



**NCCA**

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

# **Written Submission from Organisations**

Consultation on  
draft specification  
for Senior Cycle SPHE

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# **Contributor**

Association of Patrons  
and Trustees of Catholic  
Schools (APTCS)

# Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools

## Introduction

### Introduction

The Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools (APTC) 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.

The organisation represents patrons of over 300 Catholic secondary schools and Catholic joint patrons in Community Schools and those working in partnership with the ETBs in Community Colleges.

### Our Vision

APTC Patrons and Trustees are diverse in terms of individual histories and founding intentions, but 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 schools that reflect their own spiritual beliefs and their hopes and aspirations for their children.

### General Comments

In the context of our vision, APTC welcomes the revision of the senior cycle SPHE subject specification as it provides an opportunity for students to engage with significant questions about themselves, their moral values, relationships and the way they live their lives. It is imperative, however, that schools can exercise their right to approach the curriculum from the perspective of their own characteristic spirit.

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

#### Insert response here:

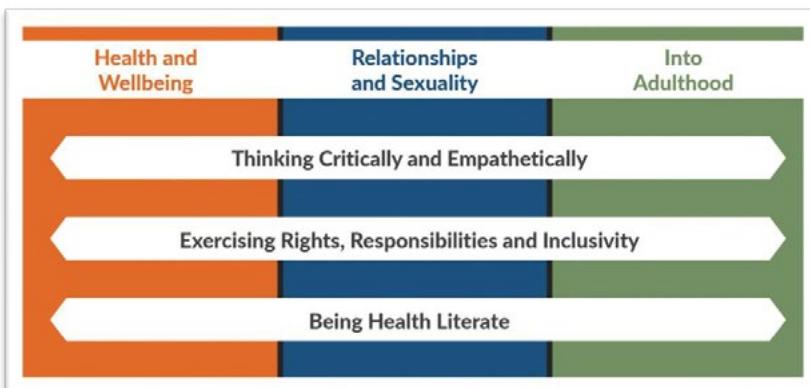
APTC agrees that the above aim of senior cycle SPHE is an appropriate one. However, there are some additional aspects of SPHE that might be included in the aim, for example, being conscious of the needs of others and helping to create a harmonious community.

Through this senior cycle programme, students should also be helped to understand that they live their lives from a particular world view. Their actions and behaviours reflect their values and beliefs. In the research carried out by Genesis in 2019 parents expressed a strong wish that schools would help their children to develop a strong moral compass and that they would learn right from wrong. Catholic schools take their inspiration from the life of Jesus Christ and the basis for the values they espouse comes from the Gospels. Care and respect are two of these core values – care for oneself

and care for others; care for one's own body and those of others and care for the environment, both local and global. For students at senior cycle, developing their moral code is an essential part of their education and formation.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

### Comment

The cross-cutting elements of the course are welcome. Critical thinking and empathy are central to the wellbeing of each individual but also to the overall good of society.

The balance between rights and responsibilities is very important. While it is important for young people to develop confidence, this should not be developed at the expense of others. To do so would be to create a society of selfish, self-centred people.

We would like to see reference to **community** in these cross-cutting elements. Society is made up of many communities and it is a concept that is already addressed in other curricular programmes.

Building on this, students could be encouraged to contribute to various communities, and to build communities. The concept of inclusion can be linked to this.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

#### Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health

1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

There are two key points from Section 9 of the Education Act (1998, amended 2020) which, in our view, are missing. The Education Act includes reference to spiritual development and the characteristic spirit of the school.

*Education Act (S9).—A recognised school shall provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and, without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, it shall use its available resources to—...*

*(d) 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**.*

These are ignored in this Strand. In the medical profession, there is recognition that spiritual wellbeing contributes to mental and physical wellbeing. While recognising that spirituality may not be addressed in detail in this subject area, it should be recognised as part of one's overall health and wellbeing.

The characteristic spirit of the school includes a particular set of values which underpin the actions and works of the school. Values also underpin the actions and beliefs of young people and this programme has the potential to assist young people in developing a set of values that will guide them throughout the lives. This is underplayed in this Strand.

The absence of any reference to religion or faith beliefs is of concern. For some people, religious beliefs make a significant contribution to their mental health and wellbeing and help to sustain them throughout their lives. In schools there are many examples of how religious practices and rituals help students to come to terms with loss and tragedy. But it is not only in terms of tragedy that faith can be a sustaining force, it is also relevant in terms of decision-making as to how a young person deals with numerous situations, including relationships with others.

Reference to religion does not mean proselytising! We are simply seeking a recognition that for some people it is central to their lives, for others, it plays a role in helping them to develop a moral compass and for yet others, it is a consolation to believe in something transcendent which helps them to make sense of the world.

It is of great concern that religion, spirituality and values seem to be ignored when all of them play a very important role in the development of young people. The word 'spiritual' is included in the rationale on page 6 of the draft specification, but later, when wellbeing factors are being listed (physical, emotional, social) 'spiritual' is not included.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

The learning outcomes stated above cover a comprehensive list of topics to be addressed through the SPHE/RSE subject specification. It is good to see that the views of students, as expressed through the NCCA research in 2019, are being taken into consideration here.

The topics named above are very 'real' in the lives of young people. The recent RTE programme, "Let's Talk About Sex" also highlighted how important it is for young people to be able to talk about relationships, sexuality, gender and gender identity in a professional, safe and trusting environment. This, of course, highlights the importance of teacher training and preparation for this subject. A number of very sensitive issues will be raised and a positive and trusting relationship between the teacher and students will be essential if meaningful engagement and learning is to occur.

As mentioned above, learning to build positive relationships is a very important aspect of education which is to the benefit of, not only the individual, but of society at large. Relationships require a two-way approach – the ability to look at a situation from one's own point of view, but also to be able to see it from the perspective of another. Therefore, the lack of reference to "empathy" is notable here in spite of the overall aim of the course being to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults*'.

We welcome the reference to “*nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict*” and would like to see included in this section the importance of sustaining and maintaining long-term relationships, including relationships within the context of marriage.

It is good to see reference to “values” but this needs further exploration – where does one’s values come from? If a young person is to be assisted in reflecting on values, attitudes and beliefs, they need an in-depth exploration of the origin of those values and beliefs. In the Catholic school, the basis of the values espoused will be the Gospel values and the school must be free to express those values.

We are in agreement that sexual matters and sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships should be included in this subject. Students mentioned the importance of addressing their emotional needs and these needs must be addressed in the subject. The variety of religious beliefs held by students in a class should be taken into account and acknowledged appropriately. Likewise, the ethos of the school must be respected. Students should be enabled to express their views and listen to counter views, which, in the case of the Catholic school, will include the Church’s teachings on marriage and the importance of the family as the basic unit of society. The importance, legally and morally, of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships is fully in sympathy with Catholic teaching. From what they learn in class they should be able to make responsible decisions and look critically at the world around them.

There have been many references to pornography and gender ideology in the media in recent months, demonstrating the variety of opinions held by members of society on these issues. These references show the strength of feelings and emotions around these topics.

Schools currently deal with many and varied issues around gender identity, particularly in relation to admissions policies. Catholic schools are inclusive schools and, to date, have been very supportive of students in the process of gender reassignment and of those who may be reflecting on, or struggling with gender identity. Dialogue in the classroom on gender identity will help to build understanding and inclusion.

Recent research on the use of mobile phone has shown how children as young as eight can be exposed to pornography. Students have expressed concern about the damage that pornography is doing to them, to the quality of relationships, and to social expectations around sexual activity. We believe it is appropriate to discuss this with young people and to include alongside that, the ethical questions arising from the production of pornography.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The third strand focuses on the transition to adulthood for the students, when they move into the phase of responsible, independent living where they need to be able to care for themselves in times of change and challenge. It is striking that in the holistic development of the student the spiritual dimension is omitted. Article 27 of the UNCRC ‘children and young people should be able to live in a way that helps them reach their full physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social potential’. Evidence suggests that ‘having something to believe in’ provides hope in times of difficulty and challenge. Hope is an integral value in faith schools.

The involvement of parents is central to the implementation of the curriculum and taking account of the values and mores of the home is critical to enabling the student to interpret what is being delivered in the classroom. The NCCA itself recognises this on page 5 of the specification: “*At a practical level, senior cycle is supported by ... the involvement of ... parents.*” While recognising this, the specification gives no further guidance as to how this might be achieved. Life events as referenced in 3.3 are experienced in a context, most generally the context of family. Major life events challenge our ability to cope and family is generally the first port of call. Equally this applies to 3.5 where ‘standing up’ for themselves is a critical life skill best understood in the context of the family. However, it is important for students to be enabled to reflect on how they learned to stand up for themselves particularly in the home *‘if you don’t critically understand your family, you are likely to repeat it, whether it makes sense or not’* Rob Ruhnke.

Schools with a strong ethos teach students a way of living and give them a moral compass to interrogate allyship. Often on the cusp of adulthood, new ways of thinking are attractive to impressionable minds. We need to enable our students to be discerning and to give them an ability to differentiate the ‘new and fashionable’ from the ‘simple and true’:-  
*‘Having a clear faith, based on the creed of the church is often labelled today as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and swept along by every wind of teaching, looks like the only attitude acceptable to today’s standards’* Pope Benedict XVI.

In this strand as indeed in all of the strands, the skill of the teacher is critical. He/she is enabling the students to make sense of the world based on their life experience to date and teach them a way of living-a way that enables them to acknowledge the sacredness of their own lives and how precious it is to care for it. The training and support of the teacher needs investment and support.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

While the subject specification is not the place to address teacher training, it is imperative that appropriate training is available to teachers, to take account of the ethos of the particular school to which they belong. That means that a general model of CPD is not sufficient, a bespoke module should be available to take account of the ethos of different schools.

It should also be noted that the delay in ratification of the Junior Cycle course led to inappropriate textbooks being published. Schools and publishers should be given plenty of time to prepare for the implementation of the course, after it has been finally approved.



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# **Contributor**

Association of Secondary  
Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)

# Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)

## Introduction

The ASTI made submissions to the NCCA's 2019 consultation on relationships and sexuality education (RSE) and the 2022 consultation on the Background Paper for the revised junior cycle SPHE programme. The key points in both ASTI' submissions remain pertinent in the current consultation on the draft senior cycle curriculum. They include the need for curriculum coherence, supporting teacher professionalism, conducive conditions in the classroom and the role of school leadership. This submission sets out the key areas of concern for the ASTI and provides recommendations for their resolution.

In both submissions, the ASTI supported the review of the RSE/SPHE curriculum initiated by the Minister for Education in 2019 and concurred that the curriculum initially introduced in 2000 needed extensive updating. Society has changed dramatically in the intervening 20- years - as evidenced in legislation, amendments to the Constitution and wider state policy around diversity and equality, in particular gender equality. The ASTI also noted that technology and social media had profoundly altered the social world which adolescents inhabit and that a revised SPHE should aim to enable students to develop the social, emotional and cognitive skills to navigate the risks and opportunities of that rapidly changing social world.

Further, a key theme informing both ASTI submissions was the centrality of student wellbeing to education and curriculum policy. There is a large and growing body of evidence of the challenges that young people face during adolescence and young adulthood. There is also strong evidence of the importance and impact of school-based health education programmes in supporting young people's emotional, social, psychological and physical wellbeing. Indeed, the latter was a key finding in the research conducted on young people's wellbeing during the pandemic.

## ASTI key concerns

### *Curriculum coherence*

Less than 22% of schools provide SPHE in senior cycle. Schools are, however, required to provide a minimum of 6 hours each year of RSE. Research consistently demonstrates that young people want and need SPHE as part of their holistic educational experience. The 2019 Oireachtas Committee report on RSE captures the common theme of the many submissions made to it when it recommends the development of a common RSE/SPHE curriculum which is gender equality-based, inclusive, holistic, creative, empowering and protective.<sup>[1]</sup>

In its 2019 submission, the ASTI underlined the need for an integrated RSE/SPHE programme. There is no educational rationale for the existence of two programmes. The latter is consequential to decisions in the 1990s relating to patronage and ethos of schools. While acknowledging this historical dispensation, the ASTI believes that a public and publicly-funded education system must provide a common curriculum irrespective of the model of school patronage. It fully endorses the Oireachtas Committee's recommendation that the Education Act 1998 be amended or at least reviewed, so that ethos can no longer be used as a barrier to the effective, objective and factual teaching of the RSE and SPHE curriculum to which every student is entitled. <sup>[2]</sup> The ASTI also underlines the importance of aligned the new senior cycle curriculum with wider school policy developments, in particular the 2018

Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice and the more recent Cineáltais: Action-Plan on Bullying.

### ***Supporting teacher professionalism***

Supporting teacher professionalism has many dimensions and is not confined to teacher CPD. Hargreaves and Fullan's concept of teachers' professional capital is relevant in this regard, comprehending as it does human, social and decisional dimensions.<sup>[3]</sup> Supporting teacher professionalism requires an approach that aims to develop and integrate these three dimensions.<sup>[4]</sup> Practically speaking, teachers need opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills; to collaborate with colleagues to actualise their knowledge and skills; space and time to reflect on their practice. Curriculum change cannot take place without dedicated professional time for teachers to 'grow' each form of capital.

Working conditions also matter. Workload; the intensification of teachers' working lives; diminished wellbeing; not feeling valued by society are having a corrosive impact on teachers' morale and job satisfaction. Annual ASTI commissioned research confirms a sharp decline in job satisfaction from 77% in 2009 to 44% in 2023.<sup>[5]</sup> Policy to support teacher professionalism must not be understood in the minimalist sense of providing opportunities for CPD. Rather, it must be conceptualised as a complex and iterative process wherein the above issues are identified and, in consultation with the teaching profession, practical solutions put in place to bring about the necessary improvements in working conditions – in particular class size; work-life balance; and a new approach to CPD which embeds teachers' learning in the context of their school's priorities and challenges.

With specific reference to a new SPHE/RSE curriculum at senior cycle, the ASTI recommends that a multi-layered approach be adopted. Aligning the new curriculum with the wider policy frameworks will require a whole-school approach. Teaching the new curriculum will require highly trained teachers. In this regard, the ASTI welcomed the introduction of the post-graduate diploma in SPHE/RSE in September 2023. However, given that only approximately 40 teachers will be able to avail of this upskilling each year, the Association is calling on the Minister to move quickly to enable other teacher education departments to deliver this programme.

The ASTI is fully aware that the role of the NCCA is to advise on curriculum and assessment matters. However, as is clear in the 2022 Advisory Report on Senior Cycle to the Minister, conducive conditions for curriculum change cannot be ignored. They include meaningful and consistent stakeholder engagement; allocation of resources; investment in teachers' professional learning. What is not mentioned in the Advisory Report is the issue of teacher workload, the lack of professional time and class size. These factors are equally critical conducive conditions to supporting curriculum change.

### ***School leadership***

High quality leadership is crucial in establishing a shared purpose and vision for a school and to the achievement of high-quality educational outcomes for students. It is equally important in ensuring a supportive, collegial and enabling work environment for teachers. The ASTI has consistently campaigned for a restoration of the number of posts of responsibility prior to the moratorium imposed in 2009 austerity measures. Indeed, it must be pointed out that since that date, the policy, evaluation and accountability framework for schools had expanded exponentially. The quality framework for schools, Looking at Our Schools, underlines the organisational complexity of schools and the need for holistic and integrated approaches to each domain of school leadership. The ASTI reiterates its demand that number of school leadership posts should be restored to pre-2009 level and post-holders should have dedicated time to discharge their duties.

### ***Class size must facilitate health education pedagogy***

The evidence on the importance of small class size for health education is.<sup>[6]</sup> Smaller classes create a safe space for students when discussing the sensitive topics. Smaller classes enable the teacher to create an environment facilitates student engagement, peer learning and building trust. It affords teachers opportunities to develop the skills of sensitive listening and watchful attentiveness to those who are perhaps less able to join in. The larger the group, the more complicated the dynamic and those students who remain silent may require further attention. The ASTI recommends that class size for SPHE/RSE classes do not exceed 16 students.

Individual students can raise issues SPHE/RSE classes which may require a professional intervention or prompt concerns in relation to welfare and safeguarding. The ASTI must put on record its concern that that current allocation ratio of Guidance Counsellors to schools is absolutely inadequate to deliver the counselling or ‘first intervention’ response to students manifesting concerns. Annual research reports by the Institute of Guidance Counselling confirms this this reality. If schools are to discharge their duty of care and serve as the protective environment for students, an urgent review of the allocation ratio is required.

### ***Respecting teacher autonomy***

Teacher autonomy is a fundamental aspect of teacher professionalism. Teacher autonomy refers to the professional independence of teachers in schools, especially the degree to which they can make autonomous decisions about what and how they teach. Teacher autonomy is strongly associated with improved job satisfaction and a greater intention to stay in teaching.<sup>[7]</sup> The 2018 OECD TALIS Report makes a strong case for enhancing teachers’ professional autonomy in order to secure the optimum educational outcomes for students. It is also central to ensuring that teaching remains attractive as a profession. It identifies autonomy as one of the five pillars of teacher professionalism, the other being knowledge and skills, prestige, career opportunities, and collaboration.<sup>[8]</sup>

One of the most consistent concerns from ASTI members in relation to SPHE is the status of the latter as a ‘timetable filler’ wherein the teacher with a gap in their timetable is allocated to teach SPHE. This pervasive practice doesn’t just impact on new entrants to the profession: it is widely experienced by all teachers. And it is a widely resented practice because it undermines teachers’ autonomy. It is also resented because teachers are not offered training to assume this role. Teachers have also expressed discomfort with teaching aspects of the programme, in particular in relation to sexuality, gender identity and pornography. The ASTI’s advice to its members is that they cannot be compelled to teach SPHE and if they agree to do so, they must be provided with appropriate Inservice training.

### ***Concluding observations***

The most important resource in our schools is the teaching profession. Their knowledge of what works well in the classroom and of what conducive conditions are necessary to support curriculum change is unique. Teachers’ voice must be respected in the process of curriculum redevelopment and not regarded as a voice among many other stakeholders. The recommendations in this submission, in particular those relating to conducive conditions, must be taken on board if we are to move forward on providing the kind of SPHE curriculum which is long overdue in second level schools.

<sup>[1]</sup>

[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](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)

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid: p.28

<sup>[3]</sup> A Hargreaves and M Fullan (2012) *Professional Capital: transforming teaching in every school* (Ontario)

<sup>[4]</sup> <https://www.teachingcouncil.ie/ezines-archive/ezines-2017/5d77d38d-f8b1-4f77-bac2-117ee166e39e.htm>

<sup>[5]</sup> <https://www.asti.ie/news-campaigns/research/>

<sup>[6]</sup> <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ITGSE.pdf>

<sup>[7]</sup> [https://tdtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/teacher\\_autonomy\\_how\\_does\\_it\\_relate\\_to\\_job\\_satisfaction\\_and\\_retention-1.pdf](https://tdtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/teacher_autonomy_how_does_it_relate_to_job_satisfaction_and_retention-1.pdf)

<sup>[8]</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1d0bc92a-en/index.html?itemId=/content/publication/1d0bc92a-en>



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# Contributor

## BelongTo

## About Belong To

Belong To, LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland is a national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) young people. Since 2003, Belong To has worked with LGBTQ+ youth to create a world where they are equal, safe and thriving in the diversity of their identities and experiences.

The organisation advocates and campaigns with and on behalf of LGBTQ+ young people and offers specialised LGBTQ+ youth services in Dublin (including crisis counselling with Pieta) and supports a network of LGBTQ+ youth groups across Ireland. Belong To also supports educators and other professionals working with LGBTQ+ youth with training, capacity building and policy development.

Belong To strongly welcomes the published draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum, following extensive consultation with students, teachers, parents, academics and stakeholders. This is a hugely positive development for young people across Ireland, and builds upon the well-informed and comprehensive Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, which was rolled out to First Year students in September of this year.

## Belong To and LGBTQ+ Inclusive Education

Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark was launched in 2022, developing from the Safe and Supportive Schools pilot project. The LGBTQ+ Quality Mark is an evidence-based, holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools and alternative education spaces that involves the whole school community. The initiative follows the four key areas of Wellbeing Promotion as outlined by the Department of Education, namely Curriculum (Teaching and Learning), Culture and Environment, Policy and Planning, and Relationships and Partnerships. Over the course of 18 months, the LGBTQ+ Quality Mark model sets a number of goals and requirements within each of these areas, which combine to ensure a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusion that involves the whole school community. Each of these requirements are evidence-based, and informed by the Department of Education's *Being LGBT in School* resource.

We support schools to attain these goals through dedicated resources, trainings and one-to-one supports. A total of 116 schools and Youthreach Centres have so far joined Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark journey to become an accredited safe and supportive school.

Belong To's annual Stand Up Awareness Week campaign is now in its 14th year. Stand Up Awareness Week is a national LGBTQ+ anti-bullying week running in second-level schools, Youthreach centres and youth services across Ireland each November. Stand Up Awareness Week is supported by the Department of Education and endorsed by major organisations in the post-primary school sector as follows: ETBI, ASTI, Teachers Union Ireland, Joint Managerial Body, National Parents Council Post-Primary, Educate Together, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Irish Second-Level Students Association, Institute of Guidance Counsellors and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. The Department of Education's continued support for the campaign is named as an action under the 'Culture and Environment' section of Cinealtais: Action Plan on Bullying.

Stand Up Awareness Week aims to decrease bullying, isolation, self-harm, suicide ideation and mental health difficulties among LGBTQ+ youth. With the campaign, we also strive to increase peer support between LGBTQ+ youth and their classmates, and increase awareness of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students among the entire school community. We are proud to have seen a year-on-year increase in the number of post-primary schools participating in Stand Up Awareness Week, with 77% of second-level schools across Ireland taking part in 2022.

## LGBTQ+ Young People's School Experiences

In partnership with the Teacher's College, Columbia University, Belong To conducted the Irish stream of the international School Climate Survey research model in 2019 and 2022. The research examines indicators of a negative school experience, the impact of the school environment on students, and school-based supports that can improve the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. The 2022 School Climate Survey: Key Findings report details the experiences of 1,208 LGBTQ+ students from Irish post-primary schools over the 2021/22 academic year, with all 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland represented.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding experiences of safety, 76% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school, with 3 in 10 LGBTQ+ students missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. School spaces most commonly avoided by LGBTQ+ students for safety reasons included bathrooms (45%), PE classes (39%), and sports facilities (29%). 69% of LGBTQ+ students heard homophobic remarks from other students, and 53% heard their peers make negative remarks about trans people. 56% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing a homophobic remark from a teacher or staff member.

Compared to the general Irish youth population, this research found that LGBTQ+ students are nine times more likely to report being deliberately excluded by peers, nine times more likely to report being the focus of rumours or lies, four times more likely to report verbal harassment, and five times more likely to experience physical harassment. Additionally, 46% of LGBTQ+ students had been sexually harassed in the 2021/22 school year, and 41% reported experiencing cyberbullying.

These experiences cause many LGBTQ+ students to feel isolated and fearful at school, impacting their sense of belonging at school and their academic aspirations. The research found that LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher rates of homophobic and biphobic harassment and assault are 21% less likely to feel accepted by the student body. Compared to the general Irish youth population, LGBTQ+ students are four times more likely to feel lonely at school and three times more likely to feel like an outsider at school.

LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher levels of harassment and assault were twice as likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe as compared to those who experienced lower rates of harassment. One in ten LGBTQ+ students are unsure whether they will complete the Leaving Certificate; reasons for this include mental health challenges (71%), hostility from other students (29%), and feeling unsafe at school (18%).

In schools with higher levels of staff support for LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ students were 35% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, 33% more likely to feel they belong in school, and 21% less likely to be absent from school due to feeling unsafe. When school staff overheard homophobic remarks and proactively intervened, LGBTQ+ students were 13% more likely to feel accepted by the student body and 14% more likely to feel they belong in school.

Where LGBTQ+-related topics had been included in the school curriculum, LGBTQ+ students were 22% more likely to feel they belong in school, 11% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, and 8% less likely to be absent from school due to feeling unsafe. However, half of LGBTQ+ students reported that LGBTQ+-related topics were not covered at all in the 2021/22 school year. SPHE led as the subject with the highest reported representation of LGBTQ+ topics, however, only 35% of LGBTQ+ students received LGBTQ+ inclusive SPHE.

## Questions to consider

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### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:**

The outlined aim is very welcome, and clearly summarises the purpose of SPHE for Senior Cycle students.

We feel it would be beneficial for this aim to be underpinned by a number of guiding principles, so as to provide clarity for students, parents/guardians, and teachers as to the purpose of SPHE class. These guiding principles should also support teachers in developing their lesson plans in relation to each of the outlined Learning Outcomes.

It is recommended that the following guiding principles underpin the teaching of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum:

- Appreciation and respect for diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.
- Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.
- Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.
- Positive and inclusive information on sexuality and sexual health.

**Appreciate and respect diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.**

- It is welcome that equality and inclusion is included under Learning Outcome 3.6.
- However, as compared to the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is lacking in developing upon the need to appreciate and respect diverse experiences, which have only been mentioned under Learning Outcomes 1.4, 2.3 and 3.6.
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29, the right to education should include "the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms," and "the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society."
- Resources developed to support the teaching of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum should include a diverse range of stories and experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.

### **Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.**

- The brevity and progressive nature of the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is very welcome, and marks a substantial step forward.
- However, it remains the case that a significant proportion of teachers who are scheduled for SPHE classes do not have specific training on areas covered by SPHE, or the curriculum itself.
- In light of this, and owing to the nature of areas covered by SPHE, particularly Strand 2, it is vital that the provision of objective, inclusive, and evidence-based information is a core element of the new curriculum.
- As such, we recommend that teachers be advised to follow resources and supporting materials produced or endorsed by the NCCA and the Department of Education when teaching this curriculum, particularly Strand 2.
- To ensure that this new curriculum is taught in full, including an LGBTQ+ Inclusive approach to all Learning Outcomes under Strand 2, it may be useful to consider including a review of SPHE teaching materials and lesson plans as part of school inspections.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt it would be helpful to have a feedback mechanism for students on a local (school) and more formal (NCCA/Department of Education/academic research) level as to their experience of being taught the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

### **Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.**

- It is welcome that consent is named within Learning Outcome 2.3, and that healthy relationships are named under Learning Outcome 2.1.
- However, it would be beneficial for the promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abusive, and violence to be threaded through the teaching materials and resources developed for the Learning Outcomes of all Strands.
- For example, under Learning Outcome 1.3 'critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs', the experience of peer pressure to consume drugs or alcohol could be framed within the language of boundaries and consent, relating to respecting a person's decision not to consume drugs and/or alcohol.

### **Positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health.**

- The return of RSE to sit within the SPHE curriculum is a very positive development, and it is welcome that Strand 2 is dedicated to RSE.
- The inclusion of compulsory RSE within the Senior Cycle SPHE framework brings Ireland fully in line with a number of international human rights standards, including:
  - o meeting the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education that comprehensive sex education be mandatory, available to all without discrimination from the early stages of life, and that this education should take a holistic, scientific, and pluralistic perspective.<sup>2</sup>
  - o meeting obligations under Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that State Parties "recognise the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health," including sexual health and mental health.
  - o meeting the recommendation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that sexual health education should be "based on scientific evidence and human rights standards", with "attention... 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."<sup>3</sup>

- o responding to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's specific concern at the "lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education" for young people

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<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, "Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education: Sexual Education" A/65/162. [Available here.](#)

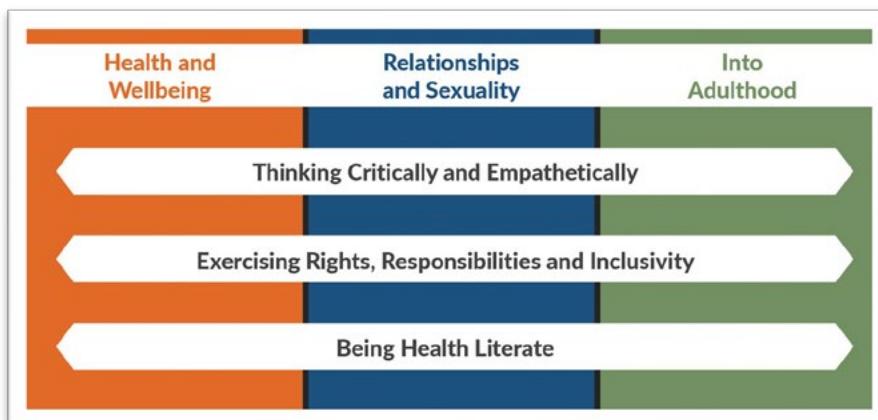
<sup>3</sup> UNCRC, "General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child During Adolescence" CRC/C/GC/20 Para 61. [Available here.](#)

in Ireland, and meeting Committee's resulting recommendation that sexual and reproductive health education be included as a mandatory part of the school curriculum.<sup>4</sup>

- Conversations around sexuality and sexual health are likely to arise under Learning Outcomes beyond Strand 2, for example in relation to alcohol and emotional wellbeing under Strand 1.
- As such, we recommend that positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health be a key principle underpinning the entire Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum and resource, rather than for Strand 2 alone.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.2	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.3	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.4	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.5	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.6	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.7	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.8	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.9	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.
1.1	

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**1.1 research the determinants of good health**

- We recommend that the wording of this Learning Outcome be updated to "determinants of good physical and mental health".
- Bodywhys, The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland, reports that "the average age of onset for anorexia nervosa is 14-18, 14-22 for bulimia nervosa and late teens to early 20s for binge eating disorder."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bodywhys (2023) 'Statistics', [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie). [Available here.](#)

- It is important that teaching under this Learning Outcome does not inadvertently reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' foods and behaviours, which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours.
- As such, we recommend that resource materials related to this Learning Outcome are developed in consultation with Bodywhys.

**1.2 discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance**

- We welcome this learning outcome and encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission strongly expressed their frustration that what was discussed in SPHE in relation to wellbeing, mental health, and a healthy life balance, was not reflected in their schools' culture.
- In particular, young people felt that what was taught in SPHE was actively contradicted by stresses resulting from homework, study, assignments and exams. Young people expressed their frustration that teachers were reluctant to change their timelines if, for example, students had multiple essays due on the same day for different classes.
- In terms of understanding and enacting the SPHE curriculum as a "praxis", it is important that the cross cutting element 'Exercising Rights, Responsibilities and Inclusivity' is adopted in relation to the school environment, for example as part of teaching under this Learning Outcome.
- Upon developing resource materials for this Learning Outcome, we recommend including information on facilitating student engagement and feedback on the school's overall culture, promotion of wellbeing, and actions to enable a healthy life balance. This could take the form of an anonymous student survey with students given the option of putting their name forward for further discussion through a focus group.
- The above suggestion is in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which adopts the Lundy model of child participation for student participation.<sup>6</sup> As noted by the quality framework document, one of the four aspects of the Lundy model is that children/students be "facilitated to express their view", and that "the view must be acted on as appropriate".
- As such, we recommend that conversations around emotional wellbeing do not focus solely on what the student as an individual can do to protect and nurture their emotional wellbeing. Class discussions could explore what can be done on a collective, school, or community level to create more nurturing environments in which the emotional wellbeing

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

of others is also protected. This approach brings the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum closer in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which names “Centrality of students’ wellbeing” as one of the ten key principles underpinning the framework.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3 critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs**

- We welcome this learning outcome and strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission highlighted that abstentionist, or ‘just say no’, teaching towards drugs and alcohol was not helpful and often resulted in students disengaging during these lessons.
- Young people felt that it was important for SPHE teachers to acknowledge that a considerable number of students at Senior Cycle will have consumed alcohol and/or drugs at some point, and that education should be focused on a health and harm-reduction approach.
- Harm reduction is defined as “...the philosophical and practical development of strategies so that the outcomes of drug use are as safe as is situationally possible. It involves the provision of factual information, resources, education, skills and the development of attitude change, in order, that the consequences of drug use for the users, the community and the culture have minimal negative impact.”<sup>8</sup>
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 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.”<sup>9</sup>
- As such, the approach to teaching under this Learning Outcome should be to ensure that students are given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them.
- Development of resource materials related to this Learning Outcome would benefit from extensive input from the HSE National Social Inclusion Office, who recently rolled out the highly successful Safer Nightlife campaign relating to drug harm-reduction.

### **1.4 explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one’s sense of self**

<sup>7</sup> Department of Education. (2022). ‘*Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools*’. Department of Education: Dublin. [Available here](#).

<sup>8</sup> Watson, M. (1991) ‘Harm Reduction - Why do it?’ *International Journal on Drug Policy* Vol. 2 (5), pp. 13-15.

<sup>9</sup> 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 [Available here](#).

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and recommend its wording be updated to include identity, reading:
 

“explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, identity, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one’s sense of self”
- The inclusion of ‘identity’ is important in acknowledging and understanding how being a member of a minority group, for example being an LGBTQ+ young person, young person of colour, Traveller young person or young person with a disability, can impact upon mental health and wellbeing.
- As detailed earlier in this submission, LGBTQ+ students experience higher rates of bullying and exclusion than the general Irish youth population.<sup>10</sup>
- In addition, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience mental health challenges; 93% of LGBTQ+ young people struggled with anxiety, stress, or depression during the Covid-19 pandemic compared with 53% of the general youth population.<sup>11</sup>
- Research identifies stigma and minority stress as two key factors in understanding poorer mental health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Stigma relates to negative attitudes to a person's LGBTQ+ identity, and discrimination they may experience. These negative attitudes can be in the home, community, school, society, or political sphere. Minority stress is a result of this stigma. It relates to the excess stress that an LGBTQ+ person can experience as a result of discrimination or rejection based on their identity. Bullying and social exclusion are key factors identified as causing minority stress among LGBTQ+ young people.
- The LGBT Ireland Report found that age 12 is the most common age at which a person first realises their LGBTQ+ identity. However, the most common age of ‘coming out’, or telling others about one’s LGBTQ+ identity, is 16.
- As Senior Cycle is the time at which a majority of LGBTQ+ people in Ireland come out to others, it is important to include consideration of identity within this Learning Outcome.

### **1.5 recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and recommend its wording be updated to include ‘in themselves and others’ as per Learning Outcome 1.7, reading:

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<sup>10</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2021). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later*. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here](#).

“recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk in themselves and others, and how these can affect emotions and behaviour”

- LGBTQ+ youth consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission highlighted the need for young people to be equipped with the skills to recognise when their friends are struggling with mental health challenges, and how to support them.
- Irish research has shown that many LGBTQ+ young people’s self-assessment of their mental health difficulties acts as a barrier to seeking support. Compared to their LGBTQ+ peers, many LGBTQ+ young people “expressed the belief that... their mental health problem was not bad enough to access treatment and they did not want to waste scarce resources by accessing services or affecting access for other people whom they perceived to be in greater need”.<sup>12</sup>
- Peer support can therefore act as a useful bridge to support students, and particularly LGBTQ+ students, to acknowledge the challenges they are facing and seek support before these difficulties become more severe.

#### **1.6 draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- To support this learning outcome, it would be helpful for an ‘online hub’ of resources designed for young people to be made directly available to students, which teachers can direct them to while teaching material related to this Learning Outcome.
- Within this online hub, we recommend including Belong To’s Better Out Than In mental health hub, which includes practical steps that LGBTQ+ young people can take to address anxiety, low mood and sleeping difficulties.<sup>13</sup>

#### **1.7 recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and strongly encourage its retention.
- As detailed previously, the inclusion of recognising signs of mental health challenges in others is particularly important for LGBTQ+ youth, many of whom avoid seeking mental health supports due to the feeling that their challenges are “not bad enough” compared to their LGBTQ+ peers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Higgins et al. (2021) ‘LGBT+ young people’s perceptions of barriers to accessing mental health services in Ireland’, *Journal of Nursing Management*, (29) 58-69. [Available here](#).

<sup>13</sup> Belong To (2023) *Better Out Than In*. [Available here](#).

<sup>14</sup> Higgins et al. (2021) ‘LGBT+ young people’s perceptions of barriers to accessing mental health services in Ireland’, *Journal of Nursing Management*, (29) 58-69. [Available here](#).

- Student and staff resources accompanying this Learning Outcome could include a comprehensive list of available support services, compiled by the NCCA and made directly available to students both via an online hub and in SPHE textbooks.
- It is important that this list includes support services that are less formal and/or youth focused. Research shows that LGBTQ+ young people are largely unaware of youth-friendly mental health services, and had negative perceptions of more formal mental health services.<sup>15</sup>
- We recommend that this list include a breakdown of free support services, such as the HSE 50808 text line; specialised support services, such as Belong To's supports for LGBTQ+ youth including crisis counselling with Pieta; sources of information on youth mental health, such as SpunOut and Jigsaw; along with the process of referral to CAMHs, and an online list of local mental health and youth mental health support services broken down by location.

#### **1.8 discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and encourage its retention.
- As detailed more extensively under Learning Outcome 1.1, it is important that that teaching under this Learning Outcome does not inadvertently reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' foods and behaviours, which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours.
- As such, we recommend that resource materials related to this Learning Outcome are developed in consultation with Bodywhys.
- Similarly, as detailed more extensively under Learning Outcome 1.3, it is important that teaching related to drugs and alcohol under this Learning Outcome take a harm reduction approach.
- Adopting a harm reduction approach ensures that students are given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them.

#### **1.9 explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and strongly encourage its retention.

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<sup>15</sup> 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. [Available here.](#)

- As detailed previously, LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission highlighted that abstentionist, or 'just say no', teaching towards drugs and alcohol was not helpful and often resulted in students disengaging during these lessons.
- Additionally, the focus group voiced that it is important for this Learning Outcome to address dependency and addictive behaviours that do not fall within the stereotypical understanding of addiction. Examples given by young people included dependence on weed to manage mental health challenges, and alcohol dependence where a person may not drink every day, but also may not be able to cope with social gatherings without alcohol.
- Young people also felt that it was important for SPHE teachers to acknowledge that a considerable number of students at Senior Cycle will have consumed alcohol and/or drugs at some point, and that education should be focused on a health and harm-reduction approach.
- Harm reduction is defined as "...the philosophical and practical development of strategies so that the outcomes of drug use are as safe as is situationally possible. It involves the provision of factual information, resources, education, skills and the development of attitude change, in order, that the consequences of drug use for the users, the community and the culture have minimal negative impact."<sup>16</sup>
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 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."<sup>17</sup>
- As such, the approach to teaching under this Learning Outcome should be to ensure that students are given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them.
- Finally, LGBTQ+ young people who attended Belong To's focus group highlighted the need for this Learning Outcome to be taught in a non-judgemental way, so as to avoid stigmatising students, their friends and/or family members who may have experience of addiction.

**1.10 discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and strongly encourage its retention.

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<sup>16</sup> Watson, M. (1991) 'Harm Reduction - Why do it?' *International Journal on Drug Policy* Vol. 2 (5), pp. 13-15.

<sup>17</sup> 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 [Available here](#).

- Young people in both Belong To's focus groups and focus groups conducted by the NCCA<sup>18</sup> highlighted the need for students to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to keep themselves and their peers safe while socialising, particularly in a nightlife context.
- A clear recommendation from LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To was the need to ensure that this Learning Outcome was not taught in a way that involves 'victim blaming' in relation to sexual violence, i.e. advising students that a victim of sexual violence could have avoided the assault had the consumed less alcohol and/or drugs.
- Resource materials related to this Learning Outcome should clearly name and explain the ongoing importance of consent – socially and legally – in the context of nightlife, drinking and drug use, including recreational drug use, "date rape" drugs, and spiking.
- Students and staff resources developed to support this Learning Outcome would be greatly strengthened through consultation with the HSE National Office for Social Inclusion, in relation to their roll-out of the CRISSCROSS project in Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

### Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to

<sup>18</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>19</sup> CRISSCROSS is an intervention program in nightlife, leisure and socialization venues to raise awareness and prevent GBV behaviours - including LGBTIphobia - linked to sexual violence and substance use. The main goal of CRISSCROSS is to combat gender-based violence in nightlife, leisure and socialization venues frequented by youngsters and young adults (16-24 y/o) through the design, testing and evaluation of innovative pilots based on the behaviour change wheel methodology, with the aim to raise awareness, change attitudes and prevent GBV behaviours -including LGBTIphobia- linked to sexual violence and substance use. Further information is [available here](#).

2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**Recommended inclusion – reproductive healthcare and accessing termination of pregnancy services**

- It is recommended that an additional Learning Outcome be included to specifically cover reproductive healthcare and access to termination of pregnancy services.
- The purpose of this recommendation is to ensure that teaching on responses to a pregnancy and accessing termination of pregnancy are not overlooked within the broad Learning Outcome 2.9.
- We recommend that student and staff resources explicitly name the HSE My Options website and helpline as the source for reliable and unbiased information on the options available to pregnant people.
- We recommend that teaching materials cover where and how to access information on termination of pregnancy (GP, HSE My Options, and family planning centres).
- Teaching materials should also explicitly address the existence of 'rogue crisis pregnancy agencies'; unregulated crisis pregnancy services which present as unbiased but may provide unreliable or anti-abortion information.<sup>20</sup>
- Resources for teachers should make clear that information provided to students must be objective and evidence-based and that a school's ethos or patronage cannot be a barrier to objective teaching on this topic.

**Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.**

- We welcome this note to Strand 2, and very strongly encourage its retention.
- Students and teachers consulted by the NCCA during the development of this curriculum noted the need for “references to members of the LGBTQI+ community [to be] normalised as a way of eliminating ‘bigotry and prejudice’.”<sup>21</sup>
- As mentioned previously, in the 2021/22 academic year, only 35% of LGBTQ+ students were taught LGBTQ+-related topics in SPHE.<sup>22</sup>
- Integrating LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families throughout Strand 2 is important not only for LGBTQ+ students, but also to foster empathy and understanding for LGBTQ+ people and their experiences among the general youth population.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To on the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum stressed the need for the entire SPHE curriculum to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons. Young people noted that, throughout their lives, students will encounter LGBTQ+ people, identities and experiences in a range of settings, and so having stand-alone lessons on LGBTQ+ topics doesn’t accurately represent how non-LGBTQ+ people will interact with LGBTQ+ people in their lifetime.

**2.1 demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.

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<sup>20</sup> Ryan, O. (2022) ‘Frightening’ language and no abortion information: Warning issued over rogue pregnancy services’, *thejournal.ie*. [Available here](#).

<sup>21</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>22</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission repeatedly expressed the need for SPHE to address topics including understanding, creating and respecting boundaries; how to communicate clearly and respectfully, what good communication looks like, and skills for communicating feelings, particularly when feeling frustrated or upset; and dealing with challenges and disagreements between friends, classmates, family members and colleagues.

## **2.2 reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and suggest that it be rephrased to include 'family', so this reads:  
"reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, family, relationships and sexual behaviour".
- The inclusion of family relationships is particularly important for LGBTQ+ young people, 56% of whom are not fully accepted in their home environment,<sup>23</sup> and over half of whom described their home environment as "not good".<sup>24</sup>
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To as part of this submission stressed the high number of LGBTQ+ youth whose parents and/or families are not accepting of their identity, or struggle initially when a young person comes out. The focus group felt that it was important that this Learning Outcome address what difficult family dynamics might look like, and ways for a young person to protect their wellbeing in a difficult home environment,
- Additionally, LGBTQ+ young people noted that, both in schools and in society, there is a stereotypical view of domestic violence as being between a couple. However, the group felt that it was important for all young people to be aware that physical, psychological and emotional abuse perpetrated by parents against their children is also a form of domestic violence.

## **2.3 discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To very strongly voiced the need for both consent and mutual pleasure to be included in SPHE classes, and felt that this was an important and progressive inclusion in the draft Senior Cycle curriculum.

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<sup>23</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here](#).

<sup>24</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2020). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here](#).

- Young people also felt that discussing care, respect and pleasure together with consent was a good way of teaching consent and boundaries, as it moves away from a purely legal understanding of consent, and allows space to discuss how consent requires ongoing communication and can be retracted at any time.
- There is a clear evidence base for the need to address consent, and the related elements of sexual behaviour including care, respect, intimacy and pleasure, with young people in Ireland.
- A recent survey by Active\* Consent found that 29% of female, 10% of male, and 18% of non-binary third-level students reported “non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force or threat of force” during their college years.<sup>25</sup>
- Published in 2019, the RCNI *Storm and Stress* report found that 80% of adolescents had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the previous 12 months.<sup>26</sup> While 20% of all adolescents had experienced serious sexual harassment, this figure stood at 68% among LGBT+ youth.
- Similarly, the 2022 *School Climate Report* found that 46% of LGBTQ+ students had been sexually harassed at school in the 2021/22 academic year.<sup>27</sup>
- To normalise the concept of consent in sexual relationships, it is important for other Strands to acknowledge that consent is a cross-cutting approach that applies to situations other than sexual/intimate relationships, including friendships and family relationships.
- Resource materials for this Learning Outcome would benefit from reference to the ‘OMFG’ (ongoing, mutual, and freely given) model of consent, and engagement with the Active\* Consent project at the University of Galway.

#### **2.4 examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt that it was extremely important to address gender stereotypes, gender norms and attitudes towards gender in SPHE.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people, how understanding men as ‘rational’ and women as

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<sup>25</sup> L Burke et al, (2020) 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). [Available here](#).

<sup>26</sup> Rape Crisis Network Ireland (2019) *Storm and Stress*. [Available here](#).

<sup>27</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

'emotional' negatively impacts men's mental health, and how gendered subject choices, such as Home Economics and Woodwork rarely being made available in single-sex boys and girls schools respectively, impact our understanding of gender roles in society.

- It is important that resource materials developed for this Learning Outcome do not focus only on attitudes towards women and girls.
- It is also important these resource materials look at and understand gender as a way that we organise society, and how harmful attitudes to gender and gender stereotypes limit all people in society, not just women and girls.
- As teachers and young people consulted by the NCCA expressed a desire to better understand non-binary identities, and gender identity more broadly,<sup>28</sup> resource materials for this Learning Outcome could include information on what gender identity is, and how cisgender people experience gender in a way that is different to trans and non-binary people.

## **2.5 identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- This Learning Outcome may benefit from being expanded to name relationship types, reading:  
"identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships (including family, friendships and romantic/sexual relationships), including coercive control."
- LGBTQ+ young people in Belong To's focus group highlighted how abusive behaviours within friendships is rarely discussed in detail, beyond the context of bullying.
- Young people also stressed the need for SPHE to include teaching on abusive family relationships, as this can be hidden to those outside the family unit and may not be well understood by those experiencing the abuse.
- The inclusion of family relationships is particularly important for LGBTQ+ young people, 56% of whom are not fully accepted in their home environment,<sup>29</sup> and over half of whom described their home environment as "not good".<sup>30</sup>
- Addressing abusive friendships within the context of abusive relationships is also particularly important for LGBTQ+ students, who are much more likely to experience behaviours linked to relational bullying than the general youth populations.

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<sup>28</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. Available at: [https://ncca.ie/media/5974/bgp-sc-sphe\\_consultation-report\\_0223.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/5974/bgp-sc-sphe_consultation-report_0223.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2020). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report*. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here](#).

<sup>30</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2020). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report*. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here](#).

- As mentioned previously, compared to the general Irish youth population, LGBTQ+ students are nine times more likely to report being deliberately excluded by peers, nine times more likely to report being the focus of rumours or lies, four times more likely to feel lonely at school, and three times more likely to feel like an outsider at school.<sup>31</sup>

**2.6 explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt that it was extremely important to address gendered violence.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people and how gender stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality and GBV.
- Similar to Learning Outcome 2.4, it is important these resource materials look at and understand gender as a way that we organise society, and how harmful attitudes to gender and gender stereotypes limit all people in society, not just women and girls.
- As mentioned under previous Learning Outcomes, it would be helpful for supports available to be clearly listed in SPHE textbooks, and for information on these supports to be made directly available to students via an online SPHE hub,

**2.7 investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations**

- We welcome the inclusion of this Learning Outcome, and strongly support its retention.
- Research by the University of Galway shows that the proportion of young people who first saw pornography between the ages of 10-13 was 53% of boys and 23% of girls.<sup>32</sup>
- Between one-fifth and one-quarter of respondents to the above research indicated that, from watching pornography, they had learned ways to communicate verbally and non-verbally during sex, ways to initiate sex, and how people behave, including gender roles, during sex.<sup>33</sup>
- This research highlights a clear need for young people to receive objective, evidence-based information on how pornography influences our attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations.

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<sup>31</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

<sup>32</sup> Dawson, K. et al. (2021) *The Porn Report*. Active\*Consent. [Available here](#).

<sup>33</sup> Dawson, K. et al. (2021) *The Porn Report*. Active\*Consent. [Available here](#).

- Parents consulted by the NCCA in advance of the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum “felt strongly that Senior Cycle SPHE should encourage learning to identify and challenge unrealistic expectations about sexual behaviour”, in the context of “concerns about the volume of sexually implicit and explicit material, including pornography, encountered by young people”.<sup>34</sup>
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To also shared the view that this was an important topic to address, as they felt that some young people relied on pornography to learn about sexual behaviour in the absence of pleasure, intimacy and boundaries being taught during SPHE.
- The inclusion of this Learning Outcome also meets a recent recommendation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, that States take a holistic approach to addressing the risks posed by digital media, including pornography.<sup>35</sup>
- It is vital that teachers are well resourced and provided with training on this nuanced area.

**2.8 discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these**

- We welcome the inclusion of this Learning Outcome, and strongly support its retention.
- It is important that resource materials related to this Learning Outcome address the personal, social and legal consequences of these actions, including the impact on victims.
- Both this Learning Outcome and related teaching materials must ensure a non-judgemental approach, which acknowledges the reality that many victims of online sexual harassment/abuse through intimate images have shared that image initially with someone they believed to be trustworthy.
- It is vital that students who may be impacted by image-based sexual abuse, online targeted harassment, and cyberbullying are not deterred from seeking support should they feel that they have not behaved in a ‘responsible’ way.
- Both SPHE textbooks and an online hub available to students should clearly outline legislation related to image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, with a detailed list of victim support services, along with sources of information for victims who wish to take legal action.
- Published in 2019, the RCNI *Storm and Stress* report found that 80% of adolescents had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the previous 12 months.<sup>36</sup> While 20% of

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<sup>34</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>35</sup> UNCRC, “General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment” CRC/C/GC/25/. [Available here](#).

<sup>36</sup> Rape Crisis Network Ireland (2019) *Storm and Stress*. [Available here](#).

all adolescents had experienced serious sexual harassment, this figure stood at 68% among LGBT+ youth.

- In addition, Belong To's 2022 *School Climate Report* found that 46% of LGBTQ+ second-level students had experienced sexual harassment in school.
- As such, teachers undertaking SPHE classes must be supported in taking a trauma-informed approach, to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of all students.

