offers a wide range of guidance's including [school guidance](#) and [social transition guidance](#). The Countess also offer [resources](#). Both the [Gender Dysphoria Support Network](#) and the [Bayswater Support Group](#) offers support to families who have been impacted by gender issues and a wide range of well-informed resources. [Sex Matters](#) and [Transgender Trend](#) also a wide range of resources while the [LGB Alliance](#) offers support to gay, lesbian and bisexual youth.

Gender non-conforming children can be vulnerable for many different reasons and it is imperative the NCCA ensure that they do not cause further distress. There are a multitude of other organisations that offer well-informed and accurate information and we urge the NCCA to take some time to study this field so that they can make sure they provide Irish students with the most up-to-date information in this fast-growing field.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

GOSHH (Gender, Orientation,
Sexual Health, HIV)

GOSHH (Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health, HIV)

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

We very much welcome the development of a new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum and we welcome this consultation process, which we feel has been very comprehensive and lengthy.

The aim is relevant and does sum up what the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle is.

The aim is also ambitious and has a lot of expectations. It may be difficult to meet this aim for every student as the SPHE curriculum is centred on experiential learning and students may take from it what they feel appropriate to them. We would hope that this aim can be achieved however.

A shorter aim which reflects that students can take from it what they feel fits best for them, might be worthwhile considering.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The lives of 12-15 year olds are uniquely different and 12-15 year olds grow up in different environments and family settings. The strands do appear to be very comprehensive and we hope that the learning outcomes can be met. It is vital that LGBTQ+ youth are represented across school curricula, particularly in relation to themes of sexual health, relationships, and wellbeing. Feedback from the young people we work with has shown us that this is really important to them.

We would like to see the topic of consent introduced in another way in the curriculum, as well as introducing sexual consent (Strand 3). We feel that an exploration of bodily autonomy, boundaries and consent generally is a pre-cursor to talking about sexual consent.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Learning is a social activity that occurs through interaction, practical engagement and reflection which should occur on a continued basis. Instead of promoting self-discovery and critical thinking on the part of the students, the current proposed CBA encourages students to engage in personal development as something that either has a right or wrong answer and whose value is to be judged based on how amenable it is to another's opinion rather than on the merit of its existence.

A suggested alternative would be a non-graded ongoing process of self-reflection and participation on the part of both student and teacher. This could comprise of a reflective journal and regular 1:1 sit-downs with the teacher held once each strand is completed or every 1-2 months. The **teacher would be equipped** with pre-set questions that are proven to promote self-reflection and critical thinking. Through this conversation, the young person would be guided through what it means to self-reflect and critically assess a topic, their feelings on it and how they see themselves in relation to it. This would equip them with the necessary tools needed to do this as they move through life.

By creating this private, safe space for student it would allow them to ask questions, discuss difficulties or triggers. It would also **support the teacher** by providing them a controlled environment to assess the student and identify any additional supports they may need, be that counselling, support around familial issues etc.

Something that would strengthen the outcome of this intervention would be the incorporation of opportunities for practical involvement in the areas of the different strands, either through community involvement as a class, individual work experience or visits from professionals in the different areas. This would enable the students to quantitatively see how they felt before and after they engaged in a topic. Through the combination of all these elements the three cross-cutting elements for supporting effective teaching and learning in SPHE as mentioned in curriculum draft would be achieved.

Acknowledging that course work, end of year projects and exams are used as a legitimate way to monitor and ensure the participation of students and the teachers on a large scale, the completion of journals and short participation forms completed by teachers after 1:1 sit downs and other activities could be put in place.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

We would like to see the following points included in the updated curriculum:

- **Inclusive Language**

The language throughout needs to be inclusive of those with diverse genders and orientations e.g. the words “his/her” are used in the Statements of Learning section but the word “student” (which is much more inclusive and gender neutral) is used throughout other sections.

We would welcome a fuller and more inclusive notion of health and wellbeing. Sometimes the language used is judgemental and value based. It communicates a pre-determined stance on the topics, i.e. what is good vs. bad, right vs. wrong. It sets out what stance or view students are expected to adopt on topics. It allows teachers and/or schools to attach their own set of values and beliefs to these words, like healthy or bad. The language should be void of opinion and the aim, both literally and implicitly, should be on promoting critical thinking and decision making skills in order to nurture and student’s sense of autonomy and agency. It would also act as a safeguarding against teachers or school boards teaching only based on personal, religious or political beliefs which may negate certain facts etc.

- **Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Identities**

Include LGBTQ+ awareness as a key theme throughout all strands of the curriculum, to ensure that LGBTQ+ inclusion and awareness is not limited to a single class dedicated to LGBTQ+ identities.

The topics of gender and sexual orientation, ethnicity and gender roles should be recognised as more than a topic to be covered in a couple of lessons. The intersectionality between these issues and all other parts of a young person’s identity are incredibly complex and deserve time and careful thought and discussion on a continuous basis. Engaging the students in thoughtful discussions where lived experiences can be shared and ideologies questioned will reinforce the learning outcomes from strand 1 as a foundational strand and better ground the students in their understanding of themselves and others moving forward.

Understanding the areas of gender and sexual orientation, ethnicity and gender roles is critical in underpinning the strands that follow, especially as they link directly to topics in strands 3 and 4. Every effort should be made to ensure that these topics are interwoven into the fabric of the curriculum as a whole; inclusive course materials and consistent use of inclusive and diverse language (religious, cultural gender and sexuality), ongoing acknowledgement of the impact they have on different subject matters as they arise, e.g. porn, bullying, emotional wellbeing etc.

- **Support and Training for SPHE Staff**

Invest in training for SPHE teachers so that they feel confident to engage with and respond to students’ questions about topics related to LGBTQ+ identities.

- **Adapting the School Community and Environment**

Schools should be encouraged to and supported in embedding the values taught in SPHE and RSE to the overall school ethos, community, and environment. It is vital that the creation of 'inclusive environments' that are respectful of racial, ethnic, or LGBTQ+ identity is not limited to SPHE class. In addition, policies related to Anti-Bullying, and Dignity and Respect, should be accompanied by clear procedures for students to follow should they feel discriminated against or bullied by a member of the school community.

- **Resources to support Teachers - Teachers Toolkit**

The reflection questions (teachers toolkit) as they currently stand are closed questions, they imply that there is a target to be met and they do not account for individual circumstances of the student's life, physical and cognitive abilities. The priority here seems to be on completing and grading the SPHE course with as little fuss as possible and not the student's journey through it.

- Having looked at the teacher's toolkit and reading the expected aims, it seems that there is very little focus on the student's personal development as an individual and more so on their responsibility to others. Understanding oneself, how to identify needs, wants and boundaries, are key to engaging in the wider community in a way that does not cause harm to self or others.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

HSE Health and
Wellbeing division

HSE Health and Wellbeing division

1. HSE Health and Wellbeing

The Health and Wellbeing Division of the HSE, at national and regional level, is focused on helping people to stay healthy and well, reducing health inequalities and protecting people from threats to their health and wellbeing. It was established based on two fundamental policy shifts within the health service *Future Health*, which describes the emerging new structures for the healthcare system, and [Healthy Ireland](#), the Government framework to improve the health and wellbeing of our population.

The services within Health and Wellbeing support people and communities to protect and improve their health and wellbeing; turning research, evidence and knowledge into action; acting as the authority on health, wellbeing and policy development; building an intelligent health system and a healthier population.

2. HSE Health & Wellbeing's support of young people in the school setting

HSE Health and Wellbeing work closely with colleagues in the Education system at both national and regional level to promote the wellbeing of young people in the school setting. Over the years we have developed a range of resources and teacher professional learning (TPL) opportunities to enhance the delivery of the SPHE curriculum, and to support the implementation of the overarching [Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice within schools](#)

See **Appendix 2** for the HSE Health and Wellbeing's current supports for the post primary wellbeing promotion process.

3. HSE Health and Wellbeing comments on the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE Short Course curriculum specification

HSE Health and Wellbeing welcomes the move to update the SPHE curriculum across the span of a child and young person's school career, and to address the issues and concerns of most relevance to that cohort in today's world. It further acknowledges and applauds the significant and painstaking work that has gone into the development of the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE Short Course curriculum specification, and into the NCCA's creation of the toolkits to support SPHE teaching and learning within the classroom.

The recent move to develop a post graduate qualification for teachers of SPHE is ground-breaking and will hopefully extend existing good practice in many Irish schools to all students and schools throughout the country. HSE Health & Wellbeing believes that the national roll-out of this professional qualification will increase the status of SPHE as a curriculum area and equip teachers to address all aspects of junior and senior cycle SPHE in a manner that is age and stage appropriate, is creative and engaging, and meets the needs of their particular students. The regularisation of SPHE as a subject to be taught by specialist teachers will also go some way to mitigate against inconsistent staffing across the junior and senior cycle years.

The SPHE curriculum is one aspect of student support in relation to wellbeing, and it must obviously be set within the implementation of the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice within schools*. This ensures a supportive school environment in which: everyday practice is informed by regularly updated policy to address emerging issues and concerns, where additional pastoral support is available, and where there are strong and positive links with the home and the community, ensuring that the young people receive information and support across all these settings.

The rest of this section sets out the overarching responses of the relevant Policy Priority Programmes within HSE Health and Wellbeing.

The HSE Tobacco Free Ireland Programme

The dangers of tobacco use and tobacco exposure is well documented¹. The necessary protection of children and young people through the prevention of tobacco and e-cigarette initiation is one of the cornerstones of the Government's [Tobacco Free Ireland Strategy](#), with an emphasis on denormalising tobacco use and completely removing it from all campuses of primary schools, secondary schools and child care facilities.

In terms of influencing individual behaviour, is important to target both risk and protective factors; addressing adolescents' attitudes toward smoking or intentions to use tobacco, motivation to comply with parents or friends, and cultural backgrounds and personality traits² Messages focused more clearly on influencing attitudes and beliefs have traditionally been more effective than messages without these types of information.

One aspect of influencing attitudes and beliefs involves raising young people's awareness of how they are targeted for marketing by the tobacco industry in their efforts to grow their profits. In light of this we particularly welcome the reference to marketing within the specification and see it as an opportunity for schools to harness the energy and activism of young people in pushing back against this callous exploitation. This is an evidenced, successful strategy to be deployed within curriculum delivery and whole school activity.

The implementation of the Junior Cycle SPHE short course curriculum will contribute to the range of measures, being taken across society and within the school environment, to prevent the harm being done though tobacco use and exposure. We strongly recommend that consideration is given to future proofing the curriculum in terms of language so that it can address ever more tobacco delivery systems, as they emerge.

The HSE Healthy Eating Active Living Programme (HEAL)

The HSE Healthy Eating Active Living Programme welcomes the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification and sees it as a valuable component of the measures needed to address the health and wellbeing of young people in the school and wider community setting.

[WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022](#) identifies the marketing high fat, salt and sugar foods as one of the key environmental factors the influence children and young people. It highlights a role for schools through incorporating awareness of marketing practices and media literacy into school curricula. It is therefore positive that the draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum includes learning outcomes pertaining to the development of knowledge and skills in the areas of nutrition, physical activity, smoking, alcohol and mental wellbeing as well as including a focus on media/marketing literacy.

The delivery of the SPHE curriculum must be set within a wider 'healthy school' concept and 'whole of school' approach in line with the *Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice within schools* and [Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan](#). It is therefore essential that the wider school environment is consistent in promoting access to and availability of healthy foods and opportunities to be physically activity throughout the school day for students, teachers and the whole school community.

¹WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) (WHO, 2003).

²US Surgeon General Reports: [Preventing Tobacco Use Among Youth and Young Adults](#) (2012) and [E-Cigarette Use Among Youth and Young Adults](#) (2016)

HSE Mental Health Programme

Schools have been consistently identified as a key setting for supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing. The important role that schools play has been recognised across numerous national mental health policy plans including [Sharing the Vision](#) and [Connecting for Life](#), our national strategy to reduce suicide.

In April 2022, the HSE launched its mental health promotion plan, [Stronger Together](#) which sets out its plan for ensuring mental health promotion is embedded across key life stages and settings. Supporting young people's social and emotional learning in secondary schools is a key action within the plan and the comprehensive implementation of the Junior Cycle Social SPHE curriculum is critical to achieving this action. The revised curriculum is welcomed, with its strong emphasis on developing young people's self-awareness and their emotional, social, and relationship skills. We particularly welcome the use of the CASEL Social and Emotional Skills Framework to inform the curriculum specification. The use of behaviour-focussed, rather than knowledge-focussed verbs would be preferable within the learning outcomes, however, we realise that these are standard across all curriculum specifications. To strengthen the specification, we would recommend an overt reference to the development and practice of the skills of empathy, and of the skills necessary to recognise, articulate and regulate emotion.

HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP)

As the part of the HSE tasked with the implementation of the [National Sexual Health Strategy 2015-2020](#) (extended pending the development of the new strategy), the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) welcomes the draft SPHE short course curriculum specification, especially in its recognition of the broadness of sexuality as an integral part of being human, which includes, but goes beyond a person's choice to be sexually active. In addition, the more detailed and specific references to aspects of relationship and sexuality health than previously, will support ongoing actions to promote an environment of openness, to reduce the negative impact of stigma and discrimination relating to sexual health and wellbeing, to identify and address unhealthy and damaging individual and societal behaviours, and thereby, to address the relationship and sexuality education needs of young people in modern Irish society.

To further enhance the specification, SHCPP would suggest that the Learning Outcomes allow for a broader exploration of the reasons why most people become sexually active at some stage in their lives, and the inclusion of the term 'reproductive health' in line with the World Health Organisation definition³. With regard to the latter, we are aware that past practices have been criticised for an over-emphasis on the biological. However, national and international evidence points to an ongoing deficit in people's knowledge of reproductive functions and their ability to communicate clearly about their reproductive health. Learning about one's reproductive health within RSE goes beyond the material covered in junior cycle science, as in addition to the physical, it should address the social and emotional aspects. Reproductive health is an integral component of overall health, and behaviours in adolescence and young adulthood can have significant impact on future sexual function and fertility. In addition, menstrual education which goes beyond the basics, is vital for all students; this includes challenging stigma and taboos, and empowering and supporting young women and people who menstruate to look after their health and seek assistance when necessary.

³ Programme of action. In: International Conference on Population and Development. Cairo: United Nations Populations Fund; 1994 (https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/event-pdf/PoA_en.pdf, accessed 15 August 2017). "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system, and to its functions and processes

Similar to other topic areas, the RSE aspect of the curriculum can only be impactful if reflected in other measures across the whole school community to promote a positive relationship with self, and an organisational culture where: respectful, healthy relationships are the norm, where inequality, discrimination and prejudice on all grounds are challenged, where harassment and violence are not tolerated and where structural and cultural barriers to realising reproductive and sexual health are overcome (including the option of gender neutral toilet facilities, the provision of period products as appropriate and the destigmatising of menstruation).

The HSE Health and Wellbeing Alcohol programme

The HSE Health and Wellbeing Alcohol programme welcomes the draft SPHE JC curriculum specification. The draft SPHE JC Curriculum aligns with and supports the implementation of national strategies [Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery 2017-2025](#) and [Healthy Ireland Strategic National Plan 2021- 2025](#) to: improve the delivery of substance use education across all sectors, including youth services, services for people using substances and other relevant sectors; improve supports for young people at risk of early substance use⁴ and helps to provide measures at community level to delay the initiation of alcohol consumption by children and young people.⁵ Despite the negative impact of alcohol on Irish society, there are strong social and cultural norms around alcohol consumption that are deeply embedded and cannot be turned around through short-term action. Research has demonstrated that drinking above weekly recommended guidelines in Ireland is considered normal and unproblematic.⁶ The primary motivator for Irish people to drink alcohol appeared to be the opportunity it provides for social connection with peers. Therefore these social and cultural norms need to be tackled at an early age in order to reduce alcohol-related harm.

⁴ [Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery](#)

⁵ Health Ireland Strategic National Plan 2021- 2025. [Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025](#)

⁶ Hope, A., Barry, J., & Byrne, S. (2018). The untold story: harms experienced in the Irish population due to others' drinking. Dublin: Health Service Executive.

Appendix 1: HSE Health & Wellbeing - national and regional practitioner responses to the Learning Outcome section of the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification.

Aim: HSE Health and Wellbeing at national and regional level are broadly in favour of the aim. Further consideration might be given to the inclusion of

- 'Wellbeing' to reflect the overall framework and curriculum area
- 'Self-efficacy' as an evidenced key skill in developing positive self- worth
- Reference to students' capacity to contribute positively to society and environment as one of the consequences of their own personal development.

Strand 1

General point: It is to be welcomed that the Learning Outcomes include reference to gender, both in terms of individual identity, which acknowledges the current and emerging ways in which people identify and express their understanding and experience of their gender, and in terms of the continuing impact of societal gender inequity based on the traditional binary, which affects everyone whether or not they identify as a man or woman. The distinction between these may need to be made clearer as it could look like an over representation of gender within the LOs.

Lo 1.2:	Some opinion that this LO might benefit from more detail as to what is intended.
Lo 1.3:	Consider broadening out from 'life experiences' and including reference to self-image e.g. Explore the range of influences that impact on self-image and self- esteem and how these affect behaviour, and identify ways to nurture a positive sense of self-worth.
LO 1.4	Because 1.4 is specific to aspects of sexual identity, there doesn't seem anywhere else where a student is invited to reflect more expansively on other important aspects of their identity. It is important not to lose a reference to aspects of sexual identity somewhere within the LOs (here or within Strand 3) but perhaps there should be an additional LO here? Also, there is some confusion in relation to the various references to different aspects of gender and it can seem that gender is over represented as an element of the Learning Outcomes. It would be useful to make the differences clear within this or a supporting document.
LO 1.6:	As 1.5 already looks at gender equity and stereotypes based on the binary of male/ female (which impact all society, even those who don't identify within the binary) , 1.6 should make it clear if it is specifically referring to bias and prejudice towards gender identities other than cisgender. It should also allow students to identify other sources of discrimination they have experienced or witnessed- reference to the 9 grounds of discrimination might be useful.
LO 1.7	Consider the inclusion of "showing concern for the feelings of others" after 'manner' as it is a separate skill to understanding the perspective of others and empathising and is very relevant to this age group, particularly in the context of social media
LO 1.8	Some opinion that this LO might benefit from more detail as to what is intended.

Strand 2

General point: The Learning Outcomes in this strand were generally considered to promote a good balance between skills and knowledge, however it was felt that there was a lack of reference to the impact of social and societal norms on behaviours

<p>LO 2.1</p>	<p>Students should start with developing an understanding of the many dimensions of health and wellbeing e.g. physical, emotional, social etc. and how these may present in adolescence. The current specific reference to food, physical activity, sleep etc. may limit their perception of what constitutes health.</p> <p>We also suggest the opening verb might be usefully changed to ‘Consider the many different aspects of health</p>
<p>LO 2.2:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● In the interests of future proofing, consider including a reference to ‘nicotine containing products’ to cover new and emerging nicotine delivery systems , as well as keeping the reference to vaping /e- cigarettes and cigarettes. ● Positive that the learning outcome in relation to marketing includes reference to unhealthy foods. WHO European Regional Obesity Report 2022 points to the potential for this approach to activate young people to focus on healthier options. Consider changing the phrase ‘snack and diet foods’ to ‘unhealthy food and drinks’. It is not clear what the term snack and diet foods encompasses.
<p>LO 2.3</p>	<p>It is recommended that his LO include reference to the impact of societal/cultural /social norms on health behaviours as this is not raised elsewhere.</p>
<p>L.O 2.4</p>	<p>Agreement that the development and practice of skills and strategies to make and implement healthy choices in real life situations was of the utmost importance. Suggest that overt reference is made to assertiveness skills</p>
<p>LO 2.5</p>	<p>Suggest: Demonstrate understanding of the key aspects of addiction and the physical, social and legal consequences</p>
<p>LO 2.7:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Would benefit from a further LO that focussed on demonstrating strategies for addressing these difficulties. ● The digital aspect (digital marketing) could be included in 2.7 and 2.10.
<p>LO 2.8</p>	<p>Query about the appropriateness of ‘Discuss’ as the verb – suggestion of ‘Consider’ or ‘Explore’</p>
<p>LO 2.9:</p>	<p>Suggest changing the LO to look first at why young people might share their own and others’ sexual imagery on line and the risks and consequences. Also important to consider the gendered nature of response to sharing own images and the disproportionate blame apportioned to girls and women</p>

Strand 3

General point: It was felt that the omission of reference to one's relationship with self as the primary and foundational relationship from which all others come, was a significant gap, as was the omission of reference to reproductive health. Also necessary to allow for the range of reasons why people engage in sexual activities to include, but not be limited to, peer pressure.

3.2	Focus on the values, behaviours and skills necessary for interpersonal relationships welcomed but it is felt that the verb discuss could usefully be replaced by 'reflect on'. There should also be an action which addresses the students' ability to demonstrate these skills.
LO 3.3 and 3.4	Could be interpreted to have significant overlap. Consider?
LO 3.5	It was felt that solely focussing on the pressure to be sexually active was contrary to the aspiration for a positive, comprehensive approach to RSE. Unless there is going to be another LO, we suggest that 3.5 might be expanded to allow for an exploration of the reasons people become sexually active to include but not be restricted to 'external pressure'
3.7	It would be good for a LO to also interrogate consent, including a consideration of the gender and power dynamics that underpin the giving and receiving.
LO 3.8:	Points raised above are implicit in LO 3.8 but so they need to be made more explicit.
LO 3.9	Also include reference to legal consequences of illegal pornography use?

Strand 4

General point: Recommendation that title be changed to 'Mental health and emotional wellbeing' as young people need to be aware of mental health as an intrinsic part of overall health and to be familiar with the terminology. A further consideration of the verbs would also be recommended as there needs to be more of a focus on the affective domain which impacts more significantly on behaviour change.

4.1	Before 4.1 students need to explore what is meant by emotional wellbeing and how it can manifest in their lives.
LO 4.2	Before young people can understand the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviours they need to learn to (i) recognise emotions (ii) articulate emotions (iii) regulate emotions Without learning the foundational skills, students will not be able to move to the more advanced skill referenced in this LO.
4.3	This learning outcome could be more explicit in relation to the scope of the term 'variety of techniques'. Opportunity to reference categories of supportive behaviours to aid self-management e.g. reflective practices, social connection, creative pursuits, physical activity, healthy eating, etc.
LO 4.5:	Whilst the link between substance use and mental health is very relevant for this age group, we would suggest that the focus could be expanded to also allow for an exploration of how mental health can be affected by the basic things necessary for healthy living such as: relationships/connection, sleep, hygiene, diet, exercise, online exposure.
LOs 4.3 and 4.4.	Suggestion to include the word 'cope'

<p>SOL 4.6-4.8</p>	<p>Of the 8 LOs, 3 are focused on bullying , with 4.7 and 4.8 seeming to overlap considerably:</p> <p>Suggest:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Examine different kinds of in-person and cyber bullying behaviour and why it might happen 2. Identify constructive actions young people can take in relation to bullying behaviour whether they are victimised, bystanding or even perpetrating 3. Demonstrate an ability to use a variety of techniques to constructively resolve conflict.
<p>LO 4.8 is invaluable.</p>	<p>LO 4.8 is invaluable. Students need to know how they can access and assess information and sources of support to ensure that they are trustworthy and genuinely supportive of their health and wellbeing</p>

Appendix 2: HSE Health and Wellbeing's current supports for the post primary wellbeing promotion process.

This following lists the current range of HSE resources and training to support student wellbeing at post primary level. For updates information on our resources, trainings and supports visit [HSE Education](#)

1. Junior Cycle SPHE Resource

The HSE is developing units of learning to support the new SPHE Short Course for Junior Cycle.

The first 5 units are currently available in English and Irish as an online resource and as a downloadable PDF, with a further 7 due in 2023.

Download from www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/hse-education-programme/junior-cycle-sphe-training-resources/

2. Mindout - Senior Cycle Mental Health Resource and Training

Mindout is a 12 session (35-40 minute), social and emotional learning programme, suitable for Transition Year or 5th year pupils. Irish manual available in 22/23

N.B. The *Mindout* programme materials are only available with training

3. Know the Score- Senior Cycle Alcohol and Drugs Resource and Training

[Know the Score](#) is a collection of 14, evidence-based, substance use lessons on alcohol and drugs for Senior Cycle students (15-18yrs). Irish manual available in 22/23

Although the resource can be freely downloaded, the associated Know the Score training is recommended:

4. Healthy Eating Policy Toolkit

This toolkit to guide schools through the process of developing and implementing, or reviewing and improving an existing policy including: including: carrying out an audit; drafting a policy; consulting with parents; implementing the policy.

Although the resource can be freely downloaded, the accompanying, *Wellbeing through Healthy Eating Policy Development* training is recommended:

Resources for parents

The following resources may be signposted to parents and may also be of use to teachers in their preparation for SPHE delivery

- [RSE- Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: For parents of 8 -12 year olds](#)
- RSE - Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: For parents of 13 - 18 year olds (available from mid Nov. 2022)
- [RSE- Making the 'Big Talk' many small talks: Healthy Ireland library collection](#)
- [Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide- practical advice to help parents and children communicate about alcohol and other drugs.](#)

Order or download from www.healthpromotion.ie



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Irish Human Rights and
Equality Commission

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission ('the Commission') welcomes the opportunity to provide its views as part of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment ('NCCA') consultation on the draft Social, Personal and Health Education ('SPHE') curriculum for the Junior Cycle. The Commission is both the National Human Rights Institution and the National Equality Body for Ireland, established under the *Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014* ('2014 Act'). In accordance with its founding legislation, it is mandated to keep under review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice in the State relating to the protection of human rights and equality. As the designate Independent Monitoring Mechanism for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Commission emphasises the obligation on the State to ensure that the SPHE curriculum advances the rights of disabled students.

The NCCA is legally required to comply with its statutory obligation under Section 42 of the 2014 Act (Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty); which means that it must perform its functions having regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect the human rights of members, staff, and service users.¹ Section 42(2) requires the NCCA to 'Assess, Address and Report' - to undertake an assessment of the equality and human rights issues pertaining to their purpose and functions; to devise an action plan to address the issues raised in the assessment; and to report annually on progress and achievements. These requirements have to be set out in the NCCA strategic plan (Assess, Address) and reported on in their annual reports.

We note that no assessments or action plans have been set out in the NCCA's Strategic Plan 2022-2025,² and strongly encourage the NCCA to comply with its statutory obligations in line with Section 42 of the 2014 Act.³ When developing and updating curricula, the NCCA should have regard to its obligations under Section 42(1), and include equality and human rights considerations in the design of the curriculum. Our guidance recommends an evidence-based approach to fulfilling requirements under Section 42, informed by equality data and targeted consultation with staff and service users, particularly those from minority groups to ensure that their views are heard.⁴ With regard to the development of the SPHE curriculum, the participation of children, including members of structurally vulnerable groups, is essential to ensure an inclusive and rights-based approach, rooted in the best interests of the child.

We have prioritised the eradication of racism, ableism, sexism and ageism in our Strategy Statement (2022-2024), and have committed to creating momentum for increased action by public bodies and others to address these and other forms of discrimination.⁵ We welcome the framing of SPHE as contributing to inclusivity of 'all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs / worldviews, social classes and abilities / disabilities'. However, we emphasise the importance of all groups being consistently considered in each of the SPHE Strands.⁶ Furthermore, research preceding the development of the draft curriculum highlights the

¹ See [Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, s. 42](#).

² National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, [Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#).

³ Guidance on implementing the Duty is available on IHREC's website. See IHREC, [Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty](#).

⁴ IHREC, [Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty](#) (March 2019).

⁵ IHREC, [Strategy Statement 2022-2024](#) (2021) p. 15.

⁶ UNESCO has recommended participatory and learner-centred approaches which stimulate critical thinking, See UNESCO, [International technical guidance on sexuality education: an evidence-informed approach \(revised edition\)](#) (2018) p. 87.

lack of status of SPHE as a subject.⁷ This should be rectified in the new curriculum by taking a “whole-of-school” approach to SPHE and emphasising the importance of SPHE for a well-rounded, holistic and rights-based education.