## **2.9 explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.**

- We welcome the inclusion of this Learning Outcome, and strongly support its retention.
- As outlined at the beginning of this section, we recommend that this Learning Outcome be separated out to create an additional learning outcome specifically addressing reproductive healthcare and access to termination of pregnancy.
- Teaching materials related to this Learning Outcome must be LGBTQ+ inclusive, to ensure that LGBTQ+ young people are provided with reliable and evidence-based information and are not reliant on seeking information related to their sexual health online.
- LGBTQ+ youth who joined Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE curriculum voiced their frustration of the absence of sexual health education in their schools or, where it was provided, a focus on preventing pregnancy rather than a holistic approach to sexual health.
- Research conducted by Belong To in 2021 found that, during the year prior, only 51% of sexually active LGBTQ+ youth aged 18 and over used protection when engaging in sexual activity, and 76% did not access a sexual health check-up.<sup>37</sup>
- This research demonstrates the need for comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education from a young age, including information on how and where to avail of free or low-cost sexual health check-ups.

## **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and

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<sup>37</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2021). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report*. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here](#).

responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**3.1 explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- To support this learning outcome, it would be helpful for an 'online hub' of resources designed for young people to be made directly available to students, which teachers can direct them to while teaching material related to this Learning Outcome.

**3.2 demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and suggest that it be expanded, with suggested phrasing below:  
"demonstrate skills necessary for life, relating to self-management, finances, the workplace and further education"
- The suggested expansion is in light of the fact that some young people, including LGBTQ+ youth and care-experienced young people, are less likely to have an ongoing support network into early adulthood, relating to housing and finances.
- This Learning Outcome is a good opportunity to provide all students with the basic life skills needed should they become independent of their parent, caregiver or family in early adulthood.
- To support this learning outcome, it would be helpful for an 'online hub' of resources designed for young people to be made directly available to students, which teachers can direct them to while teaching material related to this Learning Outcome.

**3.3 explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.

**3.4 summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- SPHE textbooks and resource materials should clearly outline the rights and protections afforded to people covered by the nine grounds of discrimination under the Equal Status Acts, along with details as to the forms of discrimination outlawed under the Equal Status Acts and Employment Equality Acts.

**3.5 consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.

**3.6 demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- SPHE textbooks and resource materials should clearly outline the rights and protections afforded to people covered by the nine grounds of discrimination under the Equal Status Acts, along with details as to the forms of discrimination outlawed under the Equal Status Acts and Employment Equality Acts.
- We also recommend that external resources be made available to SPHE teachers for this Learning Outcome, including Belong To's Allyship Guide, contained in the Stand Up Awareness Week 2023 Resource Guide.<sup>38</sup>

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

Insert response here:

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<sup>38</sup> Belong To (2023) *Stand Up Awareness Week Resource Guide*. [Available here](#).

## Teacher Training

The draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is comprehensive, well thought through, and broadly reflects the needs and lives of young people in Ireland today.

As highlighted by teachers who took part in the NCCA's consultation on the redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE, there is an urgent need for access to professional development courses for those teaching SPHE.<sup>39</sup> This access is vital to the successful implementation of the updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. As voiced by students consulted by the NCCA, LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To also expressed that the benefit and value of SPHE classes is much more closely related to a teacher's interest and knowledge in the subject than the curriculum itself. LGBTQ+ young people felt a great deal of sympathy for well-meaning teachers who were well intentioned, but poorly equipped to teach the SPHE curriculum in full.

Belong To welcomes the dedicated SPHE post-graduate diploma in Dublin City University, but recommends that investment in comprehensive SPHE training through a variety of means be made a priority by the Department of Education, to ensure that schools and teachers are facilitated to ensure that the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is taught in a manner that reaches the Department's quality framework standard. It is also important that both SPHE and LGBTQ+ inclusion be integrated to initial teacher education.

In the interim, it is recommended that all teachers timetabled for SPHE classes undertake Belong To's e-learning module 'Creating Inclusive Schools and Youth Services'<sup>40</sup> alongside the use of resources on LGBTQ+ inclusion developed by the NCCA and/or the Department of Education, such as the *Being LGBT in School* resource.

## LGBTQ+ Inclusion

As detailed earlier, LGBTQ+ students face disproportionately high rates of bullying and exclusion as compared to the general Irish youth population.<sup>41</sup> Proactive staff support for LGBTQ+ students,

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<sup>39</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>40</sup> Available at: <https://www.belongto.org/support-for-someone-else/at-school/post-primary/training-for-educators/>

<sup>41</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

and the inclusion of LGBTQ+-related themes in the curriculum, reduce the rates of absenteeism among LGBTQ+ youth, and result in a higher rate of LGBTQ+ students feeling safe and that they belong in school. The positive impact of these actions on students' mental health and wellbeing is important in addressing school retention among LGBTQ+ students; as detailed above, one in ten are unsure they will complete the Leaving Certificate with leading reasons including mental health challenges and hostility from other students.<sup>42</sup>

It is very welcome that a specific note is included under Strand 2: Relationship and Sexuality Education that this strand is to be taught in a fully LGBTQ+ inclusive manner. For the wellbeing and inclusion of LGBTQ+ students, and broader education and awareness of the student population more generally, it is important that LGBTQ+ inclusion is threaded throughout all three strands of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. This would be best achieved through the learning resources and training provided to teachers to support their teaching of the curriculum.

## Media and Digital Literacy

Teachers and parents consulted by the NCCA on the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum highlighted the need for SPHE to address "think[ing] critically and independently" so as to equip "young people... to engage critically with social media and the online world generally".<sup>43</sup> Existing references to critical thinking, critical engagement and digital literacy across Strands, for example in Learning Outcomes 1.3, 1.4, 2.4 and 3.4 are very welcome. However, it is recommended that a specific, stand-alone Learning Outcome related to media and digital literacy is included in the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

In recent years, the public have become increasingly aware of the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation that circulates online. The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), an international organisation that seeks to analyse disinformation, reported in May of this year that "mis- and disinformation targeting the LGBTQ+ community is one of the most present and consistent in the European Union".<sup>44</sup> Research conducted in 2021 found that LGBTQ+ people

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<sup>42</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

<sup>43</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>44</sup> Panizio, E. and Canetta, T. (2023) 'Rights in the time of conspiracies and fake news: disinformation against LGBTQ+ in the EU'. European Digital Media Observatory: Italy. [Available here](#).

experience 50% more online hate and harassment than any other minority group.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, 87% of LGBTQ+ youth in Ireland have seen or experienced anti-LGBTQ+ hate and harassment on social media. Only 21% of LGBTQ+ young people who reported this content to a social media platform saw action, such as removing the content or banning the account, from the platform.<sup>46</sup>

Within this context, it is incredibly important that all post-primary students are equipped with the digital literacy and critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate the trustworthiness of information they see online; to know how to find reliable, fact-based information online; and to be critical consumers of digital and traditional media.

## **Appendix: Belong To focus group with LGBTQ+ young people on the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum**

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### **Introduction**

In advance of Belong To's submission to the NCCA on the draft revised curriculum for Senior Cycle SPHE, it was decided that a focus group should be conducted with the young people engaged in Belong To's youth groups.

In September 2023, two focus groups were conducted with young people engaged a group for young people who are trans, non-binary, or questioning their gender identity, and the Under 18s Group, a group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer young people aged 14-17. The focus groups were supported by Belong To volunteers, and facilitated by Belong To's Policy and Participation Coordinator and Youth Participation Officer.

So as to allow an open, non-guided discussion on the draft curriculum, it was suggested that a discussion within the groups framed by the three strands of the draft curriculum would work best. The young people agreed with this approach.

The three strands under the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum are 'Health and Wellbeing', 'Relationships and Sexuality', and 'Into Adulthood'. Learning Outcomes within each strand were grouped, and young people were invited to write what they felt would be important to include within each Learning Outcome on post-it notes stuck to large posters. Together, the group

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<sup>45</sup> ADL Centre for Technology & Society (2021) *Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience*. ADL: New York. [Available here](#).

<sup>46</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

discussed their feedback on Learning Outcomes, and agreed Belong To's recommendations. At the end of discussions on each Strand, young people had the opportunity to highlight anything they felt was missing from the Strand, and the group agreed additional recommendations to the NCCA.

The feedback from young people is arranged by strand below, and thematically arranged in accordance with their key recommendations for each strand.

## General Feedback

### Standardisation

- Young people felt that, although the curriculum is very strong, what is actually taught in class can vary greatly between schools on account of individual teachers' preferences, time management, bias, and/or level of knowledge.
- Many young people in the group who are currently in Senior Cycle, or who have recently graduated from second-level, noted that they had been given few or no SPHE classes during Fifth and Sixth Year.
- Young people highlighted the need for all teachers scheduled to take SPHE classes to be trained in the curriculum, so as to ensure that the curriculum is taught correctly and in full. The group felt that, without this training, there was a risk of SPHE not being prioritised within the school, and/or teachers relying on their own knowledge to teach the class, which may be incomplete or not evidence-based.
- Finally, the group felt it would be helpful for all school staff to be provided with training opportunities relating to LGBTQ+ identities, wellbeing, and diversity and inclusion.

### Oversight and Student Feedback

- Young people felt it would be helpful to have a feedback mechanism for students on a local (school) and more formal (NCCA/Department of Education/academic research) level as to their experience of being taught the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.
- Young people felt it was important for the NCCA or the Department of Education to have some kind of oversight mechanism to ensure that Senior Cycle SPHE is being taught to students, and not replaced by additional classes for exam-based Leaving Cert subjects.
- Upon discussion within the group, it was agreed that integrating student consultation and/or including a focus on SPHE teaching during school inspections.

### Misinformation and Digital Literacy

- Young people felt that many teachers have the perception that much of the information taught in SPHE, and RSE in particular, was already 'out there' on the internet, and that a majority of students have likely already availed of this information.
- As such, young people were concerned that teachers feel this education is not as "necessary" as it might have been in the pre-internet age.
- However, young people expressed serious concerns about the level of unsafe and misleading information that can be found online relating to sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, dieting, wellness, and other wellbeing-related topics.
- More broadly, young people also expressed serious concerns at the lack of education to Irish society as a whole on digital literacy and media literacy, and named a number of events in Ireland which resulted in violence against minority groups that had gathered support through online misinformation campaigns.

### Consent and Boundaries

- Young people in the focus group welcomed the inclusion of consent under Strand 2, but felt it important for consent to be threaded through all Strands and Learning Outcomes as a core aspect of the SPHE curriculum.
- To ensure that students' understanding of consent goes beyond a 'surface level', and to normalise integrating consent-based thinking to everyday life, the group felt it was important to teach consent in different ways.
- One example given was consent to sharing photographs online. Under Learning Outcome 1.4, young people suggested that, when discussing media and technology, there should be acknowledgement of the fact that a person can withdraw their consent from a certain photograph being posted on social media (outside the context of image based sexual abuse). If the poster refuses to remove this photo, this should be framed as a breach of the person's consent. The group felt that framing consent in this way may act as a good introduction to conversations around consent in the context of sexual or intimate relationships.
- Consent and boundaries were considered to be closely linked by young people. The group stressed the need for students to be taught what healthy boundaries look like, how to draw appropriate boundaries with friends and family, and how to respond if those boundaries are overstepped.
- Finally, the group felt it would be beneficial for the SPHE curriculum to include teaching on knowing your personal limits – not only in the context of sexual activity, smoking, and drug and alcohol consumption – but also in terms of socialising and friendships.

### Method of Teaching

- Some young people shared their own experiences of how RSE had been taught in their school, including some teachers outright refusing to teach the topic, and others struggling to answer basic questions from students.
- Young people firmly expressed that LGBTQ+ students should not be singled out during teaching of LGBTQ+ topics, used as an example, or expected to educate staff or other students on their identity and experiences.
- Similarly, a strong and recurring issue highlighted by LGBTQ+ young people was the use of 'debates' in class to discuss certain topics. Young people named the many harmful impacts that these debates have on students with lived experience of the debated topics. Additionally, young people felt that debating topics such as LGBTQ+ families and reproductive rights was not an effective way to ensure that all students receive objective, evidence-based information.
- Young people also stressed the distinction between inviting students to co-develop LGBTQ+ clubs, and input on teaching and curriculum, and being *expected* to share their personal experiences for the benefit of others.
- The group felt it would be helpful to set up a mechanism for teachers to deal with questions they may find difficult through the provision of additional resources made available to students through an online hub.

### Educating at Primary Level

- Young people felt that the curriculum should be revised regularly to ensure that it is fit for purpose, and factually correct. One young person noted that in 2017, their SPHE book had not been updated to reflect changes in the law following the Marriage Equality referendum.
- Young people were also concerned that, through social media, traditional media, friends, and other sources, students may learn certain behaviours or acquire misinformation before being

taught it in school. One young person gave the example of encountering online misinformation about drug use at age 13, but the topic of drug use not being covered in school until Senior Cycle.

- As a result, young people strongly recommended that the revised post-primary SPHE curriculum be accompanied by greatly enhanced SPHE-RSE at Primary level. The group stressed the need for age-appropriate conversations around sexuality, sexual activity, families, and relationships before reaching secondary school.
- Young people were very aware of the concerns parents may have about extending RSE to younger age groups at Primary level. However, the group discussed how concepts such as sexual orientation, families, relationships, and consent could be discussed in an “age-appropriate” way – for example, some families having two mums or two dads, or ‘good touch’/‘bad touch’ conversations in relation to abuse and personal safety – which can then be built upon as the child ages.
- The group acknowledged that parents/guardians have primary responsibility for teaching their children about topics covered in SPHE. However, young people felt that parents/guardians often did not want to discuss such subjects, or lacked the knowledge needed to answer their children’s questions.
- To address this, young people recommended that a broader programme should be introduced by the Government, for example through community and family resource centres, to support parents/guardians. The group felt this had the dual benefit of educating parents/guardians, and taking some pressure off schools to be the sole source of guidance for young people.

### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

- **Regarding wellbeing**, the group strongly expressed their frustration that what was discussed in SPHE in relation to wellbeing, mental health, and a healthy life balance, was not reflected in their schools’ culture.
- In particular, young people felt that what was taught in SPHE was actively contradicted by stresses resulting from homework, study, assignments and exams.
- Young people further expressed their frustration that teachers were reluctant to change their timelines if, for example, students had multiple essays due on the same day for different classes.
- **Regarding mental health**, LGBTQ+ youth highlighted the need for young people to be equipped with the skills to recognise when their friends are struggling with mental health challenges, and how to support them.
- **Regarding drug and alcohol use**, young people highlighted that abstentionist, or ‘just say no’, teaching towards drugs and alcohol was not helpful and often resulted in students disengaging during these lessons.
- Young people felt that it was important for SPHE teachers to acknowledge that a considerable number of students at Senior Cycle will have consumed alcohol and/or drugs at some point, and that education should be focused on a health and harm-reduction approach.
- Additionally, the focus group voiced that it is important for dependency and addictive behaviours that do not fall within the stereotypical understanding of addiction to be addressed. Examples given by young people included dependence on weed to manage mental health challenges, and alcohol dependence where a person may not drink every day, but also may not be able to cope with social gatherings without alcohol.
- **Regarding safety**, a clear recommendation from LGBTQ+ young people was to ensure that topics related to sexual violence were not taught in a way that involves ‘victim blaming’, i.e.

advising students that a victim of sexual violence could have avoided the assault had the consumed less alcohol and/or drugs.

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

- **Regarding LGBTQ+ topics**, young people stressed the need for the entire SPHE curriculum to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.
- Young people noted that, throughout their lives, students will encounter LGBTQ+ people, identities and experiences in a range of settings, and so having stand-alone lessons on LGBTQ+ topics doesn't accurately represent how non-LGBTQ+ people will interact with LGBTQ+ people in their lifetime.
- In light of this, young people very much welcomed the note included at the beginning of Strand 2 instructing LGBTQ+ inclusion throughout the teaching of each Learning Outcome.
- **Regarding healthy relationships**, LGBTQ+ young people repeatedly expressed the need for SPHE to address topics including understanding, creating and respecting boundaries; how to communicate clearly and respectfully, what good communication looks like, and skills for communicating feelings, particularly when feeling frustrated or upset; and dealing with challenges and disagreements between friends, classmates, family members and colleagues.
- Young people also stressed the high number of LGBTQ+ youth whose parents and/or families are not accepting of their identity, or struggle initially when a young person comes out. The focus group felt that it was important that the SPHE curriculum address what difficult family dynamics might look like, and ways for a young person to protect their wellbeing in a difficult home environment,
- Additionally, LGBTQ+ young people noted that, both in schools and in society, there is a stereotypical view of domestic violence as being between a couple. However, the group felt that it was important for all young people to be aware that physical, psychological and emotional abuse perpetrated by parents against their children is also a form of domestic violence.
- LGBTQ+ young people in Belong To's focus group highlighted how abusive behaviours within friendships is rarely discussed in detail, beyond the context of bullying.
- Young people also stressed the need for SPHE to include teaching on abusive family relationships, as this can be hidden to those outside the family unit and may not be well understood by those experiencing the abuse.
- **Regarding sexual activity and sexual health**, LGBTQ+ young people very strongly voiced the need for both consent and mutual pleasure to be included in SPHE classes, and felt that this was an important and progressive inclusion in the draft Senior Cycle curriculum.
- Young people also felt that covering care, respect and pleasure together with consent was a good way of teaching consent and boundaries, as it moves away from a purely legal understanding of consent, and allows space to discuss how consent requires ongoing communication and can be retracted at any time.
- LGBTQ+ youth who joined Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE curriculum voiced their frustration of the absence of sexual health education in their schools or, where it was provided, a focus on preventing pregnancy rather than a holistic approach to sexual health.
- **Regarding gender**, the group felt that it was extremely important to address gender stereotypes, gender norms and attitudes towards gender in SPHE.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people, how understanding men as 'rational' and women as

'emotional' negatively impacts men's mental health, and how gendered subject choices, such as Home Economics and Woodwork rarely being made available in single-sex boys and girls schools respectively, impact our understanding of gender roles in society.

- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt that it was extremely important to address gendered violence.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people and how gender stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality and gender-based violence.
- **Regarding pornography**, young people expressed that this was an important topic to address, as they felt that some young people relied on pornography to learn about sexual behaviour in the absence of pleasure, intimacy and boundaries being taught during SPHE.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

- The group highlighted the benefit of learning a range of life skills during Senior Cycle SPHE, including relating to finances, the workplace, and making the transition from second level school to further education.



**NCCA**

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# Contributor

## Bodywhys – The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

Insert response here:

This aim is positive because it reflects how students will develop self-understanding and their connections with others.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

#### Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour

1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

Bodywhys – the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland suggests:

1.2 – including exercise and attitudes towards food, recognising the enablers to an eating disorder developing and being sustained; and the barriers towards early intervention and recovery.

1.3 - including information about drugs including a reference to both legal and illegal substances, given the potential dependency on either and emerging concerns about the effects of vaping.

1.4 – that the information listed also include social media and internet use, body image, weight-based commentary, bullying, stigma, isolation, gender identity, steroid use or performance enhancers, trauma, gambling, online gaming, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), inequality, neurodivergence and school pressures.

1.5 - a language change to recognise helpful and unhelpful thinking patterns

1.7 - adding information about signs and symptoms of burnout and suicidal thoughts

1.8 - that maladaptive exercise and eating behaviours are considered, recognising the potential impact in the development of eating disorders and disordered eating.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

Bodywhys – the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland suggests:

Whilst reflecting the lives of the LGBTQ+ community is a welcome aspect of the learning outcomes in Strand 2, it is important to initially provide context and dispel stereotypes. For various reasons, some students may hold negative or outdated views, lack understanding of, or be fearful of those who are LGBTQ+.

Bodywhys – the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland suggests:

2.1 - including age-appropriate language related to trust, emotional intimacy and dealing with break-ups.

2.3 – revising wording: Discuss sexual activity as an optional aspect of relationships characterised by honesty, communication, safety, care, respect, consent, and intimacy. In the current wording, reference to ‘adult relationships’ is not inclusive of young people who are of the age of consent.

2.5 - including reference to recognising and acknowledging abusive behaviour in oneself and the harmful consequences on others

2.7 - discussion of pornography is broad, open and non-stigmatising. That it encompasses pornography’s influence on attitudes, behaviours, norms and relationship expectations and dynamics. The format, circulation and availability are no longer confined to mainstream pornography studios and may be user and artificially (AI) generated, influencer-generated and shared on social media or through online platforms, both privately and peer groups.

2.9 – reference to the menopause in understanding life-span changes in adults in their lives.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

Bodywhys – the Eating Disorders Association of Ireland suggests:

3.3 - revised wording: Explore a range of life events that describe how people will experience both expected and unexpected change, loss, grief, or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these challenging times

3.6 - providing peer support knowledge and skills in order to understand the importance of allyship and how to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours to support greater equity and inclusion, while doing so safely.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

Insert response here:

The document may benefit from including quotes from young people. It could more specifically use language like 'encouraging students to make positive and healthy life choices' or 'good decision-making'.

Is there a feedback mechanism for students, parents and teachers once the Senior Cycle SPHE moves to implementation?

Page 11 – Include reference to digital literacy and media literacy.

Page 12 – The health literacy section is quite short. It should include reference to the role of general practitioners (GPs), primary care, and community services like pharmacists and a brief description of signposting and how engaging with service providers, and the support of voluntary organisations, like Bodywhys, can be proactive, not just reactive or a step towards treatment.



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# **Contributor**

## Catholic Education Partnership

# Catholic Education Partnership

## Introduction

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love be of service to one another." – Galatians 5:13-14

"Man is not a solitary animal, and so long as social Life survives, self-realization cannot be the supreme principle of ethics." – Bertrand Russell, 'A History of Western Philosophy'

Catholics value education as a holistic endeavour, with the full totality of the person, physical, moral, intellectual, emotional and social, being brought to flourish. We believe that God's glory is in the full expression of human life; therefore, human life has an inherent nobility. 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 student's holistic education. Any such subject area, properly conceived, should seek to address the whole human person, particularly given that the stated aim is "empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school."

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.

It is notable that the specification itself contains no discernible overarching ethical perspective. Indeed, it is striking at times to see, for example, relationships mentioned in *Strand Two* with little reference either to the long term good of the person, or the contribution of stable long-term relationships to the common good. The absence of any mention of committed, long-term relationships (and for Catholic schools, in particular, the absence of any mention of marriage) is notable in that regard. The specification contains no *telos*<sup>1</sup>, no end or purpose to the activities it discusses. Some parties may seek to criticise the specification in this regard, but we believe that this is a strength as it provides a vital space for the ethos of a school, of whatever religion or ethical worldview, to inform the curriculum.

Considering this, the specification provides a context for the SPHE curriculum within a school's particular ethos, as this will inform the moral, spiritual and intellectual worldview the curriculum is situated within. Schools exist within a pluralist society and within themselves contain a plurality of worldviews. The curriculum, while situated within the ethos of 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.

Therefore, the specification would be strengthened by an explicit acknowledgement of the role of the ethos in developing it into a fully realised SPHE curriculum.

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 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 (Sections 9 & 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.

### ***Role of Parents/adult students***

The specification 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 fall 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.

Any SPHE curriculum must ensure flexibility for the professional judgment of the teacher in consultation where necessary with the student's parents/guardians. As the specification recognises, adult students (18+) are entitled to make decisions with respect to their own education. The rights of parents/guardians and adult pupils must be respected in the curriculum specification.

### ***Students with Special Education Needs***

Supports and guidance will be required to make the curriculum accessible to students with additional education needs or to those with barriers to learning. With that consideration in mind, and taking on board the specialisation requirements of the subject in general, there is a need for specialised training and support for teachers engaging with SPHE with SEN students.

Other school supports may be required with respect to issues that may arise for particular students or their families in light of the curriculum.

## **Questions posed by NCCA for consideration:**

### **Question 1: Aim**

The aim of the updated curriculum is to *'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'*

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

### **Response**

CEP supports the above aim recognising that it has emerged from NCCA's consultation with many stakeholders, most of all from engagement with students.

However, we believe it could benefit from some expansion. The aim of the junior-cycle contained the following phrase: *"empower them to create, nurture and maintain respectful and loving relationships"*. To be consistent, we believe that the aim of senior-cycle should similarly refer the nurture and maintenance of relationships.

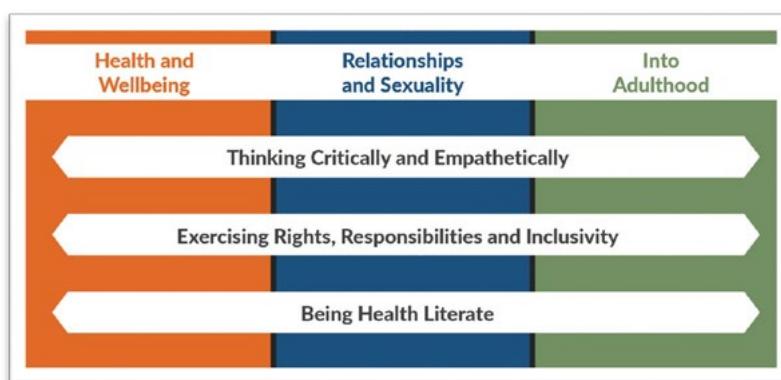
That 'loving' was left out of the junior-cycle draft specification, only to be included in the final version, makes the absence of 'loving' in the senior-cycle draft specification all that more unusual. Again, for the sake of consistency if not for the value that love plays in a fulfilling human life, we believe that loving needs to be included.

As per the observations in the introduction above, the lack of any sense of a vision for the *telos* of life in the specification, no overarching ethical perspective that can aid the person in achieving holistic wellbeing<sup>2</sup> renders the aim as expressing an activity with no substantial purpose. The ethos of a school, appropriately expressed in dialogue and encounter with other word views has an important, indeed essential role, to play in assisting the student in forming an ethical view of life.

There are also some concerns with respect to the emphasis on resilience. This is addressed later in this document in the response to Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing. In brief, there needs to be a caution that an emphasis on resilience is not taken to lay the responsibility for responding to suffering or injustice solely on the person, but must be balanced by a concern to address the sources of suffering or injustice.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

## Response

As with the junior-cycle specification, the course structure with three 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 in senior-cycle are different to those identified at the junior-cycle, but the draft senior-cycle draft specification retains a mention of the junior-cycle ones on pages 9–10. They are now referred to as 'Overarching features of effective teaching and learning in SPHE'. Is there some risk of inconsistency here that may prove unhelpful to an integrated approach to SPHE at both post-primary cycles and, ultimately, with primary SPHE too?

With respect to these 'Overarching features of effective teaching and learning in SPHE' (Awareness, Dialogue, Reflection and Action) we believe our observations on the junior-cycle specification are still pertinent:

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 of 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 specification would benefit from the inclusion of explicit 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 clearly 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 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 and ethical beliefs.

The 'awareness' overarching feature 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. The relational reality of being human is also appropriately recognised.

Leaving aside the concerns with respect to continuity and consistency across wellbeing at all levels, the cross-cutting elements in the senior-cycle draft specification (Thinking critically and empathetically; exercising rights, responsibilities and inclusivity; and being health literate) are broadly welcome. However, we wish to make observations on specific aspects of two of the three elements:

*Thinking critically and empathetically:* This is a positive from our perspective. The emphasis on "supporting young people to critically consider their own and societal attitudes, values, norms and behaviours" fits well with contemporary Catholic pedagogy's emphasis on addressing difference through a respectful encounter and dialogue. The acknowledgment "that the individual is not solely responsible for their health and wellbeing and builds an appreciation of the wider influences at play" and that "how we relate to others has societal impacts", if grounded in an understanding of our interdependence and the solidarity and respect we owe others as a fellow *imago dei*<sup>3</sup>, contains a potential rich source of reflection for those entering adulthood<sup>4</sup>.

*Exercising rights, responsibilities and inclusivity:* The appropriate coupling of rights with responsibilities here is something we had sought with the junior-cycle specification and its inclusion there and now in this draft specification is welcome. Again, the idea of interdependence and consideration for others is maintained. The inclusion of an explicit acknowledgement that teaching across the strands be reflective of all ethnicities and religious beliefs/worldviews is in full sympathy with contemporary Catholic pedagogy, as mentioned above, and it is to be hoped that Catholic schools will draw upon the universal, global nature of the Church in addressing this.

With respect to the list "genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs/worldviews, social classes and abilities/disabilities", we believe this should contain an explicit inclusion of the Traveller and Roma communities.

<sup>3</sup> Image of God – for Catholics, each person is made in the image and likeness of God, thereby having an essential dignity common to all.

<sup>4</sup> John Donne's [Meditation XVII](#) comes to mind.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

**Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.10	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Response

Despite the inclusion of 'spiritual' in the rationale on page 6 of the draft specification, when the list of wellbeing factors (physical, emotional, social) is repeated here, spiritual is oddly absent. We are curious as to the NCCA's reasoning in deciding to remove that factor from the strand, despite its earlier mention, its mention in Section 9(d) of the Education Act 1998, and the importance of spirituality identified in the NCCA's own published research overview on wellbeing<sup>5</sup>. We believe that it should be included and that students should be encouraged and enabled to discuss and explore their own spirituality and its contribution to their wellbeing. Section 1.2 would benefit from the inclusion of things broadly in the spiritual realm, e.g. meditation, prayer, mindfulness, time in nature &c.

Similar to our submission on the junior-cycle SPHE specification, we detect references to what we understand to be elements of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in 1.5, 1.6 and to a certain extent in 1.8. 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 telos they will not realise their full potential. One common criticism of CBT, and more generally of resilience-based approaches, lies in the emphasis being placed on the individual's response to trauma or injustice. It is important to note that teacher training on this particular aspect of SPHE will be required. This is worthwhile, but misses the broader challenge of addressing the source of the trauma or injustice. Stoic philosophy on justice placed a strong emphasis on improving the world for others. Similarly, schools with a Catholic ethos would be expected to address issues of justice that may arise when discussing this area.

The other elements of Stand One are most welcome, with an underlying approach of assisting the young person in their move into adulthood, in gaining knowledge about their health and general wellbeing and in having an awareness of the social and cultural factors that give rise to attitudes towards alcohol, drugs, and addiction. The emphasis on sources of assistance and practical advice on what to do when faced with addiction or stress in self or others, as well as practical advice on managing the safety of self and others is a valuable part of the specification. Of particular welcome is the emphasis being laid not solely on the self, but on concern for others too, balancing rights with responsibilities and self-care, with the needs of others.

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

#### **Students should be able to**

2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### **Response**

As mentioned in our introduction, the specification is notable for lacking in a discernible overarching ethical perspective. Relationships are discussed in this strand with no reference to the long term good of the person, or the contribution of stable long-term relationships to the common good.

The absence of any mention of marriage is notable in that regard and we question how this is consistent with Article 41(3.1<sup>o</sup>) of Bunreacht na hÉireann: “*The State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage*”. The NCCA as a state agency is ultimately bound by the Constitution and should not, in a discussion of relationships with young people on the entry point to adulthood, neglect to mention marriage as the foundation of the Family, “*the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society*”.

<sup>5</sup> Nohilly, M. et al (2023) A Systematic Literature Review to Support the Curriculum Specification, MIC

Furthermore, long-term stable relationships, traditionally grounded in marriage, are a well-established contributor to the welfare and flourishing of individuals and is a key contributor to the common good. Needless to say, this is not to state that this is true of all such relationships, but that does not undermine the general truth as to the contribution of them to wellbeing. Schools and teachers will need guidance and support on how to address the positives of marriage without causing any experience or feeling of exclusion in those in other forms of family situations.

As with the junior-cycle specification, 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 specification encourages a fuller exploration of this topic beyond a discussion of bullying or abusive behaviour.

Point 2.2 contains the only mention in all three strands of values or beliefs, and this in terms of their influence on the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour. This will require some sensitive handling in schools, as teachers may not be familiar with the nuances of beliefs and values in various faiths and ethical world-views. Catholic schools will be able to draw on the global nature of the Church and its long history of enculturation into many cultures and the dynamics of those cultural interfaces. We understand this to present an excellent opportunity to engage in respectful dialogue and encounter with a plurality of views.

We welcome the contextualisation of consent in 2.3 into a framework of care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure. The importance, legally and morally, of giving and receiving consent in sexual relationships is fully in sympathy with Catholic teaching. We agree that consent should be explicitly acknowledged as a base-line essential condition, but is not, in itself a sufficient condition for appropriate sexual relationships. Contextualising, as the specification does by bracketing consent with care, respect, intimacy and mutual pleasure, provides a richer understanding of the dynamics of sexual activity within a healthy and appropriate relationship. Catholic schools should include as a part of this context that true intimacy can only occur in a long-term committed relationships, ideally in marriage.

A common feature of the contributions provided by students on a recent RTÉ documentary on RSE, 'Let's Talk About Sex', presented by Richie Sadlier, was their request for practical information on what to do if subject to sexual abuse, violence, image-based abuse, or abusive relationships. The emphasis laid on such advice in the Strand is welcome. The specification also rightly provides for guidance on how to assist someone else who has been subject to any of these.

That documentary was also interesting in presenting views from young people expressing their concerns as to the damage that pornography is doing to them, to the quality of relationships, and to social expectations around sexual activity. We believe it is appropriate to discuss this with young people and to include alongside that, the ethical questions arising from the production of pornography. Taking a Kantian view on the evil done when the human person is reduced to a mere means, rather than an end, the broader post-primary curriculum should investigate the evils arising when humans are reduced to mere objects, instead of fellow-experiencing-subjects of Being. This can go beyond discussions of pornography and have relevance in other subject areas when discussing subjects such as slavery or other forms of exploitation.

The specific inclusion of an element addressing violence directed towards women and girls is welcome. This should be supported in schools through a whole of school approach to addressing this issue, with Religious Education, literature elements in language curricula and other subject areas aligned to address this in a broad manner at the intellectual, social and emotional levels.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

**Students should be able to**

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### **Response**

Points 3.1 to 3.5 of this specification are well thought out and considered with respect to the transition into adulthood. No single subject could ever reach a full comprehension of all that is required to be an adult. Indeed, a lifetime is needed to explore the full richness of that. The strictures of time allotted to SPHE also require discrimination as to content, and we believe that the specification has identified many essential and key points.

Point 3.3 is yet another point where spirituality should be one of the sources explicitly acknowledged in playing an important role in how a person addressed change, loss or heartache, reinforcing our earlier point on the need for the specification to lay some additional stress on this factor. The acknowledgement again of our responsibilities towards others and our interdependence is welcomed.

Our objection to point 3.6 is, in many respects, succinctly captured by the following extract from a review by Stephen Bush of Susan Neiman's 'Left is Not Woke' (2023, Polity) in the Financial Times<sup>6</sup>:

*I have yet to read a book that better crystallised my sense of unease when I hear people use the word 'ally'. "Convictions play a minor role in alliances, which is why they are often short," she writes. "If my self-interest happens to align with yours, for a moment, we could form an alliance ... to divide members of a movement into allies and others undermines the bases of deep solidarity." For Neiman, what we need is not allyship, but a recognition of our shared humanity.*

We have complimented the specification throughout for directing attention toward the other, and avoiding an exclusive focus on the 'I'. We have also complimented the sense of interdependence implicit in aspects of the specification.

'Allyship', particularly as it is defined in the Appendix, is coupled with ideas of privilege. These are concepts and terms associated with a particular view of the world, developed at first in French philosophy in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, before being fully developed in the context of the social, economic, and political history of the United States and Canada.

Their inclusion is a demonstration of the NCCA's seeming bias towards English language research and ideas, which in the main does not seem to reflect the trends within (non-English speaking) European thought. It is, to coin a phrase, a preference in favour of Boston over Berlin. It is curious that an EU country would draw so little from the thinking of our continental European partners.

Allyship and privilege are often coupled with other ideas such as intersectionality. Too often, these ideas promote an 'us and them' mentality, with 'victim status' being foregrounded in understanding relationships. This is a consequence of the underlying assumption of the philosophical underpinnings of these ideas: that language itself, the meaning of words, are mere tools by which power is asserted and exercised. Indeed, the world is to be understood, including all human relations, as primarily being about a power.

The victimhood narrative only serves to disempower people and to work against solidarity. Unlike allyship, solidarity is concerned with our interdependence rather than on intersectionalities of oppression. Solidarity is concerned with our shared humanity.

The definition of allyship in Appendix 2 creates in itself division by picking out male, white or Irish persons, as having 'privilege', and has a sense that they thereby (arising not from their humanity, but from their membership of those groups) have a duty towards 'minority identity groups'. This by implication seems to imply a certain dependence inherent in those 'minority identity groups'<sup>7</sup>, disempowering them from agency and autonomy.

European thought is not uniformly in agreement on these questions, but, in general, it can be said to contain far more concern with concepts such as interdependence, solidarity, and common humanity.

We strongly urge the NCCA to reconsider this aspect of the specification.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

### Response

For SPHE to be successful, it will need to take account of the ethos of schools. 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 a curriculum based on this specification. The NCCA itself recognises this on page 5 of the specification: "*At a practical level, senior cycle is supported by ... the involvement of ... parents.*" While recognising this, the specification gives no further guidance as to how this might be achieved.

Similarly, students themselves should be consulted in the development of this specification into a fully realised curriculum with a particular school. The rights of adult students, who will be a significant part of the student cohort engaging with this specification, must have their rights to determine their own education respected and enabled.

A whole of school approach will be required and integration of SPHE with the policies of the school and 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 draft specification 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 subject in the future.

<sup>7</sup> Which seems to include, by implication, women, despite women constituting a slight majority of the population in the State.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## Comhairle na nÓg

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

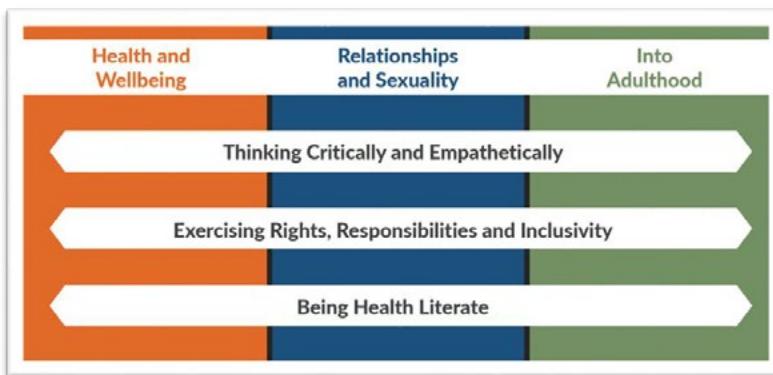
**Insert response here:**

Overall, the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive believes that the aim of the updated curriculum is going in the right direction. We feel that the aim is clear, particularly in comparison to the previous curriculum, and that it is comprehensive and broad-ranging but also straightforward.

We feel the qualities listed are really important for young people to learn in school. One suggestion for addition would be the word 'inclusive', that young people should be empowered to be inclusive as well as healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic - by specifically naming inclusivity in the aim, this would add an additional dimension and act as a statement of intent throughout the SPHE curriculum.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The Comhairle na nÓg National Executive welcome the structure of Strand 1 and are impressed by the learning outcomes. We particularly welcome the practical aspects of the course, such as identifying the signs of stress and anxiety and signposting where to go for help (1.7).

We would like to see more examples given in the specification and to be shown how it will be implemented in the teacher's toolkit - it is hard to comment on how clear the outcomes are without seeing the resources that will accompany the curriculum.

We consider the learning outcomes outlined under Strand 1 to be relevant to 16-18 year olds. This is an age where young people are experiencing the transition to independence and adulthood, which can be challenging in a number of respects. Learning about health and well-being is therefore critical to ensure that young people are equipped with the skills, knowledge and confidence to navigate this time, and be prepared for their futures. We think that the breadth of the curriculum is a benefit, and we welcome the opportunity for young people to learn about relationships, sexuality, sexual health and mental health, as well as the inclusion of how to recognise the signs of negative well-being and where to go for help.

**Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

<b>Students should be able to</b>	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The Comhairle na nÓg National Executive feel the learning outcomes do provide clarity on expectations for learning in the Senior Cycle. The learning outcomes outlined are clear, coherent, relevant and comprehensive. We also believe they are easy to follow for teachers, and clarify what to expect during SPHE Class for students.

We have a number of suggestions about how some of the learning outcomes under ‘Abusive and violent relationships’ and ‘Sexual health’ can be modified to ensure all aspects of the lives and concerns of young people are addressed.

Abusive and violent relationships:

Learning outcome 2.6

- It is unclear whether this outcome is intended to spark discussion or signpost services available to victims of this abuse.
- We welcome the focus on violence against women and girls, and alongside this we feel that the outcome should address the stigma associated with domestic violence and abuse perpetrated against men.

#### Learning outcome 2.7

- We would like this outcome to be expanded to include practical approaches to support young people to address the influence of pornography on their attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations.

#### Learning outcome 2.8

- We feel this outcome should include guidance on how both victims and others who know people suffering from abuse can be supported. More emphasis is required in the outcome on how individuals can seek help in such situations, not just after the fact.

#### Sexual Health:

##### Learning outcome 2.9

- This outcome should include reference to the menstrual cycle (as separate to a discussion focused on fertility), as well as information regarding hormonal changes and how they affect young people.
- We also feel it would be beneficial for young people to learn about menopause under this outcome, including the ways in which it affects women in their later life.

The National Executive feels that more clarity is required in relation to the ‘note’ explaining that this strand “should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated”. More information is needed on how this can be accomplished, including examples and resources to provide clarity for teachers.

In addition, we feel there are two additional points that we would like to see included under Strand 2:

- Another separate learning outcome should be introduced about recognising what it means to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community and the importance of respecting others. (This should be introduced in addition to the ‘fully integrated’ curriculum.)
- There should be a sub-strand introduced under the ‘Relationships and Sexuality’ strand title, highlighting a ‘Human Rights Based Approach’ to the teaching of the curriculum. This would ensure all students receive standardised education across the country that links to Sustainable Development Goal 3 - Good Health and Wellbeing, and Goal 4 - Quality Education. SDG target 3.7 is also relevant: “Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including for family planning, information and education, and the integration of reproductive health into national strategies and programmes” .

Overall, we feel that Strand 2 is relevant to the lives of 16-18 year olds and captures all aspects of life. This area has been neglected in the past and we feel that the structure of this strand is well thought through. We especially welcome the inclusion of all, including LGBTQI+ identities, and we hope that this will be fully implemented by teachers. However, there is a need for teachers to be supported to do this with resources, lesson plans, and examples of good practice.

The National Executive would also like to reiterate their support for the mandatory inclusion of LGBTQI+ identities and information on these throughout all of the learning outcomes.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

The National Executive would like to see Strand 3 explained in greater detail and learning outcomes separated out, as a number of the outcomes reference a large variety of different topics. For example, 3.4 references the age of consent, alcohol and drug use, and workplace rights all under one outcome. This could be quite confusing for both teachers and young people alike. The provision of sample lesson plans and other resources would help to provide greater clarity.

We agree that Strand 3 is relevant to the needs of 16-18 year olds. We believe it is vital that these topics are taught in school, and that there should be standardisation across schools so that young people can get access to the same information no matter where they are from or what school they attend.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

We feel that a ‘Human-Rights Based Approach’ to teaching SPHE and RSE must be specifically named in the curriculum. This must take account of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (in particular Articles 28 and 29), and the Sustainable Development Goals (in particular Goals 3 and 4). This should be clarified as the foundation on which the SPHE curriculum is built, and should be clearly signposted.

The curriculum requires more detailed guidelines to ensure that implementation is comprehensive and standardised across schools. We believe that it should be mandatory for schools to implement SPHE. Teachers should also be supported with resources and guidance on how to teach this subject accurately and respectfully - this should be included in the specification.

We feel that a separate strand should be incorporated, in addition to the current three of ‘Health and Wellbeing’, ‘Relationships and Sexuality’ and ‘Into Adulthood’ . This would focus on consent, sexual harassment, rape, and gender based violence. These are issues that require more attention and education amongst young people and should be given dedicated additional time and space in the curriculum.

We feel that the guideline on 60 hours of learning (p.11) should be mandatory rather than just a guideline, to ensure that SPHE is given due weight and emphasis.

In relation to assessment and reporting (p.16), there is mention of “detailed guidance… [that] will be developed upon finalisation of this specification” . We believe there should be a consultation on the methods of assessment, including with young people, before the specification is finalised - we cannot comment on this without seeing proposals, and we feel it is crucial that there is an opportunity to feed into the development of assessment and reporting methods.

The draft curriculum should include a list of available toolkits and resources (such as those already published by the NCCA, as well as other organisations like Spunout) - this will support teachers to implement the specification accurately and effectively.

Finally, in any future review and redevelopment of the SPHE curriculum, it is imperative that youth representation is fully included in the process. We feel that the youth voice and perspective is critical to understanding how a curriculum will work in practice and how it will be received by young people. We would like to see the NCCA commit to having a permanent seat for youth voice in curriculum review and development.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## Concern Muslim Group of Ireland

# Concern Muslim Group of Ireland

## Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

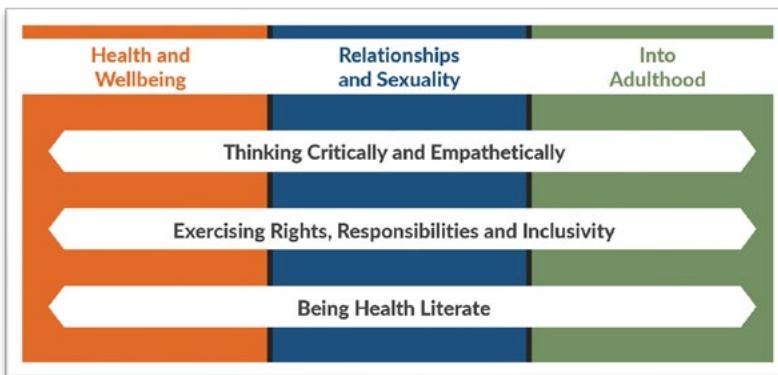
Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing.

**Insert response here:**

We at Concern Muslim Group of Ireland disagree with the aims of this draft as it has underlying agendas which does not confirm to the religious and cultural sensitivities of our representative group. We do not have confidence that schools/NCCA draft have adequately addressed all of these issues, nor have they have consulted parents and religious groups as part of any inclusive effort.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs

1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

We do not agree with this strand overall due to the following reasons noted below:

This strand does not highlight the positive impacts of religious teachings on the social, mental and health well being on the individual. Religious organizations or pro religious NGO's input into this curriculum is not evident, nor is there any websites or credit notes provided to show their input was taken either in glossary of definitions or on the NCCA website.

There is no reflection on the massive contributions religions such as Islam as provided for the emotional, mental and physical well being on the individual. This strand is not inclusive and diverse and may alienate a large section of the Irish community who have solutions for the health, emotional, social and mental aspects of the individual.

CMG is concerned about children been taught about 'social situations', we can only assume this means taking care of been 'safe' when going out to clubs, pubs, and social events where free-mixing of sexes, alcohol and drugs may be present. Muslim parents do not want their children been taught concepts of socializing which go against Islamic teaching, values, modesty and morals.

As Muslims, we do not socialize through dancing which most of the time involves free-mixing of men and women who are not married.

Any 'socializing' activity which involves Alcohol, drugs, vapes and other substances is strictly prohibited in Islam. As such, we deem it inappropriate such 'social situations' are discussed with Muslim children as been acceptable and normal. This will create friction between parents and their children and also between schools and parents.

As such this strand is lacking true diversity, inclusivity and alienating children whose background is one of modesty and living a clean and moral social lifestyle free of alcohol, drugs, free mixing of genders and sexual relations outside of marriage.

We in CMG, as a voice for Muslims and most importantly Muslim parents deem this strand vague, lacking direction and lacking inclusivity and diversity. More importantly it is one sided and not reflecting religious concerns and culture sensitivities.

\*\*Definitions on glossary page of curriculum of strand 1 such as 'mental health' is taken from WHO, World health Organization, we deem this organization as extremely liberal, and pushing leftist agenda, and one that promotes inappropriate sexualized materials, definitions and guidelines for young children such as masturbation from 0-4 years old. We welcome definitions taken from balanced organizations who do not have controversial views on sexualizing young children from a young age.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

This strand has underlying agendas and seeks to characterise contentious sex identity and transgender theories as fact to unsuspecting children who are going through developments in their early young lives. It also seeks to affirm contentious sexual identity and transgender theories and to indoctrinate and make advocates of young children. The glossary definitions and NCCA toolkit contains one-sided resources and links from largely pro transgender and lgbt+ groups. Religious parents are worried their viewpoints are disregarded and religious educational materials and links are not given an equal standing.

The research paper funded by the NCCA 'Relationships and sexuality education (rse) in primary and post-primary Irish schools (November , 2018) notes that external organisations such as Belongto and Transgender Education Network (TENI) materials are used to teach RSE in Irish schools. The paper notes there is ' little evidence of the theoretical base for any of the approaches or content on their websites'. This is highly problematic for Muslim, religious and non-religious parents as they feel they were not consulted. This trend of not adequately consulting parents as continued in this draft curriculum. Belongto and Transgender Education Network (TENI) are controversial organisations, and they are funded by the Irish government with no oversight nor academic basis for their materials. Schools are encouraged by the department of education on the NCCA website to use toolkit to teach RSE/SPHE which contain above pro LGBT/Trans organisations links. This is highly suspect and only increases the fear and worry for parents of all backgrounds as they were not consulted nor asked for feedback on toolkit, materials and informed of materials by organisations.

The Curriculum seems to strongly enforce a concept of a ‘spectrum of genders’ and that the biological sex assigned at birth is different to the ‘gender’ one feels like at one given time. As a religious minority group and one of the voices of the Muslim Community In Ireland, we strongly disagree with this definition. We believe that God ( Allah ) has only ordained two sexes, male and female and that one’s gender is in accordance with the biological sex at birth. This is based on The Qur’anic ( Koranic ) text “ The male is not like the female” ( Qur'an Chapter 4:1 ). The NCCA has not consulted religious groups and seeks to enforce a particular liberal world view which the majority of the Irish population disagree with. This is a creedal issue and based on strong fundamental faith to our creator. This does not mean we interfere nor demonise others who hold different beliefs from us. Islam teaches respect and peaceful coexistence without sacrificing ones strong held beliefs and values. The Qur'an says “ For you is your Religion ( way of life ) and for me is my religion ( way of life ) Quran Chapter 109:6). This is real diversity and inclusivity.

Definitions given by NCCA which is evidently influenced by Pro-transgender, LGBT+ NGOs and non-religious NGOs will create conflict between schools and parents as they contravene their religious and cultural values. This could lead to conflict between parents and children which can unsettle children and impact negatively on their emotional and physical well beings. Muslim parents and other religious groups do not agree with United Nations agencies such as The World Health Organisation which promote highly sexualised teaching guidelines such as teaching young children from 0-4 years old masturbation, transgenderism ideology and preparing children to have sexual relations. It can be argued that NCCA has taken their holistic CSE sex education approach which has been rejected and criticised worldwide. No religious groups have been asked to give definitions , asked for sexual education curriculum alternatives and invited in positive consultations with NCCA. The NCCA toolkit contains materials, videos, links to pro transgender and lgbt groups which shows a clear bias. These materials are unsuitable for young children and may sexualise and harm children. The NCCA and department of education encourage schools to update books used to teach children sphe/rse. we at CMG are worried international and national books on sex education influenced by Transgender and LGBT NGOS will be taught in schools. Such books sexualize children with graphic images and language. This may constitute sexual abuse and lead to grooming of children which go against the Children first act 2015 Irish law. This has the potential also to impact negatively on the mental and physical health of young children

We are also against children critiquing pornography in any form. We are particularly worried about university academics who NCCA has consulted in the past who advocate ethical porn, critiquing and enjoying pornography. Muslim teachings prohibit viewing by any medium sexually explicit materials, particularly pornography. Muslim parents have indicated their unease and discomfort with this concerning topic been discussed with their children.

We are against any discussion on ‘sexual health’ which contains normalisations of contraceptive methods and abortion as part of sexual relationships outside of marriage. We as a religious groups advocate lifestyle of abstinence till marriage, acceptable under (God) Allah. This teaching seeks to liberalize our children and directly opposes our religious teaching. Abstinence and its positive impacts such as preventing STDs and diseases is absent in draft curriculum.

Teaching on consent is highly influenced by the ‘The Active Consent programme’ based in NUI Galway. The group of authors current and published works advocate for an extreme world view which seeks to sexualize children, teach masturbation and teach sexual /transgender identities from a young age. The consent strand does not incorporate religious teachings and is extremely liberal. The publications by such authors is very concerning for Muslim parents and others alike.

We strongly believe that parents are the sole educators of their children and they have indicated to CMG that they are best equipped to teach their children about sex education in harmony with their religious and cultural values. The parents have indicated distrust and fear in the approach taken by NCCA and the particularly leftist ideological lenses present in curriculum.

This curriculum goes beyond general teaching and discusses gender dysphoria which is a realm for the health services. The potential psychological harms of sexualising children and teaching sexual identity/transgender theories has not been evaluated. This could lead to potential harms and possible litigation of schools and department of education and NCCA in Irish and European courts.

Drafts, reports and NCCA materials do not look to be inclusive of healthy debates by teenagers and young children in leaving cert. We at CMG are worried that any criticism of sex identity, LGBTQ+ and transgender theories will lead to children been labelled as bigots, bullied and unfairly punished by teachers and school. We have already seen bullying and assaults on children who have voiced their religious opinions in jurisdiction such as The United Kingdom and Canada.

We at CMG are worried that external guests invited to teach Sex education in classes will lead to children learning about sexualised content which could harm their psychological state in the long term. This has not been assessed by NCCA adequately.

We strongly disagree to the glossary of definitions at the back of the NCCA draft for leaving cert students. As mentioned before, the sexual identity, sexual health, transgender and lgbtq+ definitions and theories are not in harmony with Islamic teaching. We believe in God ordained rights and sexual practices within medium of marriage. The curricula seek to promote a range of sexual activities which go against religious values and worryingly seeks to be identical to The WHO sex education guideline for Europe. The Sexual activity definition alludes to sex and sexual practices outside of marriage and masturbation for pleasure for children. These definitions which underpin curricula is highly inappropriate and sexually explicit.

As it stands, religious parents, particularly Muslims will opt their children out of NCCA sphe/rse sex education curriculum if the current drafts stand. This has the potential to create conflict in the family and the disintegration of the family unit which social services cannot handle due to already limited funding and capacity. This can and will lead to conflict between school and parents. We have spoken to hundreds of parents who are considering home-schooling, immigration, challenging highly sexualised and controversial draft RSE/SPHE in Irish courts and some not even considering taking their children to schools.

We urge caution and for this strand and overall draft SPHE/RSE to be scrapped and a meaningful curriculum adopted with real consultation and which respects and reflects of world views including religious views which are the majority in Ireland.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

#### Students should be able to

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

As indicated in strand 2 analysis, we disagree to the underlaying agenda contained in usage of terms and concepts. Under rights and responsibilities before the law; We appreciate any material which highlights the laws contained in the Irish constitution and statue of law. However we do not accept social norms which are allowed legally or not which go against Islamic values. For example strand 3 speaks of Alcohol an drug usage. As Muslims, we are guided by Islamic scriptures which prohibits all forms of intoxicants such as drugs, Vapes, smoking, and Alcohol regardless of age and legal age in regards Irish law. As it is good knowledge to know where one stands before the law. Muslim parents are worried this strand will normalise drinking culture and only teach about legal age and drinking in moderation. Muslim parents would like the religious aspects and harmful impacts of such intoxicants to be included in Curriculum. This lack of diversity in curricula is very worrying for religious parents.

In regards age of consent: We welcome that young people are been taught vital information applicable such as the Irish law and where one stands. The worrying aspects CMG are worried about is that children will only be taught that the only thing that matters is age of consent. The absence of religious teaching and values is absent from NCCA drafts, Toolkit, and materials published by NCCA over the years. Limited discussions and consultations have not also given any indication that religious teachings in regards consent and wider sex education will be respected, discussed and included in RSE/SPHE Curriculum.

The section on advocacy is worrisome for parents due to following reasons:

Children are been put on massive pressures to advocate for controversial causes such as sex identity and transgender theories which they do not have capacity to understand nor grasp let alone discuss and advocate, we feel strongly that this will lead to children been highly sexualised , exploited and their innocence been eroded. We believe children should be allowed be children. The classroom is not the place to discuss highly sexualised material and controversial topics which even adults may find it difficult to grasp.

Through our analysis of current NCCA materials, reports, drafts, discussions and websites, we feel that this advocacy and ally ship been put forward is based on shutting broad debate and criticism of LGBTQ+, transgender and sexual identity theories/lifestyles. Under the guise of allyship, children will be trained/taught to oppose different world views such as religious teachings which disapprove and consider LGBTQA+ relationships to be highly sinful, which oppose transgender and sexual identity theories/gender pronouns and which only approve marriage between a Man and a Woman

Children in this curriculum will be taught to question severely their religious and cultural upbringing at home, at the place of worship and within family structures. This will lead to conflict within families and ultimately cause in the breakdown of the family unit, leading to a host of social issues both at home, at school and wider society. Children been taught to be adversarial and challenge their own inherited beliefs at a time which parents feel they are not ready can lead to conflict within household which is not at the interest of schools and the department of education. This underlining agenda which can only be considered as child programming and indoctrination is a worrying aspect highlighted by parents of all backgrounds.

The strand 3 talks of equity and inclusion, but the clear and underlying aspects of draft curriculum call for a single world view based curriculum devoid of any real diversity and inclusivity. The Voices we represent are angry, worried and feel their views are not respected, highlighted and taken into consideration. The lack of any real engagement, discussion and dialogue with concerned parents to all aspects of curricula at all age levels is disappointing and will lead to marginalisation of whole sections of Irish society, especially religious groups which take up the majority of Irish society. There seems to be a religious bias and lack of respect for religious groups in the drafting of the sex education programme for schools. This is evident in discussions with religious groups, with parents and evident in NCCA literature, website and discussions. This religious bias is evident in Irish political life, in referendums and laws passed recently in the last few decades. It is also disappointing to hear political leaders also taking part in these biases and clearly calling for removal of religious teaching in religious ethos schools.

We are disappointed that NCCA seems to be highly influenced by leftist/liberal Organisations such as WHO ( World Health Organisation ), Pro LGBTQA+ and Transgender NGOs and highly controversial academics who are intent on sexualising children from their tender ages. CMGI is therefore not endorsing any sex education drafts in all schools. We instead call for all taught and considered drafts to be shelved and instead to actively listen to parents and their concerns. The majority of parents we spoke to have indicated that they alone are responsible for teaching sensitive issues such as sex education at home to their children. They have argued very strongly that they do not want their children been taught sex education and highly sexualised material by teachers in schools. Parents of all groups have indicated they have and will opt their children out of RSE/SPHE sex education classes in Irish schools.



**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curacláim 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: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

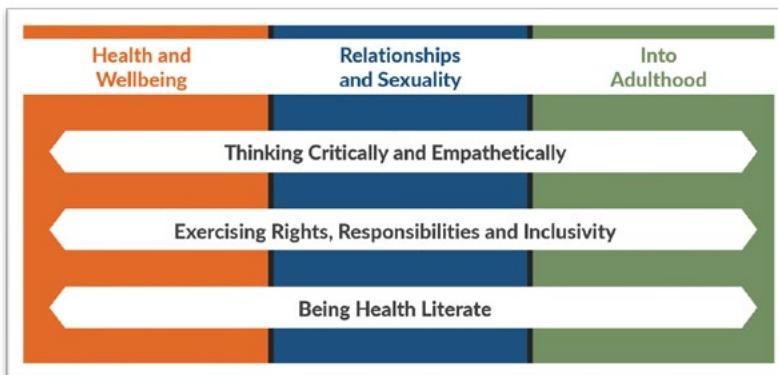
Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing.

### Response

The Council for Catechetics supports this aim. The term 'Loving' should be included in alignment with the junior-cycle draft specification. To nurture respectful, loving, and caring relationships'.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self

1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Response

We consider the learning outcomes provide clarity on expectation and that the learning outcomes are relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. We would recommend that spiritual wellbeing be also included under 1.4 with attention drawn to the scientific evidence for faith in fostering wellbeing. We would also recommend that the social context is taken into account so that students are aware of the social factors that contribute to wellbeing or lack thereof. A CBT approach which has been scientifically proven should be recommended to students and free online resources made available. Ways of controlling and dealing with anger should also be provided in 1.10.

#### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these

2.9 explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Response

The learning outcomes in Strand 2 are clear and relevant. We recommend that there be more emphasis on family relationships and intergenerational relationships and how students can learn from the elderly and also how to deal with bereavement and grief. We recommend that practical guidance be given on how to best break up a romantic relationship in a way that is considerate to the other party. The virtue of chastity should also be proposed to students as a viable option and the negative mental effects of having multiple sexual partners be addressed. The issue of gender-based violence towards men should not be overlooked. In dealing with access to sexual health services students should be provided with information about viable alternatives to abortion and how they can seek help if they become pregnant. The negative effects of pornography in perpetuating gender violence and exploitation of the other and towards unrealistic attitudes to sex should be explored in a dialogic way. The importance of the family as the fundamental cell of society should be emphasised and attention drawn to the negative consequences of family break up for all parties.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Response**

The learning outcomes for Strand 3 are clear and relevant. We recommend that practical discernment skills in making life choices and career choices be adopted, for example based on the Ignatian process of discernment or another proven methodology for making choices. Students need practical tools on how to make wise life choices and to form good habits. How can this Strand help them discern their career after school? The use of the term 'allyship' is highly problematic and we recommend changing the language to 'solidarity' or 'advocacy' also in the glossary. The use of terminology coming from Critical Race Theory is highly problematic and has no place in Irish schools. Seeing human relationships in terms of power and privilege is reductionist and ultimately places people in boxes of victim and oppressor. It reduces people to Foucaudian binaries and it serves to foster division. We recommend that this be approached through our common humanity and solidarity with fellow human beings rather than through the prism of power and privilege. The glossary on Allyship should be rewritten and the phrase: white or male or Irish person be removed as this is offensive as it currently stands.

**Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Response**

The ethos of schools and the rights of parents requires recognition. Engagement with parents will be important.



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

## Council for the Status of the Family

# Council for the Status of the Family

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

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

#### Insert response here:

The aim, as expressed, is a very laudable one. However, in practice, the method of implementing this aim is somewhat skewed. Our reasons for this statement will be explained in the comments below. Also, at this point, we wish to emphasise that the primary educators of children are the parents of those children and not the State. Article 42.3.1 of *Bunreacht na hÉireann* lays down emphatically that the conscience of parents, and their lawful preferences, in regard to the education of their children must be recognised. In other words, parents must have the opportunity to withdraw their child/children from a class which they consider unsuitable for their children.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour

1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The inclusion of the problems related to alcohol and drugs is good - so long as the discussion is directed at older children. The first place, or person, to whom the child should go when a problem arises is of course the mother and/or father, and this is of paramount importance.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations

2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

'...nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships ...'. Such a suggestion is hardly suitable for children/young people for whom this programme is intended or directed? In fact, suggestions of this nature are totally unsuitable. Senior cycle students are in school to learn scholastically, and to learn to respect others. They are not at school to learn about sex.

If it is insisted, on the part of the Department of Education/NCCA that children must be taught about sex, then a glaring omission is that the virtues of chastity and purity do not appear to get a mention anywhere.

Again, discussing sexual activity is not appropriate for children/students in secondary school. To do so would really be de-sensitising, and in fact grooming, young people. The philosophy of 'sex is for pleasure' which appears to be a large part of the RSE curriculum makes itself very evident here, and it will inevitably lead to moral, mental and physical chaos for students. At least one quarter of the terms listed in the Glossary for the programme are entitled 'sex'. These include one that refers to '... founding to sexual intercourse (in all its forms) ...'. Is this really the sort of information that should be presented to secondary school students (or, for that matter, to anyone)?

How can students/young people 'investigate the influence of pornography' without actually studying it? Such study would only serve to increase their curiosity about pornography, and would normalise the whole concept of pornography for them.

It seems that 'anything goes' with regard to sex for secondary school students - so long as it is 'safe'. In other words, they are taught to avoid the natural outcome of sexual intercourse, but they are not taught that the mis-use of the beautiful gift of sex is wrong. If a pregnancy does result from a normal involvement in sex, is advice on the provision of pro-life help given? Where 'assessment' of what is 'learned' in this area, in particular, is used it is not appropriate to discuss private and individual cases in a classroom setting, and such 'assessment' is in fact an invasion of privacy.

**Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

**Students should be able to**

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times

3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

'Allyship skills' – this is a ridiculous inclusion, and it smacks very much of the extremely dangerous 'critical race' theory. When analysed, it is actually very insulting to anyone who happens to have white skin, or who is a male, or who is Irish. An Irish person should not be made to feel guilty because he or she happens to be Irish. The inclusion of this, and other phraseology indicates how ideologically driven the agenda of the NCCA is.

Children (and that is what secondary school students are up to the age of eighteen) have a natural tendency to empathise and sympathise with anyone who is in trouble and who needs comforting. Warn them about the dangers and consequences of the mis-use of 'social media', but don't destroy their minds, and their innate innocence. Educate them in the true sense of education - *educare* – and they will be happier and healthier children, growing into adulthood.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

Concentrate on natural, civilised, health of mind and body. The idea of gender being 'socially constructed' is a false theory. It is unscientific to suggest that a male person can 'become' a female, or that a female can 'become' a male. Discussion on such a premise could harm and cause great confusion to young people/students.

Encouraging students to 'question and critique social norms' is hardly an appropriate idea in the context of RSE. If such an approach is taken in this programme, then all 'social norms' must be discussed – for instance, the tragedy of divorce, and its effect on children; the casual and indifferent attitude towards unborn babies by the 'acceptance' of abortion; the abandonment of small children and babies to the care (no matter how good it is) of child-minders while both their mother and father are obliged through economic necessity to pursue a paid career outside the home; the lack of proper housing for families, and the resultant negative effect on families, etc.

Here and there, there are some reasonable suggestions for inclusion in an RSE programme – for instance, to warn students about the danger of getting involved in drugs or alcohol just because 'others are doing it'. There is too much emphasis, however, on personal 'feelings' without any moral direction as to the rights or wrongs of a particular action. The whole programme needs a total overhaul, and preferably with far more input from the mothers and fathers whose voices are so often silenced by Government decision.



**NCCA**

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# **Contributor**

## Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association (CSSPA)

# Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association (CSSPA)

CSSPA submission response to NCCA Consultation on Redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

I, Alan Whelan, make this submission as President of Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Association, which since its establishment in 1975 has been the recognised national body representing parents in Catholic Secondary Schools, attended by just over 50% of second level students.

We agree to this, our submission, being published. We can be contacted through our email address: presidentcsspa@gmail.com

As happened with Junior Cycle consultation once again CSSPA, as the major parent second level stakeholder, was totally ignored by NCCA throughout this Senior Cycle Consultation process. With the full knowledge of Minister Foley, the Department of Education and NCCA, parent stakeholder representation in the period concerned excluded the major Catholic parent body (and the ETB parent sector). NPCPP was the only parent body consulted and at best it represented only 15% of parents. The existence of this totally inadequate parental representation model was made very clear in a Departmental commissioned and sponsored External Review of the Governance and Finance of the NPCPP. Despite these adverse findings the Department of Education and NCCA knowingly continued to ignore the findings of the Independent Review and nothing was done to reach out to the majority excluded parents. Surely the fact that NPCPP has been knowingly permitted to continue as the sole second level representative on both the NCCA board and on the SPHE working party is evidence enough of how out of touch this exercise has been.

On a micro level it is worth stating that a very 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. Interestingly parental submissions in the earlier Consultation process are not given any significance in the preamble to this present Consultation. It would seem that yet again the Irish Constitutional recognition of the primacy of parents is ignored as is Section 9(e) of The Education Act 1998.

Three years ago CSSPA was invited by NCCA to nominate a member to its proposed SPHE/RSE group and this was duly submitted. We were very surprised that our extremely well qualified nominee was rejected by the two person NCCA selection panel and our male nominee was not one of the 13 exclusively female members appointed.

\*

In common with many others I remain baffled that NCCA, an organisation frequently rejoicing in the use of hashtags #inclusivity and #diversity, chose to exclude the singular male nominee. The message seems to be that this subject area has nothing to do with males! How does this conform with any notion of “inclusivity”? Why are males so publicly excluded from NCCA working parties on SPHE?

Throughout the intervening period no efforts were made by any of the 13 female working party membership to engage with CSSPA. We are told that ETBNPA parent body was similarly ignored.

During the present Consultation the NCCA SPHE Development Team refused outright to engage with CSSPA and individual parental requests for information about any secondary parents or parent bodies invited to round table stakeholder discussions and refused to put either ourselves or individual parents in touch with them.

The Education Act, 1998, Section 9(d) missioned Irish 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”. The present Consultation seems particularly lacking in any meaningful adhering to the twin principles of parental involvement and of acceptance of characteristic spirit of schools.

\*Redaction is used for privacy purposes.

Several of our most active CSSPA parents are also teachers of, or lecturers in, SPHE and these have helped us formulate this response. Some of our teacher parents have reported their very grave concerns about the content of the training being provided by university staff to assist with their delivery of the Junior Cycle curriculum. They have reported much more positively on the Living Love resources provided by the Catholic Education Partnership.

We are very clear in our contention that this present mode of Consultation is deeply flawed. As a sociology graduate, and for some years as a sociology lecturer, I have rarely experienced as biased and unprofessional a basic survey as that offered to parents in relation to Senior Cycle. It would seem that all questions were devised so as to elicit essentially affirmative replies.

Then there is the fuller more open SPHE template set of questions:

**Question 1 - Aim**

The stated aim, as far as it goes, seems fine for those schools with a purely secular ethos. For a Church school it would be advisable to include the spiritual and moral dimensions and in recognition of its ethos reflect humankind's eternal destiny.

**Question 2 - The Learning**

**Strand 1 - Health and Well-being**

For people of faith it would be helpful to their life balance to include a mention of the importance of silent meditation and regular prayer life including lone and corporate prayer.

**Strand 2 - Relationship & Sexuality**

2.3. The stress seems to be on the notion of Sex for Pleasure (and our parent teachers confirm this in respect of present ongoing SPHE Junior Cycle training) as opposed to the important role of Sex within a committed loving relationship. Surprisingly there is no mention or consideration of the part played by matrimony, marriage, civil partnerships, divorce and separation in relationships and sexuality.

No mentions are made of the part played by Women's Refuges, Rape Crisis Centres and Marriage Councillors whenever long-term relationships go sour or are at risk of break up.

No mentions are made of morals, commitment and trust in relationships.

In 2.7 there is the statement "investigate the influence of pornography". Why should young people under the age of consent be encouraged to explore pornography? Many of our parent members are opposed to a curriculum that might include what is sometimes referred to as "ethical porn". We would be opposed to the use of porn in the classroom. We have seen some resources used in current teacher training modules and these confirm us in this judgement.

Our parents have a basic distrust of what NCCA and Department of Education have for Senior Cycle. We are already aware that some Department of Education funded university SPHE Junior Cycle trainers use what they refer to as a Sexual/Intimate Scale Activity designed for use as a ranking tool for 13 and 14 olds. These young people are to be tasked with placing words into columns that are most sexual and/or extremely intimate. We hear of words such as "digital penetration", "anal sex", "oral sex", "fisting", "rimming", "fisting", "mutual masturbation" and many more similar of an inappropriate nature being used as guides. Introducing young teens to such activities seem like a reckless abandonment of teachers' duty of care to the children in their care. To carry out any ranking activity children need to understand what the words and phrases mean. Why is there an unbelievable push to teach this to young teens? What therefore will they be taught at Senior Cycle? SPHE teachers are given no advance advice regarding the moral and physical harm that these activities could have on the health and welfare of the young. Surely this activity and the reasoning for it promote a "Sex for Pleasure" attitude without any moral compass or due regard for the safety of the child and most definitely "doing the sex" without a moral code other than consent.

SPHE teachers who attended RSE training in 2009 and later in 2016 were advised to always start from the perspective of the ethos of the school. This relates to Religious Freedom in our Constitution and is one of the 9 areas under Equality legislation where Religion is to be respected and upheld. There is no overt provision for this on the proposed new specification except for the opt out clause.

Current SPHE teachers in training are taught about Pornography & Porn Literacy. Here some have encountered word sorting activities which envisage teens being asked to sort statements under headings of “Porn World”, “Real World” and “Both or Neither”. This again is totally inappropriate as it exposes teens to graphic sexual statements and phrases that they have to form an opinion about before group discussion. This activity shows a complete lack of child safety and exposes young people to graphic sexual content that they may never encounter and will create confusion, anxiety and upset and may put pressure on the child to engage in these activities. It is clearly a sexualising of our children.

SPHE teachers report being taught how to encourage teen students in an exercise of “Rewriting the Script” in which they are asked to create a story of a mutually pleasurable respectful and consensual sexual experience of two people. In the script they are instructed to consider the emotional/romantic aspect of pleasure as well as sheer physical pleasure. Why are today’s teachers taught to ask teens to write scripts that encourage sexual activity?

Recently RTE TV hosted Let’s Talk about Sex, which for many epitomised what is proposed for Senior Cycle RSE in that there was little to nothing about love, intimacy, romance, commitment, matrimony and marriage. The TV programme, in line with the draft curriculum, offered a very impoverished view of the human person as a being of infinite value but instead it focussed on discussions with transition year pupils about porn, consent, gender identity, choking, STIs, condoms and masturbation.

Catholic education on the other hand looks at the totality of the person, physical, moral, intellectual, emotional and social in the belief that human life has an inherent beauty. This can best be seen in the Theology of the Body as expounded by Pope Saint John Paul II. The Catholic Education Partnership’s Living Love resource for Catholic secondary schools reflects such a world view.

#### Strand 3 - Into Adulthood

Introduction of the notion of Allyship seems to import with it the whole notion of Critical Race Theory and is fraught with massive difficulties. The notion that white Irish males come from a background of privilege is full of nonsensical ideology, deep prejudice (remember that there were no males on the working party that drew up this curriculum) and is not backed up by empirical evidence. By way of further example through Freedom of Information we have seen the submission of the recent National Parents Council Primary of a nomination for a position on the National Council for Special Education where despite the clear requirements for a male and female nominee only the successful female nomination was permitted.

Most parents believe that it suffices that people respect one another for who and what we/they are, including all our many differences.

#### Other important issues in respect of the Strands

In the Glossary mention is made of gender being a social construct and here we are once again in danger of a new imposed gender ideology that seems to negate the realities of physical biological sex. Organisations like TENI and BelongTo seem to have had an inordinate and disproportionate influence on the composition of this draft curriculum. An impartial examination of the CVs of those responsible for deciding the make up and membership of the various SPHE and well-being working parties will testify to this point.

Teachers attending the current SPHE courses are not equipped to deal with complex issues like Gender Dysphoria. They are not at the basic level trained Guidance Counsellors and they are not psychologists. There are considerable ethical consideration in relation to the delivery of the present JC and proposed SC programme.

Many teachers and parents who have read Sex Education documentation from the likes of UNESCO and WHO despair of the direction in which NCCA are wanting to take Irish education.

Finally, and almost unbelievably, in the Consultation we are given no indication of which subject areas will need to be curtailed/sacrificed in order to provide for this extended SPHE curriculum.



**NCCA**

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# Contributor

Debunking The Myths:  
The Science Behind  
Our Sexual Health

# Debunking The Myths: The Science Behind Our Sexual Health

The team behind 'Debunking The Myths: The Science Behind Our Sexual Health' are delighted to voice our support for the new SPHE curriculum for senior cycle students.

## Who we are:

[Debunking The Myths: The Science Behind Our Sexual Health](#) is a hugely successful SFI funded, expert-led series of interactive workshops and online engagement tools for teenagers. It was developed by the RCSI Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, in conjunction with The Rotunda Hospital, **to complement the RSE curriculum in second level schools and provide additional support to teachers, parents and caregivers.** This project is an incorporation of the work of 36 expert contributors from disciplines including: Obstetricians, Gynaecologists, General Practitioners, Psychologists, Emergency Medics, Infectious Disease experts, Midwives, and Sexual Assault Treatment experts.

As a team of healthcare professionals based in the heart of Dublin City, treating women of all ages and stages of their reproductive lives daily, we noticed the impact of misinformation and the increasing popularity of consulting "Dr Google" on our patients in recent years. We became increasingly conscious of the difficulties teenagers face when looking for reliable sources of information about their sexual and reproductive health. Many teenagers are learning about their bodies from the internet and social media, which perpetuate harmful health myths and body standards. With this in mind, the RCSI Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, in collaboration with colleagues at The Rotunda Hospital, developed *Debunking the Myths: The Science Behind Our Sexual Health*, to provide clear and reliable information in relation to sexual health while also stimulating open discussion and curiosity around the topic. The workshops are led by a panel of four experts in the field of Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Health Psychology, infectious diseases as well as representatives of the Sexual Assault Treatment Unit. This offers an invaluable opportunity for the students to directly interact with subject matter experts, who are there to answer their questions, provide clear and reliable information and dispel the most common myths.

We received funding for this 2-year project from Science Foundation Ireland in January 2022. Since then, we have delivered workshops in-person to approximately 2,000 students and online to 4,500 students nationwide. Before the end of 2023, we will deliver our biggest ever workshop online, with nearly 4,000 students enrolled. By the end of 2023, we will have served 115 schools from 25 counties, with a total of 10,500 students. We serve students of diverse backgrounds: fee paying schools, boarding schools, and schools which serve students from disadvantaged socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Of our 115 schools, 26 were DEIS schools and 9 were Youth Reach organizations.

As a team of healthcare and academic professionals at the forefront of clinical practice, we are constantly keeping up with the ever-evolving nature of diseases and medications. Our expertise and dedication to this sexual health programme sets us apart, making us uniquely qualified to fulfil this crucial role. **We see this programme in the future as a supplementary resource to teenagers complementing the RSE curriculum as it provides teenagers with a truly unique opportunity to connect with a multidisciplinary medical team in an engaging and non-judgmental environment, with the student at the focus of the curriculum.** The future of the Debunking the Myths programme therefore, is not to replace the existing schools' RSE curriculum, but to function as a sustainable, long-term partnership of a trusted clinical team to complement the Department of Education's and the Department of Health's roles in this regard.

Ultimately, we would hope to make Debunking The Myths a permanent fixture on the secondary school landscape with our team being recognized as the 'go-to' group for reliable sexual health information for young people and would love the opportunity to engage with the NCCA to discuss future opportunities. We envision a future where our students, their parents and teachers are equipped with the necessary health literacy skills to discern misinformation and access reliable resources for verifying factual information because of our programme. We want to radically change the future direction of sexual health

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

#### **Insert response here:**

We wholeheartedly agree that the aim of the updated curriculum to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school*' concisely summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students. It is imperative that students understand the obstacles and boundaries which they or others may face in becoming healthy adults, and compassionate active citizens.

We are glad to see topics such as gender roles and norms, pornography, consent, image based sexual abuse, and gender-based violence being critically examined on the course. We know that these topics are relevant to teenagers in today's climate and teaching them the skills to engage with and critically question these topics will help them into adulthood.

We are also very pleased to hear that LGBTQ+ identities will be mentioned throughout the sexuality and relationships section of the SPHE course. We received over 1,000 questions from the students during the 'Debunking The Myths' workshops, and some of the most asked questions regarding LGBTQIA+ identities were 'do gay men need to wear condoms?' and 'how do lesbians prevent STIs during sex?'. This highlights just how important it is to explicitly reference the LGBTQIA+ communities' needs when it comes to sexual health education as there is a huge deficit of knowledge. We fully support the NCCA's provision to include the community along the way during every step of sexual health education.

We hope that in conjunction with the new curriculum, teachers receive adequate, ongoing training and support from the Department and consider themselves confident to answer questions which may arise from students. We realise that nearly all teachers practicing today were born of a generation who usually did not receive the sexual health education they will be teaching. Many teachers were raised with the idea that the entire subject of sex was a taboo and societies ideology dictate that there persists a stigma associated with it. Appropriate training is needed so teachers can use their own critical thinking to tackle taboos surrounding sexual health with confidence.

Furthermore, health regulations and discourse are ever changing; new forms of contraception are released, abortion laws change, HPV vaccinations are increasing their cohorts, new viruses arise, the government changes its regulations on the free contraception scheme, etc. For those not directly involved in healthcare, it might be difficult to keep up with these changes. We as a team we have first-hand experience in this, since the beginning of the grant cycle in 2022 we have seen:

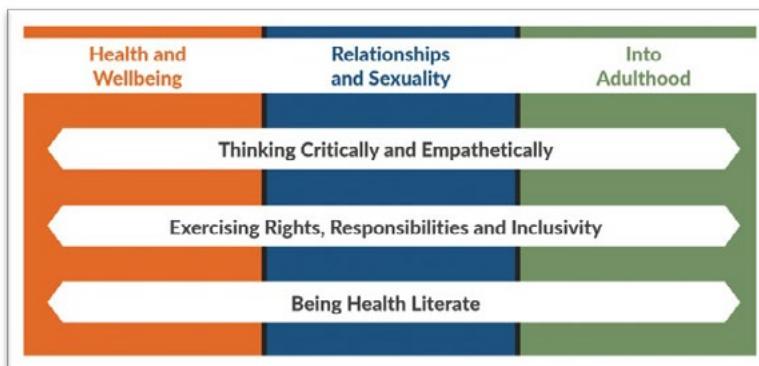
- **May 2022:** The first case of MPOX discovered in Ireland
- **August 2022:** The MPOX vaccination programme rolled out in Ireland
- **September 2022:** The government introduced the free contraception scheme for those aged 17-26
- **December 2022:** The Laura Brennan Catch-Up programme for the HPV vaccine inaugurated
- **December 2022:** Guidelines for the Mirena coil change in Ireland, increasing the number of years a patient can use the product from 5 years to 8 years for contraceptive use
- **March 2023:** We-Consent campaign launched
- **August 2023:** Expansion of the Laura Brennan Catch-Up Scheme to include males up to 23 and females up to 25

- **August 2023:** Expansion of the Laura Brennan Catch-Up Scheme to include males up to 23 and females up to 25
- **September 2023:** The government expand the free contraception scheme from the ages of 17-30

We would like to extend the invitation for our expert multidisciplinary team to support the curriculum and its teachers, they have intricate knowledge of sexual health services and changes within them. Furthermore, they are trained to speak to the public about sexual health in an open, and non-judgmental manner. We encourage the NCCA, schools, and teachers to reach out to our programme to support their RSE curriculum. As a team of highly trained medical professionals, we are confident in our capabilities to understand the needs and common questions which 16-year-olds (and in fact, the general public) ask about sexual health.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11-15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

#### Students should be able to

2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

### Insert response here:

We would like to point out that we are hugely supportive of the changes to the 'Relationships and Sexuality' curriculum. We think the guidelines are, for the most part, transparent, easy to understand, and they incorporate some important aspects of sexual health education for today's teens. We do, however, strongly urge the NCCA to critically analyse strand 2.9 and we suggest how to rephrase it.

First of all, we urge the NCCA to move away from the language used, in particular, the use of the word "safe", when talking about sex, should be re-thought.

#### What is safe sex?

Some people believe no sex is safe sex, and we agree that abstinence should be included in sexual health education as some students abstain from sex for several reasons including personal choice, religious and/or cultural identity. However, teaching abstinence *only* is proven to be detrimental to health outcomes and is unrealistic to the needs of the majority of adolescents in 2023.<sup>1</sup> We encourage students to make decisions about their sexual health based on their own wants, needs and religious/cultural ideologies.

Some people believe that safe sex is 'not catching STIs and not experiencing an unplanned pregnancy'. In this case, the focus is on preventing *unwanted outcomes* and *risk reduction*. However, branding contraception and prophylaxes as 'safe sex' only leads to stigmatisation:

If we use the words 'safe sex' does that mean if someone accidentally does not use a condom, or the condom breaks and they:

- Are tested for an STI, they are associated with practicing 'unsafe' sex?
- Are treated for an STI, they are associated with practicing 'unsafe' sex?
- Get the morning after pill, they are associated with practicing 'unsafe' sex?
- Need to access abortion services, they are associated with practicing 'unsafe' sex?

It is clear that this type of language leads to the stigmatisation of some sexual practices and services. It is the type of language associated with fear, taboo and shame, which we need to eliminate from Irish society. Accessing contraception, prophylaxis, STI testing and treatment, and other sexual health services should not be stigmatised.

At a more general level, the learning outcome 2.9 still holds a deficit-focused approach to sexual and reproductive health, highlighting what students should avoid, rather than what they want to gain from their sex lives. Pleasure and consent should be pillars of comprehensive sexual health education, but they are currently missing from the learning outcome. We are not the only organisation pointing out how the importance of sexual pleasure is not included in this draft, and we stand with Spunout in demanding pleasure "to be central to young people's understanding of sexual wellbeing".<sup>2</sup>

It has been proven that "young people are found to be critical of an approach [to sexual health education] that is overly focused on risks rather than acknowledging the positive aspects of sexual behaviour."<sup>3</sup> As Dr Caroline Kelleher, health psychologist at RCSI and expert speakers at our workshops, always points out at the beginning of her talk, an aspect that has been often overseen is pleasure, a key driver of why people have sex.

The pleasure-centered approach to sexual health education has been steadily evolving over the past two decades. The World Health Organisation included Pleasure in the definition of sexual health in 2006, which linked pleasure to safe sexual experiences, and frames it in the context of sexual health conversations<sup>4</sup>. We also know that a pleasure-centered approach significantly impact reproductive health outcomes by increasing contraceptive use, reducing unintended pregnancies and promoting positive attitudes towards sexual health: the World Health Organisation and the international education and advocacy organization 'Pleasure Project' jointly published in February 2022 the first systematic review and meta-analysis that demonstrated how interventions that incorporate sexual pleasure have better sexual health outcomes than those that do not.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Zaneva M, et al. *What is the added value of incorporating pleasure in sexual health interventions? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. PLOS ONE. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261034>

<sup>2</sup> Sexual pleasure, alone or with others: why it's important for young people - <https://www.healthnews.ie/sexual-health/sexual-pleasure-alone-or-with-others-why-its-important-for-young-people/>

<sup>3</sup> Nolan A, Smyth E. *Talking About Sex and Sexual Behaviour of Young People In Ireland*. ESRI. <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs112>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health#tab=tab_1)

<sup>5</sup> Zaneva M, et al. *What is the added value of incorporating pleasure in sexual health interventions? A systematic review and meta-analysis*. PLOS ONE. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261034>

In their Declaration on Sexual Pleasure, The World Association for Sexual Health defines sexual pleasure as “*the physical and/or psychological satisfaction and enjoyment derived from shared or solitary erotic experiences, including thoughts, fantasies, dreams, emotions, and feelings.*”<sup>6</sup> There is a prevailing discourse about sexual pleasure that acknowledges the question, *how can I understand how to communicate my own bodily pleasure to my sexual partner(s) if I do not understand my own bodily pleasure?*

Here we would like to include a powerful excerpt from Hollie McNish’s poem ‘when faking seemed like the simplest solution’ which cleverly addresses the problem with excluding self-pleasure from the sexual pleasure narrative:

#### **when faking seemed like the simplest solution**

*“for the first boy who asked me to explain how I liked to be touched ‘there’, which was a lovely thing to ask me, but it just seemed too difficult and embarrassing and intimidating to explain at the time, firstly because I had learnt that admitting to knowing my own body could make me look like a bit of a slag and secondly, because I didn’t know if the way I touched myself was the same as the way other girls touched themselves because we never spoke about it with each other and there wasn’t much in the media about it and there wasn’t such an obvious thing about it physically as it is with a penis, so what if, I thought, I told him how I liked to be touched and he’d be like ‘what?’ or ‘that’s weird’ or ‘that’s not how other girls like it’ and I’d feel like a freak, and thirdly because, if I did get over those first two hurdles and started to explain it and keep correcting him and then not orgasm when he asks for the millionth time if I’ve cum, which will make him either feel bad or make him want to get back together with Tanya, who he said he did please a lot even though we know he didn’t because she told us all that she faked it too, so I just nodded shyly and said he was doing it right already... and I started a long teenage romance with faking pleasure because it was easier than all the tiring social and cultural hurdles you needed to overcome in order to just tell a guy how you liked to be touched”*<sup>7</sup>

Exploring your body, sexuality and gender identity are part of lifelong learning and they are all completely normal to explore by yourself and with others. At its heart, sexuality education requires language and open discourse around self-pleasure and masturbation as a healthy and normal stage of development. Self-pleasure is a vital precursor for enabling young people to be able to navigate and negotiate intimate experiences with partners in the future. It is important to normalise talking about sexual self-pleasure and our bodies in the same way that we talk about other types of pleasure and other parts of our bodies.

Some of our most frequently asked questions we received at our workshops includes ‘how much masturbation is too much?’ and ‘is it normal to masturbate?’ On top of this, Sex Educator Grace Alice O’Shea of Sexual Health West recently pointed out that the question “can women orgasm?” is a frequently asked question at her workshops.<sup>8</sup> Talking about or even just acknowledging the existence of masturbation encourages the development of bodily awareness and autonomy, allowing young people to be better communicators of their own needs. Understanding that sexual pleasure begins with oneself, can be enjoyed alone and is a core function of bodily autonomy is empowering<sup>9</sup>. Leaving self-pleasure out of adolescent sexual health education relegates masturbation to a place of shame and taboo, perpetuating a harmful culture of silence that has existed for too long in Ireland. Compassionate discourse about these issues, on the other hand, creates an environment where self and mutual pleasure is normalised and establishes an actively negotiated and consensual expectation of intimate relations for all young people.

<sup>6</sup> Declaration on Sexual Pleasure. World Association for Sexual Health.

<https://worldsexualhealth.net/home/#:~:text=DECLARATION%20ON%20SEXUAL%20PLEASURE,dreams%2C%20emotions%2C%20and%20feelings>.

<sup>7</sup> McNish, H. *when faking seemed like the simplest solution*. ‘Slug: And Other Things I Have Been Told To Hate’ 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Flemming N, Kaguako F. ‘I am still getting asked, is it even a thing?: Why we need to talk to our girls about masturbation. Irish Examiner. Nov 2023. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/lifestyle/healthandwellbeing/ard-41246377.html>

We know that the teachers of this generation want change, and we know that they have never been taught or granted to speak about pleasure. We need to support and enable teachers to speak about the subject without fear and culturally inherited shame, through training and with the aid of subject matter specialists. We are more than willing to assist the NCCA and teachers with this. We know it's not an easy subject to talk about because of this cultural shame we have inherited, but we also know that if we are told pleasure is not a dirty word, it will truly revolutionise the health outcomes and autonomous choices of the next generation.

To conclude, we believe that the learning outcome number 2.9 should be changed to **“autonomously make informed decision around sexual pleasure, fertility, reproductive choices, risk reduction, sexual rights, sexual consent and how to access sexual health services and resources”**.

### **In Conclusion**

We support the NCCA's reformation of the SPHE curriculum for senior cycle students. We truly believe you have done a wonderful job and that future students will benefit greatly from the curriculum. Incorporating gender norms, consent, gender-based violence, pornography and image based sexual abuse as well as traditional methods of sex education into the curriculum will help students' health outcomes, decision making and overall quality of life for years to come. These are such pertinent topics to the needs of 16-year-olds today and will only help them to become healthy, empathetic, active citizens.

We highly recommend changing learning outcome 2.9 to reflect a move away from the traditional deficit approach to sexual health that only focus on risk reduction and embrace a more comprehensive approach to sexual health that takes into account what people want to gain from their sex lives, as outlined above. Students need to be encouraged to make healthy choices and decisions based on their own identities, needs and wants. It is crucial for them to be encouraged to know their own bodies to better communicate their pleasure and boundaries. We also appraise teaching them to critically examine the taboos around sexual health, while being provided with comprehensive, factual sexual health education with the support of highly trained professionals.

Please do not hesitate to contact us to further discuss learning outcomes from our workshops. We have evaluated both students' and teachers' experience of in-person and online workshops over the last 2 years.

<sup>9</sup> Connolly R. *Sexual pleasure, alone or with others: why it's important for young people*. Health News. 2022. <https://www.healthnews.ie/sexual-health/sexual-pleasure-alone-or-with-others-why-its-important-for-young-people/>



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## ECO-UNESCO

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:**

As a leader in environmental education, ESD and youth engagement ECO-UNESCO welcomes the new Draft specification for Senior Cycle SPHE and welcomes the opportunity to respond.

ECO-UNESCO is a leading environmental education and youth organisation focused on empowering young people and protecting the environment; we recognise the key role of environmental education and education for sustainable development in development of young people.

Education for Sustainable Development and environmental education are critically important to our understanding of our world, the interconnectedness of systems and to upskilling and empowering young people to identify positive solutions and to act at a personal level as well as more broadly in communities, regionally, nationally and internationally.

ECO-UNESCO's approach highlights the importance of Education For, About and In the Environment. 'For' – providing the necessary knowledge, skills and values to help people make choices in favour of sustainable development; 'about' – providing adequate knowledge of systems and natural ecosystems and an understanding of interconnectedness and interdependencies and 'in' providing opportunity for people to experience nature and develop a sensitivity towards the natural environment and to experience the positive health and well-being benefits that being in nature brings. We believe that SPHE provides a very important opportunity for such a learning approach including experiential learning and nature-based learning.

We welcome the student-focused, multi-faceted nature of the aim particularly the emphasis on health, resilience, respect, empathy, and care.

We welcome that the aim of the specification is designed is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

We welcome the recognition of young people as young adults, however, it is important that the focus is not just on what they will become but on the person they are now so would propose that this be amended to young person/people.

There should be a stronger focus on the students lives as active local and global citizens.

We believe that SPHE should provide opportunities for young people to build knowledge of natural systems and how these systems are interconnected. It should recognise the interdependent relationship between humanity and the natural environment. This would include environmental health and its impact on both physical and mental wellbeing; and extending the language of care and respect to the planet and all living beings.

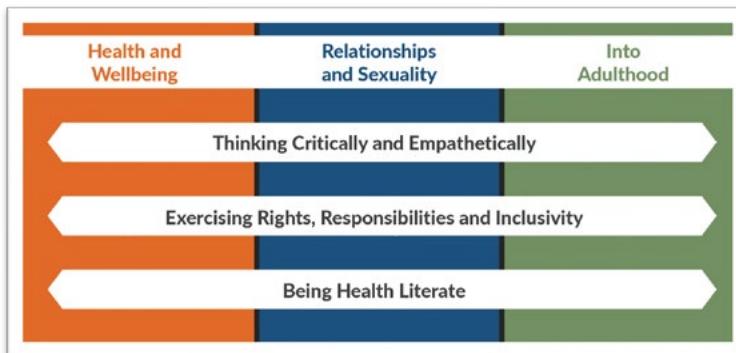
There may be opportunities in the specification to explore the links and interconnectedness between nature and society with an emphasis on ecosystems and biodiversity and its links to health and well-being.

We believe there should be an emphasis on the multiple crises currently facing humanity and an acknowledgment of the urgency with which humanity must grapple with these crises (climate, biodiversity, social) for the sake of the health and wellbeing of current and future generations and of the planet. This should build an understanding of key environmental issues such as climate change, biodiversity, consumption, our global systems; Interdependencies and relationships that exist in nature and between nature, our society and our economy at a local and global level.

There should be an extension of the core values of SPHE. These would include 'lifelong learning' and 'respectful relationships with people and the planet'.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

#### Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

(a) Clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE  
The individual learning outcomes for Strand 1 are clear.

(b) Relevance of learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16–18-year-olds today

We welcome the existing learning outcomes, all of which are highly relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18-year-olds today.

We agree with the equipping of students with critical thinking skills to analyse societal attitudes, social and cultural norms, media influences etc.

(c) What is missing from this strand

There is a connection between our health and wellbeing and nature; our health and well-being, both physical and mental, are enhanced by being connected to nature. The SPHE specification would benefit from explicitly acknowledging this.

There could be an opportunity in the specification to explore the links and interconnectedness between nature and society with an emphasis on ecosystems and biodiversity and its links to health and well-being. The existing learning outcomes could be enhanced by making explicit the interconnected nature of humanity, and the interdependence between humanity and the natural world.

Social connection and meaning derived from collective endeavours are well recognised as an essential component of human health and wellbeing and should be enhanced.

We recommend that in learning outcome 1.2 and 1.4 a reference to environmental health and access to green spaces and their connection to mental and physical health is made.

We recommend including a reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG3 Good Health and Wellbeing) and their importance for collective wellbeing of people and planet.

We recommend adding a learning outcome around developing skills to maintain positive mental health in an environmentally changing world incl. climate-changing and biodiversity loss, in particular the capacity to deal with climate anxiety. Include in curriculum support materials guidance for teachers around this challenge e.g. approaches such as Active Hope

Additional skills of systems thinking, reflection, futures thinking, decision making, problem solving, self-awareness, planning for action, collaboration and futures thinking could be considered for inclusion.

In addition, we suggest the inclusion of a sentence acknowledging that there is a role to be played by groups/organisations who work on issues including environmental concerns etc.

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

(a) Clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE  
The individual learning outcomes for Strand 2 are clear.

(b) Relevance of learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today  
We welcome the existing learning outcomes, all of which are highly relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today.

(c) What is missing from this strand  
The Specification could be strengthened by including information about how teacher capacity will be enhanced to enable quality and consistent delivery of the SPHE Curriculum.

It is important to acknowledge that there is a role to be played by groups/organisations who work on issues of relationships and sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, teenage mental health, environmental concerns etc.

There is also an opportunity to incorporate a global lens into this strand, with reference to the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 5: Gender Equality. There is also a chance to make valuable links between this strand and wider social and health issues.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

(a) Clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE

The individual learning outcomes for Strand 3 are clear.

(b) Relevance of learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds today

We welcome the existing learning outcomes, all of which are highly relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds today.

(c) What is missing from this strand

The title of the strand should be renamed as it is important to recognise that the learning outcomes relate to young people here and now not just into their future adult life. For example, self-care is not a skill that is only relevant or unique to adulthood, it is an approach and habit that should be valued and fostered across all stages of life.

In addition, it is important to note that in order to be effective and engaged global citizens, we must practice self-care and resilience building, to enable us to deal with global challenges such as climate crisis, biodiversity loss and inequalities.

It is important to foster the student voice and student agency should be explicitly named and valued in the Specification. Giving students opportunities to develop and share their own perspectives, and to shape their own learning, are essential components of learning about one's own identity as an individual and as a member of society locally and globally.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

There is an opportunity to include an additional strand on Sustainable Futures and Stewardship. Where a fourth strand is not added, we recommend including Sustainable Futures and Stewardship into Strand 3: Into Adulthood. i.e. a learning outcome on students taking greater responsibility for themselves and the planet.

There is an opportunity to include engagement with external agencies. For example ECO-UNESCO is a forerunner in the field of Education for sustainable development for over 30 years and have a range of tried and tested programmes which can complement this subject area. We have also run an ECO-Choices Health and Well-being programme.

The subject should encourage youth empowerment. As outlined in the UNESCO ESDfor2030- young people are key players and have a key role as change agents for sustainable development through ESD, as young people today are increasingly drivers of education in informal and non-formal settings.

Approaches used in this subject should not only seek out the youth voice, but also responding to it, and as such empower young people to explore issues and take action. Young people involved in our Youth Climate Voices Survey in 2020 and 2021 highlighted eco anxiety as a key issue for them and they wanted to build knowledge and skills to help take climate action. Young people have highlighted to us the importance of feeling you can take action and the importance of providing solutions to environmental issues to counter the feelings of anxiety they feel about their futures.

The subject should promote innovative approaches, practice, pedagogies and methodologies. Approaches such as peer education and the development of participatory skills that empower young people to act should be recognised, enhanced and integrated. ECO-UNESCO supports the promotion of active learning approaches and ESD methods which empower learners to be action oriented to help ensure a better world, care for the environment, and a more just society.

Outdoor education and experiential learning opportunities should be encouraged in the subject. There should be an opportunity in the subject for outdoor experiential learning which brings a range of benefits which are now widely evidenced, acknowledged and accepted, particularly in relation to ESD and mental and physical well-being. Outdoor and experiential learning offers an approach for young people to engage with the world around them & provides a stimulating context to explore how we can all contribute to a more environmentally friendly and sustainable present and future. Education 'in' the environment provides opportunities for people to experience nature and develop a sensitivity towards the natural environment.

Educators should be given in-service opportunities to explore ESD and transformational education and provided with opportunities to integrate environmental and sustainability issues.

There are many support resources available for teachers e.g. ECO-UNESCO has a wide range of education packs and an online learning hub the ECO Academy, to support teachers integrated ESD and Climate action into their work.

ECO-UNESCO [www.ecounesco.ie](http://www.ecounesco.ie)



**NCCA**

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National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Contributor

## Educate Together

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school!*'

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

**Insert response here:**

Educate Together is the representative body for 117 equality-based schools in Ireland. A registered charity, Educate Together is the management body for 95 national schools and patron (or patron/trustee partner) of 21 post-primary schools, including voluntary secondary schools, community schools and community colleges. Educate Together is an independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) which advocates for changes in areas of educational policy that promote equality and will positively impact on generations of young people in Ireland.