Making Healthy Choices

Many of the learning outcomes under Strand 2 of the curriculum pertain to physical health, while mental health is more substantively dealt with under Strand 4.⁸ This approach should not preclude consideration of mental health as an important aspect of overall health. Discussion about how to make healthy choices should take place in a non-judgemental way, recognising that health outcomes are shaped by social factors, resulting in particular barriers faced by structurally vulnerable groups.⁹ When further developing the learning outcomes in the draft curriculum, the NCCA and Department of Education should ensure the views of ethnic minorities are heard and included, to guarantee the provision of culturally appropriate education on health issues disproportionately affecting them, for example, Female Genital Mutilation.¹⁰

Sexual and Reproductive Health Education

Consultations between the Commission and Irish young people demonstrate dissatisfaction with the current provision of Sexual and Reproductive Health (‘SRH’) education.¹¹ The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to education has recommended the active involvement of National Human Rights Institutions in the preparation and implementation of SRH curricula.¹² The Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has put forward her position that objective and impartial SRH education does not interfere with the right to freedom of religion.¹³

When developing a new SRH education curriculum, the following considerations should be taken into account:

Compulsory

In its Concluding Observations on Ireland’s second periodic report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted with concern the ability of parents to exempt children from SRH classes, and recommended enhanced access to adolescent-specific reproductive and sexual health information.¹⁴

⁷ Seline Keating, Mark Morgan and Bernie Collins, [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) in Primary and Post-Primary Irish Schools](#) (November 2018) p. 32.

⁸ See for example NCCA, [Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education \(SPHE\) Short Course Curriculum Specification](#) (May 2022), Learning Outcomes 2.2, 2.3, 4.4, 4.5.

⁹ See IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 68; World Health Organisation, [Social Determinants of Health](#).

¹⁰ It is estimated that 6,000 girls under the age of 15 and living in Ireland are at risk of female genital mutilation. IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 47. Akidwa, [Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality](#) (April 2022). The Commission guidance on the Public Sector Duty recommends consultation with minority communities to ensure that public bodies such as the NCCA and Department of Education have had regard to their obligations under Section 42. See IHREC, [Implementing the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty](#) (March 2019).

¹¹ See IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) pp. 72-73; IHREC, [Ireland and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (January 2017) p. 84; IHREC, [What is life like for women in Ireland in 2016](#) (January 2017) p. 13.

¹² United Nations Secretary General, [Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education: Note by the Secretary-General](#) (July 2010) p. 21.

¹³ Dunja Mijatović, [Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society](#) (July 2020).

¹⁴ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding Observations on the second periodic report of Ireland (September 2006) para. 52; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, [Relationships and sexuality education- FAQs](#). The Council of Europe Commissioner of Human Rights has also confirmed that international human rights standards on the right to freedom of religion or belief do not entitle parents to withdraw children from sexuality education classes where relevant information is conveyed in an objective and impartial manner; Dunja Mijatović, [Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society](#) (July 2020). See also Children’s Rights Alliance, [Civil Society Alternative Report](#) (August 2022) para 169.

The Council of Europe Commissioner of Human Rights has also expressed her view that international human rights standards on the right to freedom of religion or belief do not entitle parents to withdraw children from sexuality education classes where relevant information is conveyed in an objective and impartial manner.¹⁵ Recent ESRI research has also found that 38 per cent of second year students did not receive SRH education, which was linked to the challenges of overcrowded curricula, teacher discomfort, exam pressure and the lack of status of SPHE.¹⁶ The NCCA should ensure that its commitment to compulsory SRH education is reflected in practice.¹⁷

Scientifically accurate and evidence-based

The Special Rapporteur on the right to education has noted the risk of perpetuating discrimination due to reliance on inaccurate information during SRH classes.¹⁸ In the Irish context, the Special Rapporteur on the sale and exploitation of children expressed concern with the ability of teachers to adjust the content of SRH programmes.¹⁹ The Joint Committee on Education and Skills has linked problems in the delivery of SRH classes with a lack of appropriate teacher training, and has recommended SPHE and SRH education accreditation to combat the issue of inconsistent teaching.²⁰

Inclusive

Inclusion is central to a human-rights based approach to SRH education.²¹ The draft SPHE curriculum notes the need for an inclusive approach,²² but specific detail on how the SRH curriculum will be adapted to cater to students with diverse gender and sexual identities, ethnic minority students, or disabled students across all impairment groups is lacking.²³ The Joint Committee on Education and Skills has described current provision of SRH education as adopting a heteronormative perspective,²⁴ which should be countered by factual and non-stigmatising LGBTI+ SRH education.²⁵ While reasonable accommodation for disabled students is mentioned in the draft curriculum, it relates to assessment rather than the content or delivery of the course.²⁶ In addition, research suggests that Traveller young people are at an increased risk of poor

¹⁵ Dunja Mijatović, [Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society](#) (July 2020).

¹⁶ ERSI, [Talking about sex and the sexual behaviour of young adults in Ireland](#) (November 2020).

¹⁷ The provision of the equivalent of one class period of SPHE per week at Junior Cycle has been mandatory since 2003. Department of Education and Skills, [Looking at Social, Personal and Health Education: Teaching and Learning in Post-Primary Schools](#) (2013). Relationships and Sexuality has been a part of the SPHE curriculum since 1999. Seline Keating, Mark Morgan and Bernie Collins, [Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) in Primary and Post-Primary Irish Schools](#) (November 2018) p. 9.

¹⁸ United Nations Secretary General, [Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education: Note by the Secretary-General](#) (July 2010) para 45.

¹⁹ Human Right Council, [Visit to Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material](#) (March 2019) para. 72.

²⁰ Joint Committee on Education and Skills, [Report on Relationships and Sexuality Education](#) (January 2019) p. 19.

²¹ Inclusion is a central tenet of the Commission's Strategy Statement, which prioritises the eradication of racism, ableism and sexism. IHREC, [Strategy Statement 2022-2024](#) (2021) 15.

²² See NCCA, [Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education \(SPHE\) Short Course Curriculum Specification](#) (May 2022), p. 2.

²³ As the the designate Independent Monitoring Mechanism for the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, issues of inclusion of disabled young people is a key priority for the Commission. We have repeatedly called for ableism to be addressed through institutional reform. IHREC, [Strategy Statement 2022-2024](#) (2021) p. 15.

²⁴ Joint Committee on Education and Skills, [Report on Relationships and Sexuality Education](#) (January 2019) pp. 20-23.

²⁵ Learning outcome 1.4 should inform the provision of LGBTI+ SRH education. See NCCA, [Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education \(SPHE\) Short Course Curriculum Specification](#) (May 2022) p. 13.

²⁶ NCCA, [Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education \(SPHE\) Short Course Curriculum Specification](#) (May 2022), p. 19. See also IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 65; Joint Committee on Education and Skills, [Inclusion Ireland Opening Statement on the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) by the Joint Committee on Education & Skills](#) (May 2018).

sexual health outcomes.²⁷ An inclusive SRH curriculum should recognise and respond to the additional needs of structurally vulnerable groups.

Non-judgemental

Seeking the views of young people and giving them due weight is a key dimension of children's rights. Recent data indicates that the current system of SRH education does not create the conditions for relaxed, comfortable and candid conversations between students and teachers.²⁸ The integration of 'dialogue' as a cross-cutting element of the curriculum should be accompanied by changes in delivery to ensure that the classroom is an environment where all young peoples' views are heard and respected as active contributors to the conversation.

Comprehensive

The Special Rapporteur on education has noted that human-rights based approaches to SRH education must go beyond educating to prevent adverse health outcomes.²⁹ The Commission has previously raised concerns about gaps in the provision of SRH education,³⁰ and recent data suggests that young people are turning to social media, the internet, and pornography to fill these information gaps.³¹

Discussions about comprehensive SRH education are indelibly linked to principles of diversity and inclusivity. A holistic SRH education curriculum must respond to the needs of all young people, including structurally vulnerable groups. Data on current gaps should inform changes to the SPHE curriculum. The new curriculum should collect data on gaps in SRH education provision and engage with this data in periodic reviews.³² This data system should be informed by EU Equality Data Resources³³, the forthcoming Equality Data Strategy³⁴ and the National Statistics Board's Strategic Priorities for Official Statistics 2021-2026³⁵.

Discussion about unhealthy relationships is key to a comprehensive SRH curriculum. SRH education should be informed by the Government's zero tolerance approach to Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence³⁶ and should convey strong messaging in favour of equality, and promotion of non-gender stereotyped roles, mutual respect and consent.³⁷

²⁷ Ann Nolan, [School-based relationships and sexuality education \(RSE\): lessons for policy and practice](#) (2018) p. 4.

²⁸ In this study, only 23 per cent of students reported feeling confident talking about sex with their teachers. Youth Work Ireland, [Sexual Health Youth Consultation Findings](#) (April 2018).

²⁹ United Nations Secretary General, [Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education: Note by the Secretary-General](#) (July 2010) para. 61.

³⁰ IHREC, [Ireland and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women](#) (January 2017) p. 84.

³¹ Youth Work Ireland, [Sexual Health Youth Consultation Findings](#) (April 2018). The survey also found that information from teachers about SRH education is less useful to female students than to male students.

³² The Commission has repeatedly highlighted the considerable shortfalls in equality data in Ireland. See IHREC, [Ireland and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (June 2022) p. 10; IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 18.

³³ These resources include: The European Handbook on Equality Data, Guidelines on the collection and use of equality data (2018), Guidance note on the collection and use of equality data on racial and ethnic origin (2021), Forthcoming Guidance note on the collection and use of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC) data (2023). [Equality data collection | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](#)

³⁴ [OECD Scan: Equality Budgeting in Ireland](#), see Path Forward section, Action 9, p22 and 26.

³⁵ [NSB_Statement_of_Strategy_2021_2026.pdf](#) see 3.4 wellbeing and social cohesion, p27.

³⁶ Department of Justice, [Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence](#) (June 2022).

³⁷ See IHREC, [Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality](#) (March 2020) pp. 9-10; Dunja Mijatović, [Comprehensive sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society](#) (July 2020); National Women's Council, [Submission on the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum](#) (September 2022); Human Right Council, [Visit to Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, including child prostitution, child pornography and other child sexual abuse material](#) (March 2019) para. 71.

Emotional Wellbeing

The inclusion of a strand dedicated to emotional wellbeing is an important addition to the SPHE curriculum. The Commission has raised concerns about the significant lack of appropriate children and young people's mental health services in Ireland.³⁸ The Commission has also noted the negative impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young people,³⁹ including minority ethnic children and Traveller children.⁴⁰

Bullying is widely experienced by children at school, in other youth settings, and online.⁴¹ The Commission has called for the State to immediately set a clear timeline for the publication and implementation of the new Action Plan on Bullying and Cyberbullying.⁴² SPHE classes are a safe and appropriate space to discuss abusive and bullying behaviour, however, it is essential that different forms of bullying are comprehensively and appropriately addressed by the curriculum, taking an intersectional approach. There are particular issues with identity-based bullying experienced by children and young people from ethnic minorities,⁴³ LGBTI+ children and young people,⁴⁴ and disabled children and young people.⁴⁵ Consultation with these groups is critical to ensure a culturally sensitive and inclusive curriculum. Regular review of bullying policies is also necessary so that the curriculum can keep pace with technological advances.

Commission research indicates that normalised discrimination, in the form of microaggressions, is commonly experienced by ethnic minority young people.⁴⁶ Ambitious approaches are necessary to address bias and exclusion of ethnic minority students in a sustained and comprehensive way.

³⁸ IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 73.

³⁹ See Chapter 2 of Professor C. O'Mahony, [Fourteenth Report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection](#) (2022); [The Growing Up in Ireland study reported in March 2021 that one in five 12 year olds scored in the low mood range](#): ESRI, [Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings from the special COVID-19 survey of Cohorts '98 and '08](#) (2021), p. 6.

⁴⁰ IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) pp. 74-75.

⁴¹ IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 48 ; Children's Rights Alliance, [Report Card 2022](#) (2022); Anti-Bullying Working Group, [Action Plan on Bullying](#) (January 2013); CyberSafeKids, [Annual Report 2020](#) (2021); IHREC, Commission Conversation on Racism and Racial Discrimination with Young People of African Descent in the Greater Dublin Area, 31 March 2021; BeLonG To Youth Services, [The 2019 School Climate Survey: The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people in Ireland's schools](#) (2019).

⁴² IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 48.

⁴³ In conversation with the Commission, young African leaders noted that current anti-bullying policies are too broad to deal adequately with racist bullying. They cited the need for targeted anti-racism policies to co-exist with general anti-bullying policies, and for a zero-tolerance approach to racism and discrimination in the Irish education system. IHREC, Commission Conversation on Racism and Racial Discrimination with Young People of African Descent in the Greater Dublin Area (March 2021). See also IHREC, [Developing a National Action Plan Against Racism: Submission to the Anti-Racism Committee](#) (August 2021) p. 40; Malgosia Machowska-Kosiack and Maria Barry, A report on issues facing second-generation ethnic minority young people in Ireland (forthcoming).

⁴⁴ In 2019, exclusion, verbal, physical and sexual harassment was experienced by 86%, 77%, 38% and 43% of LGBTI+ survey respondents respectively. See IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 48; BeLonG To Youth Services, [The 2019 School Climate Survey: The experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people in Ireland's schools](#) (2019), p. 7. Anti-Bullying Working Group, [Action Plan on Bullying](#) (January 2013).

⁴⁵ Disabled children are up to three times more likely to be bullied and up to six times more likely to experience violence or abuse when compared with their peers. See IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 48; Inclusion Ireland, [Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science](#) (2021), p. 2.

⁴⁶ See IHREC, [Ireland and the Rights of the Child](#) (August 2022) p. 77; IHREC, [Developing a National Action Plan Against Racism: Submission to the Anti-Racism Committee](#) (August 2021) p. 40; Malgosia Machowska-Kosiack and Maria Barry, A report on issues facing second-generation ethnic minority young people in Ireland (forthcoming).



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Irish Education Alliance

Irish Education Alliance

The Irish Education Alliance (IEA) is a growing organization comprising primary, secondary, third level and early years teachers and educators across Ireland. As professionals who work with children and adolescents, the health and wellbeing of our students is of paramount importance.

We are writing to you today in relation to the consultation process on the proposed changes to the Junior Cycle SPHE/RSE curriculum.

We have some serious concerns in relation to the proposed changes to the curriculum which include the following:

The Promotion of Transgender Ideology and Gender Identity

Gender Identity is defined in the draft curriculum as *'a person's felt internal and individual experience of gender, for example, cisgender, transgender, non-binary, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth'* (Glossary section – Appendix 2).

Gender identity is an ideology not a biological fact. We are all born biologically male or female. It is an opinion or a belief that our gender identity is separate to our biological sex. While this belief may be important to some people, it is not appropriate to teach it to young teenagers as a fact, yet the Draft Curriculum at 1.4 states that *'sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity'*. The ideology of 'gender identity', will therefore be misrepresented to school children as fact.

The promotion of gender identity poses significant risks to the welfare of children, who are being taught through this ideology that although biologically a male or female, they can choose to be different sex or must decide what gender to identify as. Teenagers often suffer from anxiety, lack of self-esteem and may have difficulty accepting their changing bodies during puberty. Adding extra confusion over their gender identity, is likely only to compound anxiety and confusion and in some cases cause serious psychological damage. At a very vulnerable and insecure age of adolescence, when minors are not fully psychologically and mentally developed, life changing decisions are being taken as a direct result of the promotion of gender identity. At this early stage in the promotion of this ideology within school systems in other jurisdictions, we are already seeing evidence of many individuals suffering severe trauma as a result of making decisions to change their sex at an earlier age. Children who would not be considered old enough to get a tattoo are being allowed to fundamentally change their bodies through taking hormones and undergoing surgery. The recent controversy over the Tavistock Clinic in the UK is just one example.

The terminology created as part of the ideology of gender identity, defined in the glossary of the draft curriculum, is confusing and harmful, in itself. For example, children are being taught that if they 'identify' as their biological sex they should be described as 'cisgender' or 'cis'.

While we recognise the importance of diversity, inclusion and respect for individual choices, it is entirely inappropriate for an ideology such as gender identity and its associated terminology to be taught to teenagers as fact, at the risk of causing them harm.

Over emphasis on sexual activity

The glossary definition of sexual activity/sexual intimacy in the curriculum document states – *'Sexual activity/sexual intimacy: a range of activities from kissing, touching, fondling to sexual intercourse (in all its*

forms) which involve giving and receiving sexual pleasure. These activities can be solitary or involve other people.' This is promoting the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake without a focus on the relationships involved – the pre-occupation with sex is the wrong emphasis to be giving school children. The Curriculum should reduce the excessive focus on sexual activity and emphasize instead the importance and quality of relationships in the RSE programme.

Exposing Students to Pornography

Strand 3, point 3.9 proposes that children should “investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people’s understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression”.

Due to the over sexualisation of mass media content, pornography has been promoted and normalised, and so too has sexual abuse. Ireland has recorded a huge increase in the sexual abuse of children. The NUIG Active Consent team, **who believe in using pornography with school children** as part of sexual consent workshops, have been co-opted by the NCCA and the Department of Education to devise and deliver Consent education as part of the new RSE Curriculum. Films with explicit sexual content are deemed unsuitable for children under 18 years of age by the Irish Film Classification Office (NCFO). It is illegal for a cinema to admit anyone under 18 to an 18-certificate film. It is incomprehensible that any educational facility would consider showing children aged 12 to 15 pornographic material, which will lead to the further sexualisation of children. It is incomprehensible that the Department of Education would require them to do this as part of the draft curriculum proposed by the NCCA.

Under the Children First Act 2015, emotional abuse includes exposing a child to sexually inappropriate material. The introduction of pornographic material into the Draft Curriculum is, therefore, not in a child’s best interests, nor does it safeguard or promote their welfare, but indeed exposes them to risk of psychological and emotional harm and it would be in direct contravention of the Children First Act.

Inadequate Consultation Process

The IEA is extremely concerned about the lack of public consultation that has taken place over these proposed changes to the curriculum. This current ‘consultation process’ appears to be no more than a box ticking exercise. It has been very poorly advertised with the majority of teachers and parents being unaware that it was happening. It should not be down to independent teacher and parent associations to inform the public of the NCCA’s consultation process as we have had to do. In the light of this the NCCA should extend the deadline for the consultation process. All second level schools and SPHE departments should be formally invited to submit a submission on the draft curriculum and all second level parents should be informed of how to engage with the consultation process by their schools.

In conclusion, several aspects of the draft SPHE/RSE curriculum, as outlined above, are entirely inappropriate for children aged 12 to 15 and no proper consultation has taken place on it. Under the Children First Act 2015 the interests of the child must always be paramount. The NCCA, the Department of Education, teachers, principals and Boards of Management in schools are duty bound to protect the welfare of vulnerable young people under the Children First Act 2015. We are therefore calling for this harmful curriculum to be withdrawn and rethought.

The Irish Education Alliance



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Iona Institute

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

These are worthy aims in themselves.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

See response to question 4.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

See response to question 4.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Response: We are concerned about a number of proposals in the draft, specifically those relating to 'gender identity', 'consent' and 'pornography'. We will deal with these one by one.

Gender identity

Strand 1 of the draft (point 1.4) says the aim of the course is to ensure that pupils "appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum".

We believe it needs to be made totally clear to parents what this means, and what the NCCA has in mind. Does the NCCA now believe that biological sex and gender are two totally separate things? Does it want Junior Certificate pupils to be taught this? Does it want pupils taught that to be 'male' or 'female' is simply a matter of self-identification and has nothing to do with your biological body? How does the NCCA want the words 'woman' and 'man' defined?

Does it believe that schools should be allowed to teach that a woman is biologically female, by definition, and a man is biologically male?

Exactly how many genders does it want pupils to be taught about? What does it want them taught about gender pronouns and their use?

Does the NCCA appreciate how controversial these topics are and that it is impossible to teach them in a value-neutral way? If the NCCA believes that gender is a choice (even if partly socially constructed) and has no intrinsic relationship to our bodies, then it is taking sides on this issue in a way many parents might find unacceptable. To judge from the SPHE draft outline, the NCCA seems to have come down firmly on the side of gender ideology.

To repeat, parents need to be fully and comprehensively informed about what gender ideology is, and its implications. This must be done in a way that is true to both sides of the argument.

Consent

Strand 3 says (point 3.7) students should be able to "appreciate the importance of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships, from the perspective of building caring interpersonal relationships and from a legal perspective".

This is laudable, but does it go far enough? For example, will schools be permitted to teach pupils that consent alone is not enough, and that two people should be in a committed, long-term relationship first, before they become sexually involved? Will religious schools be allowed to teach that the ideal setting for sexual relationships, in their view, is marriage?

Does the NCCA believe a couple does not have to be in a romantic relationship before having sex?

The HSE website, [b4udecide.ie](https://b4udecide.ie/your-decision/why-its-better-to-wait/) suggests reasons why young people should wait <https://b4udecide.ie/your-decision/why-its-better-to-wait/> until they are older before having sex (although it only encourages they wait until they have reached the age of consent).

Crucially, we must ask again what parents want their children to be taught. Do they think a consent-alone approach is enough? Do they want them taught about the importance of being in a relationship first, or even being married first?

We note, in fact, that parents receive only two mentions in the NCCA's SHPE document and in both cases it refers to them being informed about their children's progress in learning the course rather than being properly informed and consulted about its content in the first place.

Pornography

Strand 3 (point 3.9) says that students should be able to "investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people's understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression".

The aim is laudable, but how will it be accomplished? We note that some influential voices in discussions about RSE believe pornography can be positive as well as negative, this includes the 'Active Consent Unit' at NUI Galway which works in partnership with the Department of Justice and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. <https://www.consenthub.ie/>

For example, in a submission made in 2019 to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills about RSE, two members of the team, Pádraig MacNeela (a senior lecturer at NUI Galway) and Siobhán O'Higgins (who has worked for AIDS West, also State-funded) said: "*pornography can have a positive impact in assisting with learning about sexual activity, [our italics]*", although they accept that "the scripts [from pornography] for sexual activity and role models that young people are exposed to do not map well on to the WHO definition of positive sexual health" (see note below).

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_education_and_skills/reports/2019/2019-01-29_report-on-relationships-and-sexuality-education_en.pdf

In 2018, a document called 'Porn Report' was launched by then Minister of State for Higher Education, Mary Mitchell O'Connor. It was written by Kate Dawson and the aforementioned Pádraig MacNeela and Siobhán O'Higgins.

Commenting on the report, Dawson said: "it is not good enough to just say that 'porn is bad' because it is not, people really enjoy watching it, there are a lot of positive uses, but people need to have the skills to make their own mind up about the content they see because porn is so varied."

<https://www.thejournal.ie/porn-report-nuig-4168032-Aug2018/>

The question therefore arises as to whether the NCCA believes pupils should be taught about pornography in a 'value-neutral' way that presents it as neither good nor bad as such but takes the approach that it can be either a positive or a negative influence depending on its content and how it is used?

Again, we ask, will parents be properly consulted about this? What do they want?

Conclusion: We believe that the NCCA must clarify how the three topics above are to be handled, what input parents will have, and to what extent school ethos will be respected? Any future draft must answer these questions clearly, and if not, allow schools plenty of latitude in how they approach these topics.

(Note: The WHO defines 'positive sexual health as: "...a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled."

https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_2



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Irish Council for Human Rights

Irish Council for Human Rights

Dear Sirs,

We refer to the above referenced matter.

Please be advised that the ICHR has given extensive consideration to reform of SPHE/RSE before coming to the below conclusions. Also, given the gravity of the consequences to the natural development of the child, we saw fit to produce a video on the proposed updated RSE curriculum, which you may find at this link:

<https://youtu.be/-xUhAZnsLQ0>

We have also made available to members of the public a draft submission objecting to the proposed reform of the RSE curriculum, which we consider to be both dangerous and ideologically driven. Furthermore, we have also produced a template Opt-Out letter that parents may use to extract their children from SPHE/RSE teachings going forward.

For the avoidance of doubt, should the NCCA proceed with the proposed RSE curriculum, we will relentlessly engage with parents to inform them of the dangers of your ideological pursuits and we will also inform parents of the legal protections that exist, should they wish to extract their children from SPHE/RSE and the obligations upon the school to provide for alternative tuition in line with Circular 0013/2018.

Please see below the submission of the ICHR.

The ICHR has considered the following documents (this list is non exhaustive) in coming to the conclusions outlined below:

- Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education Specification;
- Background Paper and Brief for the Redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE;
- Consultation Report on the Background Paper and Brief for the Redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE;
- Questions and Answers on Relationship and Sexuality Education (Primary and Post Primary);
- Comhairle na nOg Consultation Report;
- White Paper on Education: Charting our Education Future;
- Circular M4/95; 0013/2018; 0022/2010; 0023/2010; 0037/2010; 0042/2018; 0043/2018;
- Education Act 2018;
- Children's First Act 2015;
- Gender Recognition Act 2015;
- International Technical Guidance on Sex Education UNESCO December 2009;
- LGBT and National Youth Strategy 2018-2020;
- National Strategy on Children and Young People in Decision Making 2015-2020;

- Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020;
- Provision of Sex Education Bill 2018;
- WHO Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe 2010

Rationale for Redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE

The Draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education Specification includes the following under “Rationale” for redevelopment of the SPHE curriculum:

“Adolescence is a time of important change and challenge for young people as they come to a clearer sense of their identity and gain a more secure sense of who they are. This process of ‘becoming your own person’ and gaining a secure sense of identity is a life-long process. In adolescence it’s a prime developmental concern. All young people need knowledge and skills to help them develop a strong sense of self, make informed and healthy decisions, be able to take care of themselves and others and manage life’s challenges.

Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) is an integral part of and connects with aspects of SPHE. It is of particular importance for young people at this stage of their lives, as they reflect on many questions such as ‘what kind of a person am I?’ and ‘what matters for me in relationships?’ As they continue to form their identities (including their sexual identity), they are making sense of life experiences, information, images and messages about relationships and sexuality from a range of informal sources such as their peers, family, the media, online. Therefore, having the opportunity to think about and discuss relationships, sexuality and healthy sexual expression within a safe classroom setting with a skilled teacher is vitally important.”

From our review of the proposed new curriculum, it would appear that children are being educated what to think, as opposed to how to think, with instructions such as “*appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum*” appearing within the proposed new curriculum. There are many opponents to such views, the ICHR being one.

Furthermore, matters of sexuality and gender identity are deeply sensitive and personal and we believe that any external influence, regardless of whether that influence is well intentioned, will have a detrimental effect on the natural progression of the child. As is well known, children (particularly those of a young age) are extremely malleable and may take to certain ideas wholeheartedly, whether such ideas present a danger or not. Anything relating to matters of sexuality or gender identity should not be taught to children by a stranger (however qualified they may believe they are), but by a parent.

In addition to the above, we also wish to highlight the following concerning issues with regard to education, young people and gender identity issues:

Trans Equality Network Ireland (“TENI”) and the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (“INTO”)

We are aware of a cartoon that has been produced by TENI and the INTO which shows a very young child called Lucy with Gender Dysphoria making a social transition. We find the contents of the cartoon to be alarming, not least considering the young age of the child depicted.

The reason we raise this cartoon as an issue is because this to us, is evidence of a style of teaching that promotes the normalisation of a disorder or delusion that, in fact, up until 2018 was considered a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association – and we genuinely fear that this style of teaching will/is being promoted in Irish schools.

While we believe that children who suffer from this disorder deserve compassion, we do not accept that any child should be forced to pander to illness, as opposed to treating it.

Tavistock Gender Clinic

We are aware that 234 Irish children with Gender Dysphoria were sent to the UK to the Tavistock Gender Clinic, due to an exponential rise in young people experiencing severe gender distress. It has been widely publicised in the media that the clinic in question has been the subject of numerous serious allegations regarding the quality of care being given to the children and young adults in its care. The NHS has, in fact, ordered that the Tavistock Gender Clinic be shut down after a review found that it is “not safe”.

The clinic, which had become the subject of considerable controversy after claims that it was “unquestioning” where children sought to change gender, was found “not a safe or viable long-term option” by an independent review earlier this year.

The review, led by Dr Hilary Cass, a Consultant Paediatrician, warned that medics in the Tavistock Gender Clinic felt “under pressure to adopt an unquestioning affirmative approach” to gender identity, instead of adopting a process of clinic assessment with young people who might have expressed some form of Gender Dysphoria.

We fear that the attitude towards treating Gender Dysphoria demonstrated by the Tavistock Gender Clinic is not confined to that clinic and children who are simply going through a phase or who need genuine psychiatric treatment are being / will be transitioned into another gender without question and this problem can be / will be exacerbated through the education system should the proposed new curriculum be approved.

Right to Opt-Out

In the event that the current draft of the SPHE / RSE is introduced into junior school, we confirm that the ICHR shall relentlessly engage with parents to ensure they are informed of their rights under Articles 41 and 42 of the Constitution of Ireland and Section 30 (2) (e) of the Education Act 1998, to opt their children out of the SPHE and RSE School programme.