Educate Together commends NCCA on the Draft Senior Cycle Social, Personal & Health Education (SPHE) Specification and welcomes the extensive consultation process involving all stakeholders that has led to the development of the draft curriculum.

The aim of the updated curriculum as described above fully aligns with Educate Together's values and commitments, including:

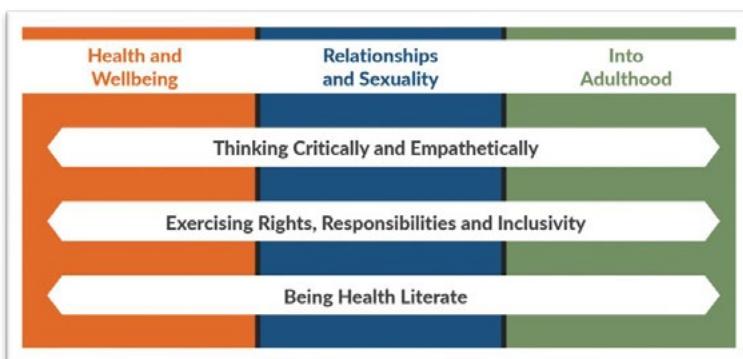
- Placing the young person at the centre of the educational process;
- Respecting and celebrating the different and unique identities of all;
- Embracing an educational philosophy that promotes the values of justice, equality and human rights for all young people, and challenges injustice and unfair 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.

In general, Educate Together agrees with the stated aim of the draft curriculum and recommends going further to reflect that at senior cycle students are on the brink of adulthood; in fact, many will reach the age of 18 before they finish their second-level school experience. Consequently, Educate Together suggests that the aim ought to be expressed in the present rather than future. i.e., to '*empower students in continuing to develop as healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young people/adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school!*' We suggest that the language throughout the document might be amended in this regard.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time,' and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### **Insert response here:**

Educate Together considers that the learning outcomes of strand 1 reflect the needs of the learner at this stage of their development and education. Broadly speaking, they reflect the unique social and educational needs of this age group and, provided the strand is taught in a safe and healthy school environment where the focus is on how students learn best, they are relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds.

However, Educate Together considers that this strand could be enhanced and made relevant to all 16-18 year olds if it allowed for an exploration of how health and wellbeing are impacted by reasons of one's gender, social and economic status, ethnicity, ability, migrant status and the intersectionality of such factors. We recognise that in-depth exploration of these issues is not possible at this level or within this curriculum specification, however if they are not stated in the curriculum their absence assumes that for example, 'the determinants of good health' are the same for everyone in society.

In addition, we strongly advocate for a focus on the interconnection between personal wellbeing and societal and environmental wellbeing, promoting a holistic perspective on health and wellbeing that extends beyond the individual to encompass broader social and environmental factors.

Educate Together considers that this strand would also be strengthened by the inclusion of the 'community' in which the student lives e.g., in 1.2 the community in which a student lives may have enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance – the list does not prohibit a focus on community, but might be strengthened by including engaging in community activities for example, similarly with 1.4.

We suggest more explicit emphasis on the contribution of physical exercise of all types on health in general, including on mental health and wellbeing.

We suggest that 1.3 might be broadened out to not only analyse social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs but to mood altering substances and behaviours in general.

We suggest 1.9 might be broadened further to not just look at pathways but also to look at risk factors, particularly as they relate to one's position in society with regard to social and economic status and other factors.

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

Educate Together welcomes the approach taken in the SPHE curriculum stating that each of the learning outcomes should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons. This integrated approach reflects modern Irish society and legislation and aligns with Educate Together equality-based ethos.

The language within 2.3 should be amended to remove the word ‘adult’ from the learning outcomes in order to make it more relevant to the lives of many 16–18 year olds who are in relationships. The legal age of consent in Ireland is 17 years and consigning sexual activity to be an aspect of only ‘adult relationships’ separates relationships of this cohort as ‘different’. Consequently, much of the value intended by this learning outcome may be lost in doing so.

**Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

**Students should be able to**

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

As mentioned earlier, Educate Together considers that this strand could be enhanced and made relevant to **all** 16–18 year olds if it allowed for an exploration of how one’s gender, social and economic status, ethnicity, ability, migrant status impact on transition to adulthood and the intersectionality of such factors. We recognise that in-depth exploration of these issues is not possible at this level or within this curriculum specification; however, if they are not stated in the curriculum, their absence assumes that the pathways are experienced in the same way for everyone in society.

Additionally, climate change, ecoanxiety and political unrest are issues that young people today will encounter more as they mature and will need to find ways to care for themselves and others in these contexts.

We strongly recommend incorporating voting rights and responsibilities, focusing on civic participation and democratic values to empower students in shaping their future through voting. This fosters critical thinking, community engagement, and the development of informed, responsible citizens for societal betterment. It also highlights the importance of ethical decision-making and social responsibility, benefiting students' mental health and wellbeing.

The agency of the student citizen is important to recognise and support as a means of self-care – this appears to be absent from the curriculum currently.

Other than this, the learning outcomes above are clear and relevant to the lives of 16-18 year olds.

### **Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

As stated at the outset, Educate Together welcomes this curriculum and urges the NCCA and the Department of Education to continue its work so that it can be taught in schools at the earliest opportunity.

To be taught effectively, teachers will need effective CPD (Continuing Professional Development), especially in the area of Relationships and Sexuality Education, where research has shown that some teachers lack confidence. Educate Together urges the Department of Education and related agencies such as Oide to provide adequate CPD for teachers.



**NCCA**

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National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Contributor

## Endometriosis Association of Ireland (EAI)

# Endometriosis Association of Ireland (EAI)

I am writing to you on behalf of the Endometriosis Association of Ireland (EAI). The EAI represents patients living with endometriosis in Ireland.

Endometriosis is a condition where tissue similar to the lining of the uterus grows outside the uterus. Endometriosis roughly affects 1 in 10 (190 million) of reproductive age women and girls globally. Pain is one of the most common symptoms of endometriosis, which can be daily or cyclical. It can also be chronic or mild. This discomfort can manifest itself in a variety of ways, such as pelvic pain that radiates down the legs or up the back, painful intercourse, and painful bowel movements and/or urination. Chronic fatigue is also associated with the condition. Endometriosis can also have a significant impact on one's mental health. Endometriosis currently has no known cure, and treatment is often directed at symptom management. It is essential to have access to early diagnosis and effective treatment for endometriosis.

We believe that the proposed new curriculum should include a comprehensive education on menstrual health that focuses on biological, practical, and emotional well-being, as well as information on endometriosis and adenomyosis. This would allow students to better understand the symptoms of the condition, which will assist to reduce the stigma associated with menstruation and possibly give access to early diagnosis and treatment. If there is an opportunity to work together on how to put this into practice, we would be more than happy to do so.

We appreciate you giving us the chance to comment on the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum and hope you will consider our suggestions. We look forward to reading the final version when it is published.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## Family Solidarity

# Family Solidarity

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

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

**Insert response here:**

**The aim fails to acknowledge the importance of relationships being characterised not only by respect and care but also by long-term commitment.**

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**In our opinion the learning outcomes in Strand 1 are clear and relevant.**

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

<b>Students should be able to</b>	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

While the 2011 framework included a dedicated section on parenting and one of its key objectives was to “discuss the role of commitment and relationship skills in marriage and other committed relationships, that help to support lasting relationships and family life” (p. 28), the updated draft specification conspicuously omits any reference to marriage or other committed relationships. This omission raises a pertinent question: Why have marriage and committed relationships been intentionally excluded?

Lasting relationships, family life, marriage or commitment are all noticeably absent from the consultation report as well. The background paper offers an interesting analysis of international practice, with a focus on New Zealand, Ontario, and Canada. In the section that overviews the key concepts and topics, the background paper highlights the significance of 'long-term commitment and parenting.' Furthermore, it introduces as one of the key ideas for discussion the claim that 'marriage and long-term commitments can be both rewarding and challenging' (p. 23). Surprisingly, this proposal, which draws from international comparisons, has not found a place in the new draft specification by the NCCA.

Another contentious learning outcome within strand 2 is 2.7, which stipulates that students should be able to "investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations". It is worth highlighting the patent absence of any reference to the negative consequences of the use of pornography, such as harm or addiction.

The whole draft specification mentions pregnancy only once, in relation to "possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy" (2.9) How can the "relationships and sexuality" strand omit any reference to birth, babies, parenting?

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

While it is commendable that this strand now encompasses content previously found within the 'personal rights and personal safety' section of the 2011 curriculum framework, it is important to note the glaring omission of any reference to commitment and long-term relationships, which are pivotal aspects of adult life. Regrettably, the section pertaining to parenting has been removed without any apparent justification.

We firmly believe that strand 3 should reinstate certain learning outcomes present in the 2011 version. For instance, it should include learning outcomes such as “students should be able to compare their understanding of the responsibilities to be a parent, and to discuss the role of commitment and relationship skills in marriage and other committed relationships, that help to support lasting relationships and family life”.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

The overarching philosophy of SPHE is notably individualistic, placing minimal emphasis on long-term commitments. Instead, it portrays senior cycle students as individuals expected to navigate their way through a series of uninhibited, casual sexual encounters, with the primary concerns revolving around consent, pregnancy prevention, and avoiding STIs.

While contraception is explicitly addressed in one of the learning outcomes, it is indeed remarkable that a curriculum focused on sexuality and relationships completely omits any mention of pregnancy, childbirth, parenthood, or the challenges and joys of raising children, which are natural consequences of sexual relationships.

Moreover, the course specification significantly neglects any reference to marriage or long-term commitment. Remarkably, marriage is not even acknowledged as a distant aspiration; it is outright neglected, as is the prospect of parenthood. The dedicated section on parenting, which was part of the previous specification, has been completely removed without justification and against the evidence from international practice, as highlighted in the background paper.

The primary emphasis of this SPHE course appears to revolve around the essentials, primarily consent and health, rather than delving into the integral components that sustain enduring relationships, such as commitment, long-term planning, mutual obligations, marriage, and more.

We firmly believe that this approach does a disservice to students and ultimately falls short of the crucial objective of nurturing their long-term well-being and their values, particularly family values.



**NCCA**

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# Contributor

## Foróige

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

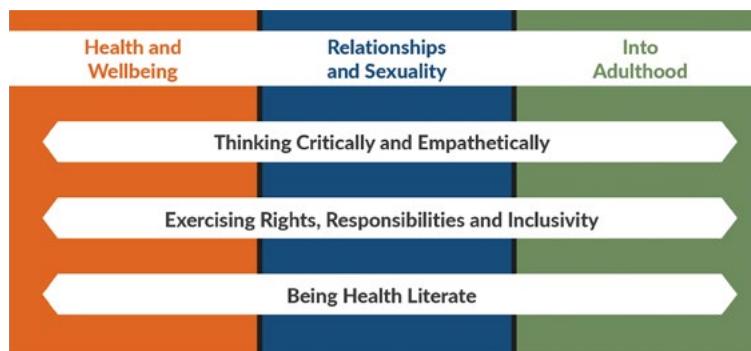
Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing.

**Insert response here:**

We are delighted to see that the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum focuses on 'empowering students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic' young adults with regards to nurturing respectful and caring relationships and preparing for opportunities and experiences of life now and in the future. This seems appropriate as based on the specification draft, the proposed curriculum seems to be heavily student centered and focused on the individual experience. There are multidimensional aspects of wellbeing intertwined throughout and this is summarised in the above. The comments we have made throughout the consultation are in support of this overarching aim.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three crosscutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
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1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and

whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

To pre-empt the following response, it is challenging 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 that the learning outcomes are relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today.

In the Strand 1 introduction we would strongly recommend that sexual health be included along with physical, social, emotional and mental health. Sexual health is one of the key pillars of health and wellbeing and although Relationships and Sexuality is a standalone strand, we believe that a cross-strand, intersecting approach is crucial for young people to recognise that the protection of one's sexual health is as equally important as one's physical, social, emotional and mental health.

- 1.1 - We are unclear what 'research' 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 comprehension and level of understanding on the determinants of health mentioned in this outcome.
- 1.2 - We recognise the importance of self care and that it is a major part of looking after your overall health. Individuals have a responsibility to regulate that for themselves and make it a priority, and we are happy to see this included in this strand. In an effort to be consistent throughout the curriculum we would encourage changing "me time" to self care throughout.

- 1.3 - We believe that substance use needs to be covered in this strand and to cover this only at Junior Cycle is not enough as the needs and experiences of young people at Junior Cycle will differ widely to those in the Senior Cycle years. We would encourage the specific inclusion of vaping as a topic, as this has and is becoming a more widespread issue. To be consistent throughout we would suggest that the word *substance use* be used to replace *alcohol and drugs*.
- 1.4 - We recognise the importance of this outcome but are unclear what 'one's sense of self' is intended to refer to in this context. We would recommend that the meaning of 'one's sense of self' is expanded so students and teachers understand what is being referred to.
- 1.5 - Foróige understands the importance of fostering positive mental health for students but we are unsure of the skill being developed in this outcome.
- 1.7 - While it is important for young people to be able to recognise signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety, it is also important for young people to acknowledge that it is ok to not be ok. We would recommend this be included in the guidance notes on this topic and that it is recognised that some stress can be healthy and normal - it is about recognising when that becomes an unhealthy level of stress.
- 1.9 - We would recommend that a list of examples be provided to teachers so that addictions such as gambling (sports gambling, gambling through games e.g. loot boxes), technology, exercise and eating disorders are explored alongside substance addiction. We would also recommend that a comprehensive list of services that provide help and support in these areas should be provided. This will be useful for teachers to signpost young people should they need additional support in this area.
- 1.10 - Foróige welcomes the reference of 'social' being included in this outcome. However, we would recommend that the language around this outcome be reviewed and potentially rephrased as at present, it implies that it is up to individuals to ensure their own safety rather than putting emphasis on discouraging the perpetration of violence, abuse, or harassment. We would welcome the inclusion of discussions around victim blaming and the stigma associated with these attitudes. This outcome could also be seen to incorporate bystander intervention, and we would welcome further clarity on this, ideally through a more thorough curriculum.

We feel that Strand 1 would benefit from more clearly including the interconnectedness of mental and physical health - currently there is no explicit link between them evident in this Strand. Mental and physical health are equally important components of overall health. Physical health can support many young people to manage their mental and emotional well-being and can contribute to a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

More generally, we believe that there could be greater integration between the three strands and the outcomes in each. We recommend that there be more clarity on mental illness and the mental health continuum, exploring self-care versus clinical or professional care/therapeutic interventions, and support in identifying when interventions are needed.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

As already noted, we find it difficult to provide a comprehensive response to this question without seeing an accompanying curriculum so that we can evaluate whether the learning outcomes are achievable or realistic. However, the learning outcomes are relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today.

With reference to the Note provided in this section, guidance and examples should be provided to support teachers, including clear objectives of how this will be achieved, and that this should be accomplished via a 'rights based approach' that is referenced earlier in the document. We would note that, for Foróige, a rights-based approach is a floor, not a ceiling - taking a rights-based approach should not be limited to rights as held on an individual basis, but, in our view, should take on a fuller and more rounded perspective of our individual and collective responsibilities and shared values, above and beyond our fundamental rights.

- 2.1- Foróige welcomes the mention of online relationships as well as in-person relationships here. We recommend that a focus on developing communication skills and the

use of assertive communication be addressed. Foróige acknowledges that communication is referenced in this section with how to communicate feelings, however we feel that other areas/forms of communication must be explored, e.g how to communicate in relationships, to address conflict and to communicate, rather than just respect, boundaries.

- 2.3 - We recommend a reconsideration of the word 'adult' in this outcome, as we feel that it could narrow the conversation with young people by failing to acknowledge their own reality. More broadly, we would strongly recommend that consent be considered under its own, standalone outcome. It is vital that young people have a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of consent in a more general sense, as this underpins all relationships, whether or not they are sexual; this will also support later outcomes that address abusive and violent relationships.
- 2.4 - We recommend that the word 'sexuality' be included along with gender in the outcome, as there can also be harmful attitudes towards sexualities and there is considerable overlap between the two. We note that there is no reference to positive masculinity throughout this section; we would argue that this could be a beneficial addition, to dismantle stereotypes and support young men to address their own and others' learned behaviours.
- For outcomes 2.5 to 2.8 we would recommend that the overall term be changed from *abusive and violent relationships* to an umbrella term *unhealthy relationships* - this would mirror the earlier section '*healthy relationships*', and would emphasise that relationships can be unhealthy in a variety of ways, including abuse, violence, and coercive control. This could also encourage young people to consider their own behaviour and attitudes in the context of their relationships.
- 2.5 - We believe that this outcome is missing reference to other types of abuse including financial as well as physical, emotional, sexual etc.
- 2.6 - Foróige is delighted to see that Gender Based Violence has been included in the curriculum, with particular reference to the violence perpetrated against women and girls - there must be recognition that GBV is systemic. We would welcome this outcome also making reference to violence against trans and non-binary people, including trans women and girls. GBV manifests differently between genders and there is stigma associated with domestic violence perpetrated against men.
- 2.7 - We believe this outcome is missing reference to signposting alternative sources of information about sexual activity, as opposed to young people seeking this from pornography/ pornographic content. Currently this outcome is situated under the sub-theme of 'Abusive and violent relationships'; we would suggest that this outcome is moved to the sub-theme of 'healthy relationships' or ' sexual health' as at present, it could be perceived to imply that anyone who watches porn is engaged in an abusive and/or violent relationship. It is important to avoid shaming students who may be viewing pornographic material, focusing instead on highlighting the differences between pornographic content and the reality of a sexual relationship.
- 2.8 - It is crucial that the intent of this outcome and what it is referring to is clarified - as such, guidance notes should be provided for teachers relating to image-based abuse. In the absence of a specified curriculum, it is unclear whether this outcome relates to the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act and the Child Trafficking & Pornography Act, and whether general harassment/ bullying is also included. It is also

important that teachers are supported to discuss the non-consensual taking and sharing of material, including where one party is unaware of the material being produced (e.g. upskirting) under Coco's Law.

- 2.9 - Foróige are delighted to see the mention of fertility in this learning outcome. We recommend that the outcome should further include mention of STIs and HIV. We are concerned that the current phrasing “explore possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy” may not ensure equal or standardised provision of information to young people, with not all options being provided to young people. We would therefore recommend that this is rephrased to read “explore **ALL** possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy”. Foróige advocates that young people should be receiving this information in a safe space where medically accurate information from trusted and reliable sources can be provided. Foróige strongly advocates that the NCCA should provide a set curriculum that all young people should be receiving in relation to unplanned pregnancy, regardless of the school they attend or teacher they have.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

Similar to our previous responses, we find it difficult to provide a comprehensive response to Strand 3 without an accompanying curriculum. However, the learning outcomes under Strand 3 are relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today.

- 3.2 - We believe that the wording “demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life” is vague - more specific goals and skills should be identified and named in this outcome.
- 3.4 - Again, we feel this outcome is too vague. The learning outcomes identified - *online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place*

rights - are very wide-ranging, to the extent that it would be hard to do them justice under one outcome. Explicit guidelines should be provided to teachers to ensure that appropriate information is delivered to young people. We strongly recommend that 'age of consent' be moved to Strand 2 and that consent deserves a standalone outcome. We acknowledge that there is a legal element to the age of consent, but this cannot be the only mention of consent - without a broader discussion, young people will not have the understanding required to engage in the legal elements. We also note that the mention of 'alcohol and drugs' here comes without fuller exploration of substance use in the SPHE curriculum other than examining its impact on mental health or to address addiction - a key element of best practice in drug prevention education focuses on acknowledging and addressing the reasons that people might use drugs, in particular the social aspects, in order to provide alternatives, and this is not referenced in the specification. Separately, we welcome the inclusion of online communication in this outcome, as a vital part of day-to-day life for young people.

More generally, while we appreciate the range of skills identified in Strand 3, we believe that if this strand is designed to address the transition 'Into adulthood', it must incorporate more fundamental life skills. We recommend that the application of life skills such as setting up a bank account, applying for motor theory tests, accessing public service cards, how to register to vote, expectation of taxes when working etc. be included. Young people do not have opportunities to develop these skills in other areas of the school curriculum and as such we would welcome their inclusion here.

### **Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

As we have already highlighted throughout our feedback, it is difficult to provide a comprehensive response without seeing an accompanying curriculum so that we can evaluate whether the learning outcomes are achievable or realistic. In addition to this, we would like to highlight that without appropriate and clear guidelines, many of the outcomes are open to interpretation by individual teachers or schools, which could result in a disparity of SPHE provision. The aim should be to ensure standardisation and equity of SPHE for all students in Ireland regardless of teacher, school, or location.

Foróige strongly believes that Senior Cycle SPHE needs to be expanded into the Transition Year Programme, rather than providing no education on the topic during that year. While we acknowledge that Transition Year is not offered in all schools and not all students choose to participate in it, we believe that it is not appropriate that those who do take TY receive no education on the very vital topics that the SPHE curriculum covers. This is a clear opportunity for young people to revisit and build on their Junior Cycle learning, and foreground learning on topics in the Senior Cycle curriculum.

We believe that the monitoring, evaluation and implementation of the SPHE curriculum will be vital to ensure that all students across Ireland are receiving the same level of education, and that content is being delivered in a consistent manner across educational settings. A clear set of guidelines for monitoring and evaluating should be developed to support this.

We welcome the inclusion of the glossary of action verbs (Appendix 1) and the explanation that verbs presented in the learning outcomes are more detailed than initially perceived; we would strongly recommend that this is highlighted to teachers so that they can familiarise themselves with it. Similarly, we welcome Appendix 2 (Glossary of Terms used in Learning Outcomes). For the definition of *Image-based abuse*, it would be helpful to provide the definition of “intimate images” so people know that it is broader than just nudes.

We would like to highlight the difficulty for teachers in ‘stepping out of the role of expert and assuming the role of facilitator’ (p.9). This is a considerable shift in approach, and may be challenging for some teachers based on the relationships they already have with students, and the fact that many will not have received training or hold formal qualifications in this area both in SPHE specifically and also more broadly in facilitation. We would recommend that teachers ‘opt in’ to facilitating SPHE, rather than it being given to someone who may not necessarily be comfortable with the content.

While we recognise that teachers are receiving training through a variety of creative and engaging methodologies, the focus of SPHE should be on the facilitation of conversations. Having open and honest conversations with peers and teachers is a critical part of the success of SPHE/RSE. Teachers should have the skills necessary to guide these conversations so that students feel comfortable and confident to be able to speak with their peers and class on such subjects.

We would also recommend that there be a timeline included for review of the specification and its implementation, to ensure that it remains relevant and up to date for students.

We wish to highlight that there was no reference made to the impact of derogatory language in the curriculum. We believe that this is an important area that needs to be addressed and this can have a major impact on the health and wellbeing of young people.

We are glad to see that there is considerable focus on empathy and empowerment within the SPHE specification - we feel that this is the right approach to supporting young people to engage with these topics.

In relation to assessment, we believe that there is a great opportunity for young people to take part in community opportunities using the knowledge and skills they have learned, to demonstrate their active citizenship in this area. We would strongly recommend that assessment includes a practical option rather than focusing purely on continuous/ classroom based assessment or research projects - this would enable students to demonstrate the application of what they have learned.

Foróige strongly believes that further consultation around the toolkit and support should include experts from beyond the education sector, as well as consulting with young people directly.



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# **Contributor**

## School of Education, University of Galway

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## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

Insert response here:

- This is a very welcome update of an essential part of Senior Cycle education and this aim encapsulates the key elements. The verb 'empower' is key and highlights that the 'how' is as important as the 'what' in this subject. Empowering the teacher to become 'facilitator' rather than 'expert' as referenced on p.9 will need careful and effective CPD due to the unique space that is SPHE.
- There is a welcome reference to both criticality and inclusivity included in the cross-cutting elements. In line with this it would strengthen this aim if both were referenced explicitly here in the aim.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health

1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

- LO 1.3 & LO 1.4 both reference '*societal norms/attitudes*' – it is hoped that this will be further clarified for the teacher. Societal norms and attitudes vary hugely from one school/community to another and in schools with wide catchment areas students may be coming from varying backgrounds with equally varying experience of societal norms and attitudes. Inequality underpins this variation and would presumably emerge in the critical analysis cited in LO 1.3. We would suggest that there is a specific LO to explore and define what we mean by '*societal norms/attitudes*' as a precursor to exploring how this can influence relationships with '*alcohol, drugs, media, technology and one's sense of self*'. We would also suggest the addition of '*school*' to LO 1.4.
- LO 1.7 & 1.8 are very welcome here. It is hoped that mindfulness resources such as those available through Headspace <https://www.headspace.com/> will be included in the accompanying toolkit.
- We question the positioning of LO 1.3 & 1.4 as they break the flow which is clear through the other learning outcomes in strand 1. We suggest these would be better placed after LO 1.6.
- We suggest that there is a space to include reference to the '*Inner Development goals*' here as this framework overlaps with much of the sentiment in these learning outcomes based on Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating and Acting to enable change. <https://www.innerdevelopmentgoals.org>.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

- The cultural roots inherent in LO 2.6 which references gender-based violence is an example of how there is no universal shared understanding on many issues. In the multicultural context of Irish classrooms, this could become a difficult topic to navigate in a critical manner without applying a Western perspective.
- With reference to LO 2.4 & 2.6 which both reference gender, allowance will need to be made for varying school contexts. Attitudes to gender in all-boys schools in the light of the influence of Andrew Tate showed that popular culture can have an all-encompassing influence in a short period of time which by the nature of this subject will emerge in the SPHE class. This highlights the need for ongoing and relevant CPD and support for teachers.
- There is room for more reference to positivity in relation to sexuality across the learning outcomes in this strand. The references to ‘harmful attitudes’, ‘pornography’ and ‘gender-based violence’ could be balanced with an exploration of healthy sexual relationships.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

- We question the title: '*Into adulthood*' and suggest that this is an overarching title for the entire SPHE specification with relevance to all three strands.
- Clarity is needed on the various skills referenced in LO 3.2, LO 3.5 & LO 3.6. This could become very subjective if not backed up by specific CPD. While teachers need to have the freedom to explore these skills with their students, appropriate guidance is necessary.
- While there are many issues covered here which are relevant to this age cohort, there are few specific references to living independently and career choices. LO 3.2 could be expanded to include these similar to the learning outcomes of Taking Charge Module 6 of the LCA Social Education module:  
<https://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/Social%20Education.pdf> p.95.
- LO 3.4 covers 5 key areas which could each form the basis of a lesson. By including all in one learning outcome we would question if some teachers may use this for one lesson only which would necessitate focusing on just one or two points due to time constraints. This could lead to the omission of crucial learning for students.
- Racism is a key issue which has key relevance for many of the learning outcomes in this specification. As such, it would be welcome to see this issue specifically referenced in the same way that 'LGBTQ+ identities' is highlighted. LO 1.3, 1.4, 1.10, 2.4, 2.6, 3.5, 3.6 all directly feed into the examination of the issue of racism. In the updated toolkit it would be helpful for teachers to have specific guidance on this topic to both ensure its inclusion and to equip teachers to explore it in a critical manner.
- LO 3.6 is very welcome and the specific reference to allyship skills is key. It will be necessary to ensure teachers approach this by facilitating the student to unpack their own biases.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

Insert response here:

- Relevant CPD to enable teachers is crucial for the fulfilment of these learning outcomes. This training will need to be relevant and regularly updated. It will be important to help teachers unpack their own biases in relation to '*social norms/attitudes*'. This training will need to be current for teachers to stay informed of issues such as laws around possession of pornography and age of consent.
- The inclusion of the term '*empathetic*' is very welcome in the aim and the cross-cutting elements, however it is absent in the learning specifications. More reference to empathy in conjunction with taking action for example in LO 3.6 would prepare students to think beyond the self and to feel empowered to take action rather than become apathetic bystanders. It is hoped that this action focus rooted in empathy will be prominent in the detail on the associated recommended pedagogy in the toolkit.
- There is an opportunity for extended learning here to link global inequality to the Global Goals. In this way students can develop their sense of responsibility as they explore their place in the world. Links to the Global Goals and the Inner Development Goals provide a potential framework for this. Both offer a framework within which students can be encouraged to understand the self as a basis for understanding their relationship with the world in general. Our suggestion is that this is explicitly stated in the SPHE specification.
- These learning outcomes do not reference the students relationship with schooling which is a key aspect of well-being. Global Goal 4 and/or the 'Inner development goals' could be used as the basis for this also.
- We suggest that Appendix 1 could be presented in line with Bloom's taxonomy to ensure greater clarity for teachers.
- We very much welcome the explicit reference to LGBTQ+ identities in this specification.
- Most of the resources listed in the SPHE toolkit are over 5 years old – it is hoped that up-to-date relevant resources will be provided backed up by training in appropriate pedagogy in ongoing and accessible CPD.
- From the toolkit the document on effective pedagogical approaches references '*judicious selection of resources*' noting the importance of '*a clear sense of purpose about what learning you want to achieve*'. Again this needs to be highlighted through relevant and accessible CPD.



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# **Contributor**

## HSE Health & Wellbeing

# HSE Health & Wellbeing

## HSE Health &Wellbeing- response to the Draft Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Specification

### **1. HSE Health and Wellbeing**

HSE Health and Wellbeing at national and regional level within the HSE, 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 1** for the HSE Health and Wellbeing's current supports for post primary SPHE and the wellbeing promotion process.

### **3. HSE Health and Wellbeing comments on the Draft Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Specification**

Overall, the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification is very welcome, and clearly an impressive amount of work has gone into the consultation and development of this draft.

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. The reference to beyond school references that transitions can be a challenging time in all of our lives and prepares young people to negotiate this transition successfully.

The overarching response from HSE Health and Wellbeing acknowledges the draft specification is broad and comprehensive, building and enhancing the capacity and health literacy of students. There is a real focus on empowering young people, building skills and understanding, and positive emphasis through use of words such as resilience, nurturing and caring. The delivery of this curriculum to all students will be a considerable achievement.

As with all curricula, a key issue will be the development and support of teacher capacity to create safe spaces for exploration and discussion of a range of issues. The Junior Cycle SPHE Toolkit (2023) is invaluable in this regard. The further expansion of the current Senior Cycle SPHE Toolkit to address the updated specification will be of similar importance.

The recent move to develop a post-graduate qualification for teachers of SPHE is groundbreaking 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 raise the profile, awareness and priority within schools and 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.

In terms of the aim underpinning the specification, it is important to maintain the positive, optimistic and hopeful balance while preparing for the challenges and experiences of moving into adulthood. The WHO definition of health used in the glossary and the wider Ottawa Charter 1996 describes health as a *positive concept emphasising social and personal resources, as well as physical capabilities*. The definition of wellbeing in the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES 2018) provides the positive basis for this focus.

### **3. HSE Health and Wellbeing response to the cross cutting elements**

#### **General Points**

The cross cutting approach is welcomed and is seen as very supportive to the further integration of SPHE. The rationale for the cross cutting elements describes the context, value, continuum of these cross cutting aspects and the knowledge, skill and enhanced learning development building on the junior cycle curriculum.

These cross cutting elements demonstrate the skills that are applicable and important across all three strands and focus on building capacity rather than just imparting knowledge. Specifically naming health literacy, across all three strands is particularly welcome as this skill of appraising and using health information is key to support young people in all aspects of their health and wellbeing as they move into adulthood.

#### 4. HSE Health and Wellbeing Response to Strand 1 – Health and Wellbeing

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.10	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

As half of the learning outcomes in this strand relate specifically to mental health, perhaps consideration of a specific emotional wellbeing strand as a distinct pillar within the overall specification could be considered, to incorporate LO 1.4 to 1.8.

While a focus on positive mental health is extremely important, it is also necessary to address mental health difficulties experienced by young people, understanding that low mood and feeling anxious at times is a normal part of growing up.

**LO 1.1:** The inclusion of the determinants of health is welcome and important to support students to recognize and understand the wide range of social and economic factors that influence health. This understanding and reflection will encourage empathy and understanding of the factors that impact on health and the communities that may experience health inequalities. This will also serve to support and empower young people to maintain / improve their own health.

**LO 1.2:** The enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance – healthy eating and active living will be important themes to thread through the work, study, play and sleep topics, as well as suggested consideration of screen time /social media use here or under LO1.4.

**LO 1.3:** HSE Health and Wellbeing strongly advocate for ongoing focus on alcohol, tobacco / vaping and substance use as part of the focus of the senior cycle specification.

The dangers of tobacco use and tobacco exposure is well documented<sup>[1]</sup>. 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 de-normalising tobacco use and completely removing it from all campuses of primary schools, secondary schools and child care facilities.

In terms of influencing individual behaviour, it is important to target both risk and protective factors; addressing adolescents' attitudes or intentions, motivation to comply with parents or friends, and cultural backgrounds and personality traits<sup>[2]</sup>. Messages focused more clearly on influencing attitudes and beliefs have traditionally been more effective than messages without these types of information.

A focus on the commercial determinants of health where individuals are exposed to marketing, trade and commercial practices that influence their health is very relevant here as well as LO1.1

**LO 1.9:** This focus on understanding different types of addiction and particularly developing awareness and understanding of services and how to access a range of support is very positive. The issue of understanding or recognizing the need for help, seeking or navigating the range of services and supports is important in this learning outcome but will be beneficial in terms of wider awareness of available health and support services.

This may be particularly relevant to substance use where many with alcohol use disorders or issues with alcohol use would not consider this addiction. Understanding the harm caused by alcohol and binge drinking within this LO is important.

This understanding can serve to deepen awareness and empathy on the wider or hidden harms on individuals, their families and community.

**LO 1.10:** This focus is important and can thread through the other two strands also in terms of positive approach to staying safe but also developing awareness and recognizing if someone needs help and practical skills on how to get help.

## 6. Health and Wellbeing Response to Strand 2 - Relationships and Sexuality

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

The potential beneficial impacts of good quality RSE is evidenced globally. According to the World Health Organisation [3], ‘sexuality education equips children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that help them to protect their health, develop respectful social and sexual relationships, make responsible choices and understand and protect the rights of others’, and the evidence consistently shows that ‘young people are more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity, and to practice safer sex when they become sexually active when they are better informed about their sexuality, sexual health and their rights’.

Within Ireland, the recent ESRI (2020) report, *Talking About Sex and Sexual Behaviour of Young Adults in Ireland*[4], using data from the nationally representative, *Growing up In Ireland*, longitudinal study, gives us additional insight into the experiences and needs of young adults with regard to relationships and sexuality.

By age 17:

- 92 % reported receiving some level of RSE in school. With females more likely to have received RSE than males.
- Just over 40% had never discussed sex and relationship issues with their parents.
- Young males were more likely to report no RSE and no conversations with parents about the topic.
- 33 % of young people reported having had sexual intercourse.
- Friends were the most common source of information about sex (almost 50%), with those sourcing most of their information on sex from their friends significantly less likely to report having used contraception when they first had sexual intercourse.
- Nearly a quarter of young people expressed regret over the timing of first sex (31% of female respondents and 16% male respondents), most of whom wished they had waited longer.

The 2021 *Storm and Stress*[5] report outlining adolescents’ experience of sexual harassment, showed the need for awareness raising, and the development of appropriate response strategies within the school setting and in broader society.

Considering the national and international evidence of young people’s needs with regards to relationships and sexuality, and the benefits of school-based provision as a complement to RSE inputs in the home and community settings, Strand 2 of the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Specification is a welcome and timely development. The breadth of the associated Learning Outcomes is significant and achieves a good balance between personal and societal issues with regard to relationships and sexuality. The specification, accompanied by appropriate implementation measures, has the potential to offer invaluable support to young adults as they navigate the later teenage years.

The overall HSE Health & Wellbeing response to the Learning Outcomes within Strand 2 of the draft specification is positive. It was felt that there was a good balance between the focus on the development of knowledge and skills in relation to personal relationships and the broader societal issues.

The exploration of the impact of gendered attitudes within media and society; the raising of awareness, and the development of help-seeking behaviours in relation to sexual and gender based violence; and the acknowledgement of sexual pleasure as an aspect of consenting adult relationships, are particularly welcomed.

**LO 2.1:** This generally reads well, however it was felt that the meaning of the word 'awareness' was unclear and that 'attitudes' might be a better choice. The inclusion of 'consent' here is also suggested.

**LO 2.3:** Not all adult sexual activity is characterised as described in this LO. We would suggest a slight amendment to the wording, 'Discuss the importance of care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure within adult sexual activity.'

**LO 2.4:** Consideration could be given to phrasing the LO more neutrally as in, 'Identify gender-related attitudes within the media, online and in society, and discuss their possible impact on relationships and society, and strategies for challenging negative attitudes and narratives.'

**LO 2.6:** The LO may be setting an unrealistic task in asking students to 'explain' the root causes of GBV. The verb 'Explore' is suggested as a more feasible task for the school setting.

The use of 'Gender Based Violence', rather than 'Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence' is queried. The preference would be to raise awareness of the three aspects of violence, especially as they overlap.

While it is completely appropriate to highlight the disproportionate effect of DSGBV on women and girls, the lack of mention of other groups, e.g. male victims, additionally vulnerable communities and LGBTI+ victims, might compound the stigma and taboo experienced by these groups in relation to DSGBV.

**LO 2.7:** The verb 'investigate' as defined in the glossary may be setting the students an unfeasibly large and complex task when it comes to the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations. It is suggested that 'Consider' or 'Discuss' might be more realistic.

**LO 2.9:** It is felt that 2.9 is too broad in scope and could usefully be divided into three for clarity and to highlight the need for skill development in addition to knowledge acquisition:

- Explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility and possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy.
- Consider the importance of safer sex practices for individuals, and for society, and the development of communication and negotiation skills in this regard.
- Demonstrate the ability to source trustworthy sexual health information, including with regard to sexual health services

## 7. HSE Health and Wellbeing Response to Strand 3 - Into Adulthood

### Students should be able to

- 3.1 explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
- 3.2 demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
- 3.3 explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
- 3.4 summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
- 3.5 consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
- 3.6 demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Healthy Ireland<sup>[6]</sup> advocates a life course perspective to promoting health that approaches health as an integrated continuum rather than disconnected and unrelated stages. This Strand 3: Into Adulthood, acknowledges this continuum and the transition that is ahead for young people. The LO of this strand are valuable in further developing self- care skills which can build and link with the LO's outlined within the other strands.

**LO 3.3:** HSE Health and Wellbeing welcomes the exploration of change, loss and heartache as aspects of the human condition and of the care and coping mechanisms that may be of support in difficult circumstances.

**LO 3.6:** Building understanding of the rights of responsibilities of adulthood and their role in shaping society by promoting equity and inclusion is very important and can link across and complement other aspects of the senior cycle curriculum.



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National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Contributor

## Irish Development Education Association (IDEA)

# Irish Development Education Association (IDEA)

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

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

#### Insert response here:

IDEA, the Irish Development Education Association, is the national network for Global Citizenship Education (GCE) in Ireland and a leading voice for the sector. We represent over 110 members involved in GCE in formal, non-formal and informal settings. Together we work to strengthen GCE in Ireland and to raise awareness of the crucial role it plays in fostering global citizenship and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Target 4.7 of the SDGs highlights the importance of GCE in achieving all of the SDGs:

*By 2030 ensure all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including among others through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.*

IDEA welcomes this consultation process, and broadly agrees that the aim of the updated curriculum summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students. The student-focused, multi-faceted nature of the aim is welcome, particularly the emphasis on health, resilience, respect, empathy, and care. The focus on students' lives now, as well as preparing them for the future, is an important one.

Furthermore, we welcome the description of multiple literacies and the inclusion of three cross-cutting elements in the SPHE Specification, which strengthen the emphasis and centrality of critical thinking, empathy, rights and responsibilities, inclusivity, and health literacy to the education of the whole person. Each of these elements reinforces the role of the student as an agent of change, empowered to act for a more equitable, sustainable world for all.

There are a number of important points which we believe should be included and/or further emphasised right across the SPHE Specification, from the aim to the learning outcomes:

1. The incorporation of a global perspective. This specification should be framed by and embedded within the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. SDG 4: Quality Education, is of particular relevance to this, and all, curriculum development. Target 4.7 provides the impetus for ensuring that all learners access quality Global Citizenship Education (GCE).

2. An emphasis on the multiple crises currently facing humanity and an acknowledgment of the urgency with which humanity must grapple with these crises (climate, biodiversity, social), for the sake of the health and wellbeing of current and future generations and of the planet. This should include a recognition of the socio-economic determinants of health and wellbeing. It should also acknowledge the need for Global Citizenship Education values such as empathy, solidarity, inclusivity and learner agency to be promoted and nurtured in the face of these crises.
3. Recognition of the interdependent relationship between humanity and the natural environment. This would include environmental health and its impact on both physical and mental wellbeing; and extending the language of care and respect to the planet and all living beings. The 2023 Citizens' Assembly recognised that young people are integral to ensuring that the environment is protected, and Recommendation 62 called on all involved in education – The Department of Education and Science, the Teaching Council, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, and the Teacher Education Support Service(s) – 'to engage in meaningful curriculum reform and teacher education to explicitly incorporate teaching and learning on biodiversity in early childhood, primary and post-primary curricula'.
4. An emphasis on interdependence and interconnectedness and on collective, as well as individual, wellbeing. This would be consistent with the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines, and in particular the 'Connected' indicator i.e. connection with my school, my friends, my community and the wider world; appreciation that my actions and interactions impact on my own wellbeing and that of others, in local and global contexts. The Specification should recognise that being part of, and actively involved in, a community, has a positive impact on personal physical and mental health and wellbeing.
5. Extension of the core values of SPHE. These would include 'lifelong learning' and 'respectful relationships with people and the planet'.
6. An emphasis on critical thinking skills and problem solving skills, and a recognition that they are essential for students now, and will continue to be essential into their futures, to help them to recognise and respond to misinformation and to recognise and challenge vested interests (including, for example, far right narratives challenging human rights, 'greenwashing' by fossil fuel industries, media bias, etc).

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

**Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, social people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

(a) Clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE

The individual learning outcomes for Strand 1 are clear.

(b) Relevance of learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today

We welcome the existing learning outcomes, all of which are highly relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Each of these learning outcomes is essential and we particularly support the emphasis on equipping students with critical thinking skills to analyse societal attitudes, social and cultural norms, media influences, etc.

(c) What is missing from this strand

Our health and wellbeing are enhanced by being connected to each other and nature. The SPHE Specification would benefit from explicitly acknowledging this. Overall, the existing learning outcomes could be enhanced by making explicit the interconnected nature of humanity, and the interdependence between humanity and the natural world. The collective nature of wellbeing is at risk of being missed or de-prioritised in favour of an emphasis on the individual, if not identified and promoted clearly in this strand. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, as referenced in the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019, p.10), "acknowledges the importance of the individual and his/her immediate relationships in their social context and in their wider community. This model demonstrates that to be human is to be relational and that wellbeing is always realised in a community". This could be referenced and drawn upon to highlight the collective nature of health and wellbeing. Social connection and meaning derived from collective endeavours is well recognised as an essential component of human health and wellbeing.

With this in mind, we recommend:

- Including reference to the Sustainable Development Goals (especially SDG3 Good Health and Wellbeing) and their importance for collective wellbeing of people and planet.
- Ensuring that teachers have access to training, resources and appropriate support, in recognition of the complexity of some of the concepts within this strand.
- Including a specific learning outcome around developing the skills of empathy and solidarity.
- With regard to learning outcome 1.2, include reference to the socioeconomic factors that act as barriers to health e.g. poverty, inequality, discrimination.
- Add a learning outcome around developing skills to maintain positive mental health in a climate-changing world, in particular the capacity to deal with climate anxiety. Include in curriculum support materials guidance for teachers around this challenge e.g. approaches such as Active Hope
- Include in learning outcome 1.2 and 1.4 reference to environmental health and its connection to mental and physical health.

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

(a) Clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE

The individual learning outcomes for Strand 2 are clear.

(b) Relevance of learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today

We welcome the existing learning outcomes, all of which are highly relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. The emphasis on gender inequality, and the impact of violence (including GBV) and attitudes on relationships is much needed and welcomed. It is essential that students understand and discuss critically important topics such as sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation and all forms of discrimination.

(c) What is missing from this strand

There is an opportunity to incorporate a global lens into this strand, with reference to the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 5: Gender Equality. There is also a chance to make valuable links between this strand and wider social and health issues i.e. expanding learning around harmful attitudes and narratives regarding gender, to other forms of discrimination e.g. related to race, culture, poverty.

The Specification could be strengthened by including information about how teacher capacity will be enhanced to enable quality and consistent delivery of the SPHE Curriculum.

We recommend that the Specification acknowledge that, in particular with regard to the delivery of Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality, specific training to teachers and school leaders will be provided e.g. through Oide. In addition, we suggest the inclusion of a sentence acknowledging that there is a role to be played by groups/organisations such as members of IDEA who work on issues of relationships and sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, teenage mental health, environmental concerns etc.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

(a) Clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE

The individual learning outcomes for Strand 3 are clear.

(b) Relevance of learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today

We welcome the existing learning outcomes, all of which are highly relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. We support the emphasis on self-care, rights and responsibilities and allyship within the learning outcomes. The equipping of students with skills to embrace inclusion, diversity and solidarity with others is essential to their lives now and into the future, and is key to the achievement of the overall aims of the SPHE curriculum.

(c) What is missing from this strand

We recommend renaming this strand 'Lifelong Learning', which better reflects how the skills outlined in these learning outcomes are both immediately relevant and important in the lives of students now, as well as being important into their future lives as adults. For example, self-care is not a skill that is only relevant or unique to adulthood, it is an approach and habit that should be valued and fostered across all stages of life.

In addition, there is an opportunity to draw strong and clear connections between the existing learning outcomes in this strand, and global citizenship. In order to be effective and engaged global citizens, we must practice self-care and resilience building, to enable us to grapple with global challenges such as discrimination, inequality, poverty and the climate crisis. The fostering of student voice and student agency should be explicitly named and valued in the Specification.

Giving students opportunities to develop and share their own perspectives, and to shape their own learning, are essential components of learning about one's own identity as an individual and as a member of society locally and globally. The allyship skills outlined in Learning Outcome 3.6 could readily be presented through the lens of global citizenship. The Sustainable Development Goals are indicative of this allyship at an international level, and can readily be applied to highlight connections between global, community and individual levels of engagement.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

1. Underpinning each of our responses and recommendations above is the conviction that SPHE should be positioned as the anchor for all teaching and learning. The SPHE Curriculum is uniquely placed to refocus curriculum development and policy discussions on the overall purpose of education. We recommend that this opportunity be taken to acknowledge that we live in a world facing multiple crises, and that our education system must have as its core priority the physical, mental, social and environmental health and wellbeing of people and planet.
2. We recommend adding a fourth strand on Sustainable Futures and Stewardship. Where a fourth strand is not added, we recommend including Sustainable Futures and Stewardship into Strand 3: Into Adulthood. i.e. a learning outcome on students taking greater responsibility for themselves and the planet. This is an opportunity to extend learning about the 'self' to learning about how that 'self' exists and can be positioned in different ways in relation to others and the wider community and global context. This aligns closely with Global Citizenship Education, Education for Sustainable Development, the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals, and associated critical thinking and problem-solving skills around how to be active agents of positive change in the world.
3. We recommend that information be provided on how sufficient time and resources will be dedicated to the delivery of the SPHE curriculum. Particularly if it does not contribute to examination results, resources must be dedicated to ensure that school leaders and teachers are supported to deliver a consistent and high quality SPHE Curriculum and to convince colleagues, students and parents of the value of this Curriculum.

4. We recommend that support materials and training for teachers include clear and explicit guidance on the handling of complex and/or controversial themes and concepts in the classroom and wider school setting. Ensuring that teachers and school leaders are GCE literate will support them in this regard. Global Citizenship Education (GCE) is a long-standing and well-established field of transformative education, providing policy guidance, training and resources for educators and students to explore key questions and challenges around how we live in this interdependent, complex world. We must foster global citizenship competencies in order to create a sustainable, healthy way of living for the benefit of humanity and the planet. The adoption of GCE as the foundation for the SPHE curriculum will enhance it and ensure its successful implementation.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## The Iona Institute

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

Insert response here:

We regard these aims as worth in themselves.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

##### Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour

1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

All of these aims are worthwhile and we have nothing.

### Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
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2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

See response to question 3 below.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

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3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

See response to question 3 below.

### **Gender**

The draft specification defines ‘gender’ as “the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, characteristics, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for women and men. Gender is socially and culturally constructed, so understandings of gender differ across contexts and over time”.

We find this definition takes for granted a contentious view of the word ‘gender’ that comes down too heavily in favour of nurture over nature. It appears to assume that any differences between male and female behaviour, even at a general population level, are purely down to ‘social construction’. This is a ‘blank slate’ view of human nature as outlined by Professor Steven Pinker in his 2002 book of that name where he challenges the ‘social construction’ view of gender.

A counterview to the one espoused by the NCCA is that ‘gender’ is a combination of nurture and nature. To come down so strongly on the side of nurture, as the draft specification does, misleads students.

At a minimum, they need to be taught that there are competing views of what ‘gender’ is and any SPHE syllabus should give a full and balanced account of the nature vs nurture arguments.

### **Gender identity**

The draft defines ‘gender identity’ as “a person’s felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex registered at birth.”

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 Senior Cycle 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 it want biological males who identify as female to be able to play in girls’ sports teams in school?

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 2.3 says students should be able to “discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure”.

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](http://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).

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 one mention in the specification even though they are the primary educators of children.

### **Pornography**

Strand 2.5 says SPHE will “investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations”

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.

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”.

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.” 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?

### **What is not in the specification; any mention of marriage or commitment**

We note that one of the aims of the Senior Cycle SPHE this one will be replacing is to “discuss the role of commitment and relationship skills in marriage and other committed relationships, that help to support lasting relationships and family life”. (p. 28). Marriage is not mentioned at all in the new specification. Why is that?

The overall philosophy of SPHE is highly individualistic. Long-term commitments don’t feature in any real way. We are treated instead as unencumbered individuals who should be able to float freely and easily from one sexual encounter to another and our main concerns should be that these are consensual, no-one gets pregnant or contracts an STI.

Marriage is not even treated as a distant prospect. It is simply ignored, and so is the possibility of having children.

We believe this ill-serves pupils and in the end fails the vital test of promoting their long-term wellbeing.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## Irish Education Alliance

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:**

We agree with this aim. However, it is very broad and there are many hidden details which are not mentioned here such as too much emphasis on gender identity, sexual orientation and sexual activity which will contradict this aim.