Opt-Out and Alternative Supervision Arrangements

In circumstances where a parent/guardian chooses to exercise their right to opt their child out of the proposed SPHE/RSE curriculum, the relevant school **must** be required to put in place alternative supervision arrangements, noting that any attempt to suggest that a parent would have to extract their child from the school during the relevant programme, would give rise to an appearance of coercion on the part of the school/NCCA/Department of Education, such that a parent would be under duress to allow their child to participate in curriculum that is contrary to their conscience.

In this regard, we wish to draw your attention to a discussion that was held in 2018 at the Dublin Pride Annual Debate, which was attended by Senator Fintan Warfield (Sinn Fein), Justin McAleese, Martin Conway (Fine Gael), Sara Phillips (of Trans Equality Network Ireland) and Peter Tatchell (a well known campaigner for the Pride Movement). During this discussion, Peter Tatchell stated: -

“In the UK, the government is still saying that the parents of kids should have the right to withdraw them from relationship and sex education. We’re not going to win that one to stop that. But what I’m proposing and what my foundation is proposing is that yes the parental opt-out should remain but parents should be required to come to the school and take their child out of each individual lesson. And of all places, two schools in the north of Ireland trialled this about five or six years ago before they got stopped. But they found the level of parental opt-out dropped to almost zero.”

For the avoidance of doubt, the ICHR shall not tolerate coercion of any sort with regard to the education of children and shall take very seriously any measures designed to intimidate or pressurise any parent into accepting that their child be educated against their conscience.

Requirement to Provide Alternative Arrangements

Furthermore, with respect to the requirement upon schools to provide for alternative arrangements for students who shall not be participating in SPHE/RSE, we direct you to the following Circulars issued by the Department of Education and Skills:

M4/95: Relationship and Sexuality Education

Section 6 (Rights of Parents) provides as follows: - *“In deciding to include a Relationships and Sexuality Education programme as part of Social, Personal and Health Education in school curricula, the right and duty of parents to provide for the religious, moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children is acknowledged. While the home is the natural environment in which Relationships and Sexuality Education takes place, most parents look to schools for support in fulfilling their obligations to their children in this area of development. Consequently, the school is seen as playing a supportive and complementary role to the home in this task. It is envisaged that this will be achieved by involving parents, with management and teachers, and, where appropriate, with pupils, in a collaborative exercise towards school policy development. This policy will make provision for the rights of parents who hold conscientious or moral objections to the inclusion of such programmes on the curriculum and will state how the school intends to address these situations.”*

- With regard to Circular M4/95, there is an obligation upon schools to *“make provision for the rights of parents who hold conscientious or moral objections to the inclusion of such programmes on the curriculum and will state how the school intends to address these situations.”*

0013/2018: Religious instruction and worship in certain second level schools in the context of Article 44.2.4 of the Constitution of Ireland and Section 30 of the Education Act 1998

Although this Circular deals specifically with the constitutional right not to attend religious instruction, we conclude that the directions issued as part of this Circular can be extended to all moral, intellectual, physical and social education, in addition to religious education, in light of the protections guaranteed under Article 42 of the Constitution of Ireland (which has been set out below for the sake of convenience): -

“The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children”; and

“The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative, and, when the public good requires it, provide other educational facilities or institutions with due regard, however, for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation.”

In light of same, we direct you to the following extracts from under Circular 0013/2018:

“3.2 Changing Practices

The key change is that those who do not want instruction in line with the requirements of any particular religion should be timetabled for alternative tuition throughout the school year rather than supervised study or other activities.

4. Requirement to Consult Parents/pupils

In future instead of waiting for a parent to request a withdrawal and then having to make alternative arrangements for the pupil for the class periods concerned a school must establish the wishes of parents in relation to opting out of religious worship or instruction and where the pupil is over 18 establish the pupil’s wishes.

Ascertaining parental/pupil choice in relation to religious instruction should be integrated with the school's processes for establishing subject choices generally.

In future the school must offer an alternative subject(s) for those who do not want religious instruction. Parents must be made aware that such alternative tuition is available and be asked to choose between religious instruction and the alternative subject(s) offered by the school. Once an opt-out has been expressed it should endure in subsequent years unless otherwise advised by the parents.

While in respect of those who want instruction in line with the requirements of a particular religion the school may appropriately engage with the parents in relation to their religious beliefs, there is no basis for a school to intrude in that regard on the privacy of those who are opting for the alternative subject(s). The only information required is that the parent wants to opt for the alternative subject(s).

6. Arrangements for Religious Worship Best practice in relation to making appropriate arrangements for withdrawal from religious worship or events is to provide parents with information about religious worship in the school; its frequency, timing, duration and the nature of the services or events. Ideally this should be done at the start of every school year. Parents should be given the opportunity to advise the school of whether or not they want their child to participate in or be present during religious worship.

It should be clarified with parents who do not want their children to attend if they want the child to be excluded in all circumstances or whether they might view particular situations differently (e.g. where the religious activity is related to bereavement within the school community or where a religious service or event in the school is a multi-faith gathering or service). Decisions made by parents should endure in subsequent years unless a parent states otherwise."

The key takeaways from Circular 0013/2018 are as follows:

- that those who did not want instruction in line with the requirements of any particular religion be timetabled for alternative tuition throughout the school year rather than supervised study or other activities; and
- that a school must establish in advance the wishes of parents in relation to opting out of religious worship or instruction; and
- that ascertaining parental choice in relation to religious instruction should be integrated with the school's processes for establishing subject choices generally; and
- that the school must offer an alternative subject(s) for those who do not want religious instruction. Parents must be made aware that such alternative tuition is available and be asked to choose between religious instruction and the alternative subject(s) offered by the school; and
- that once an opt-out has been expressed it should endure in subsequent years unless otherwise advised by the parent; and
- that there is no basis for a school to intrude in regards to the reason for the opt out on the privacy of those who are opting for the alternative subject(s). The only information required is that the parent wants to opt for the alternative subject(s).

Given the constitutional protections guaranteed to the Family in general and to Education specifically, there can be little doubt that a court would conclude that the directions issued under Circular 0013/2018 should be extended to all moral, intellectual, physical and social education – which would undoubtedly include SPHE/RSE.

We would strongly encourage the NCCA to issue unambiguous guidance around the right to opt out of SPHE/RSE and the positive obligation upon the school to facilitate same in accordance with Circular 0013/2018, failing which, we shall encourage and support parents in legally challenging same.

Relationship and Sexuality Education to be confined to SPHE

We are aware that as part of the NCCA review of Relationship and Sexuality Education, that consideration is being given to cross curricular learning of SPHE/RSE. For the avoidance of doubt, the ICHR would consider any such move to be an objective interference with the rights of a parent to opt their child out of SPHE/RSE.

In this regard, not only do we consider that any such move would leave the School open to a legal claim for damages/injunction, but there is also persuasive authority from the UK that intertwining a controversial topic such as transgenderism into the School culture, environment or other academic subjects, could leave the School/Department of Education and Skills open to Judicial Review.

The persuasive authority to which we refer is the recent case in the UK taken by Nigel and Sally Rowe against the Department of Education concerning the Cornwall Schools Transgender Guidance. In this case the Rowes were granted permission for Judicial Review over the Department for Education's refusal to intervene in their case and its promotion of the transgender guidelines in primary schools. In this case Lord Justice Lane ruled that the Department of Education's decisions were judicially reviewable on the grounds that transgender issues in schools are a matter of education and therefore the responsibility of the state.

In September 2022, the Department of Education settled their case with the Rowes, by agreeing to pay £22,000 in legal costs and providing a commitment that the Government would reform transgender policies in primary schools.

There can be little denying that transgenderism is a controversial topic and in light of same and the rights of parents to opt their children out of any aspect of the school curricula they choose, any decision to teach or encourage RSE outside of SPHE will be met with legal challenge in order to safeguard the rights of my family.

We trust that you will give due regard to the contents of this submission, and we expect that the Constitutional rights of parents shall be upheld – failing which, the ICHR shall encourage and support parents in taking collective action to litigate to protect the rights of their child.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Irish Freedom Party

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

While we agree with the importance of nurturing students in the areas of self-awareness and self-worth, the program is highly focused on two particular ideological agendas. Gender identity and race and does nothing to address the cultural, historical or biological aspects of self-awareness and self-worth. This program falls short of achieving its stated goals and only acts to further legitimatise the harmful and destructive trans ideology.

Learning outcome *"1.4 appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum "*

This learning outcome is not based in scientific fact and does nothing to address scientifically proven facts for example, links between gender dysphoria with the autism spectrum.

We believe that only proven facts should be taught in schools and children should be taught to be comfortable in their own skins without having to resort to harmful long-term mutilation of their bodies, which is the end result of the confusion this will cause.

Neurodiversity and its effects on a person's self-identity and interactions with others is completely ignored in this program and instead the authors are happy to propagate the idea that "gender can be experienced along a spectrum"

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Children between the ages of 12 and 15 will be at different stages of mental development and indeed it has been shown that the human brain will keep on developing until the age of 21. Girls tend to be more advanced in terms of social interactions and relations than boys. The themes being addressed in the proposed Junior cycle program are too advanced for persons of this age especially given the fact that all students will not be at the same level of personal development. Where we agree that information regarding the use of drugs, alcohol and addictive substances should be taught as early as possible, themes around sexual identity and gender dysphoria will be confusing to the developing mind. A young mind may not have developed the level of critical thinking required to recognised fact from ideology.

We would also note that there is no mention, at all, of the using of mobile phones and the instant gratification of gaming and social media apps and their addictive nature in strand 2.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

We believe that no assignments or assessments done on this course should be completed in isolation from the family unit of the student. We recognise that the primary educator of the child is the parents and that parents should not be left out of the child's personal development in terms of, health, self-identity and self-worth. It will also ensure transparency in relation to material being taught to children and ensure that no individual teacher can push their own personal ideologies on a group of children.

Further to this, an assessment of ideologies such as gender fluidity etc would be a complete farce as it is subject to personal opinion.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

The draft updated SPHE course would appear to be another avenue to push transgender ideology on our society and it is irresponsible to subject young minds to this content through the trusted forum which is the classroom.

There are harmful long-term effects of getting this wrong and we do not believe that teachers have the right skillset to address this theme adequately and may be subject to social pressures to promote the trans ideology.

The program mentioned self-identity but it is abundantly clear through the learning outcomes that the focus is on sexual identify and gender identity and does not take a proper holistic approach to a young person's religious, cultural or national background.

Gender identity is an ideology – not a biological fact. Indeed, the ideology is a threat to the welfare of children and should be dropped entirely from the curriculum.

If the state insists on adding it, it should be from historical perspective only and contain history of Dr John Money and his twin experiment which ended in the suicide of both young men

We have prepared a modified learning outcomes list that we believe would be more balanced and less conducive to currently harmful ideologies and which are more appropriate to the age of children in the Junior cycle and more beneficial for our country.

Strand 1. Understanding myself and others

Students should be able to:

1. Explore the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during adolescence
2. Reflect on their personal strengths and values and how they bring these into relationships
3. xplore how life experiences can impact on self-esteem and identify ways to nurture a positive sense of self-worth
4. Discuss experiences/situations of bias, inequality or exclusion based on race/ethnicity or gender
5. Be able to understand the difference between actual bias and a perceived sense of bias based on predetermined sense of entitlement.
6. Communicate in a respectful and effective manner, including demonstrating the capacity to understand the perspectives of, and empathize with others without feeling the need to force them into your way of thinking through coercion and manipulation.
7. Understand neurodiversity and its spectrum and its effects on a person's ability to understand themselves and interact with others
8. Understand the requirement for strong male or female characteristics in a healthy and well-functioning society
9. Understand the universal binary nature of sex i.e male and female human persons, which can be definitively identified by first their chromosome [XX or XY] and then by primary sexual characteristics of male or female genitals
10. Understand the positive benefits or a strong sense of National and Cultural identity in a young person's sense of self and self-worth.

Strand 2: Making healthy choices

Students should be able to:

- 2.1 Evaluate what being healthy might look like for an adolescent, including how food, physical activity, sleep/rest and hygiene contribute to health and wellbeing
- 2.2 Investigate how unhealthy products (cigarettes, e-cigarettes, alcohol, and snack and diet foods) are marketed and advertised to appeal to young people
- 2.3 Analyse the supports and challenges for young people when it comes to making healthy choices about smoking, drinking alcohol and other addictive substances/behaviours, and discuss how the challenges can be overcome in real-life situations
- 2.4 Demonstrate skills and strategies to help make informed choices that support health and wellbeing and apply them in real-life situations that may be stressful and/or involve difficult peer situations
- 2.5 Discuss the physical, social and legal consequences of their own or others' use of addictive substances
- 2.6 Consider scenarios where, for example, using alcohol, nicotine, drugs, food and screens might be used to cope with unpleasant feelings or stress and discuss possible healthy ways of coping
- 2.7 Understand the harmful effects of addictive feature of mobile phone apps and the effect on the developing brain.
- 2.8 Discuss how to share personal information, images, opinions and emotions in a safe, responsible and respectful manner online and face-to-face
- 2.9 Examine the risks and consequences of sharing sexual imagery online and explore why young people do this
- 2.10 Demonstrate how to access appropriate and trustworthy information about health

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality

Students should be able to:

- 3.1 Explore human sexuality (theory only) - what it means, how it is expressed, what healthy sexual expression might look like and the difference between sexuality and sexual activity
- 3.2 Discuss the values, behaviours and skills that help to make, maintain and end relationships respectfully (friends, family and romantic/intimate relationships) and the importance of marriage as a relational institution of commitment and stability best suited for the creation of new life and font of education and character formation.
- 3.3 Identify signs of healthy, unhealthy and abusive relationships
- 3.4 Understand the role of sexual activity in a relationship and the moral/psychological consequences of irresponsible sexual activity
- 3.5 Understand the necessity of stable heterosexual relationships for the survival of the species.

Strand 4: Emotional wellbeing Students should be able to:

- 4.1** Understand the harmful effects of social media on mental health
- 4.2.** Recognise the links between thoughts, feelings and behaviour and how these impact on how we respond to different situations
- 4.3** Recognise the benefits of social and inclusive activities such as team sports and interest groups that exist outside of social media/online.
- 4.4** Recognise the harmful effects of online gaming.
- 4.5** Discuss ways to support themselves in challenging times and where/how to seek support, if needed
- 4.6** Explore the potential impact of substance use on mental health
- 4.7** Examine different kinds of abusive and bullying behaviour that can occur in online and face to-face interactions
- 4.8** Explain why noticing and responding to abusive or bullying behaviour is important and discuss appropriate responses (why, how, where and when to report)
- 4.9** Identify actions young people can take, without putting themselves at risk, in situations where they are aware of incidents of abusive behaviour or bullying happening
- 4.10** Demonstrate how to access appropriate and trustworthy information and services aimed at supporting young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Irish Heart Foundation

Irish Heart Foundation

Introduction

The Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to this consultation on the Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE.

Non-communicable diseases are a major cause of mortality and morbidity globally. The World Health Organization (WHO) has estimated that NCDs account for 80% of the global burden of disease.¹ Most NCDs are associated with modifiable lifestyle factors. The Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) promotes policy changes that reduce premature death and disability from cardiovascular disease (CVD).

The Irish Heart Foundation is committed in our work with schools, particularly focused on increasing opportunities for physical activity, increasing knowledge of CPR and supporting schools in their efforts to provide healthy food for students. The IHF has worked in and with schools on physical activity and wellbeing for many years on programmes including Y-PATH 'PE 4 ME', Action for Life, Bizzy Breaks for bizzy bodies and bizzy minds, Let's Get Active, Happy Heart @ School, CPR 4 Schools, and the Irish Heart Foundation's Schools Health Literacy programme. Many of these programmes are part-funded by the HSE while our physical education programmes are in partnership with the PDST and DCU.

In this submission we focus on Strand 2: Making healthy choices and the associated learning outcomes.

Health Promotion

Health promotion in a school context is more important than ever and while the Wellbeing Framework for Practice and the School-Self Evaluation follows a framework similar to the HSE's previous Health Promoting Schools initiative, clear health education and promotion content and messages should be established for junior cycle children. The subject area of SPHE must take this into account. Irish research has indicated that young people who are less physically active have a narrow understanding of health and associate 'being healthy' mainly with body image², indicating a need for greater education around the meaning of health and a structured curriculum to teach children how to live healthful lives.

The course specification notes that Strand 2 "offers opportunities for students to consider how they can make healthy choices to support their wellbeing. It explores what being healthy might look like for a teenager, what helps or gets in the way of making healthy choices and how to access reliable information to support good choices"(page 10). Health and wellbeing are heavily influenced by factors such as mass marketing, digital spaces and access to information. Knowing how to find, access and critically assess health information is a key aspect of health literacy. Therefore, digital wellbeing³ should also be highlighted as an important consideration for young people's health and the ability to be able to make healthy choices. Indeed, the Irish Heart Foundation, as a member of the Children's Rights Alliance would agree with the observation in its' submission that "Achieving a balance between the behaviours, self-management and regulation areas that young people have control over at each stage of their development during the course of the three-year cycle and those that they do not yet have full control over such as food choices will be vital."

¹ WHO. (2013) Global action plan for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases 2013-2020. Geneva: World Health Organization

² Belton, S., O'Brien, W., Meegan, S., Woods, C., & Issartel, J. (2014). Youth-physical activity towards health: Evidence and background to the development of the Y-PATH physical activity intervention for adolescents. *BMC Public Health*, 14(1), 122.

³ Chambers, F. C., Jones, A., Murphy, O., & Sandford, R. (2018). *Design Thinking for Digital Well-being: Theory and Practice for Educators*. Routledge.

Health Literacy

“Health literacy is linked to literacy and entails people’s knowledge, motivation and competences to access, understand, appraise, and apply health information in order to make judgments and take decisions in everyday life concerning healthcare, disease prevention and health promotion to maintain or improve quality of life during the life course.”⁴

Health literacy is recognised as determinant of health by the WHO i.e. if children are not health literate it poses significant challenges to their current and future health. Furthermore, promoting health literacy in early years can significantly reduce health inequalities.⁵

The SHE network states that ‘health literacy will have an impact on educational outcomes such as learning achievements, academic competencies, critical thinking, and it will enable pupils to become empowered individuals as well as ethically and socially responsible citizens. Addressing health literacy in schools will not only sustain academic and health outcomes in pupils and teachers, school principals, and school staff, but it will contribute to increased health equity within society. Health literacy empowers children and adolescents to address and change the social, commercial, cultural, and political determinants of health, especially critical health literacy.’⁶

The Irish Heart Foundation believes that there is scope to intertwine health literacy into the Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Short Course curriculum given that many of the concepts highlighted in this curriculum, and particularly Strand 2, are similar to those within health literacy, such as critical thinking.

The teaching of curriculum subjects is a school’s core activity; thus, developing pupils’ health literacy through class-room teaching and learning should be a central focus if we wish to strengthen the sustainability of school health promotion.

The Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) Schools Health Literacy project is a registered World Health Organisation (WHO) National Health Literacy Demonstration Project. The project is currently developing a health literacy measurement tool and building a health literacy intervention for Wellbeing at post primary schools.

Making Healthy Choices in an obesogenic environment

An individual’s nutritional status is not solely a matter of personal choice but is heavily influenced by a wide range of social and environmental factors affecting the availability, affordability and acceptability of different foods. Indeed, while it is critical that young people are health literate, recognition in this Strand must also be given the fact that while empowering and building digital literacy among children and young people may increase their ability to recognise digital marketing, this is far from sufficient. When seeking to deliver outcomes 2.2 and 2.3, the curriculum must also reflect that recognition is given to factors outside of young people’s control.

⁴ Sørensen, K., Van den Broucke, S., Fullam, J., Doyle, G., Pelikan, J., Slonska, Z., Brand, H., & (HLS-EU) Consortium Health Literacy Project European (2012). Health literacy and public health: a systematic review and integration of definitions and models. BMC public health, 12, 80. <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-12-80>

⁵ Manganello, J. A. (2008) ‘Health literacy and adolescents: a framework and agenda for future research’, Health Education Research, 23(5), pp. 840-847. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18024979>

⁶ <https://www.schoolsforhealth.org/sites/default/files/editor/fact-sheets/factsheet-2020-english.pdf>

For example, digital marketing across harmful industries is covert and insidious, and spending is rapidly increasing. Digital marketing reaches children at too young an age, and there is evidence that it affects their attitudes, habits and consumption, and their health in later life. Children's digital rights have been an explicit concern of the international children's rights community and accordingly must be at the heart of considerations on online harms. In their submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, leading academics and experts in the area of law, child development, childhood studies, psychology, food and nutrition, media studies, and child, consumer and digital rights called for the recognition of the far-reaching harms caused by digital marketing and the personal data extraction on which it is predicated, and the need to protect children from these. This, they note, is because digital media marketing is subjecting children to intense commercial practices of implicit influence, neuromarketing, attitudinal structuring and behavioural modification, without independent evaluation to ensure they do no harm. As a result "children are thus commercial digital test subjects for marketing practices affecting their development, health and privacy." Indeed,

*"The data-driven, personal data extraction and behavioural design practices of 21st century media advertising in digital technology systems mean that food marketing now sits at the intersection of multiple harms, infringing not only children's rights to health and to food, but also their rights to privacy and to be free from exploitation."*⁷

Therefore, on 2.2 and 2.3, it must explicitly recognise that there may be cases where self-management and self-regulation, and ways to develop strategies to help make informed choices, may not be as straightforward as young people may believe.

Recommendation

Objectives 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.4 and 2.6 could benefit from consultation with the Irish Heart Foundation, particularly given our work on health literacy, as well as our work of food marketing to children.

Conclusion

While the Irish Heart Foundation (IHF) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to this consultation on the Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE, we believe that there is still some work outstanding.

In that regard, the Irish Heart Foundation and our experts in health promotion and school-based health promotion initiatives, would be happy to discuss this further, with a view to addressing the issues addressed in this submission further and in greater detail. Furthermore, health promotion professionals must be engaged in the next step of planning.

It is also of critical importance that the resources are put in place to ensure its full implementation, also ensuring that supports are embedded for teachers into the framework including dedicated training so that teachers feel confident and enabled to provide the programme.

⁷Tatlow-Golden, M. and Garde, A. (2020). Digital food marketing to children: Exploitation, surveillance and rights violations. *Global Food Security* 27 (2020) 100423 <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2211912420300778> [Open Access] p1



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
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National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

The Joint Managerial Body/
Association of Management
of Catholic Secondary Schools
(JMB/AMCSS)

The Joint Managerial Body/ Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS)

Introduction

The Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS) presents this submission as representing the perspective of post primary faith schools on the draft specification for a short course in Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), incorporating Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE).

Who we are

The Joint Managerial Body (JMB) was founded in 1972 to represent the interests of all voluntary secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland. It is the main decision-making and negotiating body for the management authorities of almost 380 voluntary secondary schools. The JMB comprises two founding organisations: AMCSS, the Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools and the ISA, the Irish School Heads' Association, representing the Protestant Schools in the State.

Section 1: Relationships and Sexuality Education – a Faith School Perspective

Education cannot be deemed to be holistic in any sense if it ignores either our actions or the spiritual or moral basis of the values that inform such actions. Neither can we be deemed to be fulfilling our school mission statements, the majority of which cite 'development of the whole person', if we ignore the values and the humanity underpinning our sexuality and sexual activity. It is therefore incumbent upon schools to engage fully with parents in the development of high-quality programmes of social, personal, and health education (SPHE) and relationships and sexuality education (RSE) congruent with the ethos of the school and setting out to educate, in the truest sense, the values, understandings and actions of the generation of young people in their care.

Setting the scene for the delivery of SPHE and RSE at local level requires the establishment of a school policy which clearly articulates the context and content of the programme and engages, in particular, with the parent perspective. Informing what actually transacts within the RSE classroom equally demands a high level of engagement between teaching staff, school leadership and the support services.

Parents choose a school for their children which most closely reflects their family values and aspirations. All schools, whether established by the State or by one or other voluntary groups such as religious orders, a diocese or a Trust, espouse a vision of the human person and give expression to a particular ethos. Some people argue that schools should adopt a neutral stance in relation to religion. The inference is that religion is a matter of personal choice and should be kept in the private sphere. However, those who would exclude religion from school also espouse an ethos of their own. They impart a worldview, a philosophy of life, just as much as the person of faith.

Our commitment to the integration of Gospel values into the curriculum and daily life of the school means that the ethical and moral frameworks underpinning what is taught within RSE classes are congruent with

Church teaching on sexual morality within the particular faith tradition - Catholic or Protestant in the case of the vast majority of voluntary secondary schools.

This does not mean that an embargo exists around any truly human experience or that faith schools will not discuss or engage with any particular aspect of the curriculum. The exact opposite is the case. The fully human nature of Jesus Christ means that nothing truly human is alien to God and cannot be alien to true educators either. Such authentic holism cannot exclude engagement with the continuum of human sexual identity and expression but what does characterise the Christian classroom is the character and quality of the engagement in seeking truly human answers, as affirmed by Archbishop Eamon Martin to the JMB/AMCSS 31st Annual Conference in May 2018:

'In the context of the current debate about relationships and sexuality education in Ireland it would be helpful for us to evaluate, at both local and national level, how our Catholic schools can ensure the safest and most healthy learning environment for all young people. Given that many Catholic schools have already been sensitively offering support to pupils who are beginning to express same sex attractions or raising personal questions about gender identity, it is timely to identify, develop and disseminate best practice in this area across all our Catholic schools. While recognising the challenges at the interface between the Church's moral teaching and pastoral practice, it would be helpful for us to share learning about: inclusive school structures and relationships; sensitive pastoral outreach and support for students; ageappropriate pastoral programmes together with curricular methodologies and resources; quality professional development and training for staff. At all times, the needs and views of parents should be fully considered in such a review and resources and methods should be developed which reflect and enhance the characteristic spirit of a Catholic school'.

To this end, JMB/AMCSS as an organisation, and JMB schools on an individual basis, have been closely associated with the NCCA review of SPHE and RSE to-date. The provision of SPHE classes across junior cycle is not an option for schools and should be universal.

The policy of age- and stage-appropriateness has always formed a central pillar of the provision of SPHE and RSE education in schools. The concept could, however, be widened to incorporate conceptual appropriateness in that students with SEN or English language deficit or those at particular ends of the maturity scale should be provided with a differentiated model of teaching and engagement with this critical subject area. Local school management is best placed to identify such needs, but such nuanced practice will demand high-calibre teacher professional development and school leadership awareness.

As with teacher professional learning, parents and guardians also need a dialogue with their children's school on these developments. Beginning with general information sessions and offering individualised meetings with school personnel where required represents a basic level of engagement. The development of a renewed SPHE and RSE policy must also involve the parent representative body in the school as well as the staff, student council, Board of Management and trustees. The relationship between home and school on this issue must be a trusting one and this can only be developed by maintaining high levels of awareness and communication.

This is equally true of the relationship between 'outside' agencies and school communities. School management is charged with the duty of ensuring everything that happens in the school community is congruent with its ethos. Specific areas such as religious education, faith formation, pastoral care and relationships and sexuality education necessarily demand greater levels of alertness in this respect than perhaps other aspects of the curriculum. Building up high level of trust between external agencies and school management should therefore represent a priority for all.

Section 2: The Draft Specification

1. Meeting the High-Level Course Aims

The aim of the updated short course is 'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive selfworth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'

JMB fully supports the overarching objectives of the proposed new short course and commends NCCA on their synthesis of value-driven, life affirming aims which both reflect and resonate with the needs and, indeed, conceptual landscape of contemporary young people. The notion that 'education is a preparation for life' has long been superseded by the reality that 'education is life' and this truth will have a bearing on the lived experience and outcomes of this new SPHE programme in particular.

The extent to which the stated high-level course aims are achieved will depend on a set of factors beyond the scope of the specification itself. These include:

- Teacher disposition, confidence, professional development, and pedagogical approach
- School leadership engagement and support
- Coherence with the characteristic spirit of the school community
- Student preparedness for age appropriate and meaningful dialogue in a safe classroom setting
- A school-wide acknowledgement that SPHE and RSE are shared priorities
- A system-wide subject recognition, support, and development context for all participants, but especially for teachers
- Authentic engagement with parents supported by a system-developed communications strategy
- Policy alignment across the school in terms of anti-bullying strategies, LGBTIQ+ awareness and inclusion, intercultural context, and guidance counselling planning
- High quality and relevant teaching and assessment resources

Behind the renewal of this critical educational provision lies the challenge of parity of esteem. SPHE and its RSE components must occupy a more significant place in the hidden 'hierarchy of subjects' that can subliminally permeate the overall curriculum. Achieving this will demand leadership and modelling by both the apex leaders in the school and equally by SPHE teachers themselves. There is much ground to be recaptured in terms of the perception, scheduling, and professionalisation of this critical provision. Our school leaders will require to be prioritised in terms of communication, consultation, and best practice sharing. This will not happen unless it is structured with an implementation plan and investment by the Department of Education on behalf of the state, as this domain of education has now been established as a national priority.