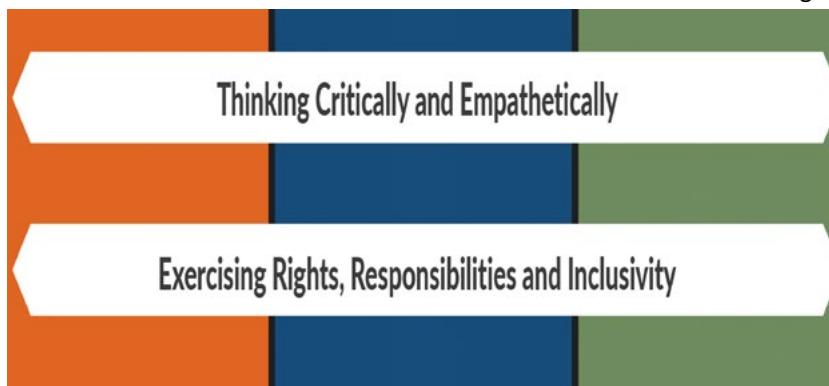
Confusing students and causing them to doubt their gender will lead to confusion, insecurity and even distress, rather than health and resilience. Will being 'empathetic' and 'respectful' (for example) require a student to use preferred pronouns even if they don't agree that a person can change their biological sex? Will they be accused of bullying or discrimination if they don't affirm something that goes against their beliefs? Again, causing them doubt and confusion.

This aim to '*nurture respectful and caring relationships*', should be fundamental, yet sexual activity is defined as..... '*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*'. What exactly is sexual intercourse '*in all its forms*' and why is there such an excessive focus on '*sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships*' for students under the age of consent? (Learning Outcome 2.3). There is no mention of nurture or respect in relationships here. This seems to be promoting promiscuity and multiple partners. This is wrong and the focus needs to move to nurturing respectful and caring relationships, which involve love and commitment, to be consistent with the above stated aim.

The political and ideological content of this draft curriculum leads us to believe that the aim is to indoctrinate and sexualise children.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three crosscutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

We agree that these learning outcomes are mostly relevant for this age group. However, there is a need to include other types of addiction such as gambling, eating disorders, sex and porn addictions as well as drugs and alcohol.

**Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**2.1:**

It is unclear what is meant by '**nurturing online relationships**'. Of course it is important that students learn about inappropriate online interactions such as bullying and coercion and the importance of engaging with people online respectfully. It is very important for students to also learn about the dangers of online relationships, especially with strangers and the pitfalls of dating apps. The SPHE Curriculum previously had 'This Book is Gay' as a resource. This book explains in detail how to use an online dating app called Grindr, which is for over 18s, to meet people for sex. This is utterly inappropriate for students under 18 and could be potentially very dangerous. It is important for students to understand the value of in person relationships over 'online relationships'.

The implication here is that there can be healthy '**online relationships**'? Shouldn't schools be steering students away from online relationships?

**2.3:**

An over emphasis on discussing sexual activity for students under the age of consent is desensitising young people to discussing sexual activity and in effect normalising it. The focus given here in adult relationships is on sexual activity for pleasure. What about the importance of **commitment, trust, communication** and loving relationships, all of which should come before sex? What about the emotional and spiritual connection which comes with sexual encounters. It is important that students learn that consent is not the only criteria that makes sexual encounters morally acceptable. **The legal age of consent for sexual intercourse in Ireland is 17 years** and therefore this learning outcome is entirely inappropriate. It is well known that paedophiles can groom children into consenting to sex. Consent does not ever make sex with minors acceptable. Students should also understand that there is also fine line between consent and coercion which is not always obvious. Desensitising children to sex could be seen as manufacturing consent.

Definitions of '**sexual activity**' and '**sexuality**' is given in the Glossary of Terms in Appendix 2 of the full draft Senior Cycle SPHE Specification –

*'Sexual activity: 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'.*

The NCCA 'sex is for pleasure' approach pervading the whole RSE Curriculum is evident here. This is not the message that 16–18 year olds should be learning, as with the reference to sexual intercourse '**in all its forms**' involving '**other people**'.

*'Sexuality: the components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual expression, sexual fantasies, attitudes and values related to sex. Aspects of sexuality can change as we go through different ages and relationships.'*

The **highly sexualised nature** of the Senior Cycle SPHE course jumps out from this definition, including the implication that it is normal for a person to have many sexual relationships over time with different people.

#### **2.4:**

Our main concern in this area is the teaching in schools of gender ideology, a relatively new theory, as fact. This could lead vulnerable teenagers who are perhaps struggling with self-esteem, mental illness or anxiety to question their gender. We should be supporting them to be comfortable with themselves and their developing bodies, not leading them to believe that changing their gender identity will solve all their problems. Gender dysphoria is a recognised mental health condition which needs to be treated with the utmost care by healthcare professionals. Normalising and encouraging social transitioning (including changing names and pronouns and facilitating it in schools) is dangerous and can lead young people down a path of making irreversible life changing medical decisions which they may come to bitterly regret. Social contagion has shown to be a major factor in the increase in the numbers of teenagers presenting with gender dysphoria. Teaching gender ideology in schools and giving LGBTQ plus students an elevated and protected status will only increase this social contagion.

#### **2.7:**

This learning outcome risks encouraging students to explore pornography and normalising its use. How could they assess the influence of pornography without actually watching pornography? This would also make young people curious about how pornography depicts sexual relationships. The assumption seems to be that all pupils in school would be watching pornographic material – in effect **normalising the viewing of pornography** in this age group. It is also indicating that sexual activity is a normal expectation in relationships. **What possible good can come from students investigating pornography when they should be directed away from it?** As a society we should be looking at how to protect children from access to it. Students should be warned about the effects of pornography on the brain and the highly addictive nature of it.

The teaching of this and other topics will also depend on the views and attitudes of the teacher. Discussions or debates could get out of hand where children may learn about topics that they are not mature enough to process. This could cause trauma and anxiety.

#### **2.8**

There may be some good in this learning outcome, but is it necessary to highlight **image based abuse?** There is the question of intimate photos or images of young people circulating, or threatened to be circulated, on social media. It is a positive outcome if it warns students of the dangers of taking intimate selfies or worse, sharing them on social media platforms. But this topic could also put the very idea in young peoples' minds.

#### **2.9:**

The above learning outcome again risks normalising sexual encounters without the context of relationships or commitment and could give students the impression that because they can have safe sex, so there is no need for inherent caution about this.

All of the above aspects arise from sexual intercourse or ‘**sex in all its forms**’. This will require educating students on how to have ‘safe sex’, which is a myth, as sex often takes place in less-than-ideal circumstances, especially for young people. As indicated, the course will teach them how to deal with unplanned pregnancy – no doubt they would be taught about the ‘morning after’ pill and abortion, which should never be normalised as a form of contraception when the moral and psychological issues are massive. This is a moral minefield, and the handling of this very sensitive subject will again largely depend on the individual views of the SPHE teacher.

\*\*\* The draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum has a new dimension to teachings in SPHE/RSE – assessment of what pupils have learned: ‘*The focus of assessment is to enable students to show evidence of their learning journey*’(Full SC SPHE Specification – see p.16 ‘Assessment’). **-This is inappropriate for the intimate nature of topics covered in the Strand 2 on RSE and a violation of students’ rights to privacy in these highly sensitive issues.**

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

### **3.5/3.6:**

We are all individuals, and everyone deserves to be treated with respect. Bullying of any sort should not be tolerated and we are all entitled to our beliefs and opinions. However, these beliefs and opinions should not be imposed on others or taught to children and young people as fact. No minority group (of which there are many) should be discriminated against. However, neither should any minority group such as LGBTQ+ people be given special treatment or an elevated status over any other. This is not equality. Ideologies and theories such as gender identity and critical race theory should not be taught as fact. This curriculum appears to be politically and ideologically driven. There is a danger that in the assessment process students who do not agree with these theories will be penalised. Is this education or indoctrination?

***'Allyship Skills (Glossary of Terms in Appendix 2):***

***Allyship involves recognising and using one's privileged status (for example as white or male or Irish person) to support individuals from minority identity groups'.***

This is critical race theory. It is also a discriminatory statement against men and white people. To teach children to think less of themselves or feel ashamed because they were born white, Irish or male or indeed to instill a sense of victimhood in non-Irish children or other minority groups is wrong and totally contradicts the stated aim of the curriculum.

### **Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

Below are some of the very **controversial, indoctrinating and overly sexualised** definitions in Appendix 2 which are extremely inappropriate. **These need to be either removed or amended:**

***'Gender: gender means the socially constructed roles, responsibilities, characteristics...***

– this is the false proposition that gender is socially constructed and unrelated to a child's physical biological sex.

***'Gender identity: a person's felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex registered at birth'.***

– This is gender identity theory – that a person's felt gender may be different from their biological sex; ie '*a boy could become a girl, neither or both*' – as set out in some of the SPHE textbooks. This is an ideology and should not be taught to students as fact.

**'LGBTQI+': an umbrella term to signify gender and **sexuality diversity** and refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people'.**

-There is a completely disproportionate focus on LGBTQ matters in the SC SPHE course and this is generally what they are referring to when they use the term 'diversity' in the SC Specification.

**'Sexuality: the components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual expression, sexual fantasies, attitudes and values related to sex.'**

**'Aspects of sexuality can change as we go through different ages and relationships.'**

-The highly sexualised nature of the SC SPHE course jumps out from these definitions, including the implication that a person will have sexual relationships with many different people over time. This seemingly promotes promiscuity, which can have negative effects on health and on establishing long term committed relationships.

**'Sexual Orientation: each person's capacity for emotional and sexual attraction to, and intimate sexual relations with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender'.**

-This points to '*intimate sexual relations*' with more than one person and more than one gender and again promotes promiscuity.

***Social Norms...****'it is important to interrogate, question and critique social norms, especially those which may be harmful, unhelpful or not reflective of what people actually feel is important'.*

-This points students in the direction of the prime importance of their feelings – rather than any objective set of values in the area of sexuality and relationships. While critical thinking is of course important, this seems to be suggesting to students that there is something wrong with a social norm by its very nature. It directs students to critique social norms – for example the normal conventional morality of sex in a committed relationship.

***'Allyship Skills': Allyship involves recognising and using one's privileged status (for example as white or male or Irish person) to support individuals from minority identity groups'.***

-This is an **outrageous** imposition of critical race theory on Irish school students, especially considering the long history of oppression of the Irish people.



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

## The Irish Heart Foundation

# The Irish Heart Foundation

## Background

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 (IHF) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to this consultation on the draft Senior Cycle SPHE specification. This builds on previous submissions in 2022 and 2023 to the NCCA on the Junior Cycle SPHE programme, the Junior Cycle Digital Media Literacy consultation and our most recent submission to the Draft Transition Year Programme Statement. This submission is part of our ongoing engagement on the Senior Cycle SPHE programme.

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 Catering Award, 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 Oide and DCU.

## Introduction

The Irish Heart Foundation welcomes the draft Senior Cycle SPHE specification, recognising that it is an inclusive, considered, and practical plan with health literacy embedded throughout. This specification draws on the foundational learnings provided by Junior Cycle SPHE, ensuring continuity and complementarity. Indeed, this is articulated succinctly on page 6:

*"By building on the learning in Junior Cycle SPHE, learning in Senior Cycle SPHE enables students to deepen the core skills of self-awareness, self-management, self-regulation, responsible decision-making, social awareness and relationship skills. Senior Cycle SPHE also provides an opportunity for students to extend their health literacy skills, as they learn how to access, understand, appraise and use information and services related to health and wellbeing and build their confidence to communicate and act upon this information."*

## Health Literacy

Reiterating the submissions and dialogue that the IHF has engaged in with the NCCA previously, we welcome the inclusion of health literacy as a cross-cutting element of Senior Cycle SPHE. The definition of being health literate (page 12) is well explained however, to support this definition, we would recommend that the key action verbs (access, understand, appraise, use and apply) are also included in Appendix 1 Glossary of Action verbs.

While the detailed guidance on assessment and reporting is not developed yet, we would hope that sample assessment tasks include a health literacy specific example.

Incorporating health literacy into the learning outcomes of Senior Cycle SPHE is a proactive step in to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed to protect and enhance their well-being, now and into adulthood. Health literacy related learning outcomes are not confined to the Health and Wellbeing strand alone however. For example:

Strand 2, outcome 2.1: “demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict”.

There is scope for the inclusion of health literacy here in terms of sharing health information and advice, support and decision making. Nurturing healthy relationships involves effective communication, empathy, respect, and shared decision-making, all of which are intertwined with health literacy. In healthy relationships, mutual respect and understanding of boundaries are essential. Health literacy promotes the understanding of personal health boundaries, and students can apply this understanding to their relationships, respecting physical and emotional boundaries. Moreover, empowerment helps set boundaries, make choices that align with values, and ensure relationships enhance well-being rather than compromising it.

Strand 3, outcome 3.2: “demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life”.

This outcome should recognise and include national guidelines and strategies across key health indicators, for example sleep, physical activity etc. Similarly, students should be able to apply and use their skills in context and in practical scenarios, such as understanding prescription labels, evaluating treatment options, communicating their health concerns and needs to healthcare providers or navigating the healthcare system, as well as “knowing their numbers” across the lifecycle. Knowledge of and ability to apply these guidelines to their lives would fit well into this outcome. However, it may also be necessary to provide teacher training to support this.

### **IHF Comments on the Strands of study**

#### ***Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing***

In the strand outline, it notes “they will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.” The Irish Heart Foundation would suggest that “mental” should be removed, with health and wellbeing being left.

In order to give young people the holistic skills, awareness and techniques to take care of their health and wellbeing, care should be taken not to neglect overall health when ensuring that mental health is given sufficient attention. Currently, we feel that the learning outcomes for Strand 1 are heavily weighted to mental and emotional health, to the detriment of other aspects of health, including physical health which, in fact will impact on mental health. The outcomes must recognise the symbiotic relationship between mental and other aspects of general health.

In terms of specific objectives, there seems to exist a gap between “factors that influence health and wellbeing generally” and “fostering positive mental health”, whereby insufficient outcomes are considered for positive health more generally. Indeed, there is a disconnect between the outline which looks at the relationships between physical, social, emotional and mental health and how the outcomes are articulated. Currently, they do not provide a clear roadmap for their development across the various areas, except with mental health. While we do recognise that mental health is weighted as a key area of importance which is highlighted in consultation, it cannot be at the expense of other areas. There is only one learning outcome (1.1) with a general health outlook, with

1.2 similarly more focused on stress than physical health. Therefore, we would strongly recommend that an additional learning outcome be included to follow 1.1 modelled on the wording: “Explore the factors that influence holistic health and wellbeing including physical activity, food, sleep, digital, social, emotional and spiritual.”

Allied to this point, is that in terms of health and wellbeing, and outcome 1.1, is that factors that influence health and wellbeing are their conditions of everyday life – those daily social experiences; physical environments; financial resources, and material living conditions - which together shape how people live their lives throughout the life course. The learning outcome should empower students to recognise the multifaceted nature of health and the various determinants that play a crucial role in shaping individual and community well-being – both positively and negatively. Therefore, we would recommend that learning outcome 1.1 could be re-worded to further elaborate on this premise: “Research the determinants of health and apply to themselves and others”.

The learning outcomes should be age-appropriate and reflect the developmental needs and abilities of the students. Although the Junior Cert SPHE Programme covers key areas such as physical activity and sleep, it needs to be considered in Senior Cycle as appropriate for age and stage. The impacts of physical health become more important as their influences widen and their decision-making increases. As they become more independent and move into adulthood, they must move from structured activity to independent applications.

### ***Strand 2: Learning Outcomes***

In relation to sexual health, there is an opportunity to introduce a reference to menopause in 2.9. While reference is made to “explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility... and how to access sexual health services”, the glaring omission of menopause need to be addressed. The need to start an open conversation around menopause was a key insight from the Women’s Health Taskforce, to improve women’s health outcomes and experiences of healthcare. Indeed, a recent campaign from the Department of Health had the objective to change “society’s conversation on menopause from one of unspoken taboo and secrecy to one of acceptance, openness and empowerment”. As the end of a woman’s fertility journey, and a key part of their reproductive health, it should be referred to in outcome 2.9.

### ***Strand 3: Into Adulthood***

The learning outcome related to rights and responsibilities before the law (3.4) presents a further opportunity for students to take their learnings and further apply those. Having summarised their rights and responsibilities before the law, they will be well-equipped to use their knowledge to advocate effectively on a wide range of relevant issues, including those listed in 3.4. A further outcome here would not only strengthen their self - advocacy skills but also empowers them to drive positive change in their communities and society at large. This would then feed into the current learning outcomes in 3.5 and 3.6. We would suggest that an additional learning outcome could be introduced: “utilise their knowledge of their rights and responsibilities before the law to engage in advocacy”.

### ***Other comments***

In respect of the “further characteristics of effective teaching and learning in SPHE”, it is also important to include that effective SPHE teaching “recognises the importance of good sources of information.” By using credible sources, it models the importance of basing decisions and opinions on trustworthy information. Teaching students to seek out the most current and reliable sources of

information is a valuable skill that can empower them to make informed decisions. Encouraging students to question the sources of information, evaluate their credibility, and compare different perspectives is a key part of SPHE. Information sources and resources are constantly evolving, so sources of information must be reviewed and considered regularly, which in turn promotes accurate knowledge, teaches critical thinking, and empowers students to make informed decisions. It may also be necessary to provide teacher training to support this.

## **Conclusion**

As ever, 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 Senior Cycle SPHE specification. We welcome the ongoing work being done to embed health literacy in secondary schools and believe this is another part of that process.

As with other consultations, the Irish Heart Foundation and our experts in health promotion and school-based health promotion initiatives, are always available to discuss any of the issues raised in this submission further.



**NCCA**

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National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Contributor

## Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)

# Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)

## **Questions to consider**

### **Question 1: Aim**

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:**

The aim for the updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is comprehensive and progressive. It seems to align with the fundamental goals of SPHE and encapsulate the core objectives of second-level education quite effectively. SPHE should prepare students for life as teenagers and adults. Up to now, this type of life skill education has been lacking and we welcome the new curriculum to counteract that.

The specifics of the aim are met throughout the curriculum and these should be kept through to the curriculum's implementation. However, a more in depth understanding of what each term in the aim means in regards to what students should receive and feel after senior cycle SPHE may be valuable to students while trying to reflect on their learning.

The ISSU agrees with this aim and believes it is present in all three strands of the new curriculum. A particular positive with this curriculum's overarching principles is seeing the three cross cutting elements go through each strand. If this aim is adequately carried out, students 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

### **Question 2: The Learning**

The draft course is structured around three strands and three crosscutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

**Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The ISSU recognises the importance of Learning Outcome **(LO) 1.5**, as it provides insight for students on fostering a good mental health, and how to recognise unhealthy thinking patterns in themselves and others. It is incredibly important that mental health is discussed and it is vital to state that everyone must know that everyone has mental health, and it is important to look after themselves and others.

The ISSU believes that this LO will help to break the stigma around mental health and encourage it to be an open and honest conversation and learning experience for students and teachers alike. Furthermore, it is vital that teachers get appropriate training for this LO as it could be triggering and distressing for students should it not be taught with awareness and care.

The ISSU notes with concern that **LO 1.8** may cause students to feel shame about certain coping mechanisms they use to manage their stress. Different people respond to stress differently, and it is important to recognise and respect this.

The ISSU recommends that while healthy examples of coping mechanisms should be taught, the element of shame should be eliminated. For example, a student may find it beneficial to have some alone time in their room in order to feel better and that may be healthy for them but not for another student.

The ISSU further suggests a one-page teacher explainer be developed for **LO 1.8**.

The ISSU believes that in terms of clarity, **LO 1.10** should expand on the examples in terms of ‘social situations’, for example going on a night out, attending school or even online. This can be interpreted differently by different teachers, and clarity needs to be provided on the learning outcomes of this topic. This should also cover how students should be mindful of their behaviours when out socially, in order to prevent intimidation towards others. This would include acting boisterously, using loud voices etc.

The ISSU additionally suggests that clarity be provided in **LO 1.10** concerning social media. This could be done by changing “*Safely manage social situations*” to “*Safely manage social situations whether in person or online*”.

The ISSU also states that the word ‘respect’ is excluded from this LO, and believes that teachers and learners would benefit in terms of clarity if it was included.

The ISSU further recognises the absence of mentioning misuse of drugs/alcohol in **LO 1.10** and recommends that this be added to provide clarity to teachers and inform students on how to stay safe while out socially.

The ISSU notes with concern that Strand 1 excludes the mention of neurodiversity and disability, although inclusion is mentioned, we believe that neurodiversity and disability should be explicitly stated in a new Learning Outcome .

The ISSU recommends the inclusion of this LO as it would provide explicit learning for students around the topic, and could provide insight on recognising neurodivergence in others and themselves.

The ISSU further recommends that there should be more definitions added to the Glossary around the subject of neurodiversity and disability as it is vital the terminology is correct and informative for the benefit of teachers and students.

#### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The ISSU recognises the importance of education surrounding relationships for young people and supports the **LO 2.2** in providing a learning environment for young people to reflect on healthy and unhealthy aspects of relationships.

The ISSU recommends adding the word ‘respect’ in **LO 2.2**, as it is very important that not only do we understand others’ beliefs and values, but that we respect them. This LO could impact how relationships work out for young people, so it is vital that this will provide clarity for teachers delivering these lessons and ensure that students learn valuable and carefully considered information around the topic.

The ISSU further recommends that a one-page teacher explainer is developed for this particular LO, to provide extra clarity. Furthermore, the ISSU recommends that there be an explicit mention of LGBT+ inclusion, especially when the lesson is delivered in single-sex schools.

The ISSU suggests that a one-page explainer be developed for **LO 2.3**, with particular focus on the aspect of ‘mutual pleasure’ and clarity that masturbation should be included in the teaching of this Learning Outcome.

The ISSU believes that **LO 2.4** needs to be approached objectively, because students may have biased and harmful narratives surrounding gender and may not even realise it. There needs to be objective examples included.

The ISSU commends the inclusion of LO **2.5**, as it is vital that young people can recognise abusive relationships and know how to approach them.

The ISSU recommends that there be more information in a teacher explainer about the cultural aspect of this. It is vital that all cultures and relationships are represented in this LO.

The ISSU praises the incorporation of the discussion of pornography in Strand 2, particularly LO **2.7**. It is apparent that students will come across pornography at some point on various social media, so it is vital to teach awareness around the topic and having open and honest conversations about it. It will provide students the information to know how to be safe.

The ISSU recommends that an in-depth teacher explainer should be provided in order to ensure that the LO is taught effectively and properly.

The ISSU proposes that an emphasis be put on the legal aspect of topics discussed in LO **2.8**. Unfortunately image-based abuse is a big thing amongst young people in Ireland, it is necessary for students to be taught about the legal implications of this and know what to do when it happens to them or others.

The ISSU notes that in LO **2.8**, although it is essential for all students to learn every aspect of sexual harassment specifically, students' perspectives and attitudes on it are very different considering their gender and school they go to.

The ISSU advises that there should be separate teacher explainers for teachers that are in single-sex schools and teachers who are in mixed schools.

The ISSU supports the inclusion of the topic of fertility in LO 2.9. It is vital that young people know about it and are aware of it for themselves.

The ISSU suggests that menopause should be included in the Learning Outcome. Even though it isn't a concern for young students, many people around them are affected by it and students should have the awareness of it and have a basic understanding.

The ISSU believes that there should be an explicit mention of vaccines in LO 2.9. It is vital for students to know which vaccines they are supposed to get and are available to them and how they can stay safe when sexually active.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The ISSU agrees that Strand 3 is an excellent opportunity for students to learn more about the transition into adulthood and it will provide them with skills and knowledge necessary to make an apt transition into life after school

The ISSU believes that **LO 3.1** is important to include and it's vital to emphasise that self-care is not a cure to ill-health but rather a strategy to maintain good health.

The ISSU notes that **LO 3.2** is a great addition to Strand 3, providing students with more insight and information about life after secondary education. However this particular Learning Outcome is rather vague and could need some clarification. Is self management referring to external factors such as time management, managing your social life or is it supposed to be more internal e.g. regulating emotions, recognising internal biases etc.

The ISSU recommends that clarity is provided around this LO, and that it is refined as it is too broad.

The ISSU commends that in **LO 3.3** grief is acknowledged as valid experience for a young person.

The ISSU advises that students are taught how to accept change and manage it.

The ISSU recognises the importance of educating students on their rights and responsibilities.

The ISSU notes that although this is a vital aspect of **LO 3.4**, it should be visible in the other strands also.

The ISSU recommends similar to the Politics and Society course that the topic of rights and responsibilities should be covered with a particular focus on the international aspect.

The ISSU recognises that **LO 3.5** is a vital skill that students need to know for transitioning into adulthood.

The ISSU states that sometimes standing up for yourself or others isn't always the best course of action if it puts you or others at risk when doing so. There should be no sense of guilt in this also.

The ISSU recommends that there should be specific mention of minority groups in **LO 3.6**.

The ISSU believes that the previous point made of including neurodivergence and disability should be included in terms of allyship in this LO also.

The ISSU further suggests that there should be an additional Learning Outcome focusing on financial literacy and information on general adult life skills. This will give students a deeper understanding of things that are not often discussed in school but are essential to life after secondary education.

### **Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

The ISSU notes with concern this curriculum is due to be taught in 60 hours over fifth and sixth year. The ISSU believes it could be difficult to adequately touch on each learning objective and ensure students process and reflect on their learning.

The ISSU believes strict assessment could add undue stress on students while they are already in a stressful time leading up to the leaving certificate exams.

The ISSU recommends assessment should be as broad as possible, meaning the project can be displayed using various mediums.

Assessment guidelines, mock example projects, and projects being completed in class time would all reduce the assessments stress on students.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

Jigsaw, the National Centre  
for Youth Mental Health

# Jigsaw, the National Centre for Youth Mental Health

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

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

**Insert response here:**

Yes, this aim captures the essence of the 3 key strands within the draft curriculum.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

Jigsaw welcomes the addition of specific factors which relate to mental health and wellbeing as part of the new curriculum for Senior Cycle SPHE and a number of these learning outcomes speak to the importance of promoting and supporting youth mental health within the school setting and indeed beyond and into the early years of adulthood.

There are a number of significant learning outcomes such as 1.1, 1.2, 1.4, 1.6 that encourage thinking, understanding, awareness raising, reflection and critically, the development of strategies which can promote and support youth mental health. In reviewing some of the additional learning outcomes it may be worth noting the order and structure of the learning outcomes such as 1.3, 1.5 and 1.9 - the focus moves very early into the alcohol and drugs, negative self-talk and addiction, whereby the expectation is that a student can understand and explain a "pathway into addiction". These are complex, multi-faceted and challenging discussion points for many adults, let along a young person who is trying to understand the many factors that can contribute to their emotions, sense-of-self, identity and, importantly, any difficulties they may be experiencing. A potential area for inclusion is a strengths-based approach as a practical strategy which could support them to manage negative self-talk, harmful thoughts but also in terms of building their capacity to reach out and look for help.

There is a significant gap in relation to help-seeking within this strand and indeed within the learning outcomes, as it does not reference the importance of a trusted adult in the life of a young person but also the importance of asking for help. While this may be embedded within the lesson plans directly, it might be helpful to explicitly reference as such so that the learning outcomes build on understanding youth mental health, factors that affect our mental health and wellbeing i.e. the broader determinants of mental health and a settings-based approach where young people live, learn, work and play....and when a young person is experiencing difficulties, how to reach out and seek help. This would also create space to introduce the factors such as alcohol or drug use and misuse. Please see link to the My World Survey (2012, 2019) which provides an evidence-base for the importance of having "One Good Adult" in the life of a young person.

<https://jigsaw.ie/research-evaluation/my-world-survey/>

Please see links to some further resources which could support some of this development which include strategies for managing feelings, understanding and recognising stress and anxiety, having an awareness of potential triggers and simple techniques for young people to use when they experience these feelings. All of these resources are located within our Jigsaw Schools Hub which provides a variety of educational and classroom-based resources for school staff on promoting and supporting youth mental health and wellbeing.

<https://jigsaw.ie/school/strategies-for-managing-feelings/>

<https://jigsaw.ie/dealing-with-stress/>

<https://jigsaw.ie/managing-anxiety/>

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**This section is a vital addition to the curriculum in relation to encouraging greater awareness of the diverse relationships which can emerge in early adolescence and into early adulthood. The learning outcome 2.2 is pivotal and essential to any discussion on the development and management of relationships (either in-person or online). The learning outcome 2.3 is incredibly welcome as part of the curriculum; it is relevant and hugely needed. What is essential to this piece is that the discussion points are “reality-based” so the use of case studies may be important for this section in order to reflect the ever-changing landscape for young people when it comes to sexual identity, associated behaviours, the “new norms” and the understanding of healthy and safe relationships. We have included a link to an article created by a number of our clinical experts which speaks to consent and sex which may be helpful.**

<https://jigsaw.ie/consent-and-sex/>

With regard to learning outcomes 2.4 and 2.7, which relate to porn and the attitudes and behaviours section - this is a challenging area in relation to youth mental health. The My World Survey found that over two thirds of young people have viewed porn on the internet. We have developed a clinical piece on this particular topic which I have also included for your reference.

<https://jigsaw.ie/porn-and-mental-health/>

It is indeed linked to many other elements such as Body Image which is an important consideration in the new curriculum within this particular strand.

There is a significant body of evidence which outlines that a greater number of young people use online as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining relationships, so it is vital that this area is discussed openly, honestly and without judgement or bias. At Jigsaw, we discuss with young people the importance of having healthy digital boundaries and how a young person might navigate some of these areas. Please see link to a classroom-based resource - while aimed at Junior Cycle there is a critical message within this resource on attitudes to social media and recognising unhealthy attitudes, which may further support these learning outcomes. Please see additional resources which may also help with regards to online engagement, social media, self-care etc.

<https://jigsaw.ie/school/digital-boundaries/>

<https://jigsaw.ie/school/privacy-rights-and-boundaries-online/>

A final consideration for this strand is in relation to sexual identity; the space and safety of this discussion is so vital to encourage young people to feel they can explore these topics in a respectful, responsive, equal and inclusive way. This is often a challenging space to facilitate for young people and we recognise how difficult it may be for the teachers to deliver on this topic, so we have provided some more articles which many support this process. Please see additional resources in this area such as transgender identity.

<https://jigsaw.ie/i-think-i-might-be-transgender/>

<https://jigsaw.ie/ask-jigsaw-bisexual/>

<https://jigsaw.ie/dealing-with-a-break-up/>

Jigsaw has partnered with [BeLonG To Youth Services](#) to provide an online course: Supporting the Mental Health of LGBTI+ Young People.

This course is for adults who work or volunteer with young people. It consists of a self-directed online course that takes approximately 2.5 hours, done in your own time and at your own pace.

The course explores:

- LGBTI+ Terminology
- Attitudes around LGBTI+ issues
- Mental health and LGBTI+ Young People
- Strategies for creating LGBTI+ safe and supportive spaces.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

The learning outcome 3.1 references ill-health; this is somewhat confusing/unclear as to the overall expected outcome. Does it relate to mental health, physical or emotional health? This section is probably the least clear in terms of what students will be expected to cover as it references in 3.3, life events, change, and it reads that it is linked to managing emotions such as loss or heartache, which is possibly more suited to the strand on Health and Wellbeing. Further clarity in 3.5 and the expectation that this may cover Bullying or Peer Pressure? While it is without a doubt relevant, the placing of the learning outcomes within this section may require some consideration.

Self-care is highlighted also which certainly will emerge in discussions within health and wellbeing so perhaps again the location of these discussion points may raise some questions. We have included a link here to the five-a-day approach which we use with young people that are practical strategies which they can use to improve their mental health. There is a strong evidence-base for this approach and it is very well received across school settings, outlined in this webpage.

<https://jigsaw.ie/five-a-day-for-your-mental-health/>

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

Jigsaw welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. This is an essential development for young people moving into Senior Cycle within our school settings. The emphasis on mental health and wellbeing is welcomed and supported and we have included a range of additional resources for your consideration, which may further support this process. An important consideration in this process is the teacher-training component and ensuring that teachers feel both confident and competent in these areas, which is key to the success of the curriculum implementation.

One important consideration in this process is the cultural changes which are emerging across many educational settings and indeed communities where our schools are based, due to migration, conflict in Ukraine and refugee supports. This is having a significant impact on schools, school staff and importantly young people.

Jigsaw has worked across 146 post-primary schools over the last four years implementing our One Good School™ Initiative and there are emerging issues for young people which have been identified, all of which are important within the 3 strands of the new curriculum. We have learned a great deal from implementing this initiative and we would welcome further opportunities to share some of our learning and expertise in the content of informing the completion of the SPHE curriculum for Senior Cycle.

Furthermore, we have developed a number of articles and supporting content for this which you will find on [www.jigsaw.ie](http://www.jigsaw.ie)



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

The Joint Managerial  
Body/Association of  
Management of Catholic  
Secondary Schools

# The Joint Managerial Body/ Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools

## Introduction

The Joint Managerial Body/Association of Management of Catholic Secondary Schools (JMB/AMCSS) presents this submission as representing the perspective of voluntary secondary schools on the draft specification for a senior cycle programme 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.

## The Draft Specification

### 1. *Meeting the High-Level Course Aims*

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

JMB fully supports the overarching objectives of the proposed new specification 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 adults. 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 senior cycle 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, if this ground is to be recaptured. 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 three strands and three cross-cutting elements, representing a significant shift in pedagogical approach as distinct from earlier iterations of this programme at senior cycle, and aligning with that of the new junior cycle SPHE short course.

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 at senior cycle will equally be demanded of the renewed teacher education support service, *Oide* as well as being comprehended at initial teacher training levels. In particular the evolution of a safe and contained, yet relevant and honest, dialogic approach with 16- to 18- 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 strands present a highly appropriate and iterative framework through which the palimpsestic engagement of emerging adults 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. We also see a case for including SPHE training in ITE courses, especially in those subject areas comprehended by wellbeing provision, such as physical education.

### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional, and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques, and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

In terms of relevance, the contemporary social backdrop to the senior cycle SPHE/RSE review forefronted a range of important topics ranging from the issues of pressure and consent to personal empowerment, online life and cyberbullying, drugs and alcohol awareness, 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 which they emerge.

In particular, JMB very much welcomes this strand’s emphasis on positive mental health, with an exploration of topics including:

- the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol, and drugs, and one’s sense of self
- recognising unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
- strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
- recognising the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognising when help should be sought, and,
- where to go and how to access help if needed

There is no ‘silver bullet’ which will resolve the challenges of addressing student mental health in schools. These challenges are both perennial and multi-faceted and will always demand constant vigilance as well as operational approaches providing supports from every possible aspect. For schools, the investment in energies and focus will bring returns on multiple levels in terms of student outcomes, attendance, retention, and progression as well as making for a happier, less fraught workplace for the adults of the school community.

This is an all-fronts issue but thanks to the NCCA’s extensive consultation around senior cycle SPHE provision – not least with young people themselves – we now have a coherent and relevant curricular framework within which we can address the key threads needed to weave a fit-for-purpose dialogue around positive mental health in the later teenage years.

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge, and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring, and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

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, and relationships and sexuality education, 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 31<sup>st</sup> 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 levels, 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; age-appropriate 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 at both junior and senior cycles to-date and we commend the NCCA’s active and respectful listening stance throughout its consultation and school engagement processes.

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 a high level of trust between external agencies and school management should therefore represent a priority for all.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

It is axiomatic that schools generally mirror the values of the societies within which they are sited, and in that regard, Ireland’s schools are fortunate in their inheritance of a particular set of civic and moral values and the richness of their broader community environments.

It is also true, however, that wider communities are enriched by the values, attitudes, and dispositions nurtured in the next generation by their schools and JMB very much welcomes the emphasis on communal agency in the draft specification, including:

- exploring a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discussing how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
- considering the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
- demonstrating allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and supporting greater equity and inclusion

The alignment of such early adulthood development with the ethos of the majority of our schools is obvious. We educate for service, justice, and peace – a mission essentially social in character – and we commend the NCCA and all its contributors for the emphasis placed on the journey all emerging adults must take; from self to others, and from inside to out.

### **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. That said, the integrated nature of the programme's three strands and three cross-cutting 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, but we are equally cognisant of the potential for 18-year-old students to utilise their right to withdraw themselves from the entire course, particularly when they perceive themselves to be under pressure in terms of examination preparation. In this respect, schools will require the programme to be optimally delivered by engaged and engaging teachers and supported by both families and the Department in terms of time pressures, curricular overcrowding, and an eventual spreading of the assessment-load on young people under a revised Framework for Senior Cycle.

The integrated nature of the draft specification nonetheless 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 and student engagement, awareness, and communication as the optimal way forward.

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.



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# Contributor

## Men's Aid

## **Thinking critically and empathetically**

Men's Aid are pleased to make this contribution regarding the SPHE senior cycle approach going forward. The focus on a deep learning process for critical, creative, and innovative thinking is most enlightening and is to be welcomed. The programme and indeed learning from the programme is a "praxis" which provides for reflection and action. This along with the programmes endeavour to develop young people as they journey into adulthood in a way that is healthy, respectful, and caring.

Of note the focus on delivering an inclusive programme (pg. 5) that engages all including all genders is to be welcomed.

The underpinning thinking in regard to providing a more focused approach to supporting young people through a socio-cultural critical lens especially by "thinking critically and empathetically" as is set out on page 11 is also to be commended.

"This element focuses on supporting young people to critically consider their own and societal attitudes, values, norms, and behaviours. The purpose is to promote awareness of the influences that shape their decisions and behaviours so that they can make informed choices and act as responsible agents of their own lives. By adopting a socio-cultural critical lens young people can become critically aware of the wider influences on health/wellbeing and relationships; examine social norms (including those that are harmful); and discern what lies within their control, what lies beyond their control and strategies for dealing with both. This lens acknowledges that the individual is not solely responsible for their health and wellbeing and builds an appreciation of the wider influences at play. It also creates awareness that how we relate to others has societal impacts. Thinking emphatically and being able to demonstrate empathy underpins positive interpersonal relationships. It involves being open to different perspectives, seeking to understand the feelings and experiences of others, and showing care for the wellbeing of 12 others. Thinking empathetically is a key feature of critical thinking as it stems from a capacity to seek out alternative ways of seeing our world".

The afore mentioned is a key service value at Men's Aid as we engage with a broad spectrum of victims impacted by DSGBV. Hence, we recognise that this as one of the cornerstones of the new approach to SPHE will carry forward throughout the life of the child into adulthood.

Men's Aid recommend that consideration be given to broadening section (1.10) which covers the area of staying safe while out socially to including staying safe while at home. It is noted that coercive control is

addressed within the document at section (2.5). Could we respectfully suggest that the staying safe at home theme could be broadened under either of the afore mentioned to address further coercive control and domestic violence and the civil and criminal processes and strategy, charters to focus on how to achieve safety through supports as a victim (victims' journey).

regard to domestic violence. We do believe a recognition of the potential to achieve safety for the male victim is opportunistic in this regard. Sadly, our service which supports all victims primarily male from time to time finds itself meeting and supporting young teenage men who are victims of domestic violence/ coercive control.

Time does not allow any further observation other than to say the consensus of opinion at Men's Aid is one of support for an excellent programme which seeks to support the development of respectful, healthy and safe relationships through a deep meaningful and engaging process.

Our thanks again for including Men's Aid in this important work and if we can assist in anyway further please do not hesitate to contact us.



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# Contributor

## Men's Development Network

# Men's Development Network

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

Insert response here:

This submission has been prepared by the Men's Development Network and the National Centre for Men's Health.

Men's Development Network has been active for 26 years in engaging men and boys to promote positive forms of masculinity and to encourage them to be their most authentic selves while promoting social, emotional and inter-personal development and fostering the engagement of men and boys as allies for gender equality and the ending of Gender Based Violence. Working towards these goals MDN presently runs a number of focussed programmes, these include:

1. The CHOICES Programme the national domestic violence intervention programme working with male perpetrators to end their violent or abusive behaviour and become non-violent and respectful within their intimate partner relationships.
2. The Male Advice Line – the national freephone advice and support service for male victims/survivors of domestic abuse.
3. The White Ribbon Campaign – MDN is the national delivery agent of the White Ribbon Campaign which aims to engage with men and boys on ending Violence Against Women and Gender Based Violence.

The National Centre for Men's Health aims to develop innovative and applied research programmes in the area of men's health through the development of partnerships with key stakeholders. In doing so, the Centre seeks to raise the public profile of men's health issues, and to contribute to effective and gender-competent policy and practice in men's health in Ireland.

We agree overall with the stated aims of this curriculum. Our submission is one which is primarily based around the methodologies of engagement with young people, particularly young boys which we believe should be strengths based and should incorporate the values of a non-judgemental non-adversarial approach.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

## Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

### Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.2	
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.4	
	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.5	
	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.6	
	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.7	
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of
1.9	addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.
1.1	

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

Overall, well-balanced set of learning outcomes covering key aspects of health and wellbeing. Consider the following:

- Ensure that Learning Outcome (LO) 1 intersects with other objectives under Strand 1 so that there is a clear acknowledgement of how the broader determinants of health impact students' health and wellbeing, managing a healthy life balance, coping strategies etc.
- 1.3 The focus on social norms is helpful – should this be extended to the area of mental health also to explore potential obstacles such as stigma, acknowledgement of vulnerability?
- We have some concerns about how the language of LOs 5 and 6 might inadvertently reinforce more restrictive or unhelpful constructions of masculinity – 'unhelpful thinking patterns'; 'regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions' – a more fundamental objective, for boys in particular, ought to be i) improved health awareness (in terms of recognising different emotions and what is causing someone to feel a certain way) and ii) improved health literacy (in terms of the language to express emotions). The language used in LOs 5 and 6 might be seen as colluding with the notion that certain emotions (fear and sadness) are off limits for boys (by being 'unhelpful' or 'harmful').
- We propose that the importance of peer-support be named more explicitly in LO7.
- This may be addressed under other Strands, but could there be more of a focus on the importance of loneliness/isolation as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing?

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

### Students should be able to

- 2.1 demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
- 2.2 reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
- 2.3 discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
- 2.4 examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
- 2.5 identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
- 2.6 explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
- 2.7 investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
- 2.8 discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
- 2.9 explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

With regard to clarity the learning outcomes presented are clear and concise. There is a worry however that the 9 separate learning outcomes are too large, and we wonder if it would be possible in the time allotted to give each of these crucial topics the time and space that they require and deserve.

With regards to learning outcomes 2.2 and 2.4 we feel that they could be merged. In terms of addressing the root causes of Gender-Based Violence, the primary root cause as identified in the 'Zero Tolerance' Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence on page 26 is gender norms, with a primary focus on male gender norms. CEDAW General Recommendation 35 (2017) on Gender-Based Violence against Women notes at paragraph 19 that it:

*"regards gender-based violence against women as being rooted in gender-related factors, such as the ideology of men's entitlement and privilege over women, social norms regarding masculinity, and the need to assert male control or power, enforce gender roles or prevent, discourage or punish what is considered to be unacceptable female behaviour. Those factors also contribute to the explicit or implicit social acceptance of gender-based violence against women, often still considered a private matter, and to the widespread impunity in that regard."*

Thus, there should be a particular emphasis placed on gendered identities and how they may influence and structure beliefs, practices and behaviours in relationships and friendships. We propose the facilitation of student workshops where they can explore the prescient aspects of masculinity and femininity as well as the expectations placed on them by their gender. By realising the constructedness of many facets of gendered behaviour we believe that it will allow students to rise above many of these expectations and become their most authentic selves.

For 2.5 we suggest including content on stalking which has recently been classified as a criminal offence under the Criminal Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act.

We see learning outcomes 2.3, 2.7 and 2.8 as being closely linked. The availability and prevalence of pornography has increased exponentially in recent years. Research carried out by the Men's Development Network surveyed men aged between 18 and 55 and found that on average, 50% used pornography weekly or more and a further 18% used pornography daily or more than daily. Amongst the same age range 38% of respondents reported that pornography had influenced their expectations of sex. While there is a lacunae in the research literature with regard to pornography usage among Irish teenagers it is undoubtedly the case that the trends noted above would also be found among the teenage cohort. As such there is a need to confront and counter harmful ideas and attitudes around sex and promote healthy relationships characterised by respect, bodily autonomy, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure.

There is also a need to include under the aegis of healthy relationships content on how relationships can end. Relationship breakups which are part and parcel of intimate life can be extremely upsetting and it would be beneficial to consider teaching ways in which this can be mitigated against.

With regard to learning outcomes 2.5 and 2.6 we see these as a crucial foundation of the SPHE programme. As an organisation that is the lead agent for the White Ribbon Campaign in Ireland, who have been delivering teacher training to secondary school teachers and principals on related topics as part of the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, we see these learning outcomes as being crucial to the prevention of gender-based violence. While we wholeheartedly welcome the importance afforded to this in the curriculum, we wish to highlight the importance of the pedagogical methodology that will be employed in this context. In particular we wish to ensure that young men are not presented as being to blame or as a problem which needs to be fixed. Such an approach would be likely to promote defensiveness and disengagement with the material and so should be avoided. Instead, we wish to ensure that a strengths-based approach is employed in engaging with both young men and women. Such an approach would be founded on the values of being non-judgemental and non-adversarial and present young men with the space to define themselves positively. The teaching SPHE toolkit characterises the programme in terms of praxis, as an ongoing process of critical reflection and action nurtured by dialogue with others. It is important that this dimension of the programme is foregrounded and we see this as being imperative to its success.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

**Students should be able to**

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

We see 3.1 and 3.2 as being similar to the broader content covered under pillar 1.

Under 3.3 we welcome the proposal and furthermore we propose that all students but particularly young men be guided in a practical way through the grieving process. We see grief and its attendant processes not just in terms of the loss of loved one but also the loss of further facets of life such as the loss of a relationship or the loss of status. In terms of preventing gender-based violence, if young people understand the stages of grief and were able to recognise when they are experiencing them they would be more likely to be able to process and verbalise these experiences and less likely to take their feelings of loss, shock anger and so on out on other people.

As part of both 3.5 and 3.6 we see the value in considering the inclusion of active bystander training to intervene particularly in instances of gender-based violence or harassment.

**Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

Insert response here:

While we welcome the depth and breadth of the content of this programme, we wish to ensure that all topics can be covered and given the time and space required for students to meaningfully explore them.

We wish to underline the importance of adopting strengths-based methodological approaches that revolve around creating safety, trust, rapport, and meaningful relationships with boys; connecting positive masculine identities with being healthy and proactive about health and wellbeing; using strong, positive messages that encourage boys to engage with health and wellbeing issues without amplifying shame or blame; enabling ample opportunities and time for boys to share their experiences to show common challenges, to foster peer-support and to create a community of mutual help.



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# Contributor

## Men's Voices Ireland

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:**

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety

1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

### **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

**See our comments on gender, domestic and gender-based violence below. Also comments on violence against children.**

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

#### **Students should be able to**

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

Allyship:

We categorically reject the claim that white Irish males are privileged. On the contrary such men today are second class citizens. The male suicide rate is about 3.5 times the female rate, yet this is not addressed as a serious problem as it would be if the rates were reversed. The outcomes for men in the family courts are highly unfavourable compared to those for women. This has led among other abuses to the way fatherhood has been demeaned in Irish law and children of separated parents are very often denied meaningful access to their fathers which is damaging for both.

The support services for male victims of domestic abuse are pathetic in the extreme despite the fact that men and women perpetrate domestic abuse at comparable rates (see below).

Underlying all of these individual issues is the grotesque fact that among all interest groups in society, men have no state-funded national representative body to present their case before Oireachtas committees, state agencies and national and local media. Women have many such bodies, Travellers have several as do LGBT, the disabled, children, and migrant groups have perhaps half a dozen. All except men.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

#### **Insert response here:**

We refer here to the terms *Gender*, *Gender-Based Violence* which appear in Appendix 2 under Glossary of Terms and which need to be challenged.

#### Gender

The notion that gender is socially constructed has been debunked decades ago. Gender is at least 50% due to the person's genes as many sources testify. In

[Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are](#), Robert Plomin makes the case that genetic differences cause most variation in psychological traits – things like personality and cognitive abilities. The way your parents raise you, the schools you attend – they don't have much effect on those traits. Children are similar to their parents, but [that similarity](#) is due to shared genetics, rather than shared family environment.

#### Domestic and Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is a very unhelpful term. It is commonly used by radical feminists and their allies to spread the perception that most violence in society is perpetrated by men against women and children and has been unconditionally accepted by the media and state agencies such as the Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence Agency.

Men and women commit domestic violence at comparable rates as scores of research articles and surveys attest. According to the [PASK report](#), men and women perpetrate domestic violence at comparable rates, most domestic violence is bidirectional, women are as controlling as men, domestic violence by men and women is correlated with essentially the same risk factors, and male and female perpetrators are motivated for similar reasons.

See also this 2020 report: [NISVS](#) Tables 9 to 12.

These and other studies demonstrate that it is false that domestic violence is gender-based.

#### Violence against children

The primary offenders are mothers not fathers, though men do commit a good deal of it. See Table 3-17 from [U.S. Administration for Children & Families](#) or indeed any other report from the ACF in the US.



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# **Contributor**

National Parents Council  
(NPC)

# National Parents Council (NPC)



## INTRODUCTION

National Parents Council (NPC) is the representative organisation for parents of children in early, primary and post-primary education. NPC was established as a charitable organisation in 1985, under the programme for Government, as the representative organisation for parents of children attending primary school and has been extended to cover parents with children in early years in 2016 and in post-primary in 2022. NPC received statutory recognition in the Education Act 1998.

### **NPC Vision**

NPC want to see an Ireland where every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential.

### **NPC Mission**

NPC exists to ensure that all parents are supported and empowered to become effective partners in their children's education. NPC will work to increase the capacity and capability of the education sector, to achieve true partnership and deliver better outcomes for all children.

### **NPC's Key Activities are:**

- Representing the parents' voice in all aspects of their children's education
- Advocacy
- Building participation
- Service delivery



### **NPC Service Delivery**

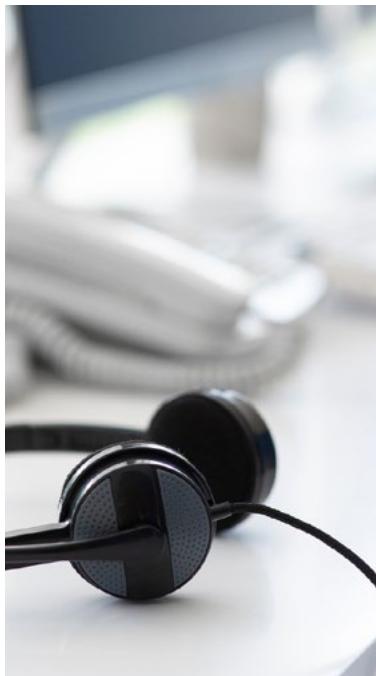
NPC services are aimed at empowering parents so that they can support their children in all aspects of their education.