2. Course Structure – Clarity and Relevance

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements. The cross-cutting elements represent a significant shift in pedagogical approach as distinct from earlier iterations of this programme. While awareness, dialogue, and reflection on action, each permeate and underpin the programme's delivery and intended outcomes, they equally present a challenge in terms of the skillset of the teacher. The good news is that our junior cycle educators have been on a transformational journey for the past six or seven years and their own professional learning has been powerfully supported by the JCT service. Such levels of high-quality engagement and professional development support in SPHE will equally be demanded of the emerging renewed teacher education support service, to be in place from September 2023. In particular the

evolution of a safe and contained, yet relevant and honest, dialogic approach with 12- to 15- year-olds in underpinning the strand elements may prove to present some of the greatest areas of challenge to teachers and, indeed, to students alike, and relevant CPD in such approaches will need to be prioritised.

The overarching four strands present a highly appropriate and iterative framework through which the palimpsestic engagement of emerging adolescents with age- and stage-appropriate health and social education learning may occur. The learning outcomes within each strand will inevitably be sequenced under the professional judgement of the teacher and the in-school SPHE team and aligned within the Wellbeing and Guidance plan for each school.

In terms of relevance, the contemporary social backdrop to the SPHE/RSE review forefronted a range of important topics ranging from the issues of pressure and consent to personal empowerment, online life and cyberbullying, emotional wellbeing and protecting one's precious mental health. Such challenges are well contextualised within the detail of the strands and are not presented as disintegrated, stand-alone topics, removed from the perspective within they emerge.

That said, the integrated nature of the programme's four strands and three crosscutting elements presents a challenge in terms of scheduling, calendaring, and delivery in the context of parents' right to withdraw their child(ren) from particular aspects of the course. In practical terms, such withdrawal, where it occurs, generally relates specifically to RSE. As currently composed, the specification does have a clear-cut Strand 3 framing a junior cycle RSE programme but equally has elements of RSE material also presenting in, for example, Strand 1.

The integrated nature of the draft specification reflects the integrated nature of life and living itself. Thus, while we are not arguing for an artificial set of bounded lessons dealing solely with relationships and sexuality education topics – and then getting on with the rest of life – we see authentic and honest parental engagement, awareness, and communication as the optimal way forward, including in situations of student withdrawal from certain programme elements. The preponderance of RSE material being sited under a single strand will be helpful in this regard, but the porosity of the topic and the treatment of, for example, gender and sexual orientation in other strands will require awareness and agency on all parties involved.

3. Assessment

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows: *Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.*

Yet another redundant educational notion – that 'you can't really assess SPHE or RSE' – has since been set straight, and the emergence of a new paradigm in both formative and summative assessment in junior cycle means we are now in a position to appropriately evaluate learning in this most important of topics.

Contemporary junior cycle students are developing significant expertise in critical reflectivity, choice-making in terms of topics they select for assessment, and judgement-making in terms of their own, and their peers', learning journeys. The development of SPHE Toolkit teaching and assessment materials will continue to support a deeper understanding of what is actually being or not being assessed and, in particular, the role of assessment in supporting students' learning and not as an end in itself.

The flexibility offered in the CBA proposals is most welcome and will enhance student agency as well as their enjoyment of the process, particularly where such assessment is social and collaborative in nature.

Closing Commentary

JMB welcomes and commends the NCCA on the scope and scale of the curricular review leading to the emergence of this draft specification. The review's key element included:

- How the RSE curriculum is planned, how it is taught and how parents are involved
- That the entire curriculum is being taught in schools to a high standard
- The role of the classroom teacher in teaching the curriculum and the appropriate level of supports which are currently being provided by external providers
- What time is given to it, what resources are being provided, and what support materials are being used
- How effective is the continuing professional development opportunities which are currently provided by the Department and other bodies to SPHE/RSE teachers

JMB will, of course, continue to engage fully with these emerging developments and looks forward to the continuing investment of new ideas, energy and resources into this most important of educational enterprises.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

National Women's Council

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is 'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This aim is welcome as a starting point; however, we disagree that this aim is comprehensive enough to summarise the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle. For the programme delivery to be effective, specific goals should be listed under the aim. These specific goals should relate to the learning outcomes listed later in the programme and should include:

- Public health promotion
- Provision of evidence-based, inclusive and objective information
- The prevention of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse against women, girls, non-binary and intersex people
- Positive sexuality and reproductive rights
- Realising gender equality

Public health promotion

It is essential that a core aim for SPHE is public health promotion which supports the development of students. Internationally, whole-school approaches to health promotion have resulted in increased engagement in education, improved social and emotional well-being and reductions in risk-taking behaviours¹. Health and education go hand-in-hand and the WHO has recognised the importance of schools for the health of not only the students, but for influencing their families and the wider community.²

Provision of evidence-based and objective information

Key to the design and delivery of the programme is the provision of evidence-based, inclusive, and objective information. A European Parliament report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) recognises that providing comprehensive sex education is "now most urgent than ever as there is a growing number of misinformation surrounding SRHR"³. The aim of the programme must recognise how fundamental this is to ensure that the programme delivers equitable education for all junior cycle students.

¹ WHO (2021) *Making every school a health-promoting school – Global standards and indicators*. Geneva: World Health Organisation. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240025059>

² Ibid

³ European Parliament (2021) *Report on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health*, p.26, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0169_EN.pdf

The aim must also state that the curriculum should be evidence-based and objective. SPHE and RSE must be implemented according to the programme and without influence from the religious ethos of the school to ensure equitable provision for all students. UNESCO highlights the importance of remaining true to the programme to ensure the success of relationships and sexuality education in particular. Deviations from the programme can result in an asymmetry between students' learning and some students having underdeveloped learning in some areas which can undermine the prevention of abuse and gender-based violence.

Prevention of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse

It is fundamental that the aim of the course recognises the prevention of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse as a core overarching aim. The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality (2021) recommended that all school curriculum reviews should:

- Promote gender equality and diversity
- Explicitly cover gender power dynamics, consent and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence – both online and offline – within the revised Relationships and Sexuality curriculum.⁴

In Ireland, 26% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15⁵ and women with disabilities are four times more likely to experience sexual violence.⁶ Gender-based violence is associated with an increase in the likelihood of teenage pregnancy and sexual health problems, early school leaving, physical and mental health difficulties and post-traumatic stress symptoms.⁷ This violence is preventable and this is recognised within the Third National Strategy on Domestic Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

Recognising positive sexuality and advancing reproductive rights

Within the specific goals that should be listed under the aim, the curriculum should recognise positive sexuality and reproductive rights as an essential element. Sexual relationships should be framed as positive, pleasurable and mutually respectful. Presenting sexuality in a positive light and teaching students about sexual health, including provision of information on contraception and abortion, is essential to establish a foundation of knowledge which can be built upon in more depth in senior cycle.

Realising gender equality

A core aim that needs to be addressed in the curriculum is contributing to realising gender equality. The UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education provides a robust and evidence-informed basis for developing comprehensive sexuality education, and its importance in establishing gender equality. UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda states that '*quality education, good health and well-being, gender equality and human rights are intrinsically intertwined*'.⁸ The guidance recommends 'understanding gender' as a key

⁴ Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality (2021) <https://citizensassembly.ie/en/previous-assemblies/2020-2021-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality/about-the-citizens-assembly/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf>

⁵ SPHE Network (2018) *Diversities: Interpretations through the Context of SPHE*. https://sphenetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/conference_proceedings_2018.pdf

⁶ NWC (2021) *NWC Submission on the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence*. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC-_3rd_National_Strategy_DSGBV_Submission_JUNE_2021.pdf

⁷ SPHE Network (2018) *Diversities: Interpretations through the Context of SPHE*. https://sphenetwork.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/conference_proceedings_2018.pdf

⁸ UNESCO (2018) *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ITGSE.pdf>

concept for RSE. Within this, the guidance recommends covering the topics of:

- The social construction of gender and gender norms
- Gender equality, stereotypes and bias
- Gender-based violence

For the age group of 12-15, the guidance recommends⁹ that students should be able to understand that:

- Gender roles, gender norms and gender stereotypes influence people's lives and can negatively impact romantic relationships
- Gender stereotypes and bias impact how people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity are treated and the choices they can make
- Gender equality can promote equal decision-making about sexual behaviour and life planning
- All forms of gender-based violence are a violation of human rights.

⁹ Ibid

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The four overarching strands in the curriculum are generally relevant to the lives of students in junior cycle and cover a broad range of topics. However, the strands require clarity and expansion to ensure that this curriculum prioritises the prevention of violence against women and girls. The topics should be viewed through a gendered lens to challenge gender norms and harmful gender stereotypes which lead to violence and discrimination against women, girls, non-binary and intersex people. Learning outcomes should be overlapping and interconnected and underpinned by a clear rationale and aim. We have provided comments on how each of the four strands and cross-cutting elements can be strengthened below.

Awareness

It is positive to see gender in the list of things which influence our sense of self and how we live our lives and this is very relevant for junior cycle students. We welcome the inclusion of dignity and rights in this section. However, awareness as a cross-cutting element must also make it clear that not everybody has equal access to their rights or is equally empowered to assert them. This has important implications for the interconnecting elements of dialogue and reflection and action. Awareness is also important for teachers in the delivery of the curriculum. Many of the topics outlined in the learning objectives may be traumatic or triggering for students and it is imperative that the mental health of all students is prioritised through a trauma-informed approach.

Dialogue

Students cannot engage in meaningful dialogue without the relevant awareness of the diversity of life experiences we have, and how these are influenced by discrimination and bias based on gender, class, race/ethnicity, disability, gender identity and sexuality. For the RSE strand, the WHO recommends¹⁰ that sexuality education must be interactive and include youth participation. This is important for ensuring that students are active participants in their learning journey and the curriculum remains relevant to their lives. In order for the curriculum to be effectively underpinned by dialogue as a cross-cutting element, the curriculum must explicitly outline how teachers can create a safe and supportive environment in which students feel comfortable talking openly.

Reflection and action

Reflection on topics covered in SPHE is essential for critical engagement with the curriculum and this must be guided by clear and specific questions and learning outcomes. There should be an emphasis here on help-seeking behaviours and disclosures of abuse as an action which may arise from the reflection. Reflection and action must also be adopted in relation to the curriculum itself. Students should be encouraged to participate in the curriculum by being given opportunities to give feedback on what they have learned and their experience of learning it, as well as making suggestions on things that were missing or needed further clarification on.

¹⁰ WHO (2010) WHO Regional Office for Europe and BZgA Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe. https://www.bzga-whocc.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BZgA_Standards_English.pdf

Strand 1. Understanding myself and others:

- Core to strand 1 should be inclusivity and diversity. Diverse family structures should be reflected throughout this strand including lone parent families, intercultural families, LGBTQI+ families and children who may be in foster care or residential care. It is essential that this strand is delivered in way that accounts for some students in the class having experiences of the things being discussed.
- As part of learning outcome 1.1, lessons about physical changes should include lessons on naming reproductive organs. A UK study found that the majority of adult participants surveyed could not correctly label all parts of female genitalia.¹¹ In addition, this strand should acknowledge reproductive health across the life cycle, including the menopause. It is important this is taught in tandem with learning about changes during adolescence in order to instill an understanding that physical, social and emotional changes happen throughout the life cycle and these are normal. Not only does that contribute to a better understanding of themselves and their bodies, but contributes to an understanding and compassion towards others.
- Learning outcome 1.5 in Strand 1 should be threaded through all of the strands.
- Although it is positive that students will be taught about how to be more inclusive through learning outcome 1.6, it is vital that this learning outcomes includes an understanding of the structural inequalities which marginalise and socially exclude people, causing discrimination and bias. It is important that students understand these are systemic issues, and improving them goes beyond personal responsibility. Discussions on race/ethnicity should include lessons on the Traveller community. This learning outcome must also include the bias, inequality and exclusion experienced by disabled people and those with mental health conditions.
- Inclusion of a learning outcome of understanding of how social norms, gender norms, culture and society influence me and other people.

Strand 2. Making healthy choices:

- All learning outcomes relating to making health choices should relate to both physical and mental health. According to the WHO, “*Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity*”.¹² All learning outcomes must be framed taking this definition into account.
- This strand must contextualise experiences of health to ensure that students have an understanding that individual health does not take place in a vacuum. Health is impacted by the conditions in which we are born, grow, live, work, and age. Crucially for the curriculum, this strand needs to include a learning outcome on understanding that gender is one of these social determinants of our health.
- Learning outcome 2.9 relating to sharing sexual imagery should be in strand 3. In addition, this point should include sharing sexual imagery both online and in person. It is important that this is not framed in a way that places the blame on young people who share sexual imagery. Rather, this is an important opportunity to teach students about the harms of sharing sexual imagery of another person without their consent as well as informing them of the legal implications.

¹¹ Morgan, E. (2021) Viva la vulva: why we need to talk about women’s genitalia. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/16/viva-la-vulva-why-we-need-to-talk-about-womengenitalia>

¹² WHO (1946) Constitution of the World Health Organisation. <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution>

- All bullet points should be discussed in the contexts of both online and in person/face to face.
- The ultimate learning outcome of 2.6 should be to understand how negative experiences can impact the physical and mental health of students, and to foster self-compassion and understanding. Studies have shown that there is a link between substance use and intimate partner violence and this should be covered in conversations about substance use.¹³

Strand 3. Relationships and Sexuality:

- 3.3 should be two separate points and give distinct weight to the importance of disclosures of abuse. The first point should focus on identifying and fostering healthy relationships. The second point should explicitly relate to identifying what constitutes unhealthy and abusive relationships. It is important that the learning outcome for this also includes how to identify grooming and coercive control.
- In addition to exploring the pressure to become sexually intimate in learning outcome 3.5, this should explicitly teach students that it is inappropriate to pressure someone into becoming sexually intimate and link in with learning outcomes 2.8, 2.9 and 3.7 on consent.
- 3.8 should list all different types of contraception. The point on STIs should be expanded to include adverse health conditions. In an Irish study of health behaviour of school-aged children over the period of 1998-2018, there was a significant decrease in the proportion of young people aged 15-17 who reported that they used a condom at last intercourse.¹⁴
- UNESCO recommends that learning objectives for 12-15-year olds should include students' ability to recognise that sexual abuse and gender-based violence are about power and dominance, not about inability to control sexual desire¹⁵.
- This section should include a learning objective of teaching students about sexual health and the importance of having a positive relationship with your sexual development for overall health and wellbeing.

Strand 4. Emotional Wellbeing:

- It is particularly important that this strand recognises the gender differences in girls' and boys' mental health and the factors which impact their mental wellbeing. There has been a concerning increase in recent years in the number of girls aged 12-14 who report feeling low every week or frequently over the last six months and this is distinctly higher than boys.¹⁶

¹³ Cafferky, B. M., Mendez, M., Anderson, J. R., & Stith, S. M. (2018). Substance use and intimate partner violence: A meta-analytic review. *Psychology of Violence*, 8(1), 110–131. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000074>

¹⁴ NUIG (2021) *Trends in Health Behaviours, Health Outcomes and Contextual Factors between 1998-2018: findings from the Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study*. <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/HBSC-Trends-Report-2021.pdf>

¹⁵ UNESCO (2018) *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ITGSE.pdf>

¹⁶ NUIG (2021) *Trends in Health Behaviours, Health Outcomes and Contextual Factors between 1998-2018: findings from the Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study*.

- This strand should include a learning outcome on eating disorders, body image and where to seek help for disordered eating. In an Irish study of health behaviour of school-aged children from 1998-2018, 15.3% of girls aged 12-14 reported being on a diet or doing something to lose weight.¹⁷ This is significantly higher than 10.9% of boys in the same age group. In addition, 95% of all child and adolescent psychiatric unit admissions for eating disorders in 2020 were girls.¹⁸ The delivery of strand 2 should be sensitive to this consideration. Bodywhys have a programme called #MoreThanASelfie which was co-created with young people and has resources for teachers as an example of how to incorporate eating disorders into the curriculum. The #MoreThanASelfie programme is suitable for use with all Junior Cycle students. Teachers can just apply for free access [here](#).
- 4.5 should also explore the potential impact of mental health disorders on substance use. In particular, this should be explored through a gendered lens. A systematic review found that feminine norms appear to play a distinct role in patterns of substance use among women.¹⁹
- For learning outcome 4.6 relating to abusive or bullying behaviour, there should be a separate point on bullying and cyber-bullying. This must take an intersectional approach so that students understand that children and young people from ethnic minorities, who are LGBTQI+ or have disabilities are more at risk of bullying and cyber-bullying.²⁰
- 4.8 should include teaching on the bystander approach and interventions in sexual harassment. Research on bystander intervention programmes in schools has shown increased bystander interventions in situations of violence or abuse.²¹
- Linking back to learning outcome 1.6, there should be a learning outcome on mental health and marginalised groups. Research²² shows that marginalised women (including asylum seekers, homeless women, Traveller and Roma women, LGBTQI women and women with disabilities) are disproportionately impacted by poor mental health.
- Nearly half of girls in junior cycle report feeling pressured by schoolwork.²³ The curriculum should reflect the stresses that students are under to perform well academically, in particular for girls, and how this can impact their emotional wellbeing.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Health Research Board (2021) *Annual Report on the Activities of Irish Psychiatric Units and Hospitals 2020*.

¹⁹ Brady, J., Iwamoto, D. K., Grivel, M., Kaya, A., & Clinton, L. (2016). A systematic review of the salient role of feminine norms on substance use among women. *Addictive Behaviors*, 62, 83–90.

²⁰ IHREC (2022) *Ireland and the Rights of the Child – Submission to the Committee on the Rights of the Child on Ireland's combined fifth and sixth periodic reports*.

²¹ Goldfarb, E. and Lieberman, L. (2020) Three Decades of Research: The Case for Comprehensive Sex Education, *Journal of Adolescent Health* 68 (2021), 13–27

²² For example see: Department of Justice (2017) *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-21*; HSE, Glen, BelongTo, TCD (2016) *The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland*; and Mental Health Reform & Simon (2017) *Homelessness and Mental Health: Voices of Experience*.

²³ NUIG (2021) Trends in Health Behaviours, Health Outcomes and Contextual Factors between 1998-2018: findings from the Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study. <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/HBSC-Trends-Report-2021.pdf>

- Stigma still exists around mental health and wellbeing and it is important that the curriculum takes measures to address stigma around mental health and mental health disorders and improve mental health literacy in young people. Research suggests that school-based programmes for adolescents aimed at improving mental health literacy are effective.²⁴

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

The inclusion of continuous learning through reflective pieces is a welcome addition to the SPHE course. SPHE and RSE are extremely important for not only personal development, but in prevention of violence and establishing healthy and fulfilling relationships. The learning outcomes presented in this curriculum will be relevant in students' day to day lives, not only during adolescence, but into adulthood. It is therefore essential that SPHE is treated with equal importance as core subjects.

In order for SPHE to be effective, critical engagement and reflection on the topics are essential. The WHO standards for sexuality education provides a matrix for the age group of 12-15 on what information they need, the skills that should be developed and the attitudes to develop. This should be used to help inform and guide the CBA.

It should be mandatory within the CBA that a gender perspective is included in the reflection undertaken by the student. In order for the overarching aims of violence prevention and gender equality to be realised, these elements need to be critically engaged with by all students. Ensuring that all students have to include reflections on these topics in their CBA will ensure equitable and effective application of the knowledge, skills and attitudes developed within the course.

²⁴Seedaket, S., Turnbull, N., Phajan, T. and Wanchai, A. (2020), Improving mental health literacy in adolescents: systematic review of supporting intervention studies. *Trop Med Int Health*, 25: 1055-1064. <https://doi.org/10.1111/tmi.13449>

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Rationale

In addition to amending the aim, the rationale should be expanded. It is positive to see inclusivity mentioned in the final paragraph, however this could be strengthened by including the importance of SPHE being delivered in a safe and supportive classroom. For children and young people who have experienced domestic violence or abuse, school plays a significant role in providing stability and a safe space. In line with this, the rationale would benefit from additional information on integration of the SPHE curriculum with the school's safeguarding policy. As mentioned previously, the prevention of gender-based violence and abuse must be named in the rationale. Relationship and Sexuality education is a vital source of information about sexuality, sexual health and healthy relationships. It is also core to establishing gender equality norms in personal relationships. The European Parliament report on women's sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) identified comprehensive age-appropriate sexuality education as being essential to fulfil of SRHR and to tackle gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, abuse and unhealthy patterns of behaviour in relationships. This overarching objective cannot be overstated in the curriculum and it is important that it is named in the rationale.

This paragraph also mentions equality and human rights. A rights-based approach is also mentioned in the summary of Strand 3 on page 10, yet specific rights are not identified nor is this expanded upon. It would be helpful for the framing of the course to articulate what a rights-based approach would look like, in addition to upholding SRHR. The curriculum needs to ensure that the rights-based approach which is adopted ensures the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child is fulfilled. It must also be underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in order to be inclusive of girls with disabilities. The contents of the curriculum must be inclusive of disabled people when discussing relationships, marriage and having children, as many disabled women and girls are subject to stereotypes throughout their lives that they cannot experience the same things as their peers. This must be age-appropriate as disabled students have said that often the information they are given about RSE is aimed at younger groups.

SPHE and Wellbeing Indicators

Active

This indicator should take account that physical activity varies based on gender, class and disability²⁵ and there is no one size fits all approach. The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study has found that significantly fewer girls are meeting the physical activity guidelines than boys, with just 7% of girls in secondary schools meeting the guidelines in 2018. Additionally, The Irish Sports Monitor shows that levels of participation in physical activity are stronger in higher income groups.²⁶

Responsible

The point on 'Do I know where my safety is at risk and do I make the right choices?' could be problematic and infers blame on the individual in cases of abuse, assault or violence. The second part of this sentence should be removed and replaced so the point is 'Do I know where my safety is at risk and how to seek support or make a disclosure where my safety has been compromised?'

²⁵ Sport Ireland (2019) *The Children's Sport Participation and Physical Activity Study 2018* https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/2019-10/csppa-2018-final-report_1.pdf

²⁶ Department of Health (2016) *National Physical Activity Plan*. <https://assets.gov.ie/7563/23f51643fd1d4ad7abf529e58c8d8041.pdf>

Connected

This indicator seeks to establish how students' actions and choices impact their lives and the lives of others. Therefore, it is important that a bullet point on understanding the differences in others (based on socio-economic background, race or ethnicity, gender identity or sexuality, disability), being empathetic and non-judgemental is added here.

Resilient

In line with other points on how different backgrounds and life experiences can impact mental health and wellbeing, a point should be added here on how resilience varies and can often be in response to minority stress.²⁷

Respected

The framing of this indicator implies that the responsibility for being treated respectfully lies with the individual rather than being having a responsibility to treat others with respect. The framing should be modified to include treating people respectfully. This is an important indicator for self-reflection in the assessment portion of the curriculum, and prompts should be clear to allow students to critically engage with their behaviour, particularly in relation to gender norms and harmful gender stereotypes. A point should be added on understanding how treating others disrespectfully can impact their physical and mental health.

Aware

This indicator should be expanded to include awareness of what my supports are, aware of how social norms, culture and society influences me. This should tie in with the suggested learning outcome in Strand 1.

The National Women's Council consulted our members for this submission and would like to acknowledge Mental Health Reform and the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre for their input.

²⁷ Meyer, I. H. (2015). Resilience in the study of minority stress and health of sexual and gender minorities. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(3), 209–213. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000132>



NCCA

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Network of Rape Crisis Centres

Network of Rape Crisis Centres

Introduction

Overall RCNI feel these specifications are a strong holistic framework and a significant advance. We are reassured about the expert support and learning offered to this age group through these specifications in terms of self – awareness and development, as well as life skills. For the RCNI we strongly welcome the recognition of the sexist and misogynistic context of sexual harassment and violence and the explicit manner in which this is addressed. This includes naming the exposure to pornographic material and the need to upskill this age group on safety online and cyber harassment and other technology-enabled vulnerabilities. We raise some concerns regarding how the specifications acknowledge trauma and victimization as well as the circumstances of structural violence to which young people are variously exposed.

The aim is very welcome in its brevity. Our only hesitation here is that it focuses exclusively on matters within the domain of control of the individual person when we know a great deal of the harms and risks are structural and social, with young people themselves having often limited capacity to make choices within these constraints and power dynamics. In an effort to stay centred on a child's locus of control do we risk being dishonest through omission with them.

The **statement of learning** however, does establish an intention to engage them in their context and their relationship with that context. The key skills outlined are comprehensive and holistic, with clear engagement with difference, difficulty and challenge, coupled with skills building on decision making.

The Traumatized Child

One of the core challenges for RCNI in reviewing the curriculum specification is that this programme will be reaching two different audiences simultaneously - the young person learning and exploring themselves and their society and developing life skills, and the young person who has already experienced victimisation and or indeed may come from circumstances of poverty, neglect or violence. The first, the children who enjoy safety and security, are, in essence, receiving a primary prevention set of messages. Overall, bar some minor comments, RCNI would see that this cohort are well served by this curriculum.

The second cohort however, if exposed to primary prevention of this nature, without acknowledgment of what has been done to them already or their circumstances, risk harm, re-traumatisation, frustration, anger, apathy, self-hatred, internalised trauma and internalised victim blaming. To take a non-sexual violence example - in 'Wellbeing', under the heading 'responsible' - an indicator for the responsible child is 'do I make healthy eating choices?'. A child may be living in a home with poverty or neglect, where these healthy choices are simply not available, is this child irresponsible? Translating that to sexual violence, a child who is a survivor of sexual violence may well 'fail' many of the wellbeing indicators. In terms of a trauma-informed response to victims, this is to set up the 'wrong' measures. For example, a victim may have developed highly sophisticated skills in numbing and locking away feelings, memories, or indeed selectively neglecting self-care. These may be strategies that in the short or medium term enable them to survive and maximise their wellbeing within their circumstances. Removing those survivor strategies prematurely and in an unsupported environment, and designating those strategies as 'unhealthy', may be seriously detrimental for the traumatised child.

We have no doubt that most teachers will have a deep appreciation for the diversity of need, known and unknown, in their classrooms and may vary how and what material they deliver to suit the diverse needs of their students. Indeed, the spiral approach and built-in consultation with students on learning progression

would appear to us to take account of that. That said, should the specifications not explicitly outline and address the challenge of the cohort of abused and disadvantaged children for whom unfiltered primary prevention may well cause harm?

Below we offer a 'proofing' from the perspective of the abused and/or neglected child. Overall, we think the curriculum specifications can serve them well but are mindful of where matters not explicitly stated may fade in translation and delivery over time.

Trauma proofing and addressing context:

Under **key skills** add 'understanding inequality'

Under table 2 key skills – 'managing myself' is explicit on structural constraints, 'wellbeing' is also strong, followed by 'working with others' – in between the lines in those three we can see the possibility of an exploration of abuse, however this is not explicit. RCNI recommend it explicitly states that a key and valued skill is knowing when not to negotiate and when not to engage with someone further.

Overview of the course:

Strands:

The **four strands** engage with context and acknowledge areas where the child will not have agency. It would be useful to treat the limited controls children may have over negative things in their lives in the same way we treat sexual relationships, shifting the focus from a fear-based approach to empowerment. Mental health and trauma are treated in a somewhat passive way at times. The child challenged by the context of relationships and sexuality is offered introspection, they are not offered action, only resilience. For example, the exploration of 'finding support' is only for the child 'failing' at emotional wellbeing.

The **cross-cutting elements** outlined have a thread throughout of the development of critical thinking and awareness. These are powerful and essential tools for the abused child and for those around them in responding appropriately to them.

Under **Dialogue** (pg 11),

Respectful dialogue is aided by presuming a diversity of backgrounds, identities, cultures and experiences in every classroom and seeing these as a resource for learning.

A concern is that this sentence is not explicit about negative background circumstances and experiences. Does the word 'background' do the work of holding things like poverty, neglect, and violence? Likewise, 'experiences' is where we assume something like abuse is potentially encompassed. In the absence of some of the specific words, our concern is that they will not be addressed.

Strands Pg 13 – 16 RCNI were pleased to engage in a very constructive discussion at the NCCA face to face consultation and will not repeat all recommendations discussed, agreed and recorded there. Below are additional matters or matters we wish to highlight in particular:

Strand 1: Understanding myself and others

1.4 Students should be able to appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum

That gender expression and gender identify are 'core parts of human identity' is not a universally held belief, indeed it is a contested belief. We feel it would be advisable for the curriculum to engage on sex, sexuality and gender identity and expression in a more objective and inclusive manner. We would suggest something

like 'appreciate/value that sex, gender and sexuality is experienced in diverse and unique ways, with no right and wrong way'.