#### **Helpline**

The NPC helpline is a national confidential service for parents. Their helpline staff listen, give information and support to parents to help them make the best possible decisions for and with their children.

#### **Website**

The NPC's website [www.npc.ie](http://www.npc.ie) aims to provide parents with information regarding Early Years, primary, and post primary education. The site also allows parents an opportunity to give NPC their views regarding education issues.





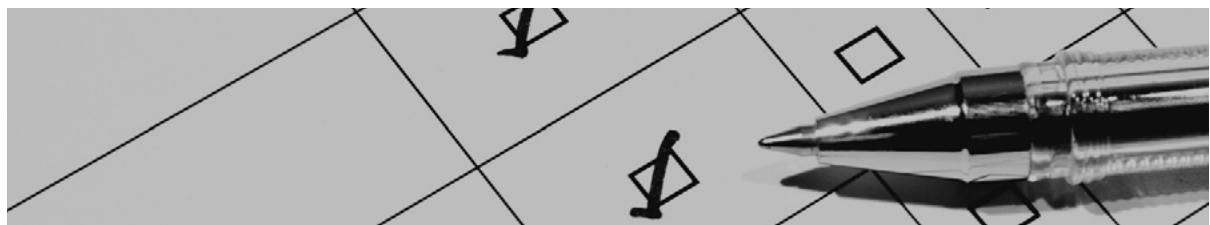
## INTRODUCTION

The **Social, Personal and Health Education** (SPHE) curriculum for Senior cycle (4th, 5th, and 6th) years, was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and is currently being reviewed. The National Parents Council (NPC) wanted to hear the views of parents on it, and their general opinions around the main three strands underpinning the SPHE Senior Cycle:

- Health and Well-being,
- Relationships and Sexuality (RSE),
- Transitioning to Adulthood.

The survey was open from November 1st, 2023, till November 6th, 2023, and had a response rate of 645 surveys completed. Parents have had the opportunity to share what they find important about the SPHE Senior Cycle, reflect on the overall strands of it, and highlight the impact this curriculum could have on their children.

Parents were asked twenty questions and were asked to rank their importance on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the least important and 5 being the most important.



Pre-school	75
Primary 4 yrs - 8yrs	312
Primary 9yrs -12yrs	325
Post Primary Junior cycle (1st - ...	177
Post Primary Senior Cycle (4th - ...	89
Finished School	26
I am not a parent or guardian	1

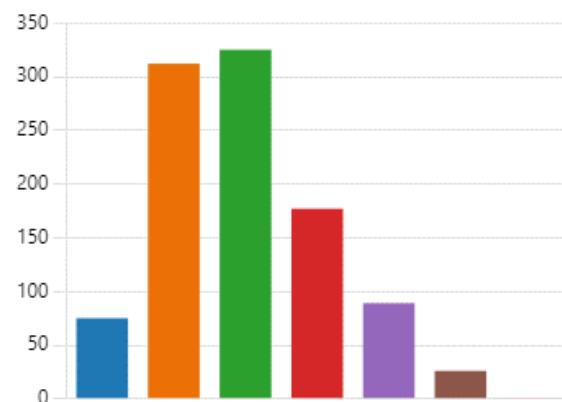
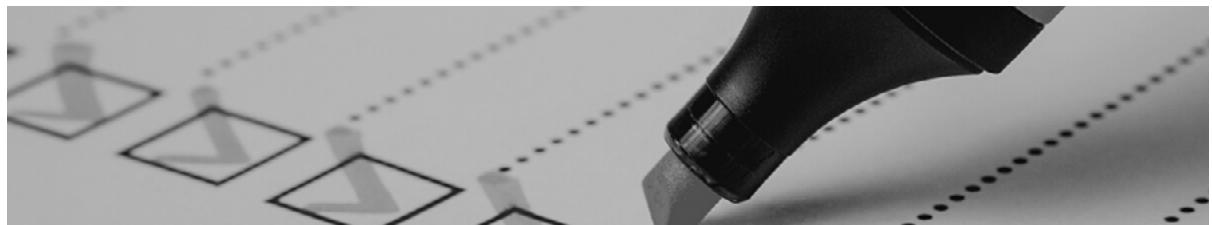


Figure 1

It would really help us to know what stage of education your child is at.

177 of parents who filled out the survey have children in Post Primary Senior Year Cycle while half of the parents (325) who filled out the survey have children in primary school (9-12 years) (See figure 1). The rest includes parents with children in post-primary junior cycle (177), pre-school (75), and parents whose children finished school (26) (See figure 1).



● Catholic	414
● Church of Ireland	17
● Community School	61
● Comprehensive	7
● Educate Together	54
● Gaeltacht	14
● Interdenominational	3
● Jewish	0
● Methodist	1
● Multidenominational	13
● Muslim	0
● Presbyterian	3
● Scoileanna Lán Gaeilge	32
● Quaker	1
● Special Education School	3
● Other	19

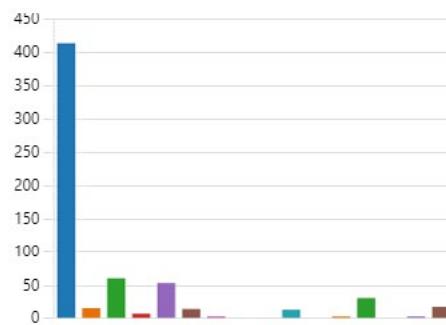


Figure 2

What type of school does your child attend? Please tick all that apply.

64% of the parents who filled out the survey have a child in a Catholic school. The second most common responses were from parents with children in Community Schools (9%), Educate Together (8%), and Scoileanna Lán Gaeilge (4%) (See Figure 2)



### Parents' General Views about SPHE Senior Cycle:

When asked whether the aim of the SPHE Senior Cycle is important to them, a total of 605 parents out of 645 found it to be important. In fact, only 3% of the parents did not find it as such while another 3% had no views (See figure 3) (See Appendix 2 for further comments)

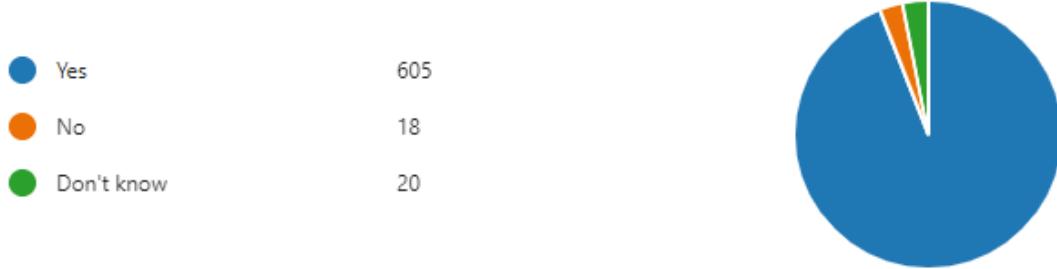


Figure 3 shows a total of 605 parents out of 645 who have found the SPHE Senior Cycle to be important.

The Senior Cycle SPHE aims to empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults, nurture respectful and caring relationships, and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.

Do you think this is a good aim for the Senior Cycle SPHE?



## STRAND 1: HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Parents were asked to answer ten questions regarding the importance of aspects related to the well-being of their children. When asked if children should learn to maintain a healthy balance between school, work, and leisure time, 72% of parents saw this as very important. A similarly high percentage of parents (85%) reported that their children should be aware of what affects their mental health (See figure 4 below).

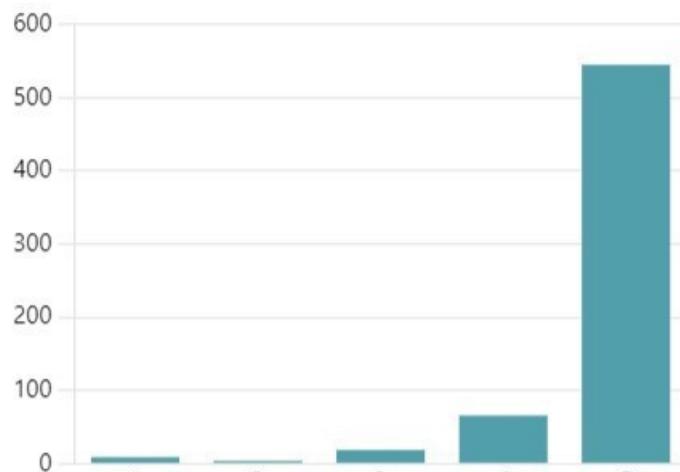
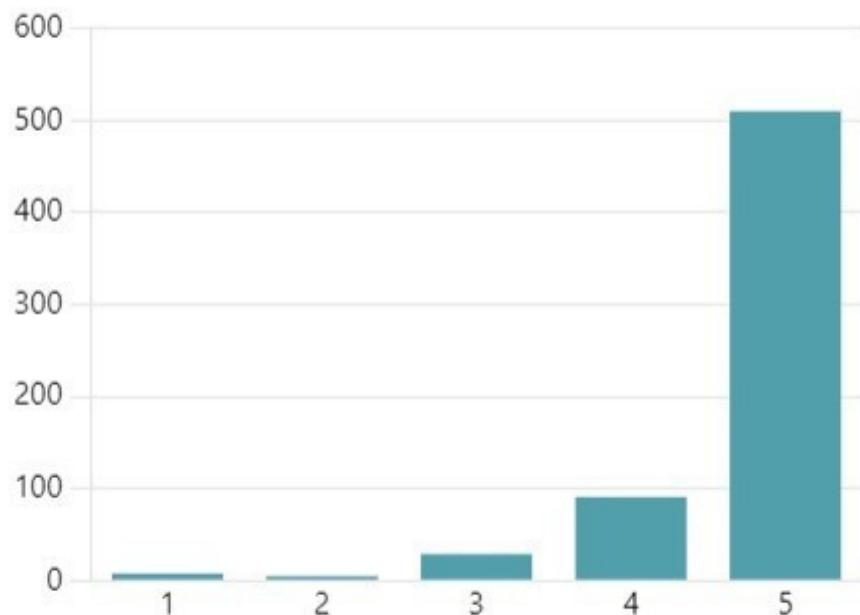


Figure 4

Learning about what affects mental health and well-being, and how family, friends, social media, alcohol, drugs and how we think about ourselves can have an effect on this.



In fact, 79% of those parents reported that they find it important for their children to identify sources and patterns of negative emotions and harmful thoughts, and their impact on mental health. (See figure 5)



**Figure 5**

Learning how to notice patterns of negative thinking, harmful thoughts and emotions and how these can impact mental health.



Similarly, 76% of parents reported that they find it very important for their children to recognise stress and anxiety in themselves and others, and to seek or provide support in such situations.

62% of parents gave, learning about the different kinds of addiction, their impact on the wellbeing of children, and how to seek help the highest importance, 23% of parents ranked this as very important, while 3% rated this as not important. 80% of parents found it extremely important for young people to discuss and devise ways to stay safe when socializing with other people, especially when their own or others' health or safety may be at risk (See figure 6).

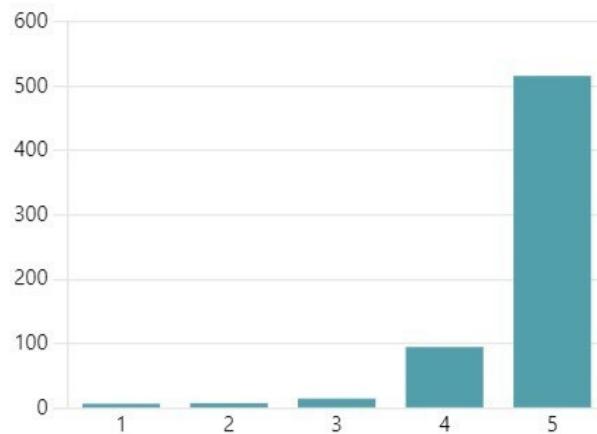


Figure 6

How important is it that our young people discuss and devise ways to stay safe when out socially, where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk?



## STRAND 2: RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY (RSE)

In this section, parents were asked to answer ten questions regarding how important the main areas covered under the SPHE's Relationships and Sexuality (RSE) strand are to their children. Generally, the majority of parents (84%) see the high value of their children learning about cultivating healthy relationships, setting boundaries, expressing their feelings, and managing conflict through open communication in such relationships (See figure 7).

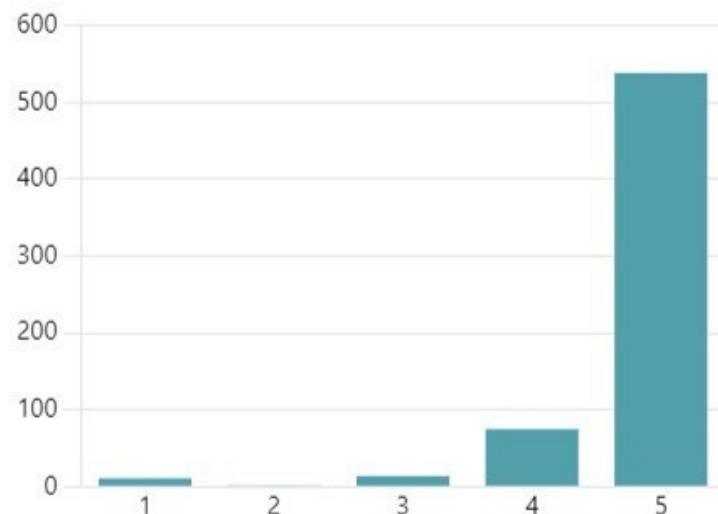
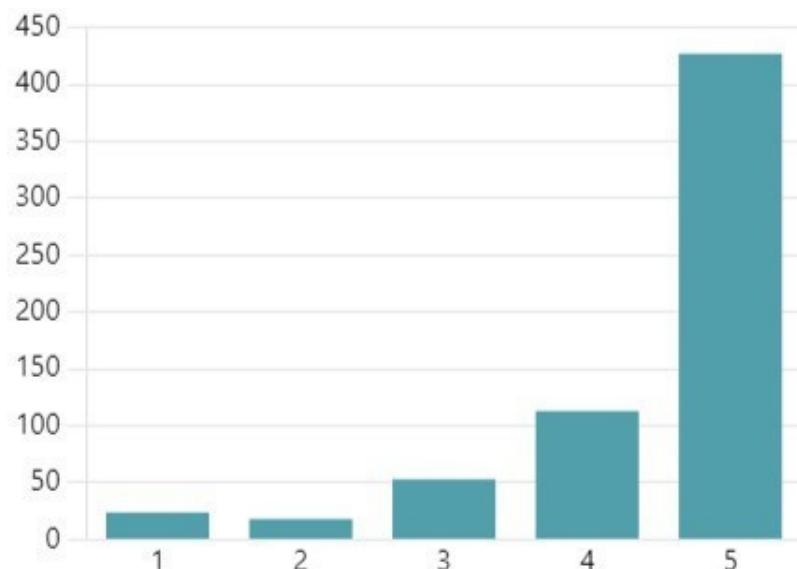


Figure 7

Learning about healthy relationships in person and online, how to set limits and rules in healthy relationships, communicate your feelings and manage conflict.



When parents were asked about the importance of learning that relationships and sexual behaviours are influenced by one's identity, 67% of parents ranked this aspect as being very important. (See figure 8).



**Figure 8**

Learning how our attitudes, behaviour and identity influence friendships, relationships, and sexual behavior.



When parents were asked about their senior cycle children engaging in discussions around sexual activities based on consent, care, and respect, the majority (76%) of them found this to be very important. In a similar vein, 73% of parents find it very important that their children learn about sexual and reproductive health (See Figure 9)

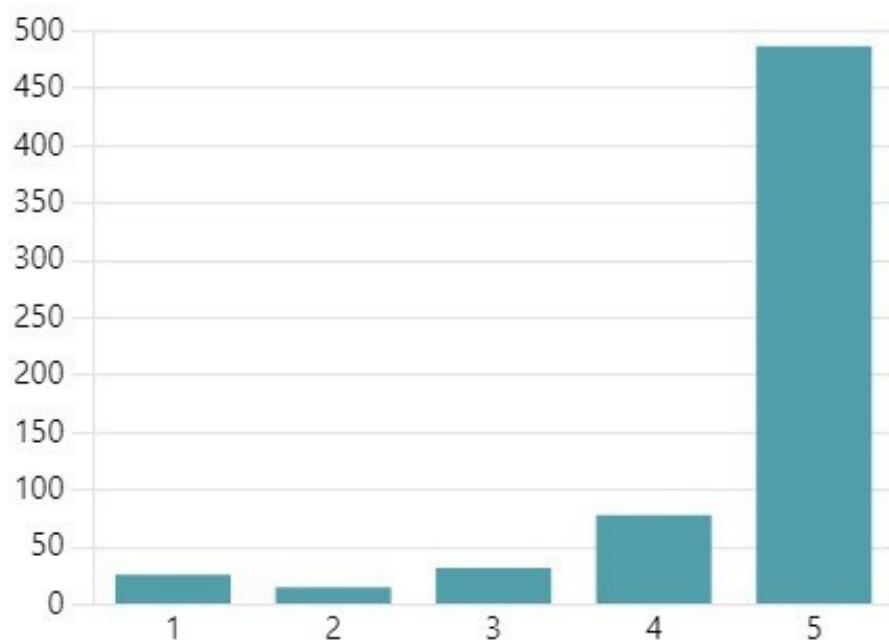


Figure 9

Discussions about sexual activity, how it should be a caring, respectful, and consensual part of adult relationships.



When asked about the value of their children learning to challenge problematic representation of gender in society and social media, over half of the parents (57%) were in favour of their children discussing ways of challenging this.

When asked about recognising abusive relationships and accessing support in such a situation, the majority of parents (77%) ranked it as most important to their children and 14% ranked it as very important, illustrating that most parents in the survey see this aspect of the SPHE Senior Cycle as important.

67% of parents ranked learning about the effect of pornography on the behaviours and expectations of their children's relationships as being very important, with 10% ranking it as the least important. (See figure 10).

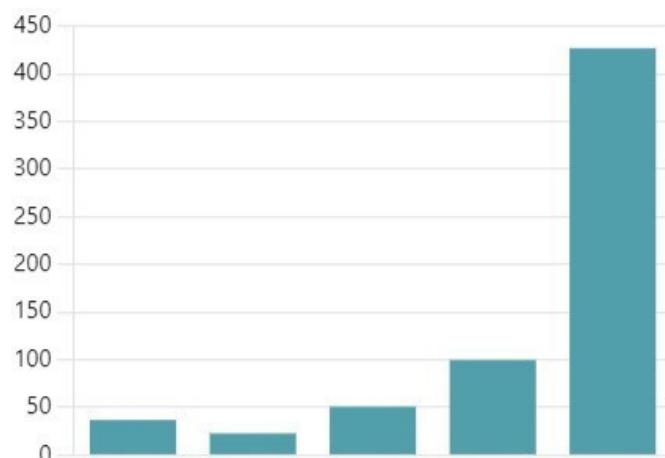


Figure 10

Learning about how pornography can have an influence on attitude, behaviours, and how it can affect expectations around relationships.



When asked about the value of discussing forms of sexual violence and how to seek help, this was accorded the highest importance by 74% of parents, while 14% ranked it as very important.

All aspects of LGBTQIA+ will be integrated throughout the RSE teaching and learning as opposed to being taught separately. Parents were asked how important they thought this was. Over half of the parents (53%) gave this the highest importance, 12% ranked it as somewhat important, and 15% ranked it as the least important (See figure 11).

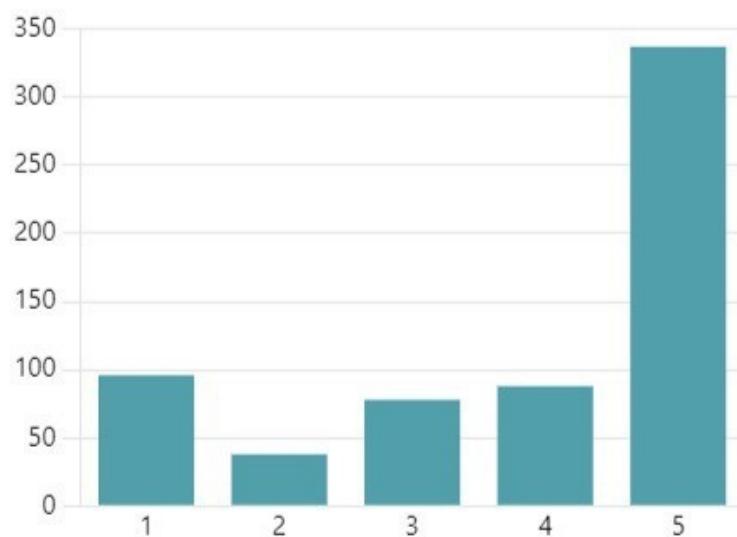


Figure 11

Thinking about the previous questions regarding Relationships and Sexuality (RSE), it is proposed that these topics would be taught in a way that fully acknowledges LGBTQIA+ relationships and families, and this awareness will be integrated throughout the teaching and learning as opposed to be taught in stand alone lessons.

Please indicate how important you think this will be (1 indicating least important and 5 most important)



### **Reflections on RSE from Parents:**

As part of this section, parents had the opportunity to share their views on the RSE within a free text box rather than specific questions. Of the 203 parents that left comments, the main issues include the importance of acknowledging diversity, gender identity, concerns around LGBTQIA+ identities, the effects of pornography on their children, and concerns around age-appropriate education, particularly for primary children (all responses can be seen in Appendix 2)

Of the 203 parents:

- 4% of parents indicated they do not want the strand of sexuality and relationships to be included within the curriculum at all.
- 2% of Parents felt that the curriculum might place too much focus on LGBTQIA+ identities being the prevailing identity. Whilst they were not opposed to these discussions, more time spent on acceptance of all they felt would be a better approach.
- 2% parents are concerned that their children will be exposed to pornographic content as part of the curriculum.

Although the survey did not ask about the teaching and learning of gender identity as this is covered in the Junior cycle curriculum 5% of parents used the free text boxes to highlight their concerns about this. They felt that topics such as gender identity should be taught at home and the extent to which their children learn about this group should be at the parents' discretion.

## STRAND 3: TRANSITIONING TO ADULTHOOD:

When asked about how important is cultivating a self-care mindset during distressing times and extending support to others in similar situations, 74% of parents have perceived this to be very important for their children. In almost the same manner, 73% of parents see it as very important for their children to be knowledgeable of their rights and responsibilities under the law, specifically when it comes to age of consent and their employment rights (See figure 12).

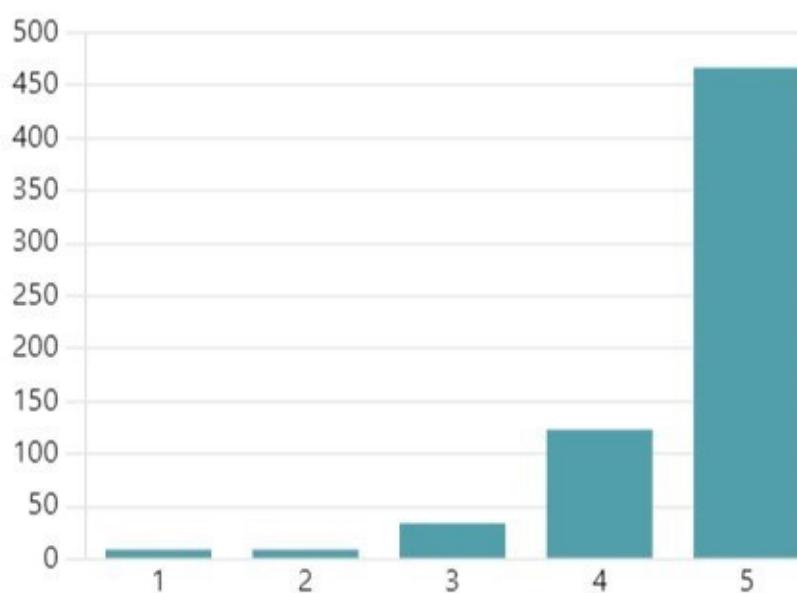


Figure 12

Learning about your rights and responsibilities as a young adult, the age of consent, communicating online in a responsible way and what your workplace rights might be.

When asked about how important it is for their children to learn about alcohol and drug misuse and to appropriately seek support, parents expressed a somewhat similar view, with 68% designating this the highest importance and 22% ranking it as very important, making it the second most common answer (See figure 13). Finally, 79% of parents find it very valuable that their children learn to stand up for themselves and be empathetic, speaking up against injustices wherever they arise (See figure 14).

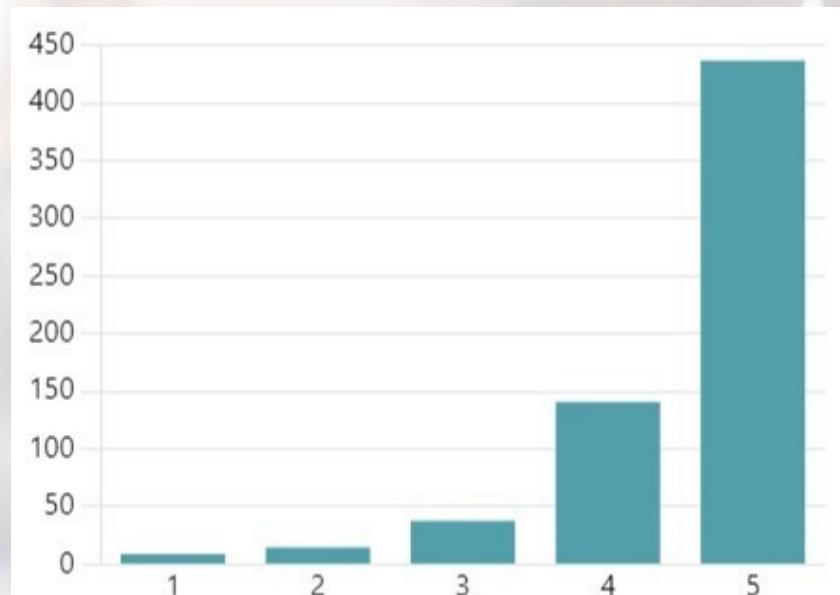


Figure 13  
Learning about alcohol and drug mis-use, how and where to access appropriate support services.

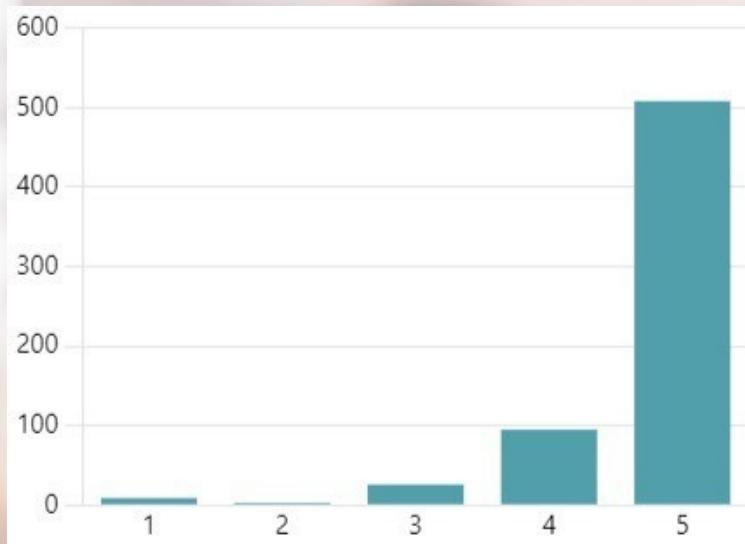


Figure 14

Learning how to stand up for yourself and others in various situations, develop skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and promote equity and inclusion.

Parents were asked, in conclusion, if they had any comments on what should be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum, see Appendix 2 for comments.

# CONCLUSION

NPC would again like to thank the **NCCA** for giving us the opportunity to represent parents' views as part of this consultation. We look forward to seeing the outcome of NCCA's consultations in this important area. If you have any questions regarding any aspect of this report, please do not hesitate to make contact.

## Appendix 1 - Questions asked in the NPC Survey

1. It would really help us to know what stage of education your child is at. Please click all that apply.

- Pre-school
- Primary 4 yrs - 8yrs
- Primary 9yrs - 12yrs
- Post Primary Junior cycle (1st - 3rd year)
- Post Primary Senior Cycle (4th - 6th year)
- Finished School
- I am not a parent or guardian

2. What type of school does your child attend? Please tick all that apply.

- Catholic
- Church of Ireland
- Community School
- Comprehensive
- Educate Together
- Gaeltacht
- Interdenominational
- Jewish
- Methodist
- Multidenominational
- Muslim
- Presbyterian
- Scoileanna Lán Gaeilge
- Quaker
- Special Education School
- Other

3. The Senior Cycle SPHE aims to empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults, nurture respectful and caring relationships, and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school. Do you think this is a good aim for the Senior Cycle SPHE?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

4. Do you wish to comment on your previous answer?

## Health and Well-being

Thinking about the factors that can influence a person's health and well-being in a general way, please rank how important you think the following topics are to be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

(1 indicating the least important and 5 most important)

5. Learning how to have a healthy balance of how long we spend studying, working, leisure time, and getting enough sleep.

1

2

3

4

5

6. Learning about what affects mental health and well-being, and how family, friends, social media, alcohol, drugs and how we think about ourselves can have an effect on this.

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7. Learning how to notice patterns of negative thinking, harmful thoughts and emotions and how these can impact mental health.

1

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8. Learning how to recognise stress and anxiety in yourself and other people, how to find and give support.

1

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9. Learning about the different kinds of addiction, to know what the signs are and how they can affect your life, where to go and how to access help, if needed.

1

2

3

4

5

10. How important is it that our young people discuss and devise ways to stay safe when out socially, where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk?

1

2

3

4

5

## Relationships and Sexuality (RSE)

This section of the SPHE curriculum looks at what might be needed to support students to have respectful, caring and healthy relationships. It also aims to support students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Please rank how important you think it is for the following topics to be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. (1 indicating the least important and 5 most important)

11. Learning about healthy relationships in person and online, how to set limits and rules in healthy relationships, communicate your feelings and manage conflict.

1

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12. Learning how our attitudes, behaviour and identity influence friendships, relationships, and sexual behavior.

1

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13. Discussions about sexual activity, how it should be a caring, respectful, and consensual part of adult relationships.

1

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14. Learn about sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

1

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15. Learn how harmful attitudes about gender are portrayed in the media, online and in society, and discuss ways of challenging these attitudes.

1

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16. Learning how to recognise abusive relationships, how one person may want to dominate, manipulate or isolate another person, and where to find support if needed.

1

2

3

4

5

17. Learning about how pornography can have an influence on attitude, behaviours, and how it

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11. Learning about healthy relationships in person and online, how to set limits and rules in healthy relationships, communicate your feelings and manage conflict.

1

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12. Learning how our attitudes, behaviour and identity influence friendships, relationships, and sexual behavior.

1

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13. Discussions about sexual activity, how it should be a caring, respectful, and consensual part of adult relationships.

1

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14. Learn about sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

1

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15. Learn how harmful attitudes about gender are portrayed in the media, online and in society, and discuss ways of challenging these attitudes.

1

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16. Learning how to recognise abusive relationships, how one person may want to dominate, manipulate or isolate another person, and where to find support if needed.

1

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17. Learning about how pornography can have an influence on attitude, behaviours, and how it can affect expectations around relationships.

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18. Discussing topics such as sexting, sexual harassment, assault and rape, and knowing what to do if you or someone you know has experienced any of these situations.

1

2

3

4

5

19. Thinking about the previous questions regarding Relationships and Sexuality (RSE), it is proposed that these topics would be taught in a way that fully acknowledges LGBTQ+ relationships and families, and this awareness will be integrated throughout the teaching and learning as opposed to be taught in stand alone lessons.  
Please indicate how important you think this will be (1 indicating least important and 5 most important)

1

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20. Would you like to add a comment to your previous answer?

## Transitioning to Adulthood

In this part of the curriculum students will learn practical skills for becoming an adult. This includes making good choices, planning for the future, and achieving their goals. They will also learn how to take care of themselves during challenging times, understand their legal rights and responsibilities, how to be understanding and empathetic to those facing discrimination or inequality.

Please rank how important you think it is for the following topics to be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. (1 indicating the least important and 5 most important)

21. Learning how to take care of yourself to stay healthy, manage the changes that life brings, and support others during difficult times.

1

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5

22. Learning about your rights and responsibilities as a young adult, the age of consent, communicating online in a responsible way and what your workplace rights might be.

1

2

3

4

5

23. Learning about alcohol and drug mis-use, how and where to access appropriate support services.

1

2

3

4

5

24. Learning how to stand up for yourself and others in various situations, develop skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and promote equity and inclusion.

1

2

3

4

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25. Do you have comments about what should be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum?

## Appendix 2 – Comments

The Senior Cycle SPHE aims to empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults, nurture respectful and caring relationships, and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.

Do you think this is a good aim for the Senior Cycle SPHE?

### Further comments (159)

#### Do you wish to comment on your previous answer?

It is important that the children are inclusive to all also!

I think there needs to be greater emphasis on real world skills. Everything from nutrition, well being, banking, taxes, debating, careers

The new scheme seems to address a multiple of very important issues in a thoughtful and measured way.

Education around empathy, respect and consent has never been more needed

I don't think it's the schools job to teach that. I am worried about the level of influence NGO's have in all changes of the curriculum. Parents teach the above at home. Schools should focus on Maths, Science, English etc.

Because your question is biased. Sphe aims to undermine kids' resilience and let ignorant people in dept of education perpetuate their own ignorance.

No

No

Technology is everywhere and everything from it all and in daily functioning, what kids may not get in life or at home, school should try and balance out to provide equality. More than high scores, kids need to be ok with themselves.

No

A Mental Health/Psychiatric Subject should become a part of a subject within schools as part of the system.

I think that openness and respect for all is a vital lesson

We need to provide evidence based progressive secular information that is not influenced by any religious ethos

I think life skills and mental health needs to be prioritised. If you don't have these it's v difficult to function properly in adult life regardless of how you do in exams

Also important to help develop citizenship and community membership

While I agree that resilience and respect is important i do not want any ideologies thought to my children regarding gender, sex, homosexuality. It's my belief that these topics should be discussed between parent and child.

As a parent whose only option is to send our children to a Catholic school, I would love to see the children exposed to different cultures, religions, ways of thinking, outside of the Catholic ideology. SPHE could be a subject that could teach the children about other cultures, to encourage them to embrace other ways of thinking and looking, outside of the Catholic bubble, that is unfortunately the only option for some parents.

The aim of the Senior Cycle SPHE aligns well with this perspective. It recognizes that education should extend beyond the traditional classroom setting and prepare students for the holistic demands of adulthood. By fostering qualities like resilience and empathy and addressing real-life challenges, the program can contribute to students' personal development and well-being.

On the surface it is a good aim, however I have some concerns about how this will be done. Specifically it needs to be done in an age appropriate way and we need to avoid agendas that are pushing for our children to be over sexualised at a young age

Schools need to lead by example and unless schools are going to deal with bullying issues in relation to their own staff trying to teach it to children is pointless

I don't think gender ideology should be included and if I knew my child was going to learn about non-binary, I would refuse to let him attend the class. I feel really strongly about this and feel upset about the amount of pressure being put on young people to accept gender ideology as fact.

Absolutely!! This is something that is learned through life experience though, not a book or curriculum.

No

No

That's very subjective. Of course that there question sounds right, but what does it mean to be empathetic or caring might be interpreted differently to each family

No

I think all of the above needs to be included in SPHE as part of all students development on top of what parents may teach or instil at home

I think its a good idea however I feel that a survey of the existing knowledge base of the students might show that a) perhaps the majority have a good understanding of the level of content being taught b) Due to the level of content young people are more likely to switch off from the current content and if this being the norm may miss valuable content later.

I would like the curriculum, also to focus on resilience by teaching children to prepare for, accept and expect stress, anxiety, failure and disappointment in the course of their lives.

My answer was yes but this is dependent on the topics that will be covered in order to promote this.

I think it should not only be about preparation for the future, but also about being health, resilient, responsible and empathetic young people now.

Consent needs to be covered thoroughly

No

Leave kids out of SPHE please

Yes - I went to select community primary school and catholic secondary school

No

If that's the full survey then I need to ask more questions... are the types of sex education being reviewed? I believe the explicit nature of the various styles of "intercourse" is inappropriate.

I think PE, mindfulness, First Aid, importants of financial planning, fresh air exercise, some DIY are all extremely important and should all be included thanks

An outward focus of what they can give to others, be responsible citizens etc would be a welcome addition.

I think they go into sexuality too much I'm all about equality but i think its talked about so much it causes so much confusion kids end up feeling worse , sexuality should be a natural process and one they learn about as they mature and get older

Overall, the positive impact of the SPHE curriculum largely depends on the quality of its implementation, the skill of the teachers, and the type of environment students are coming from. It is difficult to assess if the SPHE play a vital role in helping students develop life skills, make healthier choices, and enhance their overall well-being. I think it all depends on the area where student and their family live. I was fortunate to experience two primary schools, one in Dublin 8 and the other in Dublin 22. Words apart when comes to diversity and inclusion within the class, physical health and healthy food choices.... the success of the SPHE mainly depends on the school the child is admitted and area they live in.

This needs to be more defined. Of course I would want them to grow to be kind and respectful but that does not mean I condone teaching of ideologies as truth in the name of acceptance and respect!

I do not know what changes have been made

No

I would add teach them to be their authentic selves

Need to be taught about consent, what is a healthy relationship and what is abuse

There needs to be a huge emphasis on respect both among peers and in society in general with consequences where necessary. Students need to be held accountable for their actions and teachers need to be able to take control of their classrooms!

Without reading the content or seeing a subject matter list I can't answer the question

Schools are there to teach. Preferably critically. Family and larger society are there to teach the rest.

I agree with the above statement if it is age appropriate!! The statement hasn't gone into exactly what will be discussed

No

I think this should include learning about LGBTQ issues, minority issues, respecting differences etc. as well as the importance of consent, what constitutes abuse both in friendships and relationships

Young people need to be able to timely engage in the systems around them and offer their own insight on their learning needs for the world they want to live in. Experiential learning is an important component of this learning

Good aim, hard to see where it's worked yet

No

Independence should also be included.

I think it is important to empower young people with the tools to look after themselves physically and mentally. I think teaching them how to do e.g. meditation and yoga. Any other techniques to combat exam stress. Also to discuss openly what anxiety is. E.g. panic attack etc. ..take away any stigma they may have about talking about their mental health

I love that you have included resilience and empathy in there. Such important skills.

No

No

No

Agree with being responsible, and understanding interdependency in all their actions.

It should not teach transgender ideology

The question No. 3 is too broad and no insight into likely curriculum.

Brilliant idea to teach children about the real world, real emotions and prepare them for the world we live in today.

They should be taught that at home.

Respect and consent should be the main focus.

There is no need for any religious slant to SPHE

No

Social skills need to be looked at and improved with younger generations

Impact of social media and technology has had already on social interactions

No

I think it's important for young people to have an understanding of their own bodies and boundaries to promote healthy relationships and to influence a healthy progressive society

Could we add a few Life skills into this like driving test, booking things like appointments. Life skills they would need later in life..

Have huge reservations on what is included in this

There is quite a difference in maturity and maturity for knowledge between a 4th class and 6th class student (10-12 yr) I feel the classes should aim to be different for 4th and 5th class compare to 6th class

No

Surely we want all of our children to be respectful but I believe the respect has to be both ways. We must respect people's religious beliefs and values also.

I feel it is important topics such as relationships, consent, choice diversity, etc should be discussed openly and honestly in many settings in a child's life so they are normalised

Simple financial literacy, like how to open bank account, save money, something like home economics

Important to include responsibility in the context of responsibility at home in their families, in their school community and the wider community, growing into national, European and global responsibility.

I like that it aims to empower young people and that it says for life now and beyond school

It should not be defined at all by religious preferences

Schools should be teaching children life skills that are being lost! Respect is learned from well educated teachers and adults that know how to relate to the children there teaching! Teaching is not a tick box exercise as it is now, start with education of teachers!

Perhaps include tolerance too?

I think it should be wider eg how to deal with difficult feelings, unhealthy relationships, manage anxiety, navigate tricky social situations, problem solving options...ie when we do not always feel resilient!

All these traits are very important for young people's future. They need to be equipped for a diverse rapidly changing future. SOHE may be the most important subject they are taught.

I think a lot of training and continued support should also be in place for teachers as many are themselves demotivated and unhappy

Society is ever evolving and young people face a lot more difficulties than previous generations with their always on digital technologies. Those that have different views/looks or feelings to the majority face discrimination and prejudice, based on ignorance. SPHE should help to inform children/young people about treating everyone with respect and tolerance. It was illegal to be gay years ago and many brilliant minds (Alan Turing) were quenched or ostracised because of their sexual orientation. My child attends a catholic national school because of limited choice where I live. He was asking about two men marrying because they didn't want children at the weekend and I explained surrogacy to him, so 2 dads could have children. He is 5.

Preparing people to become responsible members of society is a good thing.

With a focus on emotional intelligence and self care

I think schools should have more access to mental health care, resources and education. Teaching kids at a young age that it's ok not to be ok is important. Teaching kids coping mechanisms at a young age is important too, it would make them more resilient, and rounded young adults.

This is becoming more and more important. Children could also be guided to self regulate i.e. try to become more in charge of their time on the mobiles and social media. These are guiding them instead.

I feel this needs to be taught in the junior cycle

I want to stop all abuse on our kids now. Give them the real tools to become healthy and resilient children and stop brain washing them and controlling them. Stop confusing their sexuality.

I believe that is exactly what should be taught to children.

The more information given to kids at age appropriate levels. Will benefit the children and allow them to be prepared for life. Society is changing constantly. Things aren't always as simple as they were in the past.

No

An element should be introduced earlier in primary school

The more preparation for real life the better.

I would appreciate for this aim to be achieved without explicitly sexualising our children

no

I think it should also aid students in understanding tolerance and acceptance of those who are different eg they/them especially in instances where their own parents may feel different and think changes to gender are "new fangled ideas". We need to equip our children with the confidence to say that they support their friends choices

Depending on what's in the details

The programme also needs to be cognizant of ideological capture, in particular on the subject of gender dysphoria, whereby ideologically motivated advocacy organisations attempt to present low quality research as in some way irrefutable, or superior to established biology and psychology paradigms.

I think regardless of the denomination of a school a full and frank sphe course. Religion has no place in children's education, especially education regarding modern relationships.

I dont think primary scoil students should be taught about trans bi etc , i think theyre too young and i would have a major problem with that as they are too young and it can be confusing

Yes but also need to discuss the inevitable experiences of dissappointments, setback and to offer good training and ongoing support to teachers so that they also are confident and comfortable in dealing with issues that arise in these educational modules

No

Open and free discussion should be a matter of course on all topics.

Great aim

I dont feel children under the age of 18 need to be taught about genders identity, drag queens, or relationships in school it should be left to the parents to discuss at home

I think the 'empower' piece in the above sentence is not strong enough as it is too vague, maybe we need to think about it as a more core skill set rather than an add-on one. This training and preparation for life is as important as the academic parts of the curriculum.

Yes everybody want healthy and considerate children but in what scope and to what extent? My response to the previous question very much depends on what my children are going to be exposed to.

No

No

Gréát that this is being done at school, hopefully school offers a balanced perspective for example some kids would be hearing homophobic rhetoric at home, hopefully this programme would bring another perspective to the child

I think young people don't know how to do the simple things in life any more and this affects their ability to work. A lot more work needs to be go towards teaching children how to manage finances, social skills, interacting with adults, learning the laws around work and entitlements

I don't think that the school is likely to achieve the aims set out above.

It might be different if parents could be sure the emphasis would be on preparing the young people to build happy, strong and successful marriages, to foster a pro natal outlook, and to imagine the sort of parents they would wish to be to their own children in turn.

Unfortunately experience has shown that these types of school assume short term promiscuous sexual relationships and aim to minimise disease, abuse and most importantly to treat pregnancy and parenting as a disaster to be avoided at all costs.

As long as this actually happens in schools, unfortunately this is often considered a free class both by teachers and students

There should be a focus on mental health

It depends on what is meant by respectful and caring relationships. If programme promotes sex outside of marriage I am against this .

This is a good aim so young adults now how to deal when education is finished and they have to stand on their own two feet.

This goal should be pursued in co-operation with parents/guardians. Details of all topics covered on the syllabus should be made known to parents in advance. No two children are the same and parents/guardians should be given the opportunity to prepare their own child for discussion of sensitive topics if necessary.

I have no idea what is taught in sphe. It seems to be more of a waste class as teachers either don't follow a curriculum, let kids go on phones, have a free class or are just not bothered. I think a class dedicated to what kids will use would be better. Kids don't value this class either, from my experience with my chold and all their friends. Maybe some schools take it on better ???

No think the aim is pretty straight forward

In conjunction with preparing young people for adult life the Senior Cycle SPHE programme should also place a strong emphasis on long term, committed, loving relationships, e.g. marriage, as an aspiration. It has been well studied that the mental well-being of people in long-term, committed and loving relationships scores far higher in comparison with their peers who are not in such relationships. Particularly men who are at greater risk of depression and self-harm at all age brackets than women.

Furthermore, preparing young adults for adult life also includes preparing them for the possibility of parenthood. Raising children in long term, committed, loving relationships is the gold standard and should be the aspiration.

Given one objective of this programme is to help young adults to manage mental well-being and prepare them for future adult life, this must be part of the programme.

As a parent I want a healthy responsible, resilience respectful and an empathic child, however I know some of the SPHE curriculum also exposes my children to pornography which I'm not happy with as a parent.

Children need to learn empathy, we have to encourage them to think about their actions and the implications they have on others.

Yes, as long as children are not being exposed to explicit materials, emphasis is placed on the traditional family setting and consideration is given to the Christian children not to feel isolated or termed hateful when their opinions are shared in group discussions.

Under no circumstances should children be encouraged to physically change their sex. If a CHILD is too young to smoke or drink alcohol as they do not have the maturity physically or mentally to deal with the reactions they do not have the mental capability to understand what their emotions are through hormonal changes and social environments. By encouraging these mental health issues in making them believe they are the opposite sex when in reality they are a Tom boy or a little bit feminine that they fancy boys and girls, which is bio sexual, ye are causing severe mental health issues in this vulnerable CHILDREN!! Ye are the problem not the solution and DO NOT HAVE MY CONSENT TO TEACH YOUR PSYCHOTIC VIEWS!!

Too early to teacher children such things. They should be protected and not expose.

All these are important and its also important to ensure balance in all we do respecting parental rights and responsibility

I believe the children learn live changing characters from school than from home so it's very important to inculcate these important virtues in the school curricula

No

Yes it is fantastic however form experience the teachers are not education enough on certain topics to convey and facilitate certain topics.

My previous answer is based on what I truely know they are being thought and exposed to

Feel a lot of time is taken with pastoral care sphe and religion. Where children are removed from class for irish for support instead of these subjects

I feel a small module on religions of the world based on respect and kindness to others instead of the above. Lots of children gave no interest in the subject and the nature of the curriculum and the way its taught is not conducive for some children with additional needs

Older son finds it not engaging

It is a wonderful programme to educate children

All fine as long as it is age-appropriate

The aim is valid provided it does not go against the original values intended

The aim will affect the student negatively. Ages are stages in the circle to know what is to be done when turns come.

In our aim for healthy, resilient, responsible empathetic young adults is within the boundaries of my core beliefs which I have nurtured my children with from infancy. I believe all rights should be respected not just some.

Once its age appropriate, and is not trying to brainwash them into non binary rubbish

SPHE should be culturally-and-belief-conscious-morally-sensitive.

Children need to understand more about being a carer & what it takes to look after a loved one, they also should be thought about those with disabilities & how they would feel if they were in a position like those born with or happen to have gotten a disability

We need to examine where we are on the curriculum amidst the changing global trends

I think that with the prevalence of neurodivergence in society today I feel that there should be a module included to explain different conditions and the challenges these conditions pose to the person with the condition in order to raise awareness and empathy within students. Most students (unless they have familial experience) do not understand the challenges that face students that are neurodiverse.

Depending on what is being taught. I wouldn't like my children to be taught about sex at their early stage all in the name of preparing them for life experience. I do that when I deem fit

No

No

Question 3: I do believe as young adults they should respect someone else's values and outlook on life but also someone else's outlook may be different to theirs which also has to be respected, so if one person's beliefs are different to another's they should both be able to come out and say it and have no issues with each other.

I do believe it's better to prepare our children for the world they are living in and not be naive with it. But there is also a set of beliefs I teach my children as a Christian which I do not think should be altered by a school curriculum

These are objectives for University/College going students - ie young adults. Not Children in schools (primary or secondary)

no

No

I don't think values should be thought as part of education. That's is the responsibility of a child's parents.

This should be taught in Catholic schools and prioritised over religion. Religious education should be removed from national schools

No

I agree with the logic but also think things should be introduced when the time is right not too soon as they are only children

Thinking about the previous questions regarding Relationships and Sexuality (RSE), it is proposed that these topics would be taught in a way that fully acknowledges LGBTQIA+ relationships and families, and this awareness will be integrated throughout the teaching and learning as opposed to be taught in stand alone lessons.

### Further comments (203)

#### Would you like to add a comment to your previous answer?

Teaching kindness to all. It doesn't cost to be kind in an ever changing society!

As long as no "agenda" is being pushed I would like to all groups being represented and that freedom to discuss is allowed regardless of views

I would like to add my voice and support for the changes. I know a great deal of debate went into the proposals and that other May choose to drag a granular curriculum

Development into some class of culture wars but I would hope that our values and importance we place on education here in Ireland wouldn't be sidelined or co-opted by outside interest groups.

I think it's critical that what is taught in school reflects what our kids are already seeing around them .

This is overstepping the mark. Schools are there to teach practical subjects. Teachers are not psychologists.

Sphe and clueless teachers are the last people who should be allowed to meddle with the above topics.

I do not want my child learning about different kinds of sexuality LGBTQ relationships

No

Ni

It's very important lgbtq+ relationships and families are a fully integrated as part of this curriculum for our children. So our children will continue to be inclusive in their mindset.

Having reservations about relationships. In particular Sexual. I believe in marriage and sexual relationships shouldn't be encouraged before w

Please don't shy away from lgbtq+ in the curriculum.