The idea of sex, gender and sexualities being 'along a spectrum' is also highly value-laden, and we believe negatively so, inviting judgement rather than acceptance. An inclusive model invites us to see people as unique expressions of themselves rather than requiring them to select points on a scale. Especially when that scale is based on the traditional subjugation of one sex by the other, including discriminatory gendered stereotypes used to perpetuate gender inequality. We believe the aim here is that diversity on sex, gender and sexuality should be respected and indeed expected. Diversity is diverse not restrictive, exclusionary or linear.

We are strongly supportive of 1.5 and 1.6. However, we do note that dis/ability gets very little explicit mention. Following sex, this comes up for us as the second most important variable in terms of sexual violence, yet it is infrequently explicitly listed. We think it particularly important when talking about sexual expression, autonomy and diversity to name and consider disability. Similarly, though perhaps less relevant here, socio-economic background is not listed. Considering that according to Department of Education statistics in the 2021/22 academic year there are 884 schools (687 primary and 197 post-primary) in the DEIS programme serving over 180,000 students it is likely that many students in this cohort will be from disadvantaged communities.

Strand 2: Making Healthy Choices

Students should be able to:

2.2 investigate how unhealthy products (cigarettes, e-cigarettes, alcohol, and snack and diet foods) are marketed and advertised to appeal to young people

2.4 demonstrate skills and strategies to help make informed choices that support health and wellbeing and apply them in real-life situations that may be stressful and/or involve difficult peer situations

2.6 consider scenarios where, for example, using alcohol, nicotine, drugs, food and screens might be used to cope with unpleasant feelings or stress and discuss possible healthy ways of coping

2.2, 2.4 are again very important skills being taught through the examples of harmful substances – understanding pressure, manipulation and grooming are key skills in preventing and addressing sexual violence.

2.6 is an important explicit engagement with negative coping strategies which will often be responses to trauma. This is a highly sensitive issue that we feel should be named. However, this topic requires those delivering the curriculum, to have the skills and capacity to create and maintain a safe place around the subject and the supports available to both facilitators and students. This curriculum content needs particular care in design, taking into consideration capacity and setting careful boundaries to support safety in this conversation.

Strand 3

Students should be able to

3.9 investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people's understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression

We feel this strand is very strong. RCNI recommendation is to change text as per the NCCA consultation day. And to reiterate here – the inclusion of pornography explicitly here is strongly endorsed by RCNI and essential.

Strand 4

Students should be able to:

4.1 discuss the fluid nature of emotional wellbeing and ways to protect and nurture it

4.4 discuss ways to support themselves in challenging times and where/how to seek support, if needed

We note there was some important discussion regarding using the heading 'mental health' or the more positive 'emotional wellbeing' at the NCCA consultation day. Our own reflection is that it should be emotional wellbeing but to acknowledge and engage consciously with the calls for mental health approaches. In our experience much of this is driven by a need to increase control, which in turn is driven by an inappropriate sense of responsibility to 'correctly identify' and 'fix'. This is counterproductive to the aim as stated in 4.1.

In terms of the balance between agency, responsibility for self-regulation and our context – we feel 4.4 is critical in ensuring we acknowledge and address any victimisation and victim blaming and establish for the adolescent the limits of what they are being expected to be responsible for. We would recommend adding 'and other' after 'themselves', and 'when' to seek support to the wording 'where/how'

Appendix 2: Glossary of Key Terms for SPHE:

Gender identities: a person's felt internal and individual experience of gender, for example, cisgender, transgender, non-binary, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Not everyone holds a gender identity. This definition should be inclusive of those who do not hold a gender identity.

LGBTQI+: an umbrella term to signify gender and sexuality diversity and refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex. The 'plus' is used to signify additional gender identities and sexual orientations that are not specifically covered by the other five initials, such as non-binary and pansexual identities.

Regarding the 'I' we feel this should have its own definition, not least because there is a yet to be settled discussion on terminology here that might be helpful to name. Those with the collection of medical condition which generally puts them under this umbrella term are not agreed on the umbrella term or its association with sexual orientation and/or gender id advocacy. There is usage of alternative terms such as VSC, DSD. An outline of this contested landscape can be found [here](#).

There are three overlapping and contradictory definitions. This is the antitheses of a definition:

Sexuality: the components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual practices, sexual fantasies, attitudes and values related to sex. Aspects of sexuality can alter/change as we go through different ages and relationships.

Sexual orientation: each person's capacity for emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate and sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender. Some people do not feel sexual attraction or may have very low levels of sexual attraction, and this is termed asexuality.

Spectrum of sexual orientations: people's sexual identities and orientations are complex and resist easy classification. The sexuality spectrum recognises the fluidity of sexual orientations that exist. There are several types of sexual orientation; for example: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual and asexual.

Sexuality, as distinct from sexual orientation, is abroad definition of a phenomenon. The inclusion of 'gender identity' is potentially stigmatising here. Its inclusion suggests that 'gender identity' is itself sexualised and pertaining to the phenomenon of sexuality. This contradicts other definitions where we have defined gender in more holistic terms, sexuality as diverse and not restricted to heteronormativity and sex not defining gender. Likewise, including 'biological sex' here also contradicts in similar ways.

Having a definition for both 'sexual orientation' and 'spectrum of sexual orientation' suggests we have a definition for neither. We would suggest these be merged into one that defines that it's about sexual attraction, practice and fantasy and acknowledges that this differs for people and is diverse and potentially fluid over a person's lifetime.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Ombudsman for
Children's Office

Ombudsman for Children's Office

Dear Mr. Slattery,

I welcome the publication of the draft SPHE Curriculum along with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultative approach to its development. I would like to thank you for inviting the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) to participate in the Roundtable discussion on the draft Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Curriculum as well as the invitation made at this event to make a written submission as part of this consultation. I would like to apologise for the delay in sending in this letter and hope that its content will be considered in the work to finalise the new curriculum.

As you will be aware, the Ombudsman for Children's Office is an independent statutory body, which was established in 2004 under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002. I am writing this letter pursuant to my statutory function under Section 7(1) (b) of the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002, as amended; to encourage public bodies, schools and voluntary hospitals to develop policies, practices and procedures designed to promote the rights and welfare of children.

I am mindful of the wide-ranging experience and expertise of the many stakeholders who are contributing to the NCCA's consultation on this curriculum. Having regard to the OCO's statutory role to promote children's right and welfare, this letter seeks to highlight a small number of ways in which the draft curriculum could be strengthened to more fully promote awareness and understanding of the rights and welfare of children.

It appears that much of what is in the draft curriculum is consistent with a child rights-based approach. We also note that there are positive references to human rights values such as inclusivity and equality (for example, p.2 and p.10). However, I would encourage the NCCA to make more explicit and comprehensive references to children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), as relevant and appropriate, in the curriculum, as express reference to children's rights would increase the visibility of the rights of children. It is important that children be facilitated to understand that rights and responsibilities are interdependent and to explore how this interdependent relationship is linked to the notion that rights are universal. The manner in which a number of rights in the UNCRC are defined offer concrete examples in this respect, which children might be supported to consider in accordance with their evolving capacities.

Some of the relevant international children's rights standards, which would provide some useful guidance in this area, are:

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), with a focus on Article 2 (nondiscrimination); Article 12 (children's right to be heard), Article 28 (the right to education); Article 29 (the aims of education); and Article 42 (children's right to be made aware of their rights).
- The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's ('Committee') General Comment No.1 on the aims of education; General Comment No.12 on the right of the child to be heard; and General Comment No.25 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment.

I would like to thank you again for inviting my Office to participate in the roundtable discussion and for the invitation to make a submission. Please do not hesitate to contact my Office if you have any queries regarding the above observations or if we can be of further assistance to your work on the proposed curriculum.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Pavee Point Traveller
and Roma Centre

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

Yes, Pavee Point welcomes this draft because it is clearly focused on the complex of intersecting range of issues and potential that are impinging on/opening up for young people in the 12-15-year age band.

However, the draft would be stronger if the broader social/structural context, mentioned a few times, were as clearly threaded through all the sections, as are the other personal/interpersonal elements.

See below

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Yes, there is excellent clarity, but again, we suggest that while there is regular mention of issues such as diversity of social class, ethnicity, dis/ability, etc., these issues are treated too tentatively. The substantive focus is too narrowly interpersonal.

Pavee Point suggest that there is a weakness regarding treatment of two of the five pillars of wellbeing: **(Connected; Respected)**. These are crucial from the perspective of Travellers, Roma and other ethnic groups who have been historically excluded and denigrated. As noted in this draft, and in the Junior Certificate Wellbeing Guidelines, erosion of these pillars can and does impact children's capacity to engage in learning and flourishing. Identity-based and racist discrimination is a wider social and structural issue; it is not adequately addressed purely within the interpersonal/ classroom social context. For instance, commitment to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and ensuing rights-based orientation of this programme, is mentioned once, and late -- on page 13 of a 17-page document.

Pavee Point suggest that:

- initiatives to recognise, promote and protect diversity of ethnic identities, including Travellers and Roma, and to counter identity-based and racist discrimination must be equally clearly threaded through this document, and
- the international and national legal basis for this be clearly stated in the introduction, and referred to throughout.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

The development of assessment tools is the field of curriculum experts and teachers. Pavee Point suggests that such tools must be designed to include monitoring and evaluation of students' awareness and understanding of, and capacity to address racism and all forms of discrimination.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Explicit recognition of the legal framework empowers as well as obligates schools to develop an inclusive ethos, that recognises diversity of identities.

- This document, in its Introduction, (and referred to throughout the text) should contain explicit recognition of the national and international legal obligations to protect and promote human rights, ethnic diversity and inclusion, and combat discrimination.
- Ensure that diversity of identities is not equated with diversity of needs – although where diverse identities have acquired minority/marginal status due to historic and systemic discrimination, resultant damage to wellbeing must be addressed through targeted actions. Ensure that ethnic diversity explicitly includes Travellers. Also, though Roma ethnicity is recognised in EU directives etc, this is often ignored in practice. Even where interconnected, identity calls for respect, promotion and protection; needs call for respect and remedy (reduction of a disabling environments; targeted supports to enable personal growth).



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Rockbrook Park School

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This aim is not in line with that expressed in Junior Cycle Updated Guidelines for Wellbeing (2021) which says that 'SPHE aims to develop students' positive sense of themselves and their physical, social, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing.' There is no rationale provided for excluding the word 'spiritual' from this curriculum, especially given the legislative underpinning for health education. The 1998 Act sets health education in the context of school's promoting 'the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students'.

By excluding 'spiritual' an imbalance is created in the curriculum, with an overemphasis on the physical and emotional aspects of the person. The overemphasis on emotions and feelings, especially during adolescence, does not lead to effective learning. Consideration of the spiritual dimension strengthens a person's search for meaning and purpose which in turn helps evolve and guide one's actions and decisions in life. It also leads to questions about who, or what, the human person is, which in turn highlights important aspects of SPHE which are also excluded from this draft curriculum. Examples of excluded SPHE aspects include: the nature of truth and falsehood; the nature of human personhood; the primary role of reason (the human as "rational animal", both rational and animal); reflections on doing good and avoiding evil; difficulties that can arise in doing good and avoiding evil; truth and falsehood (when listening, when speaking, when learning); the role of family as primary building block of society; understanding a person's place and development within a family; the human as a social being; realities underpinning social relationships; responsibility in society.

In the aim there is an over-emphasis on the individual, 'the self', with the social dimension of the person primarily addressed from the perspective of self, in the context of the self and not of others. This emphasis promotes the idea that others are an extension of the self, rather than of value in their own right. This also leads to deficiencies in gauging the objective dignity of all persons without distinction or discrimination.

In the aim above (and throughout the curriculum) values are mentioned primarily as personal and subjective. There appears to be no attempt to address the idea of objective values, of right and wrong. It is not 'healthy choices' that young people need to learn in SPHE but principles of moral freedom, and the responsibility that goes with that, if it is to be of help to them in life.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Strand One

This has an unhealthy focus on understanding self and has little to say about others. There is no mention of family, friends, or dependency on others. The idea of service to others is completely ignored. This also encompasses a grave educational deficiency in knowing and understanding the foundations of the dignity of others and thus deepening in respect for others.

There are at least three topics of learning here which are deeply politicised and partisan, and which promote highly contentious world views – without acknowledgement of the fact – and also promote views which are unscientific. Insofar as there is clarity in the expectations for learning, this is clearly a politicised curriculum and partisan at that. Learning outcomes can be relevant while at the same time damaging to young people's needs. It is arguable whether the school educational setting provides appropriate spaces to engage in current contentious political debate. Where partisan political views are to be covered, it is educationally advisable at least to ensure that these are presented with the appropriate context, which supports a balanced presentation of views. This is not provided in the proposed curriculum.

Strand Two

All these topics are relevant to young peoples' lives. The nature of addiction in the context of will, intellect and passions, needs to be specifically addressed. Gambling as an addiction also needs to be addressed.

Use of the term 'trustworthy' implies a truth, so why not say 'truthful' instead, when referring to sources of information.

Strand Three

This strand claims that 'the focus is on family relationships, friendships, romantic/intimate and potential sexual relationships in the future.' Family and friendships get little attention in the learning objectives.

By ignoring the spiritual nature of the person, sex is reduced to personal performance and pleasure, surrounded by rules for social convenience, and about what can be done (even with 'consent') rather than what ought to be done in harmony with the truth of human nature. The learning objectives here totally reflect that worldview. The assumptions contained therein (and reinforced by the glossary) – for example, that there is no normative sexual behaviour – are inherently political and widely disputed. In this they also lack integrity.

This unbalanced strand gives the impression that all relationships are sexual, and even within that context there is no mention of understanding what love might be, nor of family formation, nor indeed of abstinence. As this reductionist view of relationships out of synch with the truth of human personhood and nature, it is damaging to young learners.

While the curriculum is keen that students would access trustworthy advice and help, it is nowhere suggested that the students' families might be a privileged source of information, support and strength.

Absent suitable moral guidelines for discussing these topics then students are left vulnerable to inappropriate classroom practises. For example, while young people need to be alert to the impact of invasive digital media influences on their lives, 'investigating' (as defined) pornography is a highly unsuitable learning objective.

Strand 4

The 'fluid' nature of emotional wellbeing appears to be a new concept. It ignores traditional differences between moodiness and ongoing mental health issues.

The judgmental nature in regard to bullying is to be contrasted with the non-judgmental approach to drug abuse. What young person benefits from this approach to drugs?

There is little attention paid to normal external crises which impact (usually short-term) on emotions, e.g., bereavement, family breakdown, unemployment, poverty.

The elements of awareness, dialogue, reflection and action would be more helpful to students if

- (a) this curriculum were presented in a context of moral tradition, history, and culture, rather than a talk-shop of changing (politicised) opinions. Effective critical reflection requires learning of a prior body of relevant knowledge.
- (b) the overall context focussed on responsibilities rather than rights;
- (c) all the politicised sexuality ideas were removed;
- (d) they were presented with a full understanding of what natural communities (especially the family) are, and the rights and responsibilities arising within these communities; and
- (d) the learning was anchored within a moral framework which would allow students to evaluate behaviours.

A politicised glossary is inappropriate for a true learning environment.

Overall, the curriculum presumes on an individualistic model of the person living within a society overladen with a political ad-hoc secularist morality. This creates a curriculum that is not readily adaptable by schools which might adopt different political outlooks, not to speak of faith-based schools. It is hard to understand why the NCCA would do that.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Insofar as there is need for a CBA on this subject, then this is a valid way of measuring learning.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

- The curriculum could acknowledge that individual schools are best placed to understand the needs of their students, and have the responsibility to act accordingly in full harmony with the students' parents expectations, always recognising that the parents are the primary educators of their children. The school's freedom, in keeping with its characteristic spirit, to interact, respond and adapt curricula, such as this proposed SPHE curriculum, to the direct educational expectations of their students' parents, should be explicitly acknowledged, respected and supported.
- The curriculum could respect scientific fact instead of advocating partisan and changeable political viewpoints. Education should not allow itself to become a victim of ideological experimentation, and parents, and DES on behalf of parents (e.g., through NCCA curricula), should ensure their children are not made the subjects of such experimentation.
- The curriculum could acknowledge the holistic nature of the person, including the moral and spiritual nature, and not seek to separate emotions and will from reason.
- The curriculum could acknowledge the rights of young people in the classroom and those of their parents and not presume that what is now on offer does that.
- The curriculum should avoid euphemistic language and the adoption of politicised definitions.
- The curriculum should engage with traditional moral sources in its redesign as well as acknowledging the importance of religiosity for personal wellbeing.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Sexual Health Centre, Cork

Sexual Health Centre, Cork (1)

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

Agreed: the aim of the updated short course has the relevant elements needed to meet the needs of young people in Junior Cycle. The term "to nurture students' self-awareness....." is based on the need of the young people entering secondary school with a baseline preparation in this area. Supports should be highlighted on an ongoing basis for students who are struggling with these areas of self development or perhaps may not have a support structure at home to fully develop critical thinking. The whole school environment must allow young people to self express in a safe and nurturing environment.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

All scenarios used throughout the 4 strands should be more inclusive and reflective of the structures surrounding young people. Class based assessments should work towards incorporating and interchanging each strand of the short course thus reflecting the multifaceted lives and relationships that young people will need to navigate.

Many young people lack positive role models in the area of sexual health and wellbeing and look towards social media and/or pornography for what they perceive to be 'normal'. Research has highlighted that many young people in this age cohort are accessing pornography, however the short course does not include pornography exercises to be used in the classroom setting and instead offers research and rationale for discussing the topic.

Strand three: Relationships and Sexuality.

The impact of an individual's sexual health on their overall wellbeing should be highlighted while delivering this strand. Sexual health is a fundamental part of being human. It is an aspect of each individual life yet remains an area of health defined by stigma, shame and anxiety. The SPHE curriculum must cover the lifespan of an individual recognising that sexual health is something that will develop and change over time and requires us as individuals to negotiate this. Many people exit education without having a clear understanding of their body and what is 'normal' for them, this level of education is required so that individuals can recognise if they need medical or professional intervention. Reproductive health, including menstrual health and menopause should be discussed openly and in a practical manner, acknowledging the biological aspects but focusing on the psychosocial impact on an individual, normalising language and ensuring students know how to access services.

While discussing relationships, teachers must be aware of using heteronormative examples – the suggested toolkit in this draft is dated back to 2013 and the current Irish landscape is evolving quickly. The B4UDecide exercises are all hetero-normative scenarios and therefore compounding the feelings of isolation, stigma and shame noted among the LGBTI+ community. Many of the scenarios are quite dated and not relevant to the lives of current 12–15-year-olds in a digital age (scenarios include friends watching DVDs etc)

Lesson 6 in Sexual & Reproductive Health

Currently none of the links in this area are accessible and highlight just two topics – Teenage Pregnancy and STIs, this needs to be broadened to give a more inclusive and holistic overview of this area of health.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Yes, this is a suitable CBA for the updated short course. Studies three of the four strands in depth which ensures the student gets a stronger understanding of these topics.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

A strong SPHE curriculum will only develop if fully supported by the overall school ethos. A support structure should be put in place for teachers who find themselves blocked or not supported from delivering a wholly inclusive short course. Teachers delivering the programme should be fully aware of the services in their area and how young people can access these services.

Suggestions for Inclusion in Resources for learning and teaching in SPHE/RSE Sexual Health Information for Teens (Booklet)

Available at – <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/shift>

The SHIFT (Sexual Health Information for Teens) booklet from the Sexual Health Centre has been created to help young people, of all sexualities and genders, navigate areas of sexual health such as puberty, sex, relationships, and everything in between.

Every young person should be given the opportunity and encouragement to be fully informed about their own sexual health. This is particularly important when considering the vast amount of misinformation online.

The SHIFT resource offers factual information and guidance on healthy relationships, consent, sexual activities, contraception, pregnancy, HIV, sexually transmitted infections and more.

Inclusive sex education not only contributes to positive sexual health outcomes and healthy decision-making for all – it also encourages understanding among peers of different genders and sexualities.

WISE Online Training for Teachers, Youth Workers or others delivering sexual health information

Available at – <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/wiseline>

A major hurdle in effective sexual health education is the recorded discomfort in delivering the information – be it teachers, youth workers or parents. People have concerns about discussing topics like sexual identity, relationships and pornography with students, and more often they fear they will not be fully equipped with up to date and accurate information. WISE Online was developed in response to these concerns.

Sexual Health Centre, Cork (2)

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

I agree that this is a positive and welcome overall aim of the SPHE Curriculum. The inclusion of 'empowerment' and 'resilience' might further strengthen the proposed aim but overall I think that the aim as it stands is both appropriate and positive.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

I think that the curriculum as currently outlined in the draft proposal addresses many of the challenges faced by young people in Ireland and if delivered and implemented fully across Ireland, will equip students with the skills to address these.

In relation to Strand 1:

- 1.6 would be strengthened by the inclusion of disability, religious beliefs and social classes as included in the opening rationale.

In relation to Strand 2:

- Overall, this is a hugely positive outline and addresses many of the challenges encountered by young people in making healthy choices through their adolescence and into future life.
- There should be some acknowledgement or inclusion of a learning objective that explores the impact of disabilities or chronic illness on health choices. The reasoning for this is two-fold, in that young people with disabilities are included and seen in the curriculum, but also those who do not have disabilities or chronic illnesses cultivate empathy and understanding for their classmates, friends, family and others in their lives.

- 2.3 would be strengthened by explicit inclusion of a reference to gambling as an addictive behaviour – apart from underage access to actual gambling sites, many young people face challenges through elements of online gaming such as “loot boxes” in video games.
- 2.9 – Consider whether “young” people needs to be included in this learning objective as people of many ages engage in this behaviour/activity.

In relation to Strand 3:

- Overall, this is a welcome, progressive and inclusive approach to Relationships and Sexuality. However, given that some students may go through their secondary school experience without studying Junior Cert Science, Home Economics or Leaving Cert Biology or Home Economics, it is important that there is a learning objective that focuses on the biological components of sexual activity, in an inclusive manner.

In relation to Strand 4:

- In relation to 4.4 (not for inclusion in the curriculum document itself, but it would be important for a supporting toolkit to include a list of relevant national and regional support services that teachers could refer to. This resource should be reviewed and updated at least twice a year to ensure that contact details are up to date.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

I think that this is an appropriate CBA.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Glossary of Key Terms for SPHE

The inclusion of Key Terms for SPHE is a very welcome aspect of the draft curriculum. In particular we welcome the inclusion of terms such as LGBTQI+ but believe that the inclusion of definitions of the words which are included in the explanation of the acronym would strengthen the overall inclusive approach. This ensures that teachers providing education in this area have a list of definitions included in the curriculum and consistency of education within and between schools.

Suggestions for additions

- **Asexual** – Those who generally experience little or no sexual attraction to others. Some may possess little or no desire for sexual intercourse. Some may experience romantic attractions.
- **Bisexual** – Those who experience sexual and/or romantic attraction to more than one gender.
- **Gay** – Sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of the same gender. The term can also be used to exclusively refer to men attracted to other men.
- **Heterosexual** – Sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of a different gender to your own.
- **Intersex** – An umbrella term for a wide range of natural biological variations of those who are born with a chromosomal pattern, a reproductive system, and/or sexual anatomy that does not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies.
- **Lesbian** – A woman who is sexually and/or romantically attracted to another woman.
- **Non-binary** – Umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity is not solely a man or a woman. This includes those who identify as agender, bigender, gender fluid, genderqueer and various other gender identities.
- **Pansexual** – Those who are sexually attracted to people regardless of their gender.
- **Queer** – An umbrella term to refer to all LGBTQI+ people. Some people view it as a pejorative word while others have reclaimed it. Due to its historical use as a derogatory term, and how it is still used as a slur against many communities, it is not embraced or used by all LGBTQI+ people.
- **Transgender/Trans** – Umbrella term for those whose gender identity and/or expression is different from the gender assigned to them at birth.

Page 4 – Statements of Learning (Not specific to the SPHE Curriculum) – worth making these gender neutral – e.g. SOL 6: *The student appreciates and respects how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which they live.* The reference to the 3 selected SOLs highlights the gender neutral language used throughout the rest of the SPHE Draft Curriculum.

Other Minor typographical edits

Page 2 – Second Para – (Add an ‘a’) - indicators

Page 19 – Second last line (Add ‘in’) – should be in line with the arrangements

Appendix 2 – Glossary of Key Terms for SPHE

- Gender identities – For clarity I think Gender Identity works better.
- Health – wellbeing is one word, as elsewhere in the document
- Homophobia and transphobia – split out into two separate definitions.
- LGBTQI+ - (change 5 to 6) the other six initials
- Social norms – I think that the last line is missing 'not' – those which may be harmful, unhelpful or not reflective of...

Suggestions for Inclusion in Resources for learning and teaching in SPHE/RSE

Sexual Health Information for Teens (Booklet)

Available at – <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/shift>

The SHIFT (Sexual Health Information for Teens) booklet from the Sexual Health Centre has been created to help young people, of all sexualities and genders, navigate areas of sexual health such as puberty, sex, relationships, and everything in between.

Every young person should be given the opportunity and encouragement to be fully informed about their own sexual health. This is particularly important when considering the vast amount of misinformation online.

The SHIFT resource offers factual information and guidance on healthy relationships, consent, sexual activities, contraception, pregnancy, HIV, sexually transmitted infections and more.

Inclusive sex education not only contributes to positive sexual health outcomes and healthy decision-making for all – it also encourages understanding among peers of different genders and sexualities.

WISE Online Training for Teachers, Youth Workers or others delivering sexual health information

Available at – <https://www.sexualhealthcentre.com/wiseline>

A major hurdle in effective sexual health education is the recorded discomfort in delivering the information – be it teachers, youth workers or parents. People have concerns about discussing topics like sexual identity, relationships and pornography with students, and more often they fear they will not be fully equipped with up to date and accurate information. WISE Online was developed in response to these concerns.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor ShoutOut

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle well as its to help students develop their awareness of themselves and their own self-worth. A piece should also be added in about how they can come to accept themselves as young LGBTQ+ people may have a difficult time accepting their gender/sexual orientation when wider society says that they shouldn't exist or they're wrong for not fitting into the 'norm'. What is seen as a fulfilling and healthy life may differ for each young person, especially LGBTQ+ students, so extra care should be taken so LGBTQ+ students see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Strand 1: Understanding Myself and Other is extremely relevant for 12-15 year olds today. We welcome the acknowledgement in 1.4 that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum. We would like to see biological sex added as being experienced on a spectrum and the addition of intersex people in discussions around LGBTQIA+ people. These discussions should be integrated throughout the whole course and not left to one class specifically on LGBTQIA+ identities.

The physical changes brought on by puberty can be distressing for trans and non-binary people as it can bring on gender dysphoria. Puberty is difficult for every young person but can be especially difficult when a trans person's body changes in a way that doesn't align with their gender identity. Teachers should be mindful of the challenges trans and non-binary people face during the physical, social and emotional changes that happen during adolescence.

Many people find out they're intersex when they go through puberty and their body develops in a way that's not seen as typical for their sex assigned at birth. When learning about the changes brought on by puberty, an acknowledgement around how puberty is different for everyone should be included.

It is important that Junior Cert students learn about LGBTQIA+ identities in a non-stigmatised way, that LGBTQIA+ identities are not integrated into the whole course and not left to just one class. Consideration should be given as to the particular ways in which LGBTQIA+ students can be mindfully included in discussions on all topics including consent, drug and alcohol use, online safety, and more.

Students should be given the opportunity to learn about what the LGBTQIA+ acronym means and the language for such things as gender dysphoria, non-binary genders, transitioning, etc. Asexuality and Aromanticism should also be taught as real and valid identities within the LGBTQIA+ community.

Strand 3: Relationships and Sexuality is also relevant for young people today. Current research, such as the National Youth Council of Ireland's report "Consent and the Youth Sector: What Do We Know?" (2020), says that more than half of young people are confused about consent. As well as over 58% of young people youth workers work with do not understand what the term consent means as well as some of the language used in relation to consent.

Consent education should go beyond just teaching consent is a yes or a no, an acknowledgement of the more grey areas of consent should be considered. Students should be taught about what consent looks like and how they can go about asking for consent. It should be stressed that young people should always look for consent in their relationships. Consent is ongoing which means that just because they're in a relationship with someone doesn't mean they have their consent.

Students should also be taught the necessary skills on how to deal with their partner saying no or being rejected. Rejection can bring up feelings such as anger and sadness and students should learn healthy ways of coping with these negative feelings.

Consent also doesn't need to be sexual. In cases where students aren't ready to talk about sexual consent, consent in friendships and family can be used and is just as important. Consent doesn't only exist in sexual and romantic relationships.

Consent should also be taught in a gender-neutral way as consent is needed no matter your gender or sexuality. Women should be encouraged to ask for consent from their partners and men should be encouraged that they can also give consent.

In relation to Strand 2: Making Healthy Choices, 2.9 'examine the risks and consequences of sharing sexual imagery online and explore why young people do this' is relevant due to it now becoming a criminal offence to distribute intimate images without consent according to The Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020. Young people may not be aware that sharing sexual imagery of someone online without consent is not only a criminal offence but a form of sexual abuse.

When examining the risks and consequences of sharing sexual imagery online, students should also be taught on their legal rights if their sexual imagery ends up being leaked or shared without their consent. It should be called what it is; Image Based Sexual Abuse, not revenge porn. In the case of IBSA, students should be taught where they can go to report it and the laws around it. When discussing the consequences, students should also be taught that sharing someone's sexual imagery without their consent is a form of abuse and is now a criminal offence.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

We would recommend the following should be taken into consideration for the updated SPHE course:

Self-Esteem:

During adolescence, young LGBTQ+ people can find it difficult to accept who they are and may feel a lot of shame. LGBTQ+ people may find they have self-esteem and body image issues due to not conforming to societal standards. Increasingly there are media attacks on trans people which may cause upset and distress among trans youth. Work around health and making healthy choices should also include self-acceptance for young LGBTQ+ people. When teaching about gender equity, it must be inclusive of trans people and genders outside the binary.

Trans youth have mental health difficulties due to external factors such as unsupportive family, transphobia and the stigma associated with being trans. The LGBTIreland Report 2016 found that trans participants were more likely out of any other LGBTI+ identity to self harm. It was also found that 60% of LGBTI+ people had seriously thought about ending their lives with intersex, transgender and bisexual people being more likely to consider ending their own lives. Transgender people face additional challenges related to their day-to-day lives, only 40% of trans people feel comfortable expressing their gender identity in public. Coping skills specifically for trans youth are needed and a learning piece around accepting their trans/non-binary identity especially when the world is telling them that they don't or shouldn't exist.

Online Safety:

For stand 2.7; assess the benefits and difficulties associated with their online world. Young people should understand that dating apps such as Tinder, Bumble and Grindr are not intended to be used by young people and the dangers associated with using dating apps while they're underage.

Discussion on misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories should be allowed and ensure that students understand what they mean. While there are positives around social media, the spread of conspiracy theories during the pandemic has led to the rising of the far-right in Ireland. Students should be given the opportunity to analyse and discuss how misinformation spreads and why certain far-right groups spread fake news in the first place. Also, where they can access trustworthy information and research methods to find out if a source is credible.

Relationships and Sexuality:

Young people are often shamed for having sexual feelings and wanting to engage in sexual acts, the Junior Cert SPHE course shouldn't shame young people for wanting to explore their sexuality. Oftentimes young people are told they shouldn't have sex or shouldn't watch porn but this may not stop them from doing either. Instead, they should be given information on how to practice safe sex with reference to methods of contraception and protection against STIs.

Young people are watching porn at younger and younger ages. If they have a smartphone or access to the internet, they've most likely watched porn. Porn is becoming the primary source for young people to learn about sex. Students shouldn't then be shamed for watching porn or being curious about certain sexual activities but given the space to investigate how porn can influence their ideas about consent, sexuality and gender stereotypes (especially in regards to the fetishisation of women of colour, trans women and lesbians). Students should be taught porn literacy and how it's not reflective of reality.

Teacher Support:

The Draft of the Junior Cycle SPHE course is a big task for teachers and schools across Ireland, the Department of Education should work with LGBTQIA+ organisations such as [BelongTo](#), [TENI](#), [ShoutOut](#), etc to develop resources to help teachers so they feel confident to engage with and respond to student's questions around LGBTQIA+ identities. LGBTQIA+ training should be encouraged to staff in schools.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Transgender Equality
Network Ireland

Transgender Equality Network Ireland

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This aim covers the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle. It is crucial for young people to develop positive self-worth and skills in creating healthy relationships with themselves and others. I would add that it can be harder for young LGBTQ+ people and young people from other marginalised communities (race, ethnicity, class) to develop self-worth and self-acceptance in an oppressive culture, and that this needs to be considered by teachers and teaching materials.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Strand 1: Understanding Myself and Others.

Overall I thought it was very positive to see this strand cover a broad understanding of the individual, social processes, and then giving young people the skills to communicate and self-manage in these areas.

In 1.1 regarding the physical, social and emotional changes during adolescence, teachers need to be specifically supported to cover the experiences of transgender and intersex youth, for whom puberty might not be an easy process and whose bodies may not develop as expected. Teachers must be supported to cover these topics in the classroom in a respectful and inclusive manner.

1.3 on the impact of life experiences on self-esteem is there I would flesh out the point above regarding the experiences of marginalised young people and the difficulty (and importance) of building resilience with regards the oppressive social and cultural messaging they are receiving (i.e homophobia, transphobia, racism, anti-Traveller sentiment, etc).

In 1.4 we particularly welcome the mention of the spectrum of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression.

It's great to see inequality and exclusion covered in 1.6, I would ensure that this covers structural/systemic inequality as well as individual, and doesn't place the focus only on individual action.

Strand 2: Making Healthy Choices.

I think this strand could take a more holistic approach to health and wellbeing. It could be strengthened by including discussion of the health impacts of social and economic structures, and socioeconomic factors as health indicators, rather than focusing solely on individual choices. It is also noticeably lacking any discussion of eating disorders, orthorexia, body image, or unhealthy habits around food restriction/control, intense focus on exercise, and other unhealthy habits. It is absolutely key that the language used in this section is non-judgmental and does not promote any morality around food and wellness, but rather recognises that a) health exists at all body shapes and sizes, and b) weight is not the only, or indeed a good, indicator of health. This strand could also benefit from the inclusion of discussion of fatphobia in cultural and social discourse and the impact that this has on health, including mental health.

2.3 could be expanded to include structural systemic factors in why young people might take up unhealthy habits around smoking, drinking.

2.6 could include exercise in the sample scenarios used to cope with unpleasant feelings, I would also add trauma to the 'unpleasant feelings or stress' clause

2.7 seems very broad and vague, and definitely needs to be expanded and supported either in this document or in the teaching materials. Are teachers equipped to discuss facets of social media and internet use beyond bullying, such as beauty standards, misinformation, and radicalisation? Are teachers equipped to speak to the ways in which social media algorithms work? This links with 2.10 in terms of accessing trustworthy information about health.

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality

This strand is certainly positive overall in terms of capturing the range of sexuality education in an age-appropriate manner. I particularly welcome the inclusion of friendships and family relationships in the realm of relationships and in discussion around boundaries, consent and relationship skills. The material around consent is specifically useful in ensuring that consent is proactively sought and given, and I would encourage the curriculum to cover potential reactions if/when consent is refused, and particularly the gender norms in relation to consent i.e. breaking down the idea that men always seek consent and women have to give/refuse. We also welcome education around pornography, and would hope that the content on pornography does not shame or stigmatise the use of above, and specifically mentions that pornography can be the first visible LGBTQ+ sexuality for many young LGBTQ+ people, and that this needs to be addressed within the content to ensure that LGBTQ+ youth are specifically aware of the influence of pornography. Lastly, the strand could be strengthened with some inclusion of discussion around sexual violence, particularly focusing on power and control as factors in sexual violence; and by the inclusion of pleasure-based sexual education in order to speak directly and frankly to the educational needs of young people.

I feel 3.1 could include specific reference to the varieties in sexual orientations or identities.

3.3 could include mention of coercive control and online grooming as signs of unhealthy relationships.

3.7 I would change 'giving and receiving' consent to 'seeking, giving and receiving' consent.

3.7 I would change 'giving and receiving' consent to 'seeking, giving and receiving' consent.

In 3.8 – or specifically in the teaching materials – it is important that the language used to discuss sexual activity, contraception and protection is expansive and inclusive of all genders and doesn't rely on gender-based language.

Strand 4: Emotional Wellbeing

This strand feels particularly strong in developing students' awareness of emotional wellbeing, and building strong skills in nurturing their wellbeing. As with Strands 1 and 2, it would benefit the content to include discussion of the impact of systemic and structural processes, oppression and marginalisation on the mental health and wellbeing of students, as marginalised students will face different challenges than others in maintaining mental wellbeing. I would also welcome inclusion of discussion around gender and mental health, such as gender expectations particularly around young men and mental health and different help-seeking behaviours across different genders, again differentiating across identities in relation to expectations and norms. This should also be considered in relation to bullying and risk factors around gender, sexual orientation, race, disability, and other factors. This strand could also be linked with Strand 2 to great effect in terms of linking mental wellbeing with healthy habits around food, sleep etc.

In 4.3 I would also include pressure around school work as a stressor students experience.

In 4.4 I would include trauma, loss and bereavement under 'challenging times'.

4.5 should also examine the impact of mental health on substance use, and the mutual enforcement that can take place for young people struggling with both.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Yes, as SPHE both nurtures and requires that students engage in self-reflection and develop self-awareness. The course material is also broad, and I welcome the autonomy given to students to choose to reflect on the learning that has been significant for them across the course.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Overall I feel the course is very positive, and certainly a vast improvement on the previous curriculum. It more accurately reflects the world in which young people are growing up, their lives and social circles. It is imperative that a subject like SPHE speak fluently to those experiences in order for students to engage fully and feel that it is relevant to them. To that end, the course must reflect the variety of gender identities and sexualities that young people experience, and explicit inclusion of LGBTQ+ students in the course is crucial. While the draft curriculum mentions 'sexual orientation, gender identity and expression' being on a spectrum, we feel it would be strengthened by specific mention of LGBTQ+ identities, and then of further discussion around the lived experiences of communities who are marginalised due to their gender identities or sexualities.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

The Teresian School

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

We do not fully agree with this statement as there is something important missing. We would modify the sentence as follows:

....and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions, values and spirituality that will help them.....

'Being spiritual' is mentioned in the global diagram of KEY SKILLS of Junior Cycle, listed under the heading for Staying Well. However, spirituality is not mentioned or covered within the Draft SPHE Short Course curriculum specification as it stands. Reference to spirituality, in the broadest sense from whatever tradition, should be included. As a Christian Catholic school, we wish to emphasise the dignity of the person as image of God, a grasp of which can inspire healthy behaviour. It is from spiritual resources that a great many people derive their greatest resilience. Spiritual health is the ultimate health. (e.g., Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*.)

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Spirituality should be included as a fourth cross cutting element, along with Awareness, Dialogue, Reflection and Action, because of its eminent role in how we live our lives. It might be broadly defined as follows:

Spirituality

Spirituality is an openness to transcendent values, informally in a general sense, though also very much communicated through religions or traditions. When personalised by the individual, they give a broader and deeper meaning to life, and can be a great source of consolation, guidance and resilience in the face of life's challenges.

The learning outcomes are clear and relevant, except that once again, the spiritual dimension as a positive influence, inspiration and support is missing in each of the four areas.

At the very least, there should be a statement in each area that gives room for particular spiritualities to come into play. For example,

Students should be able to.....

- **Integrate new learnings into their existing spiritual values, to encourage holistic personal development.**

Suggested modification to the definition of the cross-cutting element:

Awareness:

Awareness is the ability to understand one's own thoughts, emotions, values and behaviour. It includes understanding how different things influence our sense of self and how we live our lives, including the influence of family, peers, the internet, gender, culture and social norms. This element also includes an awareness that to be human is to be in relationship and that we all share a common humanity, dignity, rights **and duties**. **[This suggests reciprocity and balance in relationships.]**

Suggested modification to

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality

This strand explores the cognitive, physical, emotional and social aspects of relationships and sexuality through a positive, inclusive and rights-**and-duties**-based-approach. The focus is on family relationships, friendships, romantic/intimate and potential sexual relationships in the future. **[e.g. the duty to be truthful about one's sexual history etc.]**

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Yes, it is suitable. It provides a needed focus for SPHE, and encourages personal engagement with the topics.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

The Countess

The Countess

The Countess is a group of progressive women from all walks of life including doctors, lawyers and students. We are volunteer-led, self-funded and not affiliated with any political party or religion. The Countess has members all over Ireland, and in some EU member states. Since the launch of The Countess in September 2020, we have gained 15,000 followers across social media, hosted webinars to live audiences of a thousand, and been instrumental in shifting the discourse in Ireland. We advocate for, and centre women and children in our work. We have working groups on prisons, sport, legislation and schools & safeguarding.

Since launching our campaign to preserve single sex toilets in Irish schools we have received a wave of approaches and support from parents and concerned citizens who used our template letters to make their voices heard. They do not agree with the raft of radical laws and policies being pushed through at the behest of gender identity politics. As such, we represent a growing constituency of people waking up to the impact of such measures (loosely terms 'inclusivity') on women and children. We are not interested in changing anyone's beliefs around transgender identity. We are simply calling for a wider lens when it comes to examining the impact of these laws and policies on society. We are part of a growing number of people and grassroots groups worldwide, who are working together to raise awareness.

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

Disagree.

The course cannot meet all its stated aims because it promotes an ideological standpoint that assumes all students, parents and teachers believe in gender identity ideology. Students cannot become self-aware or attain positive self-worth if they must police their thinking and deny the reality of sex. The SPHE short course requires pupils to deny their senses, their eyes and ears about who is male and who is female. This biological intelligence has been hardwired. Humans can determine the sex of another person with exquisite accuracy.

Acknowledging sex differences isn't saying that sex is all that matters but it recognises that it does matter and not naming it is harmful. (Sex Matters, [Schools Guidance](#))

All reasonable adults want children and young people to receive age appropriate and accurate information about any topic that will influence their choices and quality of life. The Countess is committed to the ideal that children and young people should be respected and treated with dignity. The aim of this submission is not to denigrate or belittle the authors of the Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE. But it must be acknowledged that while some people believe that “transgirls are girls” and “transboys are boys”, this is not a belief that is shared by everyone, and it is not reflected in law (for those without a GRC) or by material reality. A “transgirl” is a boy and a “transboy” is a girl. Gender questioning children have specific needs that those responsible for their care and welfare must address.

The draft course aims to develop *‘understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them [students] to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.’*

How can students be supported to develop skills and values that help them maintain a respectful and caring relationships if they are asked to accept beliefs they may not hold? It is neither respectful nor caring to impose beliefs on others. Children and teachers have the right not to be discriminated against and this includes the right not to believe and the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of their gender (male or female). Gender as set out in the Equal Status Acts 2005 -2015 means to be male or female. (F5[‘Gender Goods and Services Directive’ means Council Directive 2004/113/EC of 13 December 2004 implementing the principle of equal treatment between men and women in the access to and supply of goods and services.] Also, Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) states that everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance. While Article 10 of the ECHR states that freedom of expression includes ‘freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers’. Teaching of gender ideology as fact in Irish schools may contradict those basic human rights of both pupils and teachers.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Clarity is impossible if we cannot speak plainly, truthfully and without promoting any ideological stance.

The SPHE draft specification sets out its ideological commitment to gender identity in Strand 1 - 1.4. This section asks that students should be able to 'appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum'.

No distinction is made between sex (biology) and gender identity or expression (socially constructed psychology). They must be clearly differentiated as separate and distinct explorations, to enable children to develop clarity about their own sense of self.

To help children achieve clarity about sex and relationships, we need to speak and write clearly about the basic tenets of human biology. It is important for every student to understand the relevance of biology, of being female or male, to their lives, and to their general and reproductive health. For example, heart attacks manifest themselves differently in men and women, women are the vast majority of those affected by breast cancer. To fail to acknowledge the differences in sex is to fail to acknowledge that female and male bodies sometimes manifest illness differently. Children's learning must be grounded in this biological reality. Males and females undergo different biological developmental trajectories that are hard wired unlike the concepts of 'gender', 'gender identification', 'gender expression', which are social and psychological constructs.

Relevance and context

The course would have greater relevance if it contextualised gender identity ideology. Gender identity is an unfalsifiable belief, a belief that holds that everyone is in possession of a 'gendered soul'. It is an article of faith and can be neither proven nor disproved. **It is not wrong to hold that belief but it is wrong to use the curriculum to promote the acceptance of ideological assumptions.** People are not assigned a sex at birth. A baby's sex is observed and recorded. Some people may believe their sex was incorrectly observed and recorded but this is a matter for them. It is not appropriate to tell pupils that their sex is a matter of subjective interpretation. Schools should teach children it is acceptable not to believe in gender ideology, just as they are taught that it is acceptable not to believe in God, or follow a certain religion, but respect those people that do.

Clarity and relevance can only be achieved when we agree about the meaning of words. The **glossary of key terms for SPHE defines 28 terms but does not define 'sex' or 'gender'**. The draft curriculum often uses the terms 'sex' and 'gender' synonymously. This will lead to confusion and potential harm. Most people tend to understand the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender' in a way that places sex in the realm of nature and gender in the realm of the cultural. This short course must be concordant with other subjects within the curriculum. The Junior Certificate science syllabus and Leaving Certificate Biology syllabus make no reference to gender but refer to the dimorphic sex categories of male and female and address human reproduction. For reasons of continuity and clarity it is essential that the draft curriculum defines both terms.

Without a definition of 'gender' what do the terms 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' mean?
Without a definition of 'sex' what does 'sexism' or 'sexual harassment' mean?

Failure to be clear about what these terms mean will potentially lead to errors in the application of the Child First Act 2015 and the Equal Status Acts (ESA) 2000 – 2015.

Section 11 of the Child First Act 2015 states that relevant service providers must produce a child safety statement and risk assessments to comply with the Act. Failing to understand the differences between 'sex' and 'gender' or failing to define 'sex' and 'gender' undermines children's safety. By telling pupils they are behaving in an exclusionary or bigoted manner for expecting or wanting to retain single sex provision teachers undermine their safety. What reasonable educator would teach young people that to support female only or male only provision is exclusionary and phobic?

Everyone in the school population must know that they are welcome and included but that it is not 'transphobic' to state that everyone has a sex. This is crucial for equality, safeguarding and sex and relationship education.

SPHE Toolkit and Resources

The draft SPHE short course refers teachers to the [SPHE Toolkit](#) as a source for teaching resource. Teachers are then directed to [Relationships and Sexuality Education Unit 1](#). This is produced by the HSE in association with BeLonGTo. This unit suggests three activities relating to;

1. Gender and Gender Identity
2. Sexual Orientation
3. Changes in Puberty.

The sections relating to *Gender and Gender Identity* and *Sexual Orientation* are contradictory, homophobic and offensive to people with Differences of Sex Development referred to in the document as 'intersex' conditions.

Gender and Gender Identity Pg 15

Activity 3

The following definitions, provided in the toolkit resources, are neither factual nor neutral. It should be noted that while this definition of sex below is provided by an external resource provider the NCCA short course provides no definition of either 'sex' nor 'gender'.

Definition of sex provided by the 'toolkit' is incorrect.

Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that are defined as being male and female. Therefore, when children are born, their sex is largely decided or 'assigned' on the basis of their external genitalia, which generally – but do not always – reflect their internal hormonal and chromosomal make-up (see Teacher's note in activity 1, What is RSE?, for an explanation of 'intersex')

Sex is not decided or 'assigned' at birth. It is observed and recorded. The definition of sex provided by the toolkit is grounded in gender identity ideology. It is not neutral. It is not factual. Sex refers to the primary and secondary characteristics of a male or female person. Identifying someone's sex relies on what can be objectively observed not what is subjectively interpreted.

The use of the word 'intersex' in the 'toolkit' is inaccurate

The term 'Intersex' is controversial and is not universally accepted by those living with Differences in Sex Development (DSD). **When the NCCA uses the term 'intersex' is it referring to people without a DSD who choose to identify as intersex or those with a DSD, who may not use or even like the term?**

People born with DSDs are not 'between sexes'. Their complex health conditions are sex specific. There is no third sex. If there was the biology curriculum would refer to the third gamete. It does not. If teachers are going to address this subject the information provided has to be accurate and based in biology.

[Advocacy groups](#) for DSD do not believe the term 'Intersex' is neutral. The term has expanded to include those suffering with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS). This condition only affects females and results in the production of excess androgens – higher than usual levels of testosterone and androstenedione hormones in the female body, which may cause physical signs such as excess facial or body hair. The production of excess androgens does not mean a female child was 'assigned' the wrong sex at birth or that they are somehow more male because their bodies produce a higher amount of testosterone and androstenedione. This idea reinforces any sense that young girls may have that their body is 'wrong' because they experience PCOS. Women experiencing the menopause also experience a loss of estrogen and progesterone, commonly referred to as female sex hormones. The reduction of these hormones does not make menopausal women more 'male'. There are various pathologies that may lead to higher levels of sex specific hormones in a person's body this does not mean they have changed sex.

Definition of 'gender identity' provided by the 'toolkit' is misleading.

Gender identity refers to how people feel about themselves in relation to gender. Most people identify as cisgender. The prefix 'cis' means 'same as', so cisgender people have a gender identity which is the same as the sex they were assigned at birth – that is, their biological and physiological characteristics match their internal identity.

This definition implies that all people have a gender identity that may or may not match their biological sex. This is not true. **Some people may believe they have a gender identity, but it is a personal belief and must not be presented to pupils as fact.**

Gender identity relies on stereotypes to operate. A boy who does not play football is not a girl, a girl who likes to skateboard is not a boy. But gender identity teaches that these non-stereotype behaviours are indications that a child may be 'born in the wrong' body. **This is a profoundly limiting and reductive view of human expression.** A person who expresses themselves in ways which do not conform to sexual stereotypes is a non-conformist. This is to be celebrated not pathologised. The resources used to teach gender identity directly contradict earlier recourses used to teach about sex stereotypes. Teachers cannot, on the one hand, teach children that liking pink makes you a girl and on the other that it is sexist to say that all girls like pink. This is illogical.

Many people find the prefix "cis" to be a pejorative. Woman is the universal understanding of the adult female of the human species. Man is the universal understanding of the adult male of the human species. Neither are a subcategory of its own sex. The introduction of "cis" relegates the fact of being a man or a woman to a feeling.

Names and Pronouns Pg 18

This section directs teachers to a video produced by BeLonGTo that tells students they can show respect to others by using preferred pronouns. Pronouns are words that other people use to refer to a person (he/him, she/her). Pupils may request that teachers and peers use 'preferred pronouns' for them but this cannot be insisted upon. Insisting that preferred pronouns are used is not a neutral act. To do so is to compel the use of speech. This is contrary to the teachers' and students' right to freedom of expression and belief.

BeLongTo advises teachers to evade answering parents about the use of pronouns by a student. The handbook supplied to deliver their Universal LGBT+ awareness and skills training, advises professionals working with young people in community or education settings to not;

'Out them to their parents. Ensure you use whatever pronouns they wish you to use if you are communicating with their parents about or with the young person.' Pg. 23

This is a breach of trust and promotes child/parent alienation. Teachers are in breach of their child safeguarding obligations if they deliberately conceal the use of preferred pronouns by a student from the child's parents or if they use pronouns without the parents' consent.

Activity 4 - Sexual orientation Pg 19

Definition of sexual orientation is illogical.

Sexual orientation describes who a person is attracted to in terms of that person's sex or gender identity. The phrase 'sexual orientation' is often used just to refer to non-heterosexual orientations, but it is important that students understand that everyone has a sexual orientation and that this is an important part of their sexuality and its expression.

- *Sexual orientation describes who we are attracted to – how we feel about other people.*
- *Gender identity describes how we feel inside about ourselves – who we are as a man, woman, neither or both.*

This definition is illogical. A person's sexual orientation is based on sex not gender. If sexual orientation is based on an individual's perception of themselves this gives license for a male person to describe themselves as lesbian because they have a female gender identity and a female person to describe themselves as a gay man because they have a male gender identity. This is a logical fallacy.

Describing sexual orientation as dependent of how one feels about one's sex as opposed to what one's sex actually is, is homophobic. This definition of sexual orientation denies that the physical body, the sexed body, has any part to play in attraction. Is a lesbian who does not wish to add a trans identifying male into her dating pool guilty of transphobia? That a boy or man identifies as a girl or woman does not change the empirical fact of their male body. This homophobic attitude is compounded in the Teacher's Note section where Lesbians are described as women who are 'mainly' attracted to women. Lesbians are ONLY attracted to women. If they were attracted to men, they would be bisexual. Encouraging lesbian pupils to see their sexuality as gender related as opposed to sex related exposes them to abuse and harm.

A heterosexual person is described as '*someone who is attracted to people whose gender is different from their own*'. What does gender mean in this context? Does it mean the social construct of sex roles or the biological definition of sex? Using this definition would a heterosexual boy or man be guilty of transphobia for not wishing to include transwomen in his dating pool?

Heteronormative is described as '*a belief that heterosexuality is the norm or default sexual orientation*'. Coined in 1991 by Michael Warner, a social critic, the term [heteronormativity](#) refers to pervasive and invisible norms of heterosexuality (sexual desire exclusively for the opposite sex) embedded as a normative principle in social institutions and theory; those who fall outside this standard are devalued." The Irish electorate emphatically rejected the concept of heteronormativity in 2015 with the passing of the Marriage Equality Act. Heteronormativity, in western culture at least, should now be discussed as a historical artefact. How is it helpful to young gay, lesbian and gender confused people to tell them that they are the most marginalised, most despised, most hated groups in society? The actions of the Irish people in 2015 demonstrated this not to be the case.

Heterosexuality is the default sexual orientation as dictated by evolution for the survival of the human species. It is not a belief that most of the population are heterosexual. Being heterosexual is not a cause for shame. No one should feel they have a privilege because of who they are attracted to. Nor should they feel shame for not being attracted to someone on the basis of sex. It is not a belief that heterosexuality is the norm or default sexual orientation, it is a fact that confers no judgement or superiority.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Will students be allowed freedom of conscience and freedom of speech to express their knowledge that sex is binary and immutable? Will students be marked down if they do not conform to the tenets set out in the Section 1/1.4 of the draft course and in the toolkit resources that teach gender identity as fact?

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

All reasonable adults want children and young people to receive age appropriate and accurate information about any topic that will influence their choices and quality of life. The Countess is committed to the ideal that children and young people should be respected and treated with dignity. The aim of this submission is not to denigrate or belittle the authors of the draft SPHE course. But it must be acknowledged that while some people believe that “transgirls are girls” and “transboys are boys”, this is not a belief that is shared by everyone, and it is not reflected in law or by material reality. A “transgirl” is a boy and a “transboy” is a girl. Trans identifying children have specific and complex needs that those responsible for their care and welfare must address.

Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD)

Is the NCCA aware of the phenomenon of Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria (ROGD) as described by Dr Lisa Litmann in her seminal paper [‘Parent reports of adolescents and young adults perceived to show signs of a rapid onset of gender dysphoria’](#) . The paper reports that;

‘Parents describe that the onset of gender dysphoria seemed to occur in the context of belonging to a peer group where one, multiple, or even all of the friends have become gender dysphoric and transgender-identified during the same timeframe. Parents also report that their children exhibited an increase in social media/ internet use prior to disclosure of a transgender identity’.

The ideological tenor of this document will lead young people to the conclusion that it is possible to be born in the wrong body and that transitioning may be a way to alleviate their distress. Transitioning can be social and/or medical. If social transitioning is supported in schools, teachers must be aware that this is a powerful psychological intervention that teachers are not qualified to engage in. Teachers would not affirm a child who presented with an eating disorder. Why are they encouraged to affirm a child who is gender confused? Young people experiencing this condition require a multi-disciplinary team to address their needs, as suggested by the experts at the [National Gender Service](#) .Children experiencing anorexia, ASD, ADHD etc. will be supported by an expert multi-disciplinary team. Why is the same standard not applied to young people experiencing gender dysphoria?

Transition, Detransition and Desisting

The SPHE toolkit refers teachers to [the Being LGBT In Schools](#) resource.

In section 4.5.3 Transition Plan the document instructs teachers to do the following;

‘When a student expresses the wish to attend school in his or her preferred gender it is advisable that a plan for the transition process is set out in line with the student’s wishes, needs and concerns’.

If the NCCA promotes transitioning young people, it must demonstrate that it has comprehensively reviewed the research available and set out why it has come to the conclusion that social and medical transition is an appropriate response to gender dysphoria.

What is striking about [the Being LGBT In Schools](#) resource is its failure to refer to young people who desist or detransition.