I believe it is vital that all children learn about all different types of family and relationships. I strongly support LGBTQ+ relationships being acknowledged and taught as they should be as a part of RSE

Inclusive supportive information for all children is essential

Fear that 19 in particular will not be fully taught/ addressed in my children's catholic school

Discussing a persons health and staying safe ensuring positive relationships does not need to refer to LGBTQ specifically all of those issues can be thought holistically without specific reference to having to be labelled one way or other.

It's very hard to say any of those topics are less important than others. They are all important.

Giving our children age appropriate information, educating them and allowing them to discuss these topics with an open mind is key

I don't think it is appropriate to be teaching children about LGBTQ+ relationships. This should be left to parents to decide. There are too many agendas particularly around gender ideology and I don't think school is a place for these topics

So difficult to rank these. They're all so important. Everyone needs to respect everyone else and no one has a right to undermine, belittle, bully, abuse or otherwise treat others badly.

This should be a choice that parents can teach their own children this. Sexual preferences in particular should not be included

Teaching should reflect inclusivity above archaic dogma of Catholic Church

All of this has never been more important to discuss with our young people. Knowledge is power.

No

No

It's very important that Catholic schools don't just choose the bits they agree with

Q15 does not say what a harmful attitude is...

Trans is an ideology, I do not care if someone wishes to dress or pretend to be a different gender. However, XX can never become XY and visa versa.

Males should not be in women's spaces or sports. Trans identifying males are not women.

How far will this teaching go? Will it be teaching that it's not ok for women to voice their concerns regarding their own spaces and their hard won career, education and sporting opportunities.

Where is safeguarding in this teaching.

Allowing any male to access women's spaces is a massive safeguarding loophole open to those who want to abuse women and children.

There have already been many cases of abuse throughout institutions who have allowed this to happen (albeit some in different countries)

Specific care in dealing with this topic is required. Sometimes too much acceptance is making it difficult for children who are not LGBTQ+, to exist and be accepted as the pressure to IDENTIFY is huge.

O

All of the above have a relevance to young people and some will have a broader exposure than others therefore it is key to ascertain the level of knowledge and understanding in order to provide a safe and inclusive environment for young people to raise questions.

In addition to teaching young people about informed consent, we should also teach them that in many instances they may not be asked for consent. If we are honest about this, we can help them to be better prepared to react under such circumstances and stay safe. If we teach them to expect that they will always be asked, we are sending lambs to slaughter.

LGBTQ+ people continue to experience discrimination in Irish society. It is vital that their identities are normalised in RSE so that this generation and future generations develop the knowledge and confidence to end this discrimination.

I feel currently far too much emphasis is placed on LGBTQ agendas and this should not be further pushed on out teenagers. There is no need for any further acknowledgement if everybody to be treated the same.

Details and graphic sexual activits should not be discussed while still ably informing students about all topics above. It should be sensitive.

LGBTQ+ subject matter can be very emotive, I think it's important to maintain an objective perspective on it in the classroom. It's important for students to discuss and share their thoughts and views, but they should not be railroaded into adopting whatever is regarded as the most politically correct stance on issues. The trans issue is particularly controversial at the moment, and needs to be handled sensitively while openly accepting the full range of viewpoints that may be expressed, as long as they're expressed respectfully

These are all important. It would be helpful to direct parents to resources that they can use to support these lessons at home

No

Leave kids out of this

No I think these are all very important

No

Make it happen sooner

Discussions around sexual activity should be taught by parents not teachers

My concern is that children would be exposed to ideology at a very pivotal time in their lives and I would question the necessity of details?

Please acknowledge lgbtq+ relationships we never had it and so many good friends and family are so denying it will end up infusing my kid

I am greatly concerned about the direction RSE is teaching, the controversial views of certain groups and the promotion of transgenderism should not be forced on everyone. Students, teachers and parents who hold to biological facts and who do not wish to celebrate the confusion of some people's lives should not be forced to celebrate and condone behaviour which they don't believe to be helpful or right. We teach our children to respect everyone but that does not mean we have to celebrate life choices we fundamentally believe to be wrong in God's eyes. We know teenagers who have been treated very unfairly and cruelly in school because they wouldn't wear the colours or celebrate the agenda. The ironic thing is that these particular young people are very kind to their classmates who are struggling with these issues.

My child should be allowed to learn what they are as they grow up and mature , 12 is too young to learn this as especially boys aren't able to cope with this info , it should be upto parents to discuss this with their kids

I think it's important to recognise the different type of sexual orientation & relationships. I would not like this to be a dominant feature of the teaching as it isn't the most prevalent in today's society. I do think it should be included so as to teach teenagers about different types of relationships & to help reduce the discrimination that can exist.

I disagree with several aspects of the definitions of gender in the proposed curriculum

I feel this is a very deceptive way to ask questions as it is in the how this is taught that matters. The healthy relationships need to be defined as well as the tools teachers will use to teach this. therefore I cannot answer the above questions without more specific information. This could lead to a very skewed survey result

Kids from 4 to 8 yo are way too young to be concerned with LGBTQ agendas.

I think the fundamentals of respect and explicit consent coupled with information on what good relationships look like will allow the principles of acceptance of all orientations to follow

I think all of the above is important when in secondary school but would not be age appropriate in primary

It is essential that we don't segregate or "other" children who identify as LGBTQ+ sexuality is emphasised far too much. If we just focused on all children's RSE education it would reflect our actual society. Sexuality doesn't impact any other curricular subject and the same should go for SPHE

I think number 19 is important to have it taught as part of, not stand alone & not too much emphasis on lgbtq+

I would agree with the RSE esp consensual relationships & that because ( unfortunately) girls dress with very provocative clothing doesn't mean it's consent for taking advantage. I wish girls wouldn't feel the pressure to dress that way with their peers. They are also hugely targeted on social media about their clothing, skin care,

bodies etc. Parents need to have conversations as a well as school about Pornography and it's influence over boys especially with such ease of access and phones. I would like to know the type of discussions that are had in school so I could chat to my teens about what they learned. As parent we are leaving our schools have the difficult conversations and I feel if parents know what was discussed ( eg. Healthy relps ) in classes, it could open up a conversation with their teen.

Extremely important to include diversity of gender, sexuality, relationships and families

With reference to question 19 I would like to be assured that the trans issue is taught in a way that is not anti-woman or anti-feminist

I think it is extremely important that the curriculum includes LGBTQ+ relationships and families. We must not exclude and it is not harmful to others to learn about it.

Equally we must teach about consent, safety in relationships, social media and out in society.

It is a joint effort between school and parents. It would be great if the curriculum was sent to parents.

There needs to be a huge emphasis on what normal healthy sexual relationships are compared to the perception in the world of porn. Also consent needs to be paramount.

Again without knowing what position the curriculum takes on the issues above it isn't possible to give realistic feedback . What moral stance does the curriculum take on issues like transgenderism, sex before marriage or before the age of 18 ( IMO the message should be strongly against both and in line with Catholic teaching )

Question 13 should also acknowledge that sex happens between teenagers as well as adults. Age of consent extremely important. Of course LGBTQ+ relationships should be incorporated into teaching. It would be against equal rights not to.

School has no place teaching anything outside of sexual mechanics. A family is a family children see their environment as normal regardless of what is in it. Children are already confused by everything. Anyone looking to add to that for their own self gratification should be in prison or worse.

Treat it as normal and they will see it as normal without needing to go in depth on issues children are neither physically nor mentally developed enough to internalise.

My hope that these sessions will be given by compassionate, educated and unbiased teachers who follow value based education. Children need to know how to protect and enhance their fertility, to understand their cycles, to know that natural family planning can be a real option as much as using contraceptives. I want my daughters to know that their pro-life views are respected and have a place in society.

It is vital that any discussion on sexuality and gender be taught in a fully open and inclusive way and be completely free of any religious or socially conservative influences.

I think gender based education is different in every home teaching it in school could be more harmful then helpful. More time spent on acceptance of each and every person for who they are could be a more beneficial approach. I worry about consent also... when alcohol is involved there can be no such thing as consent. And also the unrealistic and easily accessible world of porn is really doing our younger generations a lot of damage.

No

Integration of LGBTQ+ in lessons needs to be the focus and allow young people openly challenge their own bias in a safe way without ridicule.

Inclusion of LGBTQ community needs to be massively addressed in all levels of education. Not just addressed in post primary school when children may already have been exposed to homophobia due to lack of early education and normalisation of this basic human right.

No

I think it's important but there is almost too much focus on this at the moment making kids confused and possibly saying they are one sexuality or another too early in their lives

I welcome the revision of the SPHE curriculum and the updating of learning for the modern world my 3 daughters live in.

I think sex education in a school setting should be well rounded to include all topics for all orientations. It should be a positive experience overall with a reminder throughout with regards to relativity vs pornography and consent from both sides.

Far too long being taught as different when it should be included like a spectrum.

As you can see from my answers I am open to 95% of what is proposed but have an issue with what feels like an over endorsement of trans women's rights - particularly to the determinant of women's rights. Gender equality has been hard fought for to let female only safe spaces be eroded. An education programme that celebrates difference, acceptance and tolerance is good - but kids shouldn't feel silenced to talk about anything respectfully because they are afraid of being 'cancelled'. Teachers need a lot of support and training in facilitating these sensitive conversations.

No

Discussing pornography, the mechanics and preferences of sexual activity and anything of a sexualised nature outside of an educational and scientific context is not appropriate for a school setting. Students are in school to gain knowledge in academia and anything passed that is overreaching by the school and department of education.

No

While I think it is important to discuss the issues of transgenderism I am concerned that over discussion will cause greater confusion at an already difficult time in a child's development.

No

Yes lgbtq should be included but integrated as is stated. There can be an over emphasis on these relationships in media etc

I agree with teaching about LGB but not beyond that

I don't want my child learning about most of these topics

Until the curriculum is developed, there will continue to be doubt on the real intention. The project is laudable if the outlines are followed.

Only if it is taught to kids over 16 as it is too complex an issue to present to younger kids. Feel it's appropriate after junior cert but not before

Evidence and fact based content that reflects scientific reality only should be taught.

I don't want my children thought about lgbtq+ it's nonsense. Only two be thought about the two real genders male and female.

I have a concern of what age most of the topics start in a classroom?

This curriculum should include teaching about all members of Irish society.

The same criteria apply for all healthy relationships - homosexual or heterosexual - singling out LGBT is unnecessary and highlights them as different.

This should all be done from a neutral standpoint with no religious undertone

No

No

I suppose they will be old enough to handle these discussions it's not something I want thought to a primary level it's wasn't really thought in my time school so that's all new but if it helps young people then I encourage it

Given the small percentage of LGBTQ+ relationships and families there are in the general population, I feel only a similar percentage of time should be devoted to that topic.

As a Catholic I do not agree to LGBTQ+ gender ideologies being taught to my children as I feel it has become very divisive in the current society and it represents such a small minority. Its something that should be taught in the home if the parents see fit to do so.

Transgender issues have no place being taught in school. Also I would have huge reservations re pornography etc.

It is normalising issues that only affect a tiny minority.

I think children are way too young in primary to be learning about gender dysphoria, trans, etc. I think this education should be discussed with parents and if in school only in secondary. These ideas put into a very young mind have been proven to be harmful to children at such a young age, and are confusing for a large majority of children these days.

Consent, that what pornography portrays isn't normals and use of trans inclusive language all important in my opinion

Orthodox Catholic families raise their children to love and respect themselves and others. Sexual relations happen within a marriage and within a belief system. It is not a stand alone part of our humanity but a beautiful gift of who we are as children of God. Pornography is abhorrent to practising Catholics. Catholic do not separate gender from the human being. It is not something you can choose. People with same sex attraction are respected and loved within the Catholic church but are called to live a celibate life. Catholics must be respected within the Irish education system. Parents are the primary educators of our children, not the state. One size does not fit all.

I think all of these topics are important as the more open we are with children the more open they can be in return. There has been too much shame and secrecy which has left children vulnerable and open, frank conversations are the way forward for children to be informed to make safer choices for themselves

All of this needs to be supported at home, parents need to be teaching all this too.

Why would it not fully acknowledge LGBTQ+ relationships and families?

Children at that age are still discovering themselves and how to navigate their social environment. Adding one more dimension to the mix could confuse them and inappropriately influence them during this already tumultuous and crucial age period.

Introducing ideas around transgenderism at this level may not be apt

Think there has been too much emphasis on lgbtq+..my child complains 'its all they ever talk about now'.. discussions becoming too woke rather than based on common sense, real experiences of all people,

I think that vulnerable children could be influenced into thinking that they're gay/bi when they're not. A minority of people are gay: being gay is not the norm. I feel awful saying this but I think that the traditional ideas of relationships are being trampled on by an ideology where anything goes. The definitions of everything will be so wide that our children won't know what type of relationship to strive for! Gay people deserve respect and freedom to live their lives as do we all. However, 100% of the curriculum should not be amended to reflect a minority.

I wonder if all the discussions around non binary intersex etc which are in fact v rare is confusing teenagers and complicating their developing into adults

It would be a huge disservice to all our children not to acknowledge LGBTQ+ relationships and families

Childrens education should reflect the times they are growing up in, positive role models are as important as curriculum. If the teachers in school aren't happy with what they are being told to teachers then the children will pick up on this and not learn a thing.

I think it should be addressed in stand alone lessons rather than integrated throughout the teaching.

Society in general, and parents in particular, have not been given enough opportunity to input into the 'harmful gender attitudes' discussion. Q 15 is very leading. Yes of course, anything that is harmful is bad but I can see harm in extreme swings either way in the gender debate. I feel schools have swung too far without seeking input from parents.

I can't really rank many of these topics. Most of them seem equally important.

I'd like my child (even though only a preschooler at the moment) to be inclusive of everybody

Consent workshops, information about coercive control also needs to be included.

Extremely important that this is taught in an inclusive way. Insure people have support and know how to support their friends and family members. Make sure that bigotry and judgement is reduced in society.

and the way it is taught should be gentle and age related and more and more knowledge given with the older age groups. i do agree it should start by 5th class primary school.

All are very important topics - obviously the depth and how they are thought vary from age to age - but a 6th class student needs to be aware of all of the above - differing levels of education to that of a 2nd year student of course

I have no issue at all teaching about tolerance to all in an LGBTQ+ community and ensuring students understand diversity but I do have a concern about how this is approached when teachers are given \*minimal\* training in this area (I am a post primary teacher so I am fully aware of the extent of CPD). Gender identity is an extremely delicate topic and one that I believe can cause great confusion for teenagers just trying to find their way in the world. It is a very "fashionable" topic at the minute and I hear a lot in school that I do not believe is healthy not helpful towards those who are genuinely trying to find their identity.

There is no point just "ticking the box" and a day or two of inservice will not teach teachers adequately on how to deal with this!

Perhaps this is a subject that should be co-taught by a school counsellor or outside professional.

I have many LGBT friends in my life. I am concerned at some of the books, stories and ways of teaching about this topic are being put together. I think there should be education on this topic but the style and context is what concerns me.

I think it is so important these days to discuss all aspects of sex from consent to how harmful and unreal pornography is and about keeping myself safe whilst online and texting

All relationships matter. Regardless of gender identity. The rise of social media and how teens in particular view it is causing countless harm.

I am against the proposal that these topics would be taught in a way that fully acknowledges LGBTQ+ relationships and families, and this awareness will be integrated throughout the teaching and learning as opposed to be taught in stand alone lessons. These topics acknowledging other traditional families should also be taught alongside, and not just the LGBTQ+ relationships and families in isolation.

I think it's very important that sexuality is normalised, and that it just becomes something that people are not judged on but are simply accepted for.

Hugely important to talk to social media and the impact of porn.

I can't stress enough that the consent piece in the TV show "normal people" reflected how teens should be talking about before intercourse

There is too much focus on gender identity and not enough on what all humans have in common.

Identity politics has become divisive and zero sum.

This hyper focus on gender is actually a form of sexism that seeks to define people in narrow terms and cancel anyone who doesn't toe the line. We should focus on common rights and humanity, civic mindedness instead of hyper individualism and us vs them mentality.

Personally think LGBTQ+ should be taught at home. Too much is being pushed by government and schools.

Kids aged 6 -10 do not need to learn about sex from school. Let them form their personalities first. At this age they accept what their peers are like not based on sex, usually on physical features. Bully each other on glasses, height, weight and most recently whether they have autism. The acts of Sex are not part of this innocent stage. Parents should be responsible to talk to their kids about personal development all along. Hormones will influence enough in their teens.

Kids under 10 should be left to be kids and not overload with sexual, they will be what they will be naturally

Normalising LGB relationships may be fine, however the TQ+ part of that equation is extremely problematic and has serious repercussions for the safety of women only spaces and sports. TQ+ is a deeply contested ideology at odds with many branches established medical literature, and in the main supported by problematic, poorly conducted research, which has not stood up well to detailed scrutiny.

So called TQ+ rights, infringe on the rights of biological females and in effect place the feelings of biological males, often with complex psychological issues, above the rights of women and girls. It is unethical, if not immoral, that gender ideology is presented as having the same status as biological reality.

As a parent number 5 all the way but as a post primary teacher, I will not be covering some of these topics.

I don't think it's appropriate for school to teach my child about sex acts, fertility, gender ideology, pornography, assault or rape. My child is 9 YO F, it's not appropriate and she's too young, I think it's more suited for age 12+ and I would prefer to discuss this with my own child, I will not be allowing my child to attend any classes discussing any of the above.

10 yr olds are too young to be learning about trans etc i think its better to wait for secondary school as they'll understand better

Educators need to be trained in how to deliver these modules and be sensitive and comfortable to what these discussions can trigger in them and in students. Ongoing supervision should be available as support to educators to develop their own competence, comfort and intuition in delivering these modules. I was trained in delivering these modules within a youthwork setting but my own training as a counsellor was what helped me deliver these modules with emotional awareness and sensitivity in how they were delivered eg to be done in a comfortable 'non classroom' setting, sit in circle, make it enjoyable, safe, non judgemental, allow for 'hyperness, challenging and withdrawal behaviours as these topics may make some students anxious, upset, exposed etc

This is hugely important as not all children have parents who will sit down and talk to them about relationships, sexuality etc. Parents also may not have experience in some of these topics.

I think it would encourage identity issues in children. I completely agree that they should be taught to respect all people but they should not be given a biased education on transgender topics. I would much prefer an extra 15 minutes was spent on English, maths or Irish than any of the above. Schools need to stop crossing the boundaries.

Frank discussions on all topics.

No child under 18 should be hearing about the lgbtq agenda in school. It is up to the family to discuss this and rare there childrens not the school. Would be better to show children how to grow their own food, teach about obesity and seed oils and going organic. Teach them how much chemicals are in our day to day life and how to protect ourselves from them, teach children to be outdoors, show to build dens and basic diy skills. Teach them instead of medical intervention for mental help use meditation, yoga, these are life skills not that a man who identifies as a woman is a woman because they aren't! Teach basic science!

We have to acknowledge diversity in relationships and gender equality now more than ever before. The information being given to the children should be made accessible to parents to read so they can have knowledge of what the child has been informed on and can open discussions at home in the same.

Can straight families also be fully acknowledged and given the same attention and dedication in the curriculum? It is one sided and unfair when only LGBTQ+ relationships are discussed and for our children it feels like this option is imposed on them and forced down their throat. Where is the freedom of choice?

LGBT+ agenda shouldn't be " integrated throughout the teaching ". It's indoctrination. No need to push lgbt topics. It should be a stand alone lesson and parent should be informed about the content of such lesson.

I'm not happy with a lot of this being taught in school. Most of this should be taught at home. Rape and sexual assault and sexual health services etc is not age appropriate for senior school children. I would have a big concern and would be interested in seeing the curriculum before it is live. This all makes me very uncomfortable

I'm a bit confused by the above questions. You are asked to rank them in order of importance yet there are seven questions but only five boxes. I have based my answers above on how important each topic is in relation to each other. However I believe they are all vitally important and most of the topics need to be covered in tandem.

No

Don't agree with teaching primary school level about lgbtq I think they are too young and easily influenced

Be careful of age you teach it at. Very confusing .

Gréât programme

I think all topics are very valid and are just as important as each other. However beyond awareness of lgbtq+ community and being respectful of everyone I don't think such an emphasis should be put on this/them as it shouldn't be an issue. I.E everyone should respect everyone's individualistic and sexual preference but we are coming close to it being frowned upon to be heterosexual and I don't think emphasises on any group is helpful.

I really think it's reallimportant to have robust sex ed that includes all communities and also consent  
It is proposed that the school be made the channel for state indoctrination of young people.

There is no such thing as neutral attitude to sex and relationships. The state is as biased as the Catholic church, the Islamic teachers, Freudians or any other source.

I think these topics should be discussed at home not at school. Parents should be telling their children about sex, porn, lgbtq+ there

The curriculum should reflect ALL people and sexual orientations. Acceptance and understanding is key

I don't think it's appropriate teaching LGBTQ+ in a school environment given its current contention and split beliefs among parents particularly with Trans & Queer community. Possibly making children aware as it's current but have serious issues going into the ideology of it with my children.

These topics are amazing, I'm so glad they are being covered.

No.19 is confusing our children. My 12 year old was never confused about his identity until this came to the fore. He's now asking IF he should be questioning his gender identity and what does that mean. Teenagers have so much on their plate without having to question their own gender identity! I am also speaking as a Secondary school teacher. Stop indoctrinating our young people!

I like the approach of including LGBTQ+ throughout rather than taught separately. However, I think there can be an overemphasis on it - a sense of specialness of LGBTQ+ people as opposed to people who are heterosexual. Sexuality should be taught in a proportionate way that recognises this being LGBTQ+ is the same, no more and no less, than heterosexual relationships

I am against any of these issues been taught in the school setting in mixed groups by a teacher who will promote their own Liberal ethos. As a parent I will teach my children in these matters as the primary educator in a way that recognises our family values and moral code.

How attitudes, behaviour and identity influence friendships / relationships / sexual behaviour is quite subjective. Teenagers are very impressionable and I think it would need to be handled with sensitivity.

Parents/guardians should be notified in advance of discussions around sexting, sexual harassment, assault and rape so that they can prepare their child. Children in 4th year could be aged 15 - this should be taken into account when determining how explicit the detail will be for each year. There is a big difference in a child aged 15 and one aged 18. This is reflected in cinema age ratings and a similar approach should be adopted here in terms of age-appropriate content.

Some teachers/ schools can have an agenda re gender and as such have their own opinions which they push on growing minds. It is best that parents deal with this in a safe home environment, not a school environment. Woke values and extreme ideas, etc are pushed by some teachers. I have heard this in practice and am not in favour of this approach.

(1) It seems an emphasis is placed on consent only in adult sexual relationships. This implies that sexual activity in a casual nature is the norm and expected and there is no aspiration for long term commitment. It is a very individualistic attitude towards sex devoid of a loving nature, which does not account for the consequences or rewards. A natural outcome of sexual activity between males and females is pregnancy and parenthood and it appears there is no effort to establish that link other than to prevent pregnancy. Furthermore, there appears to be no effort to discuss the options of reserving sexual activity only for loving, committed and long term relationships, even when studies show that young people often regret early sexual encounters and casual hook-ups and in reality long for commitment from their partners, particularly young women.

(2) I would question the introduction of the influence of pornography in the absence of raising concerns about how it is impacting the behaviour of young adults. Particularly, how young men treat young women and their expectations of sexual access. Without a value based approach it is leaving something in a vacuum.

(3) I strongly oppose the introduction of an LGBTQ+ theme into any aspects of this programme. In particular the TQ+ elements. Gender Identity theory is just that, an opinion and has no factual or scientific basis. It is wrong to introduce Gender Identity Theory as "fact" to young adults who are at an extremely impressionable life stage. It encourages young adults to look at the internal questioning of who they are or how their physical bodies develop as something other than a normal part of growing up and imposes unnecessary stress and anxiety during a perfectly normal stage of human development. It also reinforces gender stereotypes - sometimes a boy who likes to play with Barbie, is just a boy who likes to play with Barbie. It is extremely homophobic, sexist and misogynistic and has no place in a school programme.

I want my child to respect every one however I see that the LGBT+ ideology is being forced upon our children and their religious beliefs and values are seen as them being homophobic. Most times they are silenced and segregated.

Educating our young people on what is or isn't appropriate behaviour is so important they may not take it all in straight away but there may come a point in a relationship where they become aware that certain behaviours are not acceptable or that they cannot be responsible for other people's actions or choices. Empower our young people to respect themselves.

Yes, as long as children are not being exposed to explicit materials, emphasis is placed on the traditional family setting and consideration is given to the Christian children not to feel isolated or termed hateful when their opinions are shared in group discussions.

Children should be kept safe and not exposed to pornography indirectly all in the name of education. It is barbaric and should not be allowed in schools to reduce the effects of teaching these topics in schools. Why would we dedicate the curriculum to LGBTQ, and not to straight male and female. It is as if we are advertising LGBTQ and making straight people male and female feeling left out or having to choose.

Regarding LGB relationships I believe the above to be important. However, gender identity theory is a separate belief system that should not be taught as fact. To do so seems inherently harmful to young men and women who are figuring out their bodies and sexuality.

I don't support teaching my kids that being transgender is ok

Again from on the ground field experience this content is not taught properly as teachers are overwhelmed with the content.

If there is a way to teach all this in a fun way to grab/keep their attention. I find my daughter does what she needs to do in her 1st year s.p.h.e. class but she doesn't take it in, she doesn't retain any of it. And I think these are skills for life so very important to know and remember going forward.

as a parent, I should be the primary educator of my children. I do not appreciate the school exposing my children to sexual and pornographic contents.

Also, The curriculum only favours the LGBTQ+. straight students and families feel they are less important because everything is all about LGBTQ.

Will There be a freedom of choice? because the straight have no option of choice, as much as the LGBTQ+ students have.

These teachings are being forced on our children whether they want it or not, in the way that is unnecessary, unsuitable, inappropriate and unfair, there is no freedom of choice here.

I would prefer to teach my children about sexuality in the best way I know, that would not mess up their mind and mentality.

The more we normalise talking about sex and sexuality the easier it will be for our children. Parents also have to be able to talk to their children about all issues above.

Should be discussed at home

Alot of the above are not taken seriously by a lot of children in the school setting

All of these topics are the stuff of life!

I am all for inclusivity but with hormones and confusion young people are impressionable and it would depend on what is being taught. Parents should be informed as to the teachings and be allowed to give consent if they feel it is too much information and if it is age appropriate

Age before 16 doesn't need this sexual gender LGBTQ ideology to be taught. Their minds should focus on development of studies of subjects they will need for life sex and gender at this age are too early and can be confusing for them. Teach them rather about cooking gardening DIY projects that they can use once older

Kids should learn most of this stuff primarily at home. Parents are best at judging age-appropriateness rather than schools.

LGBTQ+ relationships are not normal relationships as God intended and should not form a part of the lessons to be included in SPHE.

I believe LGBTQ relationships have been given undue prominence. The straight family with core religious beliefs should be allowed to breathe and be well promoted. I think the outright attempts to brainwash our children should stop. We want our children to grow respecting ALL but not be forced to become and explore practices contrary to their upbringing and values. One group's right shouldn't negatively impact on the other, otherwise the system becomes guilty of the same things they are opposing.

Mental health is most important.

These are all topics I agree should be covered. But I would not like to see Teachers forced to discuss these matters if they are not comfortable with it. And I wouldn't like too much detail given on certain topics. I feel these are subjects that need to be discussed at home. But I know some parents & kids are not comfortable talking together about some topics, so for these to be briefly covered in School is important.

We don't hate anyone including LGBTQ+ but don't like to see naked people.

Matters regarding sex, sexuality, LGBTQ+, is not meant for school curriculum

I don't know

I my experience, as a parent, the acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships should be a core understanding for students and should only need to be included in the same realm as heterosexuality, this understanding is based on the teachings at home. I understand that homophobia exists but less so in the current generation than in previous ones, I hope.

Children should not be taught adult matters at their early stage, they should be protected and guided. They shouldn't be taught that they could change their gender, God created them beautifully as they are.

We need to implement all this quickly

I think these areas should be taught even younger as kids don't make it as fast as 4th year unfortunately

There are some topics I would prefer to teach at home. These topics are very dependent on a good Tutor. Not a spare teacher thrown in with their own views.

No

I do not believe primary school children need to be educated on sexual practices or sexual relationships at that point in their development. I also do not support discussion on gender fluidity at this point.

I do however fully support education on mental health and resilience and the basics on relationships as appropriate

No

LGBTQ+ should not be taught to children in primary school

All topics listed are important

I think children need to get some information but not too much. Let their innocence be protected for as long as possible.

I think all the above should be introduced in a gradual way - for example the content in 6th class would be more detailed than content in 4th class for example. Parents should be aware of the content that will be taught that year so they can continue the learning at home, help their child with any topics or content that might be more challenging, more personally relevant for example

I think children and young adults should sit with their family members and talk about these types of relationships there's a certain amount of learning and teaching that can be done in respect to this topic but I feel talking to small children in schools about this can have an influence in terms of them wanting to be a certain gender or LGBTQ also I feel that they shouldn't be thought about multiple genders because scientifically there is only two genders male and female him and her I wouldn't feel comfortable if my child had to refer to someone as they or them.

I disagree with putting too much information in a child's mind that can confuse them and make them question who they are before they are mature enough to fully understand more about the world, and while they are vulnerable, dealing with adolescence and easily influenced. I agree with acceptance and respect to other people and their choices but I do believe we as a society create too much confusion by being accepting of every single different opinion. How do children understand right and wrong. Safe boundaries, when we teach them you can draw your own boundaries and change it anytime you want?

far too much attention is being dedicated to sexual awareness and mental issues for a group of children ages 13-17. It appears this new SPHE direction is to appease the LGBTQ+ narrative and in my mind is verging on grooming.

no

The function of the human body should be taught and that is it. Keep your opinions on relationship out of the school.

I do not want my daughter to be taught about certain things regarding "Gender" etc. While I acknowledge and sympathise with those who struggle with their "Identity" and genuinely question their "Gender", there is a Trend that is taken over Social Media and its destroying the lives of young children and adults. There are obviously genuine cases of children/young adults who struggle with their Identity and again I totally sympathise with them and their families, but then there is a wider community who follow trends on Social Media and its these groups and messages that are quiet dangerous and damaging to our children who may be just feeling isolated and alone, and they are roped into thinking that their problem/s lie within their Biological Gender and Sex. This is where I draw the line and am very uncomfortable with my daughter and my other children being taught that this is ok and this is "normal", because it absolutely is not. This whole Agenda is being pushed on our children and on us Adults and we are afraid to have an opinion or voice our feelings on such things. And you are totally destroyed by others pushing the narrative if you don't go along with the Agenda. We have been silenced as Parents and I am 100% not ok with that. Social Media and Advertising Companies etc are taken advantage of this situation and financially benefiting from these young people who are literally just being normal teenagers and trying to discover who they are and where they fit into Society. When I was growing up none of this existed (Thank God) but I was confused as a teenager, I didn't know who I was or where I fitted into. I was not confused about my Gender but I was just trying to find myself. But nowadays unfortunately Children/teenagers/young adults are being fed the narrative "that if they are lost or confused, than automatically its a Gender issue and they need to transition". This is so so dangerous and damaging and I do not want any of my children to be part of this. We will teach our children what we believe to be true and right, and just let the schools educate them on their normal subjects, but keep this stuff out of their curriculum.

I don't agree with any teaching that teaches about lgbt issues or relationships. This shouldn't be normalised and taught in schools. If someone stopped my underage child and spoke about any such issues I'd call the Garda. There is no place for it in forced government education. Stick to history, maths ect.

Children in NS only need to know basics about sexual relationships, ie more than just male female. Graphic detail should not be taught to NS kids. Kids should be taught about harmful impact of pornography and the disassociation from real relationships

no

All of the above are beneficial however this shouldn't be introduced too soon

Do you have comments about what should be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum?

**Do you have comments about what should be included in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum?**

**Real life examples**

All of the above and more! It's a significant development and impossible to keep up with the changes. But marginalisation, targeting of misinformation and micro marketing, algorithmic influence and much more have to be addressed therein. It's a tall order!

**Having respect for yourself and for others.**

I think it should be abolished. I have seen the latest Junior Cycle one and it is an embarrassment of NGO propaganda.

Even if sphe pretends to address these topics, teachers are too ignorant of life, and the ncca are so idiotic, they could not be trusted. Out of their depth, they will cause harm. Would actually teaching maths not be a good start instead.

No

No

A mental health/psychiatric subject should be created and become a part of the curriculum within all schools and all levels.

**How trauma in childhood can have an effect on you ad an adult.**

Resilience should also be included in this subject to ensure young adults don't feel constantly under threat or offended where there is no offence or threat.

**Leave out any topics pushing gender ideology**

All of this sounds great. It's getting all schools to teach it fully and not treat it as an optional extra that students can ignore - that's the challenge.

CPD for teachers should be compulsory so they're teaching the latest thinking in the curriculum, and teaching it in full, regardless of religious ethos.

SPHE has been a victim of 'use it as study time' in my daughter's school far too often. She's in 6th year, but at that age, they need all of this guidance more than ever.

**Again, this is should be taught by parents**

I would like bullying to be addressed in its many forms subtle and not

Lessons in how to build resilience and confidence, skills such as practising meditation to help positive mental health

A lot of thought and consideration has gone into this. It's all about the delivery of it. Not all students would feel comfortable discussing such sensitive topics in the school environment. Some teachers also may not be comfortable addressing some of these topics. Do students and teachers have the right to opt out?

No

No

Learning to accept that stress, anxiety, disappointment and failure, are a natural part of any life and are not to be feared.

A focus on alcohol as well as drugs is important, as alcohol addiction and mis-use cause harm to more people in Ireland.

Im not sure if the following are already part of the curriculum, but these are my thoughts -

Financial planning and management should be a focus. It's a very important skill for students to learn before leaving school.

Addiction issues should include non substance misuse too, such as gambling etc.

Personal health should cover basic biology, not just reproduction & safe sex. It would be helpful for students to have an overview of how their body works from the perspective of taking care of their whole self - nutrition, their immune system, cardiovascular and respiratory health (importance of exercise, no vaping etc) etc. Also, how everything interacts and impacts everything else eg stress and the immune system etc

Adult life skills such as menu planning, job interview skills, writing a cv, budgeting, taxes etc
No
Leave kids out of this
All of these are very important
Consultation with Richie Sadlier
Too much of an overlap with what is already on the Junior Cycle curriculum so students will have covered a lot of it already so will disengage
There should definitely be a self reflective section for students to look at their own behaviours patterns and the impact this may be having on others.
Maybe financial responsibility too.
When I see the word ' inclusion ' alarm bells go off now because of the exclusion it leads to for those who don't celebrate the agenda. Tolerance and acceptance is one thing but promotion and celebration is another and that is what these phrases have come to lead to in secondary schools.
I think consent is a really important topic. I also think a clear focus on when along with consideration for the appropriate thoughts, feelings, duration & seriousness of relationships that should be taken into account prior to becoming sexually involved with a boyfriend/girlfriend. I also think the realities of what STD/STI infections involve along with the practical changes that would be required in their lives in the event of an unplanned pregnancy is important to discuss.
Again question 24 needs to be defined. I support acceptance and balance but I do not agree with the focus on LGBTQ+ or gender. There is no longer a balance being shown in the school. This ideology is being taught as normal and it is not the majority. Kids should be left alone as kids until they are adult enough to make decisions about their sexuality and gender.
Sex education needs to come at later years. Secondary school is a better place for this, where students are more mature and interested.
Lets not confuse a 5 yo with sex. No need for them to have this type of education as they are too young.
Again not all relevant for primary school
This subject could be used to balance out the current imbalance between students leaving school full of theoretical knowledge but very lacking in practical life and living skills.
I think these are all extremely important. Especially Learning how to stand up for yourself and others in various situations. Taking care of yourself - mentally, physically and emotionally. As well as learning about your rights in the workplace, include how to read payslips and claim tax benefits.
It's all well and good giving the kids the skills to deal with these situations but pointless unless schools address the issues of drug/alcohol/ smoking misuse on school premises. Blind eyes being turned in every school in the country which is only enabling the problem.
There is no such thing as "drug mis-use" as it implies that somehow drug use may be acceptable in some circumstances. For children drug use is never OK and the very term makes me even more suspicious of what is inside this SPHE curriculum
Evidence based emotional regulation skills.
A strong aversion to any adult that wants to push their political beliefs as fact from a position of power and authority.
Teach the unvarnished facts and keep your ideals to yourself. You are teachers. Not priests.
It's also important to learn about managing finances, cooking and other life skills.
As my previous answer more or less covered acceptance/kindness of each individual human whether they're Irish or of different origins or if they're part of LGBTQ+ just being kind to other humans. I don't want any gender based education taught in school that's as per family decides at home. Good values should be taught at home. Be kind ..look after yourself and your friends ..stay out of trouble make good choices. Stick up for yourself within your group ..don't start fights... also for the children that aren't academic that's OK their talents lie elsewhere can these be nurtured ??? We can't possibly rate our children's intelligence solely on academic achievements... there's so much more they have to offer society. Some are far more intelligent than high achievers but the school system doesn't support that.

No	Meditation, yoga, autism, healthy food choice disability, adhd, sensory processing, a range of activities, not just sport, over emphasis on sport.
	Look at the educational models in lower socio economic communities around the world and the impact this has had on the ones development and their subsequent contribution to society.
	Looking at political systems that support discriminative practice and the impact on said societies
	So much more education around consent and sexual violence needs to be happening.
No	I think we need to do more to highlight the negative impact of drugs. Scare tactics are unfortunately necessary like hearing real stories and seeing films showing how addiction ruins lives.
	I think and many adults I speak to these days also agree, home economics should be a compulsory course for all genders. All children should be able to look after themselves at the end of primary school. At minimum in a theoretical way.
	Interesting about age of consent that does not protect them as grooming etc can take place its important for them to be able to protect themselves and be able to assert themselves when giving or not giving consent.
No	
No	Children and young adults mimic the attitudes and actions of their parents. Including and educating parents around the teachings of the SPHE curriculum should be prioritised as oftentimes it is the parents that require guidance and not the children/young adults.
No	
	Include financial advice - dangers of credit etc ie: longterm effects on future borrowing/mortgages
	No comments.
	Teaching about resilience is important too.
	The value of money.
	Please do not teach gender identity as fact - humans cannot change sex, to imply such is negligent. It is a belief - like Catholicism, Islam or any other religion, people are free to believe what they want but they should not impose those beliefs or restrictions based on those beliefs on other people. Gender should be replaced with sex - sex balance, sex equality. Conflating gender with sex confuses the issue and leads to poorer outcomes for women and girls.
No	
No	Focus on online dangers attached to social media, porn addiction, the risks of being misled by false friend requests, being fed misleading and divisive information and how to deal with peer pressure and other pressures the online world facilitates. Basically how best to stay safe online as much as offline
	Introduction on Irish legislation and the legal system around consequences of actions possibly.
	I would strongly oppose any gender ideology studies as it sends out the wrong messages to vulnerable and confused children.
	Workplace health and safety should be a module within working rights
	From my knowledge of my own families children, who are in the age bracket of 4th-6th year, I see a huge difference in maturity. I don't think the education about these subjects should be given equally to a 10 year old as would be a 12 year old. For example a majority of 10 yr olds should not need to learn from school about the addiction help centres etc but could be informed to stay away from illegal things and drugs drink etc. A 12 yr old could be advised more on these subjects, the same with subjects like abuse, rape, a 12 year old can handle more information than a 10 year old. So I feel the classes should be age appropriate per year. Also I believe gender identity, gender dysphoria should not be taught in school at primary level. Children of this age are too young, some have not even gone through puberty. These subjects are of a sensitive nature and should be discussed with parents for the majority, as I believe it is the parents responsibility to teach their children these things. If a child is not in a position to go to their parents on lgbtq subjects then maybe if there is a designated teacher/Councillor to help children in these matters if the child needs to talk to someone that they know they are there to talk to.

Consent, grooming signs, how to ask an adult for help, what to do if they see something online that they find upsetting or distressing

Definitely a focus on the online world and social media and how that affects our lives and how to deal with that. Discussions around what is real and what is not real online and how to question what might be real or not online.

There is nothing here to help a young adult find a good wholesome community where they know they are loved for who they are. Where is the discussion on faith and people's spirituality? Where is the sense that they are part of something bigger and greater than themselves and how they are valued for who and what they are? Years of not teaching people about faith has people searching in all the wrong places for a sense of value, meaning and community.

I definitely feel relationships and sexual identity should be covered as well as positive mental health

Homemaking , how to run a home , pay bills , budgeting , saving , investing

Emphasis on the damage social media can cause when not used optimally is important. Ideally if we can promote kids to move away from their phones and do more activities. So an emphasis on the psychological and physical benefits of hobbies, sports, music drama etc. would add a positive twist to the curriculum.

Inclusion and diversity should also be discussed, with respect to ethnic, cultural, ability and disability themes

The menstrual cycle. The different phases the different hormones. How there are some days of a month a woman will not be at her peak and that is ok. Not to beat herself up over it. How blinding pain every month is not normal and they should see a specialist. Beneficial for all sexes and identities to learn about these things.

Also learning about how eating junk foods and ultra processed foods can affect your mood and skin at a young age and health in a few years.

Yes, also about learning to deal with disappointment, failures, loss, set backs..all part of life journey too!

In addition to all the areas in this survey, Practical skills such as cooking healthy meals, financial skills around money management, loans and mortgages etc

Other life skills inc driving and basic legal rights should be included

The first question should be taught way before in primary and junior cert. I think learning about employment rights is essential and also how to stand up for themselves and be confident and problem solvers

Please make these topics as inclusive of neuro diverse student's needs too.

First aid

Re relationships - education around red flags and different personality types particularly understanding what narcissistic people are like. So so important.

Include sections that deal with more severe mental health issues and mental illness bipolar, paranoia, DID, schizophrenia and on how poor mental health, body image, self esteem or not dealing with ODD, autism, ADHD, alcohol and drug use can lead to the above more serious mental illnesses. How to cope with them and about how these people should be able to integrate into society without bias. More about disabilities as 1 in 8 people have them (hidden or not).

LGBTQ+ have many organisations working on their behalf but those with mental illnesses are still seen differently, from my observation. Discuss ACES adverse childhood experiences and trauma so those affected are more aware of their own experience and how they are effecting their lives.

respect would be so more. The senior cycle needs to respect themselves, their bodies and their minds and respect for family and others.

This list of what I would like to see in Senior SPHE is endless but unfortunately time isn't! I have seen the introduction of Well-being at JC take hours from academic subjects and standards slip. It is not for the benefit of students or teachers as filling the time and engaging students in all the Wellbeing hours is difficult. A number of staff have been given CSPE/SPHE classes to "fill their timetable" with absolutely NO training in these areas whatsoever, not even an inservice. This is totally incorrect and again just a box ticking exercise in attempting to say students Well-being is being looked after.

I would hate to see the same in Senior Cycle. There are only a finite number of hours on a school timetable and students currently take 7 exam subjects (at a minimum). I \*presume\* the SPHE reform is being carried out in line with the overall senior cycle reform to see how it can all work together for the \*best of the student\*. There is little point looking at it independently. Whatever happens PLEASE ensure that schools are directed to only allow suitable qualified people teach these classes.

Please remove all references to choosing and changing your sexuality

Holistic Health and Wellbeing, Charitable work should be considered and included.

The earlier these topics are discussed the better as children are accessing information online from all types of sources

This is all wonderful and exactly what should be taught in schools as how to grow into successful adults. I'd also believe that financial sense could also be included though as a parent I intend to teach this aswell

Other important life skills for adulthood - value of money, budgeting, what insurance is, how banking works etc

Your rights as a worker. How to deal with bulking in the workplace or within a relationship. How to recognise the signs of abuse for yourself and friends. How to access services for help.

I support the proposal for the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum, without the undue attention and focus given to the topics around the LGBTQ+ relationships and families. Thanks.

I think all of above is important. I really hope this programme doesn't take hours away from academic subjects in the same way it did at Junior cycle.

Anything related to life skills. A lot of things we as adults have learned through life experiences, some of them not so easy to learn and some that if we had been better educated we would not have had to go through. Prevention is always better then cure as they say.

I think what has been outlined in the previous points encompasses what I would speak to my son and daughter about

Better have a good book.

Its very important that girls learn to be empowered and expect equal treatment and opportunities in life and the work place. To expect the same pay and That they should recognise all forms of misogyny and how to deal with it and call it out. On personal safety students should be taught self defence etc

The importance of breastfeeding.

Work experience in caring for the elderly or disabled.

Money management as a singleton and in a relationship and as a parent.

Importance of saving for the future.

Irish tax

needing t learn that is ok to feel overwhelmed at times etc, learning to navigate disappointments, tricky friendships, low moods, lonliness and learning its part of life's journey

More practical skills like teaching them about good credit. The impact of debt. How to buy a home. How to register to vote. The importance of voting. Better career guidance.

Tax, banking, budgeting

No I think what's described is very thorough

Meditation, yoga, non medical advice to boost mental health, clean living!! Organic whole foods!

Teach them how to grow there own food basic diy ie change a plug/bulb.

I think role playing is important for this section. Also my children are very reluctant to speak up in class so the training should be carefully moderated so all the class feel they can take away the learnings even if they did not offer their own opinions and observations to the group.

Our children do not need exposure to sexual and pornographic contents. The parents are the primary educator of the children so we would appreciate if this aspect is left to the parents as it has always been in the curriculum. We do not want our children sexualised and exposed to unnecessary contents.

Group work.

Children should learn about their rights and duties as citizens not only rights as workers. They should be taught not only about " empathy" and " inclusion " ( which they are taught all time in a primary school), but to think critically. At that stage it is more important, because they are more mature and responsible.

As before, I think all of these topics need to be covered. I'm finding the ranking a little confusing. I would like to know children rights against emotional abuse in the EU, where can they turn to, who cares about that.

No

So important to link the strands together .... For example bullying is never just about the situation itself but about how it impacts you based on your previous history and your current mental health. Being able to separate that out and recognise what is controllable and what isn't is vital

I think if children are more prepared for life they will be less anxious or suffer from mental health issues as they have not been prepared in the past

A module on the realities of child rearing and breastfeeding

Good citizenship, marriage, family, community, kindness, healthy eating and exercise.

Bullying in the workplace is a huge problem, students should be given the skills to address this so that they are ready for it when they see it

All of the above! Regardless of the type of school

I think it would be great to normalise counselling/therapy as a means to recognising your false core beliefs and negative thought patterns. Everyone should do it - in fact it was offered in schools just think of the difference it would make!

How to recognise bullying behaviour and what to do if you see someone in class is being isolated or bullied.

I think this programme is evil to the core particularly in relation to sex where sexual activity is promoted at such a young age giving rise to all sorts of mental health issues as well as lots of confusion etc. Leave our young people alone.

Social media and access to pornography online is having a very detrimental effect on the mental health of our young people. Each secondary school should have a dedicated student counsellor on site and all schools should ban the use of smartphones on the school grounds. Some parents are having to purchase smartphones for their children in the first year of secondary school because homework is assigned electronically via an app. They may feel that their child is not emotionally ready for all that a smartphone entails but they are not supported by schools. Children need proper education on the use of smartphones if we are introducing them at such an early age.

Consent workshops

Mental Health and consent workshops

I agree it is very important to prepare young adults for living life independently.

All elements should be in conjunction with conversations to take place at home. Parents and guardians, who know their children best, should be fully involved in all aspects of the programme with all material including suggested readings made available in an easily accessible manner in advance of any discussion taking place at school.

Yes I think that students should be taught more about hormones and the way hormones can affect women at different parts of their cycle. For example how in the final phase of the cycle we should be reducing stress and looking after ourselves more whereas at the beginning of the cycle might be a good time to study or get some exercise in. I think this is really important for all genders to learn about. I also think a lot more should be taught about healthy eating, how different foods affect you and how to choose healthier options.

How to manage your money would have been very helpful as well. Options available to you.

Not sure if cv writing and all that is covered under this but will put it in there!

I believe heterogeneous family values should be pushed as well and other children religious values and beliefs should be included as well.

We need to teach our young people skills for when they go out into the world. A parenting course should also be mandatory not just about having and caring for a newborn but teach the reality about caring for older children, supporting children holistically, providing a secure and positive environment for a child. Being responsible for decisions about the child's life, including children with additional needs.

Our children do not need exposure to sexual and pornographic contents. The parents are the primary educator of the children so we would appreciate if this aspect is left to the parents as it has always been in the curriculum. We do not want our children sexualised and exposed to unnecessary contents

Learning appropriate skills and not exposed to adult life at a young age. Don't raise children to become an adult quickly.

The SPHE curriculum should have a section that let students know it is ok to be either Male or Female and where straight people are celebrated as well.

Topics like honesty, love and respect for parents and others should be taught

All of the above seem very good to me. As I mentioned in the previous section, just for the programme to be done in a way that grabs their attention so they actually retain all this information, so they know how important it is.

Time allocated for these classes should not be used for other activities

as a parent, I should be the primary educator of my children. I do not appreciate the school exposing my children to sexual and pornographic contents.

Also, The curriculum only favours the LGBTQ+. straight students and families feel they are less important because everything is all about LGBTQ.

Will There be a freedom of choice? because the straight have no option of choice, as much as the LGBTQ+ students have.

These teachings are being forced on our children whether they want it or not, in the way that is unnecessary, unsuitable, inappropriate and unfair, there is no freedom of choice here.

I would prefer to teach my children about sexuality in the best way I know, that would not mess up their mind and mentality.

Again would be better by expert speaker or at home rather than class based

Maybe more about bullying and online trolling and the affects on kids.

SPHE curriculum should remain as it is with the sole aim of developing skills and helping to maintain an overall healthy work-life balance for young adults without reference to emerging inappropriate sexual relationships such as LGBT+

Knowledge of God should be taught using the Holy bible

Balanced attitude to life, good religious and moral upbringing.

Promoting and respecting family values

Boys supporting female puberty and vice versa.

Basic life skills such as how to save, monitor your taxes and avail of tax back if necessary.

How to budget. Health insurance and how to get the best value.

Driving skills

Morality and values.

Please let the LGBT Community also learn that its not by force or aggression to make people accept their orientations- Respect begets Respect. So it must not be forced on but know not everyone will accept politely

As before

No

I think outside speakers are sometimes a good way of introducing a different perspective on a topic . ie a nurse from a sexual health clinic. A person who works in womens aid ....

All above is very important and needs to be discussed in senior cycle. A safe place and a trustworthy source of information from trained staff where students feel comfortable to discuss openly about certain issues/ topics. Instead of getting info from peers or the internet which may not be helpful.

I think keeping things very basic is important children can be very vulnerable and need to be protected especially when it comes to gender identity. Children are very easily influenced and they don't have the maturity to think things through.

Practical/ workshop type learning as much as possible for these skills.

it probably should be equality and inclusion rather than equity and inclusion but given the poor direction education has taken over the last number of years, and the pull towards profit, this is understandable.

The country does not have any systematic practices that discourage equity. Don't push political issues from the USA here in Ireland.

I just want my Child to know how to protect herself in general. We as parents will teach her about Sex and Relationships. I do not want her being taught about "Pornography" etc. Because we as parents do not know exactly what is included in this Curriculum.

It's my job as her Mother to educate her in this area, not that of a school.

On the surface this would seem ok but given examples from the us this will lead to identity politics and racialising kids and sowing division. I fundamentally disagree with equity, it's a poor

substitute for equality. Everyone should be treated equally but equity try's to fix the outcome regardless which is none sense.

no



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

National Women's Council  
Ireland (NLCI)

# National Women's Council Ireland (NWCi)

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

#### Insert response here:

The proposed aim serves as a promising foundation to build upon. However, similar to our Junior Cycle specification submission<sup>1</sup> and Senior cycle background submission<sup>2</sup> we continue to emphasise the need for a more gender sensitive lens for the development and delivery of a SPHE curriculum. We recommend the inclusion of the following areas to ensure a more comprehensive and inclusive SPHE Senior Cycle:

- Public health promotion
- Advancing gender equality
- The prevention of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse against women, girls, non-binary and intersex people
- Positive sexuality and reproductive rights
- Provision of evidence-based, inclusive, and objective information

#### **Public health promotion**

Health and education go hand-in-hand, with the World Health Organisation (WHO) recognising the role education plays in the health of students, their families, and the wider community.<sup>3</sup> Public health promotion

in Senior Cycle SPHE should include key learning objectives on contraception, pregnancy choices, female anatomy, menopausal health, and responsible substance use.<sup>4</sup> The new curriculum must be inclusive, recognising the distinct experiences of marginalised groups, including disabled individuals, ethnic minorities, the LGBTQI+ community, and those from diverse family backgrounds, to promote holistic wellbeing and awareness. It is crucial that the curriculum considers intersectionality for students – understanding how different aspects of their identity intersect and impact their lives and experiences. This thoughtful approach ensures that every student's unique background and challenges are considered, fostering a more comprehensive and empathetic educational environment.

<sup>1</sup> NWC (2022) Submission to the NCCA Consultation on the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum.

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Junior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Submission\\_2022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Junior_Cycle_SPHE_Submission_2022_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> NWC (2022) NWC Submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC\\_Submission\\_on\\_Senior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Redevelopment.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Submission_on_Senior_Cycle_SPHE_Redevelopment.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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 behaviours.<sup>5</sup>

### **Advancing gender equality**

NWC provided an intersectional feminist analysis of the Junior cycle draft curriculum and Senior Cycle SPHE Redevelopment submission. Both of which highlighted the importance of SPHE and RSE (Relationships and Sexuality Education) in advancing gender equality and preventing violence against women and girls. In our Senior Cycle submission, we stressed the importance of communicating this message to educators, recognising its transformative potential for society.<sup>6</sup>

For this approach to be effective, it is essential that all stakeholders within the educational system, as well as parents, guardians, and caregivers, comprehend the significance of a curriculum firmly rooted in gender equality for the well-being of young individuals. They must also recognise how such a curriculum will ultimately benefit both the students and society as they transition into adulthood.<sup>7</sup>

UNESCO has developed a toolkit to promote gender equality in education which clearly outlines that curriculum updates should include holistic gender audits to gender proof teaching methods, learning materials, classroom practices and learning environments.<sup>8</sup> For young people aged 15-18, the UNESCO toolkit places a strong emphasis on promoting a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental concepts related to sexual orientation and identity. It underscores that gender inequality can impact sexual behaviour and potentially elevate the likelihood of experiencing sexual coercion, abuse, and violence.<sup>9</sup>

The UNESCO international technical guidance on sexual education further recommends that students (15-18 years) should be able to understand that:

- It is essential to challenge one's own and other's gender biases.
- Homophobia and transphobia harm people with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Gender inequality, social norms and power imbalances influence sexual behaviour and may increase the risk of sexual coercion, abuse, and Gender Based Violence (GBV).
- Intimate partner violence is harmful, and support exists for those who experience it.
- Everyone has a responsibility to advocate for gender equality and speak out against human rights violations such as sexual abuse, harmful practices, and other forms of GBV.

<sup>4</sup> NWC (2022) NWC Submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC\\_Submission\\_on\\_Senior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Redevelopment.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Submission_on_Senior_Cycle_SPHE_Redevelopment.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 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>

<sup>6</sup> NWC (2022) NWC Submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC\\_Submission\\_on\\_Senior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Redevelopment.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Submission_on_Senior_Cycle_SPHE_Redevelopment.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO (2019) Mainstreaming gender equality in curricula and teaching and learning materials.

[https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Education/publications/GENIA2019/19\\_Dec\\_GEN\\_IA\\_Toolkit\\_18.pdf](https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Education/publications/GENIA2019/19_Dec_GEN_IA_Toolkit_18.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

As young people approach adulthood and prepare to leave school, they enter a critical transitional phase where their understanding of gender, consent, and power dynamics can be influenced by numerous external factors. This transition occurs outside the structured environment of classroom discussions, potentially exposing them to misinformation, entrenched gender stereotypes, and a lack of clear guidance on cultivating emotionally healthy and responsible relationships.<sup>10</sup>

***The prevention of sexual violence, exploitation and abuse against women, girls, non-binary and intersex people***

As per CSO data, "in 2022, just over four in five (83%) victims of reported incidents of Sexual offences were female, and over half (51%) of all victims-survivors were under 18 when the incident took place".<sup>11</sup> It is fundamental that the curriculum recognises the importance of prevention of sexual violence, exploitation, and abuse as a core overarching aim. Along with a gendered lens for all topics to challenge gender norms and harmful gender stereotypes which lead to violence and discrimination against women, girls, non-binary, and intersex people.

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.<sup>12</sup>

NWC's recent Call for Inputs: Online Safety<sup>13</sup> highlights the need to address and combat the harmful exposure of children and young people to pornography, especially given its suspected link to increased harmful sexual behaviour among this demographic. There must also be a recognition of inappropriate exposure to explicit and violent pornography at a young age which contributes to harmful attitudes regarding sex, relationships, and gender, possibly even sexual violence. NWC has previously highlighted the role of various video-sharing platforms, in facilitating this exposure and calls for measures to mitigate this issue, such as stricter content moderation and age-appropriate education as part of school curricula. It is of critical importance that we protect children and young people from the negative impacts of online pornography.

In Ireland, 26% of women have experienced physical or sexual violence since the age of 15,<sup>14</sup> and disabled women are four times more likely to experience sexual violence.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> This is preventable and it is recognised within the [Third National Strategy on Domestic Sexual and Gender-Based Violence](#).

<sup>10</sup> NWC (2022) NWC Submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment  
[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC\\_Submission\\_on\\_Senior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Redevelopment.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Submission_on_Senior_Cycle_SPHE_Redevelopment.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> CSO (2023) Recorded Crime Victims 2022 and Suspected Offenders 2021  
<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rcvo/recordedcrimevictims2022andsuspectedoffenders2021/keyfindings/>

<sup>12</sup> 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>

<sup>13</sup> NWC (2023) NWC Call for Inputs: Online Safety  
[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final\\_Media\\_Commission\\_Submission.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final_Media_Commission_Submission.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> SPHE Network (2018) Diversities: Interpretations through the Context of SPHE.  
[https://sphenetwork.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/conference\\_proceedings\\_2018.pdf](https://sphenetwork.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/conference_proceedings_2018.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> 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](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC- 3rd_National_Strategy_DSGBV_Submission_JUNE_2021.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> SPHE Network (2018) Diversities: Interpretations through the Context of SPHE.  
[https://sphenetwork.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/conference\\_proceedings\\_2018.pdf](https://sphenetwork.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/conference_proceedings_2018.pdf)

### **Positive sexuality and reproductive rights**

While we welcome the inclusion and integration of the strand on relationship and sexual education within SPHE, the curriculum should also 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,<sup>17</sup> including the provision of information on contraception and abortion, is essential to establish a foundation of knowledge before students enter adulthood.

### **Provision of evidence-based and objective information**

A European Parliament report on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) recognises that providing comprehensive sex education is “now more urgent than ever as there is a growing number of misinformation surrounding SRHR”.<sup>18</sup> The programme must recognise how fundamental this is to ensure that it delivers equitable education for all Senior Cycle students.

It must also state that the curriculum should be evidence-based and objective. SPHE and RSE must be implemented according to the curriculum and without influence from the religious ethos of the school to ensure equitable provision for all students. Over the past several years, in our work with young women – e.g. [#FemFest](#), it has been consistently highlighted that there is a lack of consistency in the approach and relevance of fact-based sexuality and relationship education to young people's lives. 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.

## **Question 2: The Learning**

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> 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](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2021-0169_EN.pdf)

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional, and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques, and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol, and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.10	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18-year-olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The learning outcomes in Strand 1 generally provide a reasonable level of clarity on expectations for learning. The learning outcomes in Strand 1 appear to be relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18-year-olds today. However, the use of a gender sensitive lens can make strand one more inclusive. Additionally, all the three strands are interconnected and should be taught with a focus on intersectionality.

The following are some points which should be considered in the development of this Strand:

- 1.1. Encouraging students to explore the multifaceted determinants of good health through a gender-sensitive lens. Recognising the influence of societal expectations and roles on health choices, we should aim to facilitate discussions that highlight the unique health challenges of girls and women. Students should be made aware of equitable access to healthcare for all genders, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of health determinants.<sup>19</sup> In this learning outcome, it's vital to support teachers in understanding the human rights situations of diverse communities including Traveller and

<sup>19</sup> Miani, C., Wandschneider, L., Niemann, J., Batram-Zantvoort, S. and Razum, O., (2021). Measurement of gender as a social determinant of health in epidemiology—A scoping review. *PLoS One*, 16(11), p.e0259223.

Roma, disabled students, and migrants. The unique social determinants of these communities must be acknowledged and facilitated by teachers.

- 1.2. Acknowledging that the pursuit of a healthy life balance can be influenced by gender norms; strategies that address these concerns should be explored to create a platform for open dialogue about societal support systems that can promote a harmonious life balance for all genders.<sup>20</sup>
- 1.3. The social norms and attitudes towards alcohol and drugs should particularly be mindful of the potential impact on mental and physical well-being. The aim should be to challenge stereotypes and promote responsible substance use across genders.<sup>21</sup> It's important to create awareness of the shame and stigma associated with communities dealing with addiction issues. In tandem, studies have also shown that there is a link between substance use and intimate partner violence and this should be covered in conversations about substance use.<sup>22</sup> The ultimate learning outcome of 1.3 should be to understand how negative experiences can impact the physical and mental health of students, and to foster self-compassion and understanding.
- 1.4. To foster mental health and well-being there is a need to enhance a gender sensitive lens. This is particularly pertinent as girls, who face double the risk of common mental health difficulties compared to boys.<sup>23</sup> In [NWC's Gender-sensitive Mental Health report](#), a study examining the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the psychosocial wellbeing of adolescents, conducted by Wang et al. (2021) was cited which emphasised the importance of integrating a gender perspective into adolescent care. The research revealed notable gender-related disparities in vulnerability and the impact of the pandemic, particularly in areas such as mental health, academic performance, and physical wellbeing. Ultimately, the study's findings indicated that, during this stage of life, young girls are more prone to encountering mental health challenges compared to boys of a similar age. It is also of critical importance that all mental health services and supports are gender sensitive, taking account of the particular needs of women and girls, as envisaged in our national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision*.
- 1.5. This should also recognise the influence of societal gender norms on negative self-talk and thinking patterns. At the same time, there is a need to empower students through positive self-affirmations that challenge stereotypes.
- As mentioned in our Junior Cycle submission, there should be a learning outcome on mental health and marginalised groups. Research shows that marginalised women (including asylum seekers, homeless women, Traveller and Roma women, LGBTQI+ women, and disabled women are disproportionately impacted by poor mental health.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>20</sup> WHO (2021) Gender and Health <https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/gender-and-health>

<sup>21</sup> 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 Behaviours*, 62, 83–90.

<sup>22</sup> 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>

<sup>23</sup> Guidelines on mental health promotive and preventive interventions for adolescents. (2020). Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/336864/9789240011854-eng.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> 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

- This strand should include a learning outcome on eating disorders, body image and where to seek help for disordered eating. The teachers can guide the students with support from organisations such as [BodyWhys](#), which has a teen (13-18) online support group for young people struggling with eating disorders.
- Stigma still exists around mental health and wellbeing and it is important that the curriculum takes measures to address such stigma and improve mental health literacy in young people. Research suggests that school-based programmes for adolescents aimed at improving mental health literacy are effective.<sup>25</sup> Students should be provided with information on the range of mental health services and supports available for young people in communities across the country.

### Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge, and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring, and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland; and Mental Health Reform & Simon (2017) Homelessness and Mental Health: Voices of Experience

<sup>25</sup> Seedaket, 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>

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The learning outcomes in the "relationships and sexuality" strand do provide a level of clarity on expectations for learning. It outlines some specific objectives and goals that students are expected to achieve. The relevance of the learning outcomes to the lives and needs of 16-18-year-olds today is somewhat dependent on the specific content and how it is delivered. The subject of relationships and sexuality is undoubtedly important for adolescents, as they navigate a critical phase in their development. As stated in our response to Strand 1, all three strands are interconnected and should be taught with a focus on intersectionality. The learning outcomes should address the challenges and questions that young people commonly face in this area.

The following are some points which should be considered in the development of this Strand:

- 2.1. Respecting boundaries for both in-person and online relationships is necessary. Ringrose et. al. (2021) in their study delved into image-based sexual harassment and abuse. It included both qualitative and quantitative research, involving 480 young individuals aged 12 to 18 from various regions in the UK. The findings shed light on the troubling prevalence and normalisation of non-consensual image-sharing practices among young people. These practices encompassed unwanted sexual images like cyberflashing and unsolicited explicit pictures, as well as coerced sexting and the unauthorised recording, distribution, or threat of distributing sexual images.<sup>26</sup>
- 2.1. Should also include normalisation of disclosure of sensitive sexual and related issues including knowledge of pregnancy, HIV positive status, and sexual abuse.<sup>27</sup> It is essential to inform young people of the support they can reach out to for assistance. Information on trustworthy and credible resources should be disseminated to students.
- 2.3. The emphasis on consensual sexual behaviour is essential for promoting healthy sexual relationships. Hence, young people should learn how to both give and refuse consent. It is important to effectively communicate personal preferences and sexual limitations. A knowledge and understanding of healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships, information on how to avoid unhealthy sexual relationships and how to access help and support where needed is essential.<sup>28</sup>
- 2.4. To promote gender equality, it's imperative to discuss measures to combat harmful social and cultural biases, dispel misconceptions, and counter prejudice.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, it is imperative to empower students to express solidarity with those facing discrimination based on gender, race, or religion. Equally essential is addressing and challenging biased behaviour related to diverse sexual

<sup>26</sup> Ringrose, J. et al (2021). Understanding and Combatting Youth Experiences of Image-Based Sexual Harassment and Abuse. Available at <https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Campaigns/Understanding-and-combatting-youth-experiences-of-image-based-sexual-harassment-and-abuse-full-report.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> OHCHR (n.d.) The struggle of trans and gender-diverse persons <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity/struggle-trans-and-gender-diverse-persons>

orientations and gender identities.<sup>30</sup> Women from various ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds can and do face Domestic and Sexual Gender-based Violence (DSGBV). Regardless of their backgrounds, such women share similar experiences and challenges. However, for marginalised groups like Traveller women, those from minority communities, and disabled women and girls, the experience can be even more complex. Discrimination, poverty, social isolation, and disadvantages create additional hurdles for them in seeking help, support, protection, and long-term solutions in dealing with a violent relationship. Women living in rural communities can be even more vulnerable because of increased levels of social isolation.<sup>31</sup>

- 2.4. and 2.5. As per the International technical guidance on sexuality education, 15-18 years old should have basic awareness of national level policies and legislative provisions “concerning CEFM, FGM/C, non-consensual surgical interventions on intersex children, forced sterilization, age of consent, gender equality, sexual orientation, gender identity, abortion, rape, sexual abuse, sex trafficking; and people’s access to sexual and reproductive health services and reproductive rights”.<sup>32</sup>
- 2.6. Students should be aware that gender-based violence can take any form of physical, sexual, financial, emotional, or psychological abuse.<sup>33</sup> Along with information on the role of power dynamics that result in gender inequalities. Under this point it is essential to emphasise the role of bystanders to safely assist anyone in need. Students should discuss safe intervention as a strong statement against violence, fear, and victimisation. CSO data shows that in one in seven (15%) cases of detected sexual violence in 2020, both the victim and suspected offender were under 18 years of age and the Sexual Assault Treatment Units (SATUs) in Ireland have seen a rise in the number of victims-survivors of peer-to-peer violence they treat. The Sexual Assault Treatment Unit (SATU) annual report for 2022 shows that 20.1% of victims-survivors attending their centres were 18 years or below.<sup>34</sup>
- 2.7. The Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual & Gender-Based Violence Implementation Plan identifies the need for awareness raising with age-appropriate campaigns on pornography and the sex trade that may fuel misogyny and violence against women and undermine gender equality.<sup>35</sup> NWC, through the Beyond Exploitation Campaign (2020) also highlighted the harms of pornography on children and young people, by influencing expectations, normalising sexual behaviour based on misogynistic, and often abusive and violent, models of sexual expectations.<sup>36</sup> This highlights the pressing need for increased awareness and open dialogue regarding pornography among Senior Cycle students. The NWC's call for input on online safety cited research conducted by the Children's Commissioner in 2023, which amalgamates findings from focus groups with teenagers aged 13-19

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> NWC (2021) NWC Submission on the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender- Based Violence [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC-3rd\\_National\\_Strategy\\_DSGBV\\_Submission\\_JUNE\\_2021.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC-3rd_National_Strategy_DSGBV_Submission_JUNE_2021.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> HSE (n.d.) Appendix 1 Categories of Abuse <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/socialcare/safeguardingvulnerableadults/appendix%201-3.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> NWC (2023) NWC Call for Inputs: Online Safety [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final\\_Media\\_Commission\\_Submission.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final_Media_Commission_Submission.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> DSGBV Implementation Plan (2022) <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/228481/69e48889-49ea-49d6-8143-982f6cc28bac.pdf#page=null>

<sup>36</sup> Beyond Exploitation (2020), Submission to Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

and a survey involving 1,000 young people aged 16-21 in the UK. This report highlights that young individuals are frequently exposed to violent pornography, depicting coercive, degrading, or painful sexual acts, with a striking 79% encountering such content before reaching the age of 18.<sup>37</sup>

- 2.8. Raise awareness on the pressures of body image on social media which can create unrealistic expectations on sexual behaviour and body appearance and ultimately harm gender stereotypes.<sup>38</sup> Along with greater knowledge of how to address victim blaming and varied societal perception. Additionally, those who witness online bullying incidents should be introduced to ideas of greater social transparency on social media platforms to effectively promote greater accountability and empathy, ultimately leading to improved bystander behaviour.<sup>39</sup> Provide information on legal recourse for victims of image-based abuse and other serious crimes – e.g., Coco's Law.
- 2.8. Adopt a Zero tolerance approach to sexual harassment and violence in all school settings and provide more counsellors and online/in person talking therapy sessions in school – promoting the importance of student participation and mechanisms to hear and support their voice in school settings.
- 2.9. Should also include normalisation of disclosure of sensitive sexual and related issues including knowledge of pregnancy, HIV positive status, sexual abuse. It is essential to inform young people of the support they can reach out to for assistance. Information on trustworthy and credible resources should be disseminated to students.
- 2.9. Changes in bodies over time and the role of hormones which influence reproductive and sexual capacities including menopause must be discussed with Senior Cycle students. The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust's Menopause Easy Read Information is a good example for conveying important information for menopause to students in a clear and accessible manner.<sup>40</sup>
- 2.9. Greater awareness generation within schools on the free contraception scheme for the age category 17-31 years and the facilities available for abortion care available in Ireland should be provided.
- 2.9. Ireland's low ranking (40th out of 43) in the European Atlas of Fertility Treatment Policies underscores the need to prioritise fertility education for young girls and boys to prevent future infertility.<sup>41</sup> One effective initiative is Fertility Europe's FActS! game, launched at the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE) Congress 2023. This programme is designed to assess fertility knowledge among European teenagers aged 15-18. The initial phase will target four EU countries with robust patient associations, conducting a 3-year pilot to lay the foundation for broader implementation.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> NWC (2023) NWC Call for Inputs: Online Safety

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final\\_Media\\_Commission\\_Submission.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final_Media_Commission_Submission.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> European Parliament (2023) The impact of the use of social media on women and girls

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL\\_STU\(2023\)743341\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2023/743341/IPOL_STU(2023)743341_EN.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust (2020) Menopause Easy Read Information

<https://www.sath.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Menopause.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> Fertility Europe (2021) European Atlas of Fertility Treatment Policies [https://fertilityeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/FERTIL-Atlas\\_EN-2021-v10.pdf](https://fertilityeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/FERTIL-Atlas_EN-2021-v10.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Fertility Europe (n.d.) Fertility Awareness Project – FActS! game <https://fertilityeurope.eu/fertility-awareness/>

- The curriculum should be inclusive of disabled people when discussing relationships 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. The content must be age appropriate as disabled students have said that often the information, they are given about RSE is aimed at younger groups.<sup>43</sup>

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18-year-olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

The learning outcomes in the "into adulthood" section of Strand 3 provide a reasonable level of clarity on expectations for learning. The learning outcomes in the "into adulthood" section of Strand 3 are generally relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18-year-olds. As mentioned in Strand 1 and 2, it's important to consider the interconnected nature and focus on intersectionality within the three strands in the curriculum. This phase of adolescence is marked by significant transitions, including career exploration, financial independence, and increased personal responsibility. The learning outcomes address these key areas and can empower students with essential life skills.

<sup>43</sup> NWC (2022) Submission to the NCCA Consultation on the Draft Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum. [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Junior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Submission\\_2022\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Junior_Cycle_SPHE_Submission_2022_FINAL.pdf)

While the “into adulthood” section of Strand 3 covers essential topics, there are a few additional areas that should be considered:

- 3.1. To promote self-management and self-care skills schools need to inform students about reliable online and in person talking therapies and additional supports that can be accessed locally, including facilities available in the school.<sup>44</sup>
- 3.2. The nationwide Financial Literacy Score Index, commissioned by the Bank of Ireland and conducted by Red C, has highlighted financial literacy as a gender issue. According to the report, women and young adults consistently demonstrate below-average financial literacy scores.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, it is essential to incorporate financial literacy as a life skill under learning outcome 3.2, especially for students transitioning from school life to adulthood.
- 3.3. It is important for students in Senior Cycle to learn how to manage changing situations in life and how to take care of themselves and others. It is also essential to iterate to students that they can seek assistance if they feel overwhelmed. Assistance can be provided from their family, friends, school or if necessary external support can be garnered. For instance, Jigsaw Ireland has an early intervention, primary care service for young people, providing mental health support, and 1 to 1 online/in person talking therapy services for young people aged 12-25.<sup>46</sup>
- 3.3. The learning outcome needs to go beyond “change, loss of heartache”. For many Traveller and Roma young people, bereavement is largely due to health inequalities underpinned by structural racism and discrimination. Therefore, interdepartmental collaboration is required to address these social determinants of health (e.g., employment, addiction, accommodation, and health). Targeted supports should be developed with relevant Traveller & Roma organisations, ensuring they are culturally appropriate.
- 3.4. Greater mental health literacy support is needed for young people as they transition from post primary education to ensure young people have the critical emotional regulation and health promotion skills to manage greater independence.<sup>47</sup> For many students, this transition period may be the first time they experience living outside the family home and/or will experience greater financial responsibilities (including paying rent and bills) etc.
- 3.4. To prepare students to enter college, it is essential to provide them with relevant and supportive information on sexual harassment. As per the NUI Galway/Union of Students of Ireland Sexual Experiences survey from 2020 over half of first year students reported experiencing sexual harassment or some form of sexual hostility at the beginning of college.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup> WHO (2021) Classification Of Self-Care Interventions For Health <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/350480/9789240039469-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>45</sup> Bank of Ireland (n.d.) Ireland's financial literacy lags peers according to new national study. <https://www.bankofireland.com/about-bank-of-ireland/press-releases/2023/irelands-financial-literacy-lags-peers-according-to-new-national-study/>

<sup>46</sup> Jigsaw (n.d.) <https://jigsaw.ie/information-and-elearning/?bring=a-young-person&cat=&search=&pagesd=1>

<sup>47</sup> NWC (2022) NWC Submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment

[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC\\_Submission\\_on\\_Senior\\_Cycle\\_SPHE\\_Redevelopment.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Submission_on_Senior_Cycle_SPHE_Redevelopment.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> USI (2020) Sexual Experiences Survey 2020 <https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SES-published-report.pdf>

- 3.4. Students who decide to enter the workforce directly after school, either in part-time or in full-time capacity, should be provided with basic sexual harassment within the workplace training at the school level. Additionally, to prepare students for work life, informing them about external training modules that are available for them to learn and prepare for the real world would be beneficial. One such example is the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) Learning which has a short training module for Health and Safety in the Workplace for Students Starting Work.<sup>49</sup>
- For 3.5 and 3.6. It is important to inform students on the role of bystanders. The Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) indicated that bystanders have a powerful role to play in preventing or stopping bullying.<sup>50</sup> It highlights the role of bullying outside the school premises and under such circumstances it is essential to understand who will be held responsible.<sup>51</sup>
- 3.6. This learning outcome should include racism and discrimination and provide students with the skillset to identify their own prejudices, learn about the experience of marginalised and socially excluded communities, and ways to show solidarity towards those subjected to racism and discrimination on a daily basis.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

To enhance the Senior Cycle curriculum, it is important to reiterate the recommendations put forth in the NWC's report titled "[Every Woman: Towards Reproductive Health, Choice, and Care for All](#)".<sup>52</sup> This included a focus on the prevention of gender-based violence, championing positive sexuality and reproductive rights, equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and regular training, implementation of the programme without any influence from the religious ethos, provision of regular time-tabled lessons and to integrate a whole school approach. Lastly, in early 2023, after NWC published its submission on the Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Redevelopment, we also suggested that SPHE is made mandatory for all Senior Cycle students to tackle gender-based violence.<sup>53</sup>

The three cross-cutting elements in the Senior Cycle curriculum are generally relevant to the lives of students in Senior Cycle and cover a broad range of topics. The topics should be viewed through a gendered lens and

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<sup>49</sup> HSA (n.d.)  
[https://www.hsa.ie/eng/education/health\\_and\\_safety\\_courses\\_online/online\\_courses\\_for\\_students/](https://www.hsa.ie/eng/education/health_and_safety_courses_online/online_courses_for_students/)

<sup>50</sup> ISPCC (2022) Bullying and the role of the 'Bystander'  
<https://www.ispcc.ie/bullying-and-the-role-of-the-bystander/>

<sup>51</sup> Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science School Bullying and the Impact on Mental Health (2021)  
[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_education\\_further\\_and\\_higher\\_education\\_research\\_innovation\\_and\\_science/submissions/2021/2021-08-23\\_report-on-school-bullying-and-the-impact-on-mental-health\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_education_further_and_higher_education_research_innovation_and_science/submissions/2021/2021-08-23_report-on-school-bullying-and-the-impact-on-mental-health_en.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> NWC (2022) Every Woman: Towards Reproductive Health, Choice and Care for All  
[https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/15880\\_NWC\\_Every\\_Woman\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/15880_NWC_Every_Woman_Report_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>53</sup> NWC (2023) SPHE must be made mandatory to tackle gender-based violence  
[https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/sphe\\_must\\_be\\_made\\_mandatory\\_to\\_tackle\\_gender\\_based\\_violence](https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/sphe_must_be_made_mandatory_to_tackle_gender_based_violence)

learning outcomes should be overlapping and interconnected and underpinned by a clear rationale and aim. We have provided comments on how the cross-cutting elements can be strengthened below:

- **Thinking Critically and Empathically**

In today's interconnected world, critical thinking and empathy are essential life skills. By weaving these themes into the SPHE curriculum, students can learn to analyse information, question assumptions, and make informed decisions about their health, relationships, and life choices. Critical thinking allows them to navigate complex issues such as gender equality, gender stereotyping, consent, and mental health with a discerning mind. However, to ensure sexual health & relationship education is objectively delivered, Atheist Ireland has also advised that legislative change is necessary in order for RSE to be delivered independent of the ethos of the school.<sup>54</sup>

Simultaneously, empathy fosters a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals, including those related to gender, identity, and personal boundaries. These skills are particularly relevant for young people as they grow and form their own identities and beliefs.

- **Exercising rights, responsibilities and inclusivity**

Empowering students with knowledge about their rights and responsibilities is paramount, especially within the context of relationships and sexuality. By emphasising these concepts, the SPHE curriculum can help students understand and assert their rights to bodily autonomy, consent, and respectful relationships. At the same time, the role and responsibility as a bystander needs to be clearly introduced to students. Inclusivity is equally crucial, as it promotes an environment where all students feel respected and valued regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, or background.

The curriculum lacks an intersectional lens towards issues impacting students/young people. Fostering inclusivity in the curriculum can contribute to creating a society where diversity is celebrated, and discrimination is challenged. To ensure greater inclusivity, the note mentioned in the introduction of Strand 2 on LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families should be fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning throughout the curriculum. Additionally, the experiences of marginalised groups including migrants, Travellers, Roma and disabled individuals should also be highlighted.

- **Being Health Literate**

Health literacy is the cornerstone of personal well-being and a crucial aspect of the SPHE curriculum. Students must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about their physical, emotional, and mental health. By promoting health literacy, the curriculum can address key issues such as reproductive health, mental health, and access to healthcare services. It can empower students to seek help when needed and engage in preventive measures to maintain their health. 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.

As highlighted in the response for each of the Strands above, it is essential to address the interconnectedness across the various strands, for instance: Strand 1 (health and wellbeing) and Strand 2 (relationship and sexuality) are intertwined and should be discussed in light of sexual and reproductive health for issues including sexual transmitted infections, methods of contraception, options available for abortion care. Similarly, issues of mental health and the impact on students that is elaborated in Strand 1 is relevant across all the three strands in the curriculum.

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<sup>54</sup> Atheist Ireland (2021) <https://atheist.ie/2021/11/school-ethos-sphe-rse/>

How this curriculum is taught and facilitated needs to be carefully considered. The aim of the course is to empower students; therefore, they cannot be left feeling overwhelmed and isolated by the material on sensitive themes like mental health and GBV. Teachers and parents will need to be supported with how they can address concerns or more in-depth conversations that students may wish to have. Parents may also need assistance understanding the curriculum's significance for young people.

A nuanced understanding of diverse viewpoints and experiences to be as inclusive as possible in recognising the intersectionality of each young person's individual needs.<sup>55</sup> An intersectional approach is needed so that girls are not treated as a homogenous group. The health and sexual health experiences will be different for girls from a migrant background or ethnic minority, LGBTQI+ girls, Traveller and Roma girls and disabled girls.<sup>56</sup> It is important that this is reflected throughout the entire programme, taking into consideration their experiences and how to engage students/young people in the programme who may have not engaged with the Junior Cycle curriculum or who may not have the same 'literacies and numeracies' identified on Page 9 of the draft curriculum.

*The National Women's Council consulted our members for this submission and would like to acknowledge Pavee Point for their inputs.*

Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us. Please email this document to [SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie](mailto:SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie) before October 18th, 2023

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<sup>55</sup> NWC (2021) Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE [https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC\\_SPHE\\_submission.pdf](https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_SPHE_submission.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## The Natural Women's Council

# The Natural Women's Council

We wish to thank the NCCA for the opportunity to respond to the draft specification. The Natural Women's Council is a grassroots group including parents, grandparents, therapists, health care workers, teachers, lawyers and more with over 10,000 supporters across the country. Our focus is on safeguarding children and protecting women's rights and spaces. We have committed to over 2,000 volunteer hours this year without any funding other than donations from people around the country who see the value of our work.

We are deeply concerned about the content that is proposed to be taught to minor Irish children aged 15 to 17. I urge the NCCA to discard this proposed SPHE short Course curriculum and wisely use the proposed 60 teaching hours to instead focus on core subjects such as English, maths, science, history, civics etc., all subjects that parents can universally support and agree on without need for consultation.

We ask the NCCA - where is the evidence that students, teachers and parents were demanding this to be brought in to school because of an overwhelming demand in dealing with gender confusion? The majority of parents either do not know this is being taught or do not want this to be taught. We plan to do our own independent survey and publish results to the public to clearly illustrate that this is not a parent, teacher or student driven agenda.

We understand that parents can legally opt their children out of the parts that are contrary to their moral conscience. However, why should children who have parents against an unscientific ideology and highly sexualised programme be the ones to have their children excluded? Why don't we do an "opt-in" whereby IF parents want these changes, hey do after school classes? How many would opt in to this.

Furthermore, there is no risk assessment for many of the topics being proposed for the SPHE programme. Who is going to be held accountable when this goes wrong? Will the Department of Education's insurance policy cover damages incurred from future lawsuits when a risk assessment was not even completed?

We will continue to submit Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and intend to communicate the responses to the wider public as we have done with our FOIA responses in relation to the lack of parental engagement on the Junior Cycle SPHE consultation.

## **Eight Objections to the proposed Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum**

We list our main objections below, which is by no means an exhaustive list, but rather a prioritised list.

1. Lack of parental involvement in process: No parental involvement in drafting nor consultation with parents of secondary school students on the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.
2. UN driven "Sexuality" teaching: The course proposes to teach "sexuality" not sex education and the claim is that this is UN approved teaching, but unbeknownst to most, the teaching of "sexuality" was soundly rejected in the UN by outraged UN member countries. The radical groups within the UN then quietly withdrew the vote on sexuality education as they knew they would lose, but then went about promoting it as a UN policy regardless.
3. Forced acceptance of all sexuality of all persons: This course will force the teaching of inclusion into our classrooms of any and all sexual identify, practice and fantasy without reference to morals, safety and religious objection.
4. Obsessive focus on sex and pleasure for minor children: Extreme focus on sex and sexuality to the exclusion of love, religion, chastity and marriage. Suggesting to vulnerable and impressionable children that everyone is at it, why not you? Discussing sex and consent with children below the Irish age of consent which is 17.
5. Promotion and normalisation of transgenderism. Gender dysphoria is a medical condition which requires parents first and foremost to be involved. Schools teaching children that they can change their sex and that will solve their serious emotional issues is teaching lies and is extremely dangerous. Teachers must teach children facts, not ideology. Also the obsessive focus on gender dysphoria in our schools has seen the skyrocketing of the number of children identifying as the opposite sex and an increase in Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria with autistic girls being the majority of those who are suffering from this condition. This is causing distress and harm to the most vulnerable children.

6. Pornography has no place in our schools. That this must be said is difficult to understand. But it must be said. Instead of teaching pornography, schools should instead report back to the adults in the government, their employer, if they are aware of harm being done to children who are accessing pornography on line. It is illegal to provide pornography to children. Teachers should use their voices and their unions to petition the Irish government to use the criminal law to pursue persons and organisations illegally exposing children to pornography. Teachers should not join the ranks of those criminals and expose children to pornography. Teachers are in a very dangerous legal position if they are required to teach a subject that is illegal for adults to show to children.

7. White Irish Male privilege doesn't exist: Privilege is privilege and there is no colour, nationality or sex attached to it! Suggesting to children that there are characteristics that they are born with that they should somehow feel ashamed of is racism and sexism, pure and simple. Wanting Irish children to feel self-loathing and instilling a sense of victimhood in non Irish children is despicable and will only lead to division and polarisation.

8. Religious ethos of schools not reflected: This Curriculum does not have regard for the religious characteristic spirit of the vast majority of Irish secondary schools.

**Detail of eight objections above:**

**1. Statutorily required Parental Consultation did not happen**

The failure to engage and notify parents of radical change to the sex education of their minor children violates Section 9(d) of the Education Act 1998 which act requires a school to, “...**(d) 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..” (Emphasis added)

Further, parents are the primary caretaker and educator of their children pursuant to the Irish Constitution. The Constitution afforded parent's these superior rights over their children because the drafters understood that it is the family, not the state, that raises strong, healthy confident and well adjusted children that can go onto contribute meaningfully to the Irish nation.

It was left to unfunded parent groups and religious groups with little to no budget to notify as many parents of this consultation as our limited funds and reach allowed. For example, the Natural Women's Council printed and posted over 250,000 information leaflets around the country and help numerous live and online events as the NCCA failed involve parents in this consultation. In contrast many radical and well funded NGOs were invited to the discussion on our children early and often in the process. It was a secret club and parents were not given the secret password.

The subject matter proposed to be discussed here is not appropriate for a school setting. Firstly, the very specific and liberal political viewpoint being pursued here would not be agreed by very many Irish parents. And further, if the NCCA intend to claim this draft consultation process is in fact the consultation with parents to satisfy the statutory requirements of Section 9(d), this is on its face not sustainable.

A roundtable discussion was organised by the NCCA in October of this year and not a single secondary school parent organisation was invited. Not a single secondary school parent organisation was engaged in the drafting of the proposed curriculum. No outreach campaign was undertaken to advise parents of the consultation process.

The consultation date was extended in October and a hasty email sent to secondary schools asking them extremely belatedly to let parents know. Does the NCCA even know if those schools complied? We can advise the NCCA that many children's secondary schools failed to pass on the late message about the consultation process and survey to me. It was too little too late to extend the date in late October and hope schools would send out the message.

This fiasco has exposed the fact that the NCCA has no connection with or relationship with parents and parent organisations, despite the fact that morally and legally, parents are the most important stakeholder in this process. But the most important stakeholder was left out in the cold and not invited into the discussion on their own children. Emails on this topic with the NCCA in October of this year reveal the abject failure of the NCCA to reach out to parents and frankly, the NCCA threw up their hands and admitted they had no such channels to parents.

Genuine outreach to parents on a massive scale would have been necessary to meet the statutory enforced consultation requirement set out above. But this did not happen.

The obvious difficulty for the NCCA in promoting this radical agenda and incorporating it into the curriculum with broad parental consent is that such broad parental consent does not exist. Which is perhaps why this critical statutory step of obtaining parent consent to these radical changes was skipped. Better to beg forgiveness than ask for consent when one knows consent will not be forthcoming appears to be the policy here. Precisely the same policy that was used for the Junior Cycle SPHE "consultation".

The lack of consultation with parents in relation to the Junior Cycle was the subject of a FOI request submitted by myself. Nine questions were asked about the level of consultation with parents. The NCCA demurred and refused to answer any question on the topic of engagement with parents on the basis that the NCCA simply hasn't the time. This matter is now before the Information Commissioner who has agreed to take the case on.

No doubt as well the plan for the senior cycle is to quickly declare victory once the consultation is closed, claim all participant bar an undisclosed number of pesky parents agreed that the curriculum is brilliant and rush the curriculum through for September 2024 before anyone knows what has happened. This is what happened for the Junior Cycle.

A shocking video has circulated in the last few years of a Scottish teacher advising a group of Irish teachers at an INTO meeting to not to tell parents that they are teaching the children about these sexual topics, because teachers don't want 30 parents complaining to them!! Which accurately, if shockingly, reflects the difficulty of obtaining agreement and consent from all parents for their individual child to be taught transgenderism as fact and not ideology and to teach sexuality over sex.

## 2. UN driven "sexuality" education snuck in and erased sensible biological sex education

The vast majority of parents would and do agree to age appropriate biological and fact based sex education in our schools. Most parents believe that this is still what is taught and would be shocked to learn that fact based sex education has been replaced without their consent or knowledge by "sexuality education" which is driven by a desire to teach children at an increasingly younger and younger age about sex, masturbation, sexual pleasure, consent, sexual fantasy, gender identities, contraceptives, etc. Largely driven by the UN, an organisation that no Irish person voted for. (Refer to the WHO Standards of Sexuality document for further details and the matrix for topics to be taught by age group)

The good news is that other countries are standing up and pushing back against this criminal sexualisation of our children. In 2021 the World Health Assembly (part of the UN) attempted to pass a resolution to call for "sexuality education". Happily, this resolution was strenuously objected to by many countries. The resolution was then hastily withdrawn.

Because of this resounding rejection of "sexuality education" this push by the UN to promote this radical content should have ended there. But the UN and its organisations continue to push for their radical "comprehensive sexuality education" (CSE) despite its own inability to be pass a resolution for such education and despite no Irish parents providing a mandate to the UN to force this sexualising content on our children .

This is classic scope creep and it needs to stop. Schools and teachers have no mandate to teach sexuality education. Parents do not agree to the sexualisation of their children and the UN has no mandate from its member states and no authority in Ireland to insist that their policies be adhered to.

## 3. Forced Inclusivity – of all Sexualities which by definition includes ALL sexual expression, ALL sexual fantasies, ALL attitudes and All values related to sex.

The NCCA Information Note on the SC SPHE states the following about inclusivity ;  
Inclusivity: The draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum is designed to support high quality teaching and learning in order to meet the needs of all young people. Building on the updated Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum, the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum supports teachers in adopting an approach that is inclusive in accordance with principles of equality, human rights and responsibilities: one that is inclusive of all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs, social classes and abilities/disabilities (Rationale - page 7). (emphasis added)

The definition set out in the Draft Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) Specification defines sexuality as " the components of a person that include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual expression, sexual fantasies, attitudes and values related to sex. Aspects of sexuality can change as we go through different ages and relationships.' (emphasis added).

So based upon the clear wording of the Information Note and the draft definition, my children will be taught that they must be inclusive of any and all sexual expression, sexual fantasy, attitude or value of any person. So if a person is an adult who fantasises about children, our children will be taught that they must be "inclusive" of this person's sexuality. There is no room for dissent or moral objection. All sexualities will be and must be accepted.

This forced acceptance by children of any and all forms of sexuality, encompassing all sexual expression, all sexual fantasies, all sexual attitudes and all sexual values is abhorrent. This tells children that they do not have the right to have their own opinion on matters of sex, that only the NGO/ Irish government position on sexuality is acceptable, and that position is that all sexuality is to be included in society. Children will be taught to discard their family's religion or cultural views on sex. It's all a go, and they must be seen to be supporting it. Otherwise they are non-inclusive bullies. How can this be considered inclusive when it is clearly narcissistic? These are not the behaviours we want to instil in our children.

Were these provisions safety checked? Who reviewed and signed off on these provisions and stated it was safe to teach the same to children? If a person had dangerous, illegal or immoral sexual expression, fantasies, attitudes or values this teaching would be helpful to their cause. But otherwise, this teaching will only cause confusion, shame and damage to children.

#### 4. Obsessive focus on sex and pleasure for minor children is harmful.

It has been noted by observers that CSE programs have "an almost obsessive focus on teaching children how to obtain sexual pleasure in various ways. Yet, ironically, comprehensive sexuality education programs are anything but comprehensive as they fail to teach children about all of the emotional, psychological and physical health risks of promiscuous sexual activity. The ultimate goal of CSE is to change the sexual and gender norms of society, which is why CSE could be more accurately called "abortion, promiscuity and LGBT rights education."

The WHO Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe, pushes educators to "give information about enjoyment and pleasure when touching one's body .....masturbation, enable children to gain an awareness of gender identity and give the right to explore gender identity" to children aged 0 to 4. Age 4-6, they are to be given information on same sex relationships; 6 to 9 year olds taught about contraception, aged 9 to 12 enable children to use condoms and contraceptives effectively, and give information about sexual rights and on it goes.

The CSE content is target at children at ages that they are most likely to internalise the information and is incremental, per the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (2018) (section 2.1) This is a clear admission by the UN that they are incrementally brainwashing the kids at strategically targeted ages. This internalisation of sexualising messages will create generations of damaged children who will go onto to be damaged and dysfunctional adults.

Why are we allowing and promoting an agenda in Ireland that sexualises children? Who in Irish society would benefit from overly sexualised children?

#### 5. The promotion and normalisation of transgender ideology leaves vulnerable children with gender dysphoria without medical treatment for their medical condition Gender dysphoria and autism

We are learning more and more each day about the children who are presenting with gender dysphoria. The National Gender Service as reported by The Irish Independent newspaper on the 3rd of October 2022 reported that up to 90% of people using gender service may be autistic. And yet the Department of Education are prepared to present and teach to children that transgenderism is natural and normal when we can't explain the explosion in numbers presenting with gender dysphoria, like we have not been given any answers to explain the skyrocketing numbers of children presenting with autism?

Should we not halt this headlong rush to promote gender dysphoria as the new normal and instead insist that our government fund research into this alarming link. Shouldn't we be pausing and asking what is happening to our children rather than be goaded into applauding and rushing them into irreversible medical interventions?

#### Gender dysphoria and depression

The National Gender Service agency has stated that almost half of all young adults attending gender services over the past 6 years are suffering from depression. 49.1% were depressed, 15.6 had low mood and 26.3 % suffer from anxiety. This is a total of 91% of those seeking gender services. So nearly 100% are suffering from poor mental health.

Is this a mental health crisis rather than a gender confusion issue? Are we making switching gender seem trendy and cool to impressionable young people who are depressed, low and/or anxious?

Are we adequately and compassionately treating the depression, low mood and anxiety of those young persons with talk therapy, which takes time and money, before rushing them into drugs and surgery which both have life long implications? Or are they provided with antidepressants, which are well documented to then cause sexual dysfunction, and then moving them onto gender reassignment?

#### Transition Regret

And what then when they do have the irreversible surgery? What does the NCCA propose to teach children about persons who attempt to transition to the opposite sex via surgery and chemicals, who regret the decision? Who look back and realise they were suffering from mental illness and wish that their mental illness had been treated instead of surgery and drugs for gender dysphoria?

Will the teachers of the SPHE course be required to show children the mutilated arms of girls who have tissue removed from their arms to create a penis? Will they discuss the horrifying issue that some suffer when their anal tissue is used to create sex organs and the smell of that tissue doesn't fade away leaving the person with surgically engineered sex organs that smell of faeces? Imagine if this was your child and you knew this agenda was promoted in his/her school.

Irish psychotherapist Stella O'Malley, beloved of many Irish parents for her pragmatic no nonsense yet compassionate bestselling books "Buliproof Kids" and "Cotton Wool Kids" has done ground breaking work on exposing the anguish of persons who have undergone transgender surgery and drugs who then regret these largely irreversible decisions and their attempts to de-transition.

Ms. O'Malley's Channel 4 documentary "Trans kids: it's time to talk" is a must watch for anyone who believes that transitioning surgery and drugs are the silver bullet for depressed and confused children. She discusses the fact that as a child, she felt like she was a boy and feels she would have sought transitioning surgery had it been available in the 80's. She then outgrew this perception and is now a wife and mother and she is grateful that such options were not available to her.

#### No respect for Diversity where diversity of belief and opinion is not tolerated and is claimed to be bullying

The view that affirmative care is the only option for children suffering from gender distress is non-diverse by its nature. It is also at odds with the view of our leading licensed and trained medical team in Ireland dealing with gender dysphoria. Donal O'Shea, an experienced, licensed and trained endocrinologist has come out strongly and publicly against the notion that affirmative care lead by unlicensed activists is the proper medical treatment that should be afforded those suffering from gender dysphoria, instead of treatment from within the licensed medical community.

Oddly, it would appear that Donal O'Shea, our leading public expert at the Gender Clinic was not invited to input into this proposed curriculum that presents the ability to change sex as a fact not an ideology. A curriculum which very much focusses on his area of expertise. Instead unlicensed non medically trained NGOs and activist groups were invited to NCCA's table to input into the draft curriculum on what is clearly a medical matter. Stella O'Malley a licensed and trained psychotherapist with decades of experience who has been very public on transgenderism since 2018 also, strangely, was not invited to the table to input.

#### Social Contagion

By constantly focussing on transgenderism in school, Ireland's rate of children with gender dysphoria has skyrocketed. We had 1% of children claiming not to identify with their birth sex in 2012 and shockingly this leapt to 6% in 2023. We all know girls are particularly susceptible to social contagion. Historically, transgenderism was largely found in males who from a very early age identified as female. Now we have girls in friend groups who never claimed to be a boy prior to secondary school suddenly claiming they are transgender. Why? And why rush to incorporate this into curriculum as normal and natural and to be affirmed when we don't know why its happening?

If children suddenly were turning purple, would we rush to affirm purpleness or would we as adults seek to investigate why this is happening? Or do we immediately tell teachers to affirm purpleness and rewrite the curriculum to affirm the colour purple and warn teachers and parents to ask no questions or risk being called a bigot? Would we allow drugs and surgery for these children to affirm the purpleness?

Transgenderism is not a sexual orientation, it is a dysphoria. We do not affirm anorexia, another form of dysphoria, we do not tell young children that suffer from anorexia that yes, indeed, you are fat, you need to eat less. We engage experienced, licensed and trained professionals to compassionately and professionally treat the child and the condition. We do not expect teachers who are not medically trained to teach and affirm anorexia. Do children suffering from gender dysphoria not deserve equal respect and care? If not, why not?

### Precautionary Principle to protect children, principals and teachers

The precautionary principle must apply to the promotion and normalisation of transgenderism in Irish schools. We are dealing with vulnerable and impressionable children. We are setting young and depressed children on the spectrum down a road to genital mutilation and sterilization. Are we the parents really expected to be on the roadside watching this and cheering this on? Can anyone in 2023 hand on heart state this is the best way forward for these depressed children? Or will we silently go along with this extreme agenda against children, for fear of being called transphobic? A word that did not exist a very short time ago.

If a child decides in secondary school after 160 hours of SPHE in both the junior and senior cycles that they are transgender and are put on the path to surgery and drugs and becomes sterilised as a result, and the child subsequently decides that this was the wrong decision, will they have a claim against his or her school, administrators, board or teachers for teaching the SPHE classes? This is a serious issue.

### 7. Pornography

Pornography is a blight on society and as parents and educators we must protect children from pornographic content, not require children to study it. That this has to be stated seems surreal. Pornography drives sexual violence, particularly against girls.

Teaching pornography and other sexual content will not protect children from harm, common sense makes clear teaching pornography to children is in fact bringing the harm directly to the child.

There is a very real worry here that the true and unspoken intention of those pushing this agenda is to normalise exposing children to harmful ideas and material at a young and impressionable age. To sexualise them at a younger and younger age. To normalise children accessing pornography.

Why doesn't the Department of Education instead of proposing to teach pornography, use its considerable resources and power to engage in a campaign to stop children accessing