Desistance or desisting is the process of reversing a transition which was only social (e.g. by reverting to an earlier name). Desistance typically implies that an individual who was once seeking medical transition is no longer doing so.

Detransition is the process of changing a person's gender presentation back to his or her biological sex, by seeking to reverse an earlier medical transition.

This is particularly worrying as research conducted by statsforgender.org shows that gender dysphoria recedes in [80%](#) of cases if not actively affirmed.

If resources and supports are in place to support transition, similar supports must be put in place to facilitate those who change their mind. **Young people must be told that it is acceptable to desist and detransition and that they will be supported to do so.**

Dr Lisa Litmann's paper '*Individuals Treated for Gender Dysphoria with Medical and/or Surgical Transition Who Subsequently Detransitioned: A Survey of 100 Detransitioners*' describes a population of individuals who experienced gender dysphoria and chose to undergo medical and/or surgical transition and then detransitioned by discontinuing medications, having surgery to reverse the effects of transition, or both. Reasons for detransitioning were varied and included: experiencing discrimination (23.0%); becoming more comfortable identifying as their natal sex (60.0%); having concerns about potential medical complications from transitioning (49.0%); and coming to the view that their gender dysphoria was caused by something specific such as trauma, abuse, or a mental health condition (38.0%). Homophobia or difficulty accepting themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual was expressed by 23.0% as a reason for transition and subsequent detransition. The majority (55.0%) felt that they did not receive an adequate evaluation from a doctor or mental health professional before starting transition and only 24.0% of respondents informed their clinicians that they had detransitioned.

Safeguarding and Consent

In the context of sexual activity consent must be freely given, enthusiastic and ongoing. The absence of the word NO is not consent. Promoting the concept that boys can be girls and girls can be boys has particular consequences for young people. In the pervading ethos of this curriculum promoting the idea that people can change sex there is a significant risk that boys and girls who feel uncomfortable will say nothing for fear of being described as bigoted or transphobic. Social transitioning also poses safeguarding risks to other children, and undermines their rights. Schools are obliged to provide single-sex toilet or stand-alone single occupancy facilities for children, as per the Equal Status Acts. This is necessary for children's privacy, dignity and safety. Lobby groups have misinterpreted and misrepresented the law to schools. Some to extent that they believe that gender identity and gender expression are protected characteristic in addition to gender. They are not.

This has profound consequences for girls who are same sex attracted i.e., lesbian. They will face the prospect of heterosexual boys identifying as girls but remaining opposite sex attracted and claiming that they are lesbian. BeLongTo has set the groundwork to undermine lesbian boundaries by describing lesbians as people who are mainly attracted to women. This is nonsense. Lesbians are only attracted to women. The term "cotton ceiling" is sometimes used when discussing these issues, but it is controversial. It stems from "glass ceiling", which refers to an invisible barrier preventing women from climbing to the top of the career ladder. Cotton is a reference to women's underwear, with the phrase intended to represent the difficulty some transwomen (males who identify as women) feel they face when seeking relationships or sex. "Breaking the cotton ceiling" means trans identifying males being able to have sex with lesbians. The NCCA must consider whether supporting the idea that males can be lesbian erodes the sexual boundaries of same sex attracted girls.

BeLongTo promote "chest binding" as part of its affirmation model, which can cause [significant physical harm to girls that practice it](#). Schools must be aware that binders can cause shortness of breath, cracked ribs, heavy bruising among others, which in turn can affect children's ability to study and take part in PE activities.

[The Cass Review](#), undertaken by leading child paediatrician Hilary Cass OBE, a consultant in paediatric disability and a former President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, has found that gender distress, and body dysphoria, can be a response to a range of developmental, social and psychological factors, including developmental attachment trauma, child sexual abuse and difficulties with challenges of neurodiversity.

Has the NCCA assessed **the safeguarding risks inherent in promoting 'gender identity'** as a fact? Are teachers aware that by encouraging children to find a solution to their psychological distress in physical and social changes they are promoting 'social transitioning', the process of changing your name, asking people to use different pronouns to refer to you, or changing aspects of your appearance (such as your clothing or your hairstyle) in order to present as a different gender. Dr Cass stated that 'social transitioning' is not a 'neutral intervention', and can promote serious psychological distress in those suffering from gender confusion. It is not the role of the school or teacher to engage in powerful psychological interventions. They are untrained and uninsured to do so. School management and teachers need to consider their duty of care and whether by promoting gender identity as fact, and without contextualisation, they are breaching that duty.

Additional Resources

It is also important to note that the additional resources for teachers and students only include those that support gender ideology. Can the NCCA provide a rationale for why these resources were included while other resources that provide a different point of view on gender identity were not? The following resources should at least be included as a reference:

[Transgender Trend](#) - Transgender Trend is the leading organisation in the call for evidence-based healthcare for children and young people suffering gender dysphoria and for factual, science-based teaching in schools.

[Genspect](#) - an international alliance of professionals, parent groups, trans people, detransitioners, and others who seek high-quality care for gender distressed young people.

[DSD Families](#) - an information and peer support charity for families with DSD conditions

Key Points Made by The Countess

1. Sex is real. Children are born male or female. No child is "born in the wrong body". Not conforming to gender stereotypes does not mean a child is the wrong sex.
2. The SPHE curriculum must work coherently with the entire curricula. Teaching pupils that sex is dimorphic in the science and biology curricula but teaching that it is a social construct in SPHE is incoherent and untrue.
3. A child who identifies as a different gender to their sex has not legally changed sex.
4. Schools and teachers must understand that 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' are not protected characteristics in the Equal Status Acts. Gender is a protected characteristic and for the purpose of the Equal Status Acts gender means to be male or female.
5. Stereotypes damage girls and boys. Not conforming to sex-based stereotypes does not mean a child is confused about their gender. They are simply a non-conformist. Not conforming should be celebrated not erased.

6. Schools have an obligation to ensure all teaching materials, policies and external facilitators are appropriate and meet child safeguarding standards. See Department of Education Circular 2018/43
7. All bullying and harassment by any child/teacher, for any reason, should be tackled. This includes bullying of staff and students who do not believe in gender identity ideology.
8. Schools should make clear that everyone is included and valued. It is not “transphobic” to recognise that everyone has a sex, and to have sex-based rules were justified.
9. Gender Identity is a valid belief system but it must be contextualised as a belief some people hold but others do not. It is a subjective belief and must not be taught as fact in an educational setting.

The Countess, September 2022



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Teachers' Union of Ireland

Teachers' Union of Ireland

Dear Barry

I am writing in relation to the ongoing consultation on the above. The TUI would like to make the comments below in relation to the draft specification and matters arising from same. The TUI is making comments that relate directly to the draft specification as well as wider issues which may be outside the direct remit of the NCCA but will have implications for successful implementation of the specification which will, presumably, be agreed by NCCA Council. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at dduffy@tui.ie or on 087 7713941.

The TUI is strongly encouraging members working in the area to get involved in the consultations. The TUI welcomes the draft specification and looks forward to seeing what feedback emerges from the consultation process.

It is perhaps to be expected that much of the media commentary about the draft specification has focused on the RSE aspects. However, the TUI strongly believes that the other three strands of the course also contain important topics for students to learn. It would be unfortunate if all discussion focused on just one strand to the detriment of meaningful discussion of the other three. For example, alcohol education in strand two is a very good example of where schools are doing their very best to address a serious health education issue which extends far beyond the school walls. As noted by the HSE (2022: 23)

"Almost one and a half million adults in Ireland drink in a harmful manner, with 40% engaging in heavy episodic drinking (i.e. binge drinking) at least once a month."

There is much to be welcomed in the course which puts the parent at the core of the course and as always, they have the freedom to choose to withhold consent for their child to engage with the RSE aspect.

The course is ground breaking in that it must be taught without ethos or any such overtures. It is a course that should equip students to deal with the world they live in, what we need to do now as educators is ensure the teachers who provide the curriculum are equipped with the resources and training required to assist them.

In the case of SPHE and RSE, schools have a clear responsibility for delivering the SPHE and RSE programme but, in the broader societal context, parents/guardians and families clearly have a primary responsibility in terms of fostering values and practices in relation to sexual health and relationships that are positive and underpinned by respect for oneself and others. Indeed, Article 42 the Irish Constitution cites the family unit as the 'primary educator'.

It should be noted that teachers generally would not consider their delivery of the RSE programme to be constrained by what was prescribed twenty years ago. They have had to take into consideration developments in the intervening period. Therefore, they routinely address matters such as marriage equality, LGBTQ+ issues, consent, contraception, safe use of social media etc. Indeed, not only are these matters addressed through RSE but are also often captured as part of other subjects such as Religious Education, Politics and Society, Computer Science, CSPE, SPHE/Pastoral Care etc. Coverage of these issues in the revised draft specification would be welcome. It would also be helpful if the relevant organisations could provide useful and age-appropriate resources to schools to support the specification if and when it is approved.

Schools need to be able to decide which teachers are best suited to teaching sensitive matters such as sexuality. These teachers must be able to access high-quality CPD to enable them to carry out this sensitive task. The DoE has a responsibility to provide this CPD at a time and venue that is convenient to teachers. The CPD is vital to teachers as students may make disclosures of a highly sensitive nature in or after a class. Teachers need to be properly prepared by the PDST and other agencies for when this may happen.

The TUI has a concern that RSE is not available equally in all school settings. The TUI strongly supports the Constitutional protection of religious freedom but also believes that RSE should be available to all students unless the parents of a student explicitly ask for their child to be exempt. The availability of RSE should not depend on the religious ethos or otherwise of the individual school.

The TUI is aware of reports that some materials and/or speakers being used to support the delivery of RSE in some schools may not be in line with best practice of independence and the provision of non-directive expert knowledge. The TUI believes that it can be useful for schools to use outside materials and/or speakers to support particular parts of the RSE programme. However, it is important that schools are confident that the materials or speaker are in line with best practice and that particular agendas are not pushed by the materials or speaker. It would be helpful to schools if the DoE could develop additional resources that schools could then have confidence in using.

The issue of cyber-security has received significant attention recently. In March 2018 the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs issued a report on the topic of cyber-security and made recommendations regarding schools, such as cyber-safety education being part of the curriculum. It should also be noted that 'risky' internet behaviour usually, by its very nature, happens outside of school premises. Parents have a clear responsibility regarding the safety of their children outside of school and it may be unconstitutional for schools to take over that role. It is interesting to note that a CyberSafeIreland survey found that more than one-third of eight to ten year olds rarely or never spoke to their parents about online safety despite 10% of those surveyed being online for more than four hours per day and 40% of survey respondents peaking to strangers online (RTE News February 5th 2019).



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Women's Aid

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

Women's Aid is happy with the aim, which overall is positive. The focus on positive self-worth is important, especially for young women, transgender and non-binary people who, due to societal messaging, may not believe they deserve respectful and caring relationships and fulfilling lives.

However, the aim needs specific goals which are linked to the learning outcomes to be most effective and clear.

The Citizens' Assembly recommended that the curriculum should promote gender equality and explicitly cover gender power dynamics, consent and domestic, sexual and gender based violence both offline and online¹.

This recommendation is echoed in the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based violence which again links young people's understanding of gender equality with consent and healthy relationships².

Moreover, Women's Aid research on intimate relationship abuse and young people aged 18 to 25 shows that 1 in 5 young women and 1 in 11 young men in Ireland have suffered intimate relationship abuse and that over half of the affected young women first experienced this abuse under the age of 18. It is therefore essential to include gender-based violence and intimate relationship abuse in the curriculum³ of younger students, as a preventative measure.

Therefore, Women's Aid recommends that the following are included under the aim and also in the rationale:

- An overarching focus on gender equality and the links between gender inequality and violence against women and girls. This should include gender stereotypes and gender norms and how these impact relationships and young people's choices and the barriers to realising rights based distinctly on sex/gender, sexuality, and gender identity.

¹ Recommendation 27, Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, June 2021

² ZERO TOLERANCE Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence 2022-2026, page 26

³ Women's Aid (2020) *One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse in Ireland* https://www.toointoyou.ie/assets/files/pdf/one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf

- A focused goal on prevention of gender-based violence and abuse, particularly within the context of dating relationships.
- A focused goal on promotion of healthy relationships and barriers to same.
- An overarching intersectional lens taking into consideration the experiences and barriers of disabled people, people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, neuro-divergent people and people from diverse ethnic communities.
- The course should be evidence based, inclusive and objective and should not be influenced by the religious ethos of the school, so that all students have the opportunity to learn these important life lessons.
- The course should promote positive and equal sexuality and reproductive rights, including information on abortion and contraception.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Women's Aid agrees with the draft SPHE curriculum for junior cycle and in particular we are delighted that it includes:

- Reflection on sex/gender equity and gender stereotypes and their impact on relationships (1.5).
- Discussion on the online world and sharing of personal information and images, including the risks and consequences of sharing sexual imagery online (2.7-2.9).
- Education on sexuality and healthy/unhealthy relationships, including support options (3.2-3.4, 3.10).
- Pressures of being sexually intimate (3.5).
- Consent in intimate relationships (3.7).
- (3.9) Influence of digital media, and in particular, the influence of pornography on young people's sexual expression. The need to raise awareness in young people on how pornography fuels misogyny and undermines gender equality is one of the goals of the National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Women's Aid warmly welcomes its inclusion here⁴.
- Bystander* approach to abuse (*which could be renamed as or paired with 'upstander') (4.8).

In relation to sharing personal images, we would suggest that the curriculum uses more specific language to make sure that the impact of image based sexual abuse is examined in a way that does not inadvertently suggest that victims of image based sexual abuse are in any way responsible for intimate images being shared and that makes it clear that responsibility is totally with the people who take and/or share intimate images without consent. The legislation in this regard should also be covered (Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020).

While the curriculum addressed all of the above topics, it is unclear whether there is a gender analysis and an overall framework that clearly links gender inequality with harmful social norms and gender-based violence, including teenage dating violence, sexual harassment and online abuse of girls. As recommended above we suggest that this link is made explicit.

Women's Aid also recommends:

- Each section should be viewed through a gendered lens, 1.5 should be threaded throughout all other strands.
- Prevention of gender-based violence needs to be prioritised throughout.
- All sections are impacted by intersectional factors. This needs to be clear in examples given. Gender equality will be different for people from more marginalised groups whose experiences, expectations, needs and potential additional barriers must be understood in the context of their particular and distinct experiences which – in addition to structural gender inequality – can relate to their ethnicity, disability, sexuality, or gender identity (for example). The course should be inclusive whereby students of all religions, ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities, social classes, and disabilities should see themselves in it.
- Strands can overlap e.g. relationships can impact emotional and physical well-being and vice versa. This should be reflected in course delivery. There should be opportunity for reflection throughout the course to look back at what has been learned and how it impacts other strands.

Specific comments on the four strands:

Strand 1: Understanding myself and others –

- Inclusivity and diversity should be at the core of this strand. In delivery, it is important to be aware that some students will have experienced what is being discussed in terms of exclusion, harms, or discrimination.
- It is important to retain distinct language throughout to ensure that content and information are relevant to all in different and distinct ways: Sex/Gender, Sexuality & Gender Identity.
- 1.3 is very important to set expectations for what young people deserve and are entitled to expect in current or future relationships. Empowerment is key.
- 1.4 is also part of relationships and can impact how women are treated in relationships e.g., biphobia (bi women not seen as valid by straight male partners), or how transgender women are treated by male partners.
- 1.5 is key in terms of gender stereotypes and should be threaded across all strands.
- 1.6 should also look at how to respond when someone is subject to these biases, e.g., calling out sexism.

Strand 2: Making healthy choices –

- 2.1 should refer to possible impact of gender-based violence and discrimination on physical and mental health.
- 2.4: Some of the difficult situations included should be scenarios where it is hard to seek support or stand up in relation to gender abuse, for example peer group upholding sexist beliefs, friends not believing a disclosure of abuse.
- 2.7: This learning outcome should include discussion on creating digital boundaries, sharing of intimate images and body image pressures.

- 2.8: This learning outcome should also include coercion, abuse, stalking and harassment. Again, it needs to be intersectional e.g., transgender women and ethnic minority women experience high levels of online abuse.
- 2.9: This may be better located in Strand 3. In any case, it is important that the discussion around this learning outcome does not blame young people for sharing their own images, and specifically does not blame the victim of image based sexual abuse. Coercive control needs to be part of this learning, including being coerced into taking and sending intimate images and videos, which is not the fault of the victim. It should be used as an opportunity for students to reflect on the harms of sharing images of others without consent, and to inform them of the relevant legislation.

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality –

- As this section is positive and rights based, it must acknowledge that not everyone can realise the same rights. It assumes inclusion and equity.
- Overall, there needs to be a section on understanding what relationship abuse is, i.e., power and control. This needs to include a piece on the types of abuse e.g., emotional, sexual, physical, economic, and online and the complexities of each.
- 3.3 needs to be separated into two separate points: 1. promoting healthy relationships and 2. intimate relationship abuse, the signs (which must be intersectional) and the supports available. It needs to explicitly mention coercive control (including what is it, the impacts and relevant legislation) and grooming.
- 3.5 should not just be about showing respect for people's choices, but should also be about yourself, understanding what you are or aren't comfortable with and what coercion means. There is a need to mention power and control in relation to consent.
- 3.7 should include an understanding of what consent is and is not, and an understanding of barriers to consent e.g., coercion and factors that deny consent such as intoxication. It should include recognition that sexual abuse is rooted in gender inequality and is about power and dominance, not about inability to control sexual desire.
- 3.8 should list all contraception and the barriers to contraception access and information on abortion. It should include information on contraception for LGBTQ+ people.
- This section needs a piece on sexual health and positive sexual health.
- *This section could be triggering and lead to disclosures. Teachers need to be equipped to deal with this and school policies need to be in place to support victims/survivors and to respond appropriately to perpetrators.*

Strand 4: Emotional well-being –

- This section should include external factors which may be impacting on mental health, such as having experienced domestic abuse in the family (including witnessing abuse of a parent or other family member) harassment, sexualisation of young women, relationship abuse, online abuse, sexism etc.

- Again, this needs a gender lens. Young women's mental health and well-being can be severely impacted by their experiences of gender based violence within and outside of intimate relationships. Women's Aid's One in Five report⁵ tells us that of the young women who were abused, 84% said that the abuse had a severe impact including loss of self-esteem, anxiety and depression, withdrawal from family and friends, giving up work or college, suicidal thoughts/attempting suicide, needing treatment for physical injuries, and living in fear.
- An intersectional lens also needs to be included, such as impacts of abuse on people with minority sexual orientation or gender identity, young people from ethnic minority backgrounds and young disabled people.
- 4.6 should include the impact of these behaviours on mental health and well-being.
- 4.7 should include what would be a barrier to speaking out, how to overcome these i.e., bystander/upstander approach, and how this needs to be supported by a culture of equality within the school.
- 4.8 should link in with Bystander Training, but should also acknowledge where it should be brought further and is not the responsibility of the student e.g., student acting abusively.
- Stigma surrounding mental health and mental illness should be addressed. Stigma can act as a particular barrier to emotional wellbeing, especially if a young woman has not disclosed abuse to anyone and how it has affected her. According to Women's Aid research⁶, 32% of young women never spoke to anyone about the abuse they experienced with many suffering in silence. When asked about the impact intimate relationship abuse had on them, 84% of young women said that the abuse had a severe impact⁷.

Observations on the 3 cross cutting elements

Women's Aid welcomes the 3 cross cutting elements:

- **Awareness** – Great to have gender included in people's sense of self and positive to reference to a common humanity, dignity and rights. It important to acknowledge that people who are further marginalised aren't treated the same, and that they don't have the same access to their rights.
- **Dialogue** – Creating safe spaces is essential. Discussion needs to be led by students and be cognisant of speaking for or about those in the room who are more vulnerable e.g., speaking about experiences of abuse in a room where some may have experienced or be currently experiencing abuse.
- **Reflection and Action** – Reflection could bring things up for students personally. There needs to be an emphasis on help seeking behaviour and disclosure of abuse that may result from reflection. Teachers need to be prepared and appropriately trained to handle these.

⁵ Women's Aid (2020) *One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse*. https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf

⁶ Women's Aid (2022) *Women's Aid research on intimate relationship abuse and young people aged 18 to 25 in Ireland*. https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/womens_aid_too_into_you_factsheet_2022.pdf

⁷ Women's Aid (2020) *One in Five Young Women Suffer Intimate Relationship Abuse*. https://www.womensaid.ie/assets/files/pdf/one_in_five_women_report_womens_aid_2020.pdf

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Women's Aid welcomes the reflective nature of the assessment.

As gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence should be key goals of the course, a gender perspective should be mandatory in assessment and at least one of the 3 pieces of work should deal with gender equality or gender based violence.

As this course provides essential and lifelong learnings, it needs to be treated with equal importance to core subjects and this should be reflected in the assessment.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

A few additional suggestions are outlined below:

- **Consultation:** Women's Aid believes that consultation with students and diverse groups is vital in finalising the course.
- **Six indicators of well-being (Figure 2 and Table 3):** It is important that the wording around these indicators does not inadvertently place the blame on people who may be abused and should recognize that it is not always possible to make the right choices, especially when there is abuse or coercion. For example, it may not always be possible for a student to make the "right choice" in relation to their safety. Resilience and awareness should include awareness of support available.
- **Training:** Women's Aid recommends that specific training is provided to SPHE teachers, including on how to manage a safe space and respond to disclosures, and that specialist NGOs are consulted in the development of said training, in particular in relation to intimate partner abuse and coercive control.
- **FAQs:** Should add an FAQ to the SPHE FAQs about why we need to educate young people about abuse and share with them the opposite model of healthy behaviors.
- **Glossary:** needs definitions of coercive control, intimate relationship abuse and the types of abuse e.g. emotional abuse, online abuse.

Finally, Women's Aid would like to have more information on:

- Specific resources that will be provided to teachers, especially in relation to healthy/unhealthy relationships, consent training, online harassment and non-consensual image sharing.

In this regard Women's Aid has developed a range of materials for young women experiencing abuse in their relationship. While targeted at an older cohort (18-25), some of these resources can be used/ adapted for a younger audience. They include: how to spot the common warning signs of intimate relationship abuse; survivor stories; a relationship quiz; an online safety guide; information on the different types of abuse; tips for helping friends; and research on intimate relationship abuse and young people aged 18 to 25. Many of the materials used as part of Too Into You are relevant to those under 18. These resources are available here: <https://www.toointoyou.ie/>

- How using students' examples for future discussions (page 12) is going to be evaluated and how can it be ensured that the diversity of students is represented in these banks of examples.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Youth Work Ireland

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

Yes we agree with this aim of the short course to nurture self awareness, and supporting young people's learning and knowledge around sexual health and relationships.

The urgent need for inclusive sex education emerged as a key issue for young people with work with. They have told us that the current RSE teaching in schools is inadequate, not fit for purpose and does not reflect or address the needs of young people growing up in Ireland today. Ireland has changed in the last decades, we are a more inclusive, equal and progressive society and sex education in Irish schools should reflect this. We feel that the proposed new short course will address the concerns the young people spoke about. Certainly in terms of Strand 3 we feel the learning outcomes will support young people in receiving adequate, factual and appropriate education which in turn will support them to make healthy decisions around their life choices.

The focus on decision making, wellbeing, life skills and relationship building is very welcomed, as is awareness around the impact of digital media. We particularly support the values and rights-based approach that is being put forward as a framework for the short course. This should ensure all young peoples' rights and identities are reflected in the teachings and that all young people feel included and receive the knowledge that is appropriate for them.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

We feel that the learning outcomes listed are comprehensive and the framework of the three cross cutting elements will support young people's learning across all areas and allow them a safe and support space to talk about these issues and get reliable information.

As part of the in-day consultation at Collins Barrack we have fed into the learning outcomes for the four strands.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

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Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

This is probably more a question for teachers and their capacity to support young people around their CBAs. What is vital is that teachers are supported and training to be able to deliver the short course. In some case youth workers have played a support role to teachers and have gone into schools to deliver sexual health and other programmes which are not part of the core curriculum.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Individual contributions

Written contributions were received from fourteen individuals who approved the online listing of their names. Contributions approved for publication can be accessed by clicking on the specific hyperlinked names below.

[Colm Cunningham](#)

[David Hegarty](#)

[David Nolan](#)

[Donald Nunan](#)

[Dualta Roughneen](#)

[Kay Maunsell](#)

[Liam Coughlan](#)

[Louise Price](#)

[Mary Creedon](#)

[Mary Louise Nolan](#)

[Michael Burgess](#)

[Michael Norris](#)

[Michelle Kerrigan](#)

[Paul McGregor](#)



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Colm Cunningham

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

I agree that this is an important goal

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

There are many important strands here. To provide learning outcomes that are assessed in classroom based assessment requires that the information provided, and therefore sought in assessments, is factually accurate and not subjective. There are serious issues with the way gender identity is presented as a series of facts that students should learn and should be able to repeat in the associated assessments. Gender identity theory is an ideology or a belief system, much like the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ is a belief system. Neither should be taught as fact in our schools.

There is no question that there are now many transgender young people and it is important that students become aware of this and are accepting of those who have different experiences to themselves, but to present gender ideology as fact is misleading.

There are key statements in the learning outcomes and the associated resources that are simply not based in fact and should not be in any school curriculum.

For example:

1.4 Students should 'appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum'

"when children are born, their sex is largely decided or 'assigned' on the basis of their external genitalia, which generally – but do not always – reflect their internal hormonal and chromosomal make-up"

Not appropriate. Children are not assigned a sex at birth. Their sex is observed and it is a material reality. The cases where external genitalia 'do not reflect their internal hormonal and chromosomal make up' are called disorders of sexual development (congenital conditions in which the development of chromosomal, gonadal or anatomic sex is atypical)

and they are extremely rare and represent a genetic abnormality. This is not a basis to suggest that gender is on a continuum. What's more, this material is at odds with what the same students are being taught in science.

"Most people identify as cisgender"

Most people do not identify as having a gender identity at all, they simply accept the biological reality that they are male or female. For a very large proportion of people to be labelled cisgender is itself an insult.

It is striking that in learning outcome 1.5 the students learn about gender stereotypes, which most people agree are regressive and limiting AND YET it is a failure to conform to such stereotypes that can lead to students questioning whether they really 'fit' with their 'assigned' sex. Teachers presenting, as fact, that gender exists on a spectrum is not a neutral intervention for students who are undergoing a major development period in their lives. They should be allowed to undergo this development without these factually incorrect interjections from teachers, whose authority/expertise they are taught to respect.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

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Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

As stated above, any assessments in which students must draw on factually unsound information leads to consolidation of learning of statements that are not sound.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Balanced advice about handling gender with adolescents is strongly advised. The resources being presented here are put together in close collaboration lobby groups that do not provide balance on a topic of important in adolescent development.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor
David Nolan

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This aim is too much based on 'self', not on others. Whilst knowledge of 'self-worth' is helpful in giving a student self-confidence etc., it runs the risk of filling him/her full of pride: 'I'm great', when really, everybody has reasons to be proud, but also reasons to be humble. There should be mention of weaknesses here also, and the importance of humility.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

No comment on this one at this time.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

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Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

Yes. If they do any serious work on a topic here, they should be able to explain why they chose it, and why it was an important piece of learning.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

Point 3.8 says: 'Students should be able to explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted infections'

Really? These are 12 to 15 year olds. I see that the NCCA has its focus on

- a. Ensuring 'safer sexual activity'
- b. 'Methods of contraception'
- c. 'Protection against sexually transmitted infections'.

Surely the NCCA should be nurturing a healthy respect for their developing sexuality by speaking about the wonderful power sex is to transmit life.

And that in so transmitting it, they should give due importance to living chastity and purity of body, faithfulness to husband/wife/partner as being the best outcome as attested to by countless studies.

How dare the NCCA in the **core** of its message to 12-15 year olds talk about precisely *contraception*, '*safer sexual activity*' (largely taken to mean: avoiding conception), and – of all things – '*protection against sexually transmitted infections*'.

This draft document makes no mention of the birth rate in Ireland: in **2021 there were only 11.7 births per 1,000 population**. It needs to be 17 births per 1000 population (replenishment level), but it has been below this level since 1990, no less. This bodes very badly for the future of this country: given these figures, it will become an aging population extremely quickly.

So, the NCCA, in drafting this document, should be encouraging young people to have families and children – and not having them have their first focus on contraception, safer sexual activity and protection against sexually transmitted infections.

This section reeks of the WHO policies of 'Comprehensive Sexuality Education'. Do the Irish people know that this is what is g=being foisted on them? The NCCA should come out and tell them.

Point 3.9 says: 'Students should be able to investigate the influence of ... pornography on young people ... re sexual expression'.

Again, this section reeks of the WHO policies of 'Comprehensive Sexuality Education'. It should not be our policy in the Department of Education syllabus.

In Ireland we are proud people: we are able to think for ourselves. Our young people deserve better than this mess of pottage the NCCA is delivering up. We don't need to copy and ape what the 'woke' pressure groups of the world are pushing – in this case, the WHO, in tandem with Planned Parenthood.

Pushing the 'teaching of pornography' is part of the overall NCCA and WHO package:

- get the young people accessing pornography.
- That'll get them fired up about having loads of sex: they'll see plenty of it on the screens, and they'll experiment themselves.
- Get them have sex early (let's not forget this is geared at 12-15 yr olds).
- Then, they'll have unwanted pregnancies – and fall into the welcoming arms of Planned Parenthood.
- The plan is complete.

Shame on you NCCA: you should be doing what I said above:

Encourage young people to have families and children and stable relationships and build up this country, not tear it down with smut

Please focus on that.

You say, rather *grandly*, that the purpose of this curriculum is to promote students' 'wellness'

'managing myself' and 'staying well'. Well, ubiquitous studies show that people who access porn regularly become very selfish and turned in on themselves. Like an alcoholic, when they have had 'one fix', they're only thinking of their next one. This doesn't make for faithfulness to spouse/partner. It certainly doesn't help students' 'wellness' 'managing myself' and 'staying well'.

Don't teach pornography in schools.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Donald Nunan

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

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Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

From what we have read of the programme, this proposed new programme is poisonous for the minds of young children. It reflects an attitude of a public authority akin to that of the Chinese Communist Party's policy towards the Uighurs whom they wish to coerce into thinking and seeing themselves as the CCP wants them to.

All this new sexual education being proposed for schools comes from the WHO which is an organisation dominated by the new 'Woke' philosophy which is anti-Christian and strongly influenced by the claims of the powerful LGBT lobby, which our legislators have swallowed, 'hook line and sinker'!

Some real education is needed in schools rather than presenting vulnerable pupils with unscientific views that one's sexuality is a matter of choice.

The ongoing case concerning Enoch Burke shows that some schools have already entered a Walter Mitty (and Alice in Wonderland) place, where words and language can be changed to suit 'whatever I want them to mean'. An English language teacher should not be compelled to misuse the plural pronoun 'they' to mean 'he/she'. To try to force him to do so amounts to oppression.

Let people 'change' their sexuality under the guise of 'gender' but they should not be allowed to force their chosen unreality on others.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

See answer to Question 1 above.

I believe that these learning outcomes are detrimental to the lives of children who act on them and can be disturbing to his/her/'they'r siblings.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

I don't think CBA is suitable for SPHE. I have no trust in the people proposing this new teaching in schools.

I have read that the Minister for Education/Government has stated that the program will be compulsory, **and parents will not be allowed to withdraw their children from it.**

This is contrary to the Irish Constitution. Article 42.1 states: 'the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.'

Teachers teach in *loco parentis*.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Dualta Roughneen

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

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Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This is a laudable aim however it is a misguided understanding of education and the role of the school in the lives of young people. Schools can provide guidance and direction however the primary responsibility for this is the parents and the family of the child.

The state may consider that the education system is a suitable means to exercise its responsibilities *in loco parentis* however for the vast majority of children there is no need for the State to take any role in forming children in the manner described. This is done by the parents.

For those whose parents are failing them in this manner, there are other avenues for the State to fulfil its responsibilities without imposing a state-led approach to morality, relationships and all that falls within that on the majority of students unnecessarily.

It is incorrect to assume that there can be one approach to this and that the State should be required to impose it. The idea that the State supercedes the parents or imposes on the schools that they have chosen a single-option in this area which is the one element of the curriculum that defines the ethos of the school.

To make a state defined curriculum developed by interest and lobby groups whose own ethos is at odds with the school is to allow interest and lobby groups to usurp the role and function of the school patronage and the parents themselves. It undermines plurality and diversity that the State claims to be committed to.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the first 2 of the 3 statements of learning SOL 5 and 6 are already value-laden from a particular perspective.

SOL5 - making moral decisions is extremely contested not just among religions and non-religious but at the level of philosophy and ethics and is probably the fundamental focus. To claim that the State through the course is going to teach young people how to make moral decisions is to assume the State has the answer to this question which is completely untrue. This points to the danger of the assumptions the State makes in taking on this role.

SOL6 - may or may not be true yet it reads as a form of indoctrination rather than examination. There may be an argument that communities and culture in Ireland, factually, have been shaped by an absence of diverse values, traditions beliefs.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Starting note: the official 'indicators of wellbeing' are very limited and reductive. Wellbeing is not so formulaic and people are not so shallow.

However, the main focus of this response has to be on Strand 1 and Strand 3

Strand 1 makes 3 strong claims that are contested at best but also potentially harmful.

Stand 1

1.4 appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum

The claim that 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' are core part of human identity is not based on any evidence and there are many issues in this area that are still being discovered and addressed:

- Claim gender identity is so central may be harmful for children at this age as they are still learning about themselves. Affirming gender identity and expression at this age can lock in many children into a path of assuming they are in the wrong gender that leads to puberty blockers, surgical transition and often regret. Evidence shows that when gender affirmation is not offered the majority of children and young people desist in their claims of gender dysphoria and desire to detransition. The state should be very careful of pushing children, even with the best intentions, down this path.
- Additionally, as data becomes available, the close correlation between gender confusion and autism is still being examined and rushing to push gender identity and expression as core into a curriculum may be very harmful and avoid offering the correct supports
- The differential between males and female teenagers expressing gender confusion (multiple more girls than boys) and the rapid increase in these numbers in recent years points to an issue that needs much further exploration;

Most importantly, it has to be emphasised that taking an affirming approach to gender identity and expression is likely to be harmful to children by locking them into a pathway that the majority would willingly choose not to take if they were not affirmed by parents, peers and schools, which may ultimately lead to surgery they regret, infertility in later life as well as other medical complications.

1.5 reflect on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations, behaviour and relationships

It is unclear why this area needs to be discussed under SPHE. It is a political and divisive discussion, often heavily weighted in favour of one particular worldview. It ignores some innate characteristics and assumes absolute neutrality in these areas is the primary value. Of course there are areas that may need to be addressed but these happen at societal level without the need for the school to impose particular views in this area.

1.6 discuss experiences/situations of bias, inequality or exclusion based on race/ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation and devise ways to create more inclusive environments

As above, the assumption here is to focus on a negative that may not be existing at all but to create division by claiming generalisations in individual schools that may be of no relevance. There are and can be issues of bias, inequality and exclusion and the school should address these as they occur rather than taking an 'educational' approach that has been hijacked by agendas that are divisive and often seek to create problems that do not exist. The approach pits groups against each other rather than seeking harmony. It creates bad feeling, resentment and a sense of grievance. By choosing to follow a path of identity politics the school will not create inclusion only difference – and resentment in all groups.

These areas could be removed completely from the syllabus and children would be better off.

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality This strand explores the cognitive, physical, emotional and social aspects of relationships and sexuality through a positive, inclusive and rights-based approach. The focus is on family relationships, friendships, romantic/intimate and potential sexual relationships in the future.

The main problem with Strand 3 is that as it is currently defined, there are significant areas that are very subjective and their content remains to be determined. Many schools and parents will have particular interpretations in these very personal areas for their children and how they would like their children to approach relationships and sexuality.

Where it isn't subjective, the strand is value-laden in favour of everything being ok so long as it is consensual- it is not clear that there is any discussion on the importance or value in delaying sexual debut; there is no reference to abstinence as important; there is no reference to the illegality of sexual activity at the age in question; the importance of giving consent is strange language in itself, but even more confusing when children are at the age where they legally cannot give consent. There is little about being careful of predatory people, of pushy boyfriends/girlfriends nor of the psychological benefits that come from stable relationships, commitment, marriage and abstinence. Will there be discussion of how contraception can fail, that pregnancy can occur and then that abortion (which should be described as what it is – the killing of a living human being) may be considered or promoted. There seems to be little discussion of consequences, for oneself or the person you are intimate with.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

No. In an area of life that is very sensitive and at an age where young people are also quite impressionable yet rebellious, this approach invites unlimited scope in exploration of areas that the young person may not be ready to. It is an approach that offers little in terms of boundaries or direction, knowing that the direction proposed of the course is one of permissiveness and non-judgmentalism. At the age in question, children and young people need guidance, direction and boundaries as they form their values and beliefs.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

It would be better to keep it factual and neutral, practical rather than venturing into the private and complex lives of children that the State can never really know very well. There should be clear indication of the role of parents being involved and approving of what teachers are saying to their children, with parental consent being a requirement.



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor

Mary Creedon

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

This aim does not summarise the purpose of SPHE for Junior Cycle. There is too much emphasis on relationships as the main aim of the course . We have just come out of a pandemic. 12-15 year olds need to be given the knowledge understanding and skills to interact socially and emotionally with their peers The aim needs to place a greater emphasis on the physical , emotional and social wellbeing of the student.

It should include Personal Leadership, Communicating Positively, Feeling Connected, Making a Difference and Dealing with Adversity. These wellbeing areas are very relevant to 12-15yr olds. The spiritual health of the student should also be included . The Spiritual health of the student was included as an aim in the 2016 specification so why exclude this now?

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

Strand 1 : Understanding myself and others (pg 13 of of Draft specification)

This strand focusses on developing self awareness and self esteem and the physical and emotional changes that happens during adolescence . It looks at students reflecting on their personal strengths and values and identifies ways to nurture a positive sense of self -worth. This is all very good and relevant to the lives of 12-15yr olds

However **learning outcome 1.4 "appreciate that sexual orientation , gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum"**.

This is a hugely flawed learning outcome as this is not everyone's opinion . This learning outcome should not be included in the specification and in my opinion it is not relevant to the lives of 12-15yr olds. Many children are very vulnerable and unsure of themselves at this age . To teach this ideology to children would cause great harm, upset and confusion.

Many parents would be outraged if teachers taught gender theory and spectrum of sexual orientation as defined in the Glossary of terms .Many teachers out of moral conscience will not be willing to teach this .

Gender identity is defined as “a person’s felt internal and individual experience of gender, for example cis gender , transgender , non binary , which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth (Glossary section – Appendix 2 from specification) Sexual Orientation and the Spectrum of Sexual Orientations as listed in the Glossary section – Appendix2 **“people’s sexual identities and orientations are complex and resist easy classification. The sexuality spectrum recognises the fluidity of sexual orientations that exist. There are several types of sexual orientation; for example: heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual and asexual.”** and the resources developed to deliver this learning outcome should be removed from the curriculum as it would be nothing short of psychological abuse to deliver this learning outcome to students .

Lawyers for Justice Ireland state the following regarding this learning outcome.

“The Draft Curriculum does not address the rationale, necessity and justification for introducing gender identity as part of RSE for 12 to 15 year olds.

Gender identity is an ideology not a biological fact. There are two sexes, male and female, yet the Draft Curriculum at 1.4 states that gender identity is a “..core part of human identity.” This is not biologically or factually correct, and the ideology of ‘gender ideology’ is, therefore, being deliberately misrepresented to school children.

The introduction of gender identity into the Draft Curriculum, therefore, poses risk of psychological, emotional and physical harm to children aged 12 to 15 is in contravention of Section 9(d) of the Education Act 1998, the Children First Act 2015 and Article 3(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

A child’s welfare is paramount, and in any action the State must have their best interests as the primary consideration.

The school is under a statutory duty to safeguard and promote a child’s welfare”.

For this reason Learning Outcome 1.4 can not be included in the SPHE Specification .

Learning Outcome 1.5 “reflect on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations , behaviours and relationships”

This learning outcome should not be included in the specification as it is disrespectful and undermines an individual’s choice to adopt traditional gender expression and roles. Why is there a need to build up a hatred towards heteronormative male and female roles. Why is there a need to focus on this ? This in my opinion is vey harmful to students and can create a resentment towards their own gender . Why not focus on the uniqueness of males and females and create in students a love for their gender rather than attempting to put masculinity and femininity on spectrum. For the above reasons I feel this learning outcome should not be included in the specification.

Learning outcome 1.6 discuss experiences/situations of bias , inequality or exclusion based on race/ ethnicity , gender and sexual orientation and devise ways to create more inclusive environments.

This is a fair learning outcome but could be developed further. Values such as appreciation and the benefits of volunteering should be included in this learning outcome . Children should be taught to appreciate what they have and look to helping ALL people that are marginalised in society. For example people who are homeless, families and individuals who are on very low incomes , is unfortunately a very real reality for 12-15 year olds and students should be given the skills, knowledge and understanding to devise ways of helping those marginalised in society and understand the rewards of volunteering in their local community.

I think there is a very important learning opportunity lost here by not focussing on what the student can give back to it’s community which in return would have a very positive impact on understanding themselves and others.

Strand 2 Making Healthy Choices.

This strand helps students to consider how they can make healthy choices to support their wellbeing. It explores what being healthy might look like for a teenager, what helps or gets in the way of making healthy choices and how to access reliable information to support good choices. A range of aspects of healthy living are explored including: exercise, sleep, food, alcohol, addictive substances and addictive behaviours and managing the online world. These in my opinion are very good and clear learning outcomes and are very relevant to the lives of 12-15yr olds.

Strand 3 Relationships and Sexuality:

In this strand there is an excessive emphasis on sexuality and sexual activity.

Learning Outcome 3.1 “explore human sexuality – what it means, how it is expressed and what healthy sexual expression might look like and the difference between sexuality and sexual activity.”

The Sexuality Wheel Graphic taken from the NCCA SPHE/RSE resources tool kit is used to initiate discussion on the many aspects of Human Sexuality. [Resources for working with children, young people and families - sexualwellbeing.ie](https://www.resourcesforworkingwithchildrenandyoungpeopleandfamilies.com/sexualwellbeing)

This learning outcome and resource is not appropriate for 12-15 yr. olds. It is sending a very confusing message to children about their sexuality. To state that the core part of who we are as human beings is determined by our sexuality is seriously flawed and should be removed from the curriculum.

Learning outcome 3.8 “explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted (STIs)”.

This learning outcome should not be included in the specification as it is promoting sexual activity to 12-15yr old's. This is against the law as the current legal age for sexual activity in Ireland is 17yrs.

The glossary definition of Sexual activity/sexual intimacy in the Curriculum document states '*Sexual activity/sexual intimacy: a range of activities from kissing, touching, fondling to sexual intercourse (in all its forms) which involve giving and receiving sexual pleasure. These activities can be solitary or involve other people.*'

This is promoting sexual license and the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake without a focus on the relationship aspects.

The pre-occupation with sex is the wrong emphasis to be giving school children. **The Curriculum should reduce the excessive focus on sexual activity** and emphasize instead the importance and quality of relationships and the benefits of an abstinence approach in the RSE specification.

Learning Outcome 3.9 “investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people’s understanding, expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression”.

This learning outcome should not be included in the SPHE Specification for 12-15 yr olds as there are many reasons for this. The NUIG Active Consent team, **who believe in using pornography with school children** as part of sexual consent workshops, have been co-opted by the NCCA and the Department of Education to devise and deliver Consent education as part of the new RSE Curriculum. The Active Consent team includes Dr. Kate Dawson of NUIG who has said - '*...watching porn can be useful as it has 'very detailed imagery'*' (interview on Ray D'Arcy show on 14/02/2019). She wants school children to be shown porn videos to help them understand such films are “scripted and dramatized” and to “reduce the shame of watching porn”. The WISER programme on ‘porn literacy’ delivered by Kate Dawson in schools in the West of Ireland familiarized students with the slang words for the disturbing sexual practices in pornography; Kate Dawson along with another member of Active Consent is co-author of *The Porn Report 2018*, which stated that ‘it’s healthy and ok to watch the porn you want’. As NUIG sex researchers are involved in drafting the new RSE Curriculum, there can be little doubt that this could be a wholesale introduction to pornography, and not a precautionary approach. This is completely inappropriate for school children – **the promotion of pornography must be removed from the Junior Cert SPHE Curriculum**. Also under the Children First Act 2015, emotional abuse includes exposing a child to sexually inappropriate material. The introduction of pornographic material into the SPHE Draft Specification is, therefore, not in a child's best interests, nor does it safeguard or promote their welfare, but indeed exposes them to risk of psychological and emotional harm.

Strand 4: Emotional Wellbeing

This strand focuses on nurturing emotional wellbeing and promoting positive mental health. It helps develop problem solving and coping skills for dealing with the emotional ups and downs of life, explores how young people can support themselves and others in challenging times and where/how to find support when needed . This is all very relevant to the lives of 12-15yr olds and should be included in the SPHE specification.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

As SPHE is a short course 2 pieces of work would be sufficient to present and accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

As mentioned there needs to be more of a focus on skills qualities knowledge and understanding that make well rounded mature adults who will be the anchor for society in years to come.

The Relationships and Sexuality section of the SPHE short course should be a stand alone unit. It should not be integrated throughout the short course so that parents if they wish can avail of their statutory right to object to their child partaking in RSE/SPHE. Under Article 30(1) of the Education Act 1998 a school shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student.



NCCA

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Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Contributor
Mike Norris

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is *'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

I do not agree. Rather, it seems to me that you are endorsing the legal fiction about the possibility of sex change. On page 2, you say that young people "continue to develop their identities (including their sexual identity)", as if they could, of their own volition, determine their sex and perhaps change it from time to time. If gender, as you suggest, is a social construct, then it is like fashion, another social construct: it can change with mood, time of day, weather. Is this part of your calculus? A person's sex is not like her hairstyle, her favourite music, or the consensus on social media. It is an innate part of a person.

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

The strands appear to be based largely on subjective quantities like thoughts and emotions. These are important, but one's formation is not complete without objective observation and analysis. Beliefs are part of the process, but however firmly you hold to something, belief by itself does not make it true. Gender identity is a belief system, biological sex is real. It is not transphobic to say this. If you say that people need to be protected from statements like this, you are infantilising them, you are saying that they need to be shielded from the truth.

On page 13, you say that gender identity is a spectrum. What is this based on? It seems to resurrect some of the retrograde stereotypes that constrained young people in the past. It is now normal for boys to be ballet dancers and for girls to be engineers (for example) without having to feel awkward or confused about it. "For all that gender is revealed by stereotypes appearances and actions, it is defined as an inner knowing. This helps conceal how regressive it is."¹

Also on page 13, you say that students will discuss sexual orientation. Based on your belief that gender identity is a spectrum, the result is that sex is irrelevant to sexual orientation. Will students discuss this? Sexual orientation¹ is based on biological sex, not on gender identity.

Question 3.

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Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

It students question belief-based and other unproven aspects of this course, such as gender identity, will they be marked down?

¹ Joyce (2021, 115). 2 Stock (2021, 89-98).

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

The transgender issue is a serious one and should be treated in a rational and professional way. We have seen the effects of succumbing to ideology and to the echo chambers of social media, and of the harm done by subjecting children to “irreversible damage” because of overzealous activists and of unauthorised medical practices.³ There is no indication that you have thought through the consequences of some of your fanciful assertions or considered the effects that this change in the curriculum will have on young people. For example, Stock outlines some of the effects of sex-incongruent language. One is the Stroop effect, another is inhibitory effect of such language – people see what they see: should they be punished for saying what they see?⁴

I am concerned that this part of the curriculum has been influenced, if not controlled, by gender-identity ideologues. As Joyce puts it, these people are averse to viewpoint diversity and open debate.⁵ If someone disagrees with them, they are likely to be accused of transphobia and to be denied any further opportunity to debate the subject rationally. It would help if you identified the authors of this document and cited the sources used.⁶ It is a pity, but there is no indication that you have read any of the critical literature on this subject.

If gender identity were just that, it would not be such a contentious issue. If someone wants to believe that he is a woman, he is quite entitled to do so. However, your course is about enforcing gender **recognition**. This is coercive and contrary to freedom of expression and belief. According to your new world order, if a man asserts that he is a woman, the rest of the world must accept that and allow him, for instance, to enter safe spaces reserved for women. This is not acceptable and your attempts in this regard are egregious, all the more so since you are a statutory body.

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Stock, Kathleen. 2021. *Material girls: why reality matters for feminism*. London: Fleet.

³ Littman (2018), Shrier (2020).

⁴ Stock (2021, 206–210).

⁵ Joyce (2021).

⁶ Other than the nominal author of the template according to Microsoft Word.



NCCA

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Contributor

Michelle Kerrigan

Questions to consider:

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Insert response here:

This aim does not summarise the purpose of SPHE for Junior Cycle. There is too much emphasis on relationships as the main aim of the course. We have just come out of a pandemic. 12-15 year olds need to be given the knowledge, understanding and skills to interact socially and emotionally with their peers. The aim needs to place a greater emphasis on the physical , emotional and social wellbeing of the student.

It should include Personal Leadership, Communicating Positively, Feeling Connected , Making a Difference and Dealing with Adversity.

These wellbeing areas are very relevant to 12-15 year olds . The spiritual health of the student should also be included . The Spiritual health of the student was included as an aim in the 2016 specification so why exclude this now?

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Insert response here:

Strand 1 : Understanding myself and others (pg 13 of Draft specification)

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However learning outcome 1.4 "appreciate that sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum".

This is a hugely flawed learning outcome as this is not everyone's opinion . This learning outcome should not be included in the specification and in our opinion it is not relevant to the lives of 12-15 year olds. Many children are very vulnerable and unsure of themselves at this age. To teach this ideology to children would cause great harm, upset and confusion.

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A child’s welfare is paramount, and in any action the State must have their best interests as the primary consideration.

The school is under a statutory duty to safeguard and promote a child’s welfare”.

For this reason Learning Outcome 1.4 can not be included in the SPHE Specification .

Learning Outcome 1.5 “reflect on gender equity and how gender stereotypes impact on expectations , behaviours and relationships”

This learning outcome should not be included in the specification as it is disrespectful and undermines an individual’s choice to adopt traditional gender expression and roles. Why is there a need to build up a hatred towards heteronormative male and female roles. Why is there a need to focus on this ? This in my opinion is vey harmful to students and can create a resentment towards their own gender . Why not focus on the uniqueness of males and females and create in students a love for their gender rather than attempting to put masculinity and femininity on spectrum. For the above reasons I feel this learning outcome should not be included in the specification.

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Strand 3 Relationships and Sexuality:

In this strand there is an excessive emphasis on sexuality and sexual activity .

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This learning outcome and resource is not appropriate for 12-15 year olds . It is sending a very confusing message to children about their sexuality .To state that the core part of who we are as human beings is determined by our sexuality is seriously flawed and should be removed from the curriculum.

Learning outcome 3.8 “explain the importance of safer sexual activity with reference to methods of contraception and protection against sexually transmitted (STIs)”.

This learning outcome should not be included in the specification as it is promoting sexual activity to 12-15yr old's . This is against the law as the current legal age for sexual activity in Ireland is 17yrs .

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This is promoting sexual license and the pursuit of sexual pleasure for its own sake without a focus on the relationship aspects .

The pre-occupation with sex is the wrong emphasis to be giving school children. **The Curriculum should reduce the excessive focus on sexual activity** and emphasise instead the importance and quality of relationships and the benefits of an abstinence approach in the RSE specification.

Learning Outcome 3.9 “ investigate the influence of digital media (in particular, the influence of pornography) on young people’s understanding , expectations and social norms in relation to sexual expression”.

This learning outcome should not be included in the SPHE Specification for 12-15 year olds as there are many reasons for this

The NUIG Active Consent team, who believe in using pornography with school children as part of sexual consent workshops, have been co-opted by the NCCA and the Department of Education to devise and deliver Consent education as part of the new RSE Curriculum. The Active Consent team includes Dr. Kate Dawson of NUIG who has said - '*...watching porn can be useful as it has 'very detailed imagery'*' (interview on Ray D'Arcy show on 14/02/2019). **She wants school children to be shown porn videos** to help them understand such films are **“scripted and dramatized”** and to **“reduce the shame of watching porn”**.

The WISER programme on 'porn literacy' delivered by Kate Dawson in schools in the West of Ireland familiarized students with the slang words for the disturbing sexual practices in pornography; Kate Dawson along with another member of Active Consent is co-author of *The Porn Report 2018*, which stated that **'it's healthy and ok to watch the porn you want'**. As NUIG sex researchers are involved in drafting the new RSE Curriculum, there can be little doubt that this could be a wholesale introduction to pornography, and not a precautionary approach. This is completely inappropriate for school children – **the promotion of pornography must be removed from the Junior Cert SPHE Curriculum**. Also under the Children First Act 2015, emotional abuse includes exposing a child to sexually inappropriate material. The introduction of pornographic material into the SPHE Draft Specification is, therefore, not in a child's best interests, nor does it safeguard or promote their welfare, but indeed exposes them to risk of psychological and emotional harm.

Strand 4 : Emotional Wellbeing

This strand focuses on nurturing emotional wellbeing and promoting positive mental health. It helps develop problem solving and coping skills for dealing with the emotional ups and downs of life, explores how young people can support themselves and others in challenging times and where/how to find support when needed . This is all very relevant to the lives of 12-15yr olds and should be included in the SPHE specification.

Question 3.

Students will complete one Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) as part of their learning in the SPHE short course. The proposed CBA for the updated short course is a portfolio of learning and is summarised as follows:

Students will choose three pieces of work, completed over time and linked to different strands of learning within the short course, and present these accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen and how it marked important learning for the student in SPHE.

Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

As SPHE is a short course 2 pieces of work would be sufficient to present and accompanied by a reflection on why each piece was chosen.

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

As mentioned there needs to be more of a focus on skills qualities knowledge and understanding that make well rounded mature adults who will be the anchor for society in years to come.

The Relationships and Sexuality section of the SPHE short course should be a stand alone unit . It should not be integrated throughout the short course so that parents if they wish can avail of their statutory right to object to their child partaking in RSE/SPHE. Under Article 30(1) of the Education Act 1998 a school shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student.



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Contributor

Paul McGregor

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

The aim of the updated short course is 'to nurture students' self-awareness and positive self-worth and to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will help them to create and maintain respectful and caring relationships and lead fulfilling and healthy lives.'

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for junior cycle and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing

Insert response here:

These are worthy qualities to foster, provided they are done without causing psychological harm and with the input of parents

Question 2.

The course is structured around four strands and three crosscutting elements (see specification pp 9-16). Having considered these please give us your feedback on the proposed course outline.

Specifically, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide **clarity** on expectations for learning in junior cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be **relevant** to the lives, interests and needs of 12-15 year olds today.

Insert response here:

See below

Question 3.

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Do you think this is a suitable CBA for the updated SPHE short course? Please explain your answer.

Insert response here:

See below

Question 4.

Any further suggestions for how the draft updated SPHE course could be improved?

Insert response here:

I am a parent of a child who is about to embark on junior cycle education. I have concerns about some of the proposals.

I am concerned that the content of the curriculum will conflict with values that his parents have been fostering as primary educators of the child.

I am concerned that ideology will be imposed which takes an unscientific approach towards the sex of a person. IE Male = XY and female = XX.

I am concerned that the phrase 'the course aims to ensure pupils appreciate sexual orientation, gender identity and expression are core parts of human identity and that each is experienced along a spectrum'.

If it is proposed that such a controversial topic be taught, then how will it be done so as to not compromise the values that the parents are trying to instil? Is it proposed to re-define 'sex' to gender? Is it proposed to teach that gender can simply be chosen? How is it possible to do this without siding with an ideology, undermining the values that parents have taken pains to instil over the years? This runs the risk of ignoring the values of the family.

I am concerned that 93.7) this field 'consent' although not unreasonable, in theory, will over reach religious boundaries. If my child attends a school with a Christian ethos, will the school have safeguards in place to protect the belief system of that religion/ Will they be forced to neglect this belief system, to teach that sexual relations can be conducted outside of the institution of marriage and that all is needed is dual consent?

Will they be taught that sex is ok, as long as this meets the standard of consent? What steps are to be taken to provide against reduced capacity and under-age sexual activity/ Will teachers become complicit in criminal activity?

Parents need to know what exactly is being proposed and should have meaningful input.

In respect of pornography, I have concerns. I have read that the departments of Justice and Further education etc is working with a group from the NUI Galway. This group, it seems are promoting pornography as a positive.

Does the NCCA take a view that it should be taught in a neutral way? Will parents have input in this? Will it teach about the dangers of the early sexualisation of children: that case studies have found there is an increase in violence towards women after viewing pornography, and leads to the sexualisation of women with its accompanying lack of respect for women?

Will parents be properly consulted and have input into this area of the proposed curriculum/

In conclusion, I believe that the ethos of schools should be protected and respected.

I believe that parents are and should remain the primary educators of their children and retain the right to remove their children from subjects, if required. I believe parents must have proper input into the end product.



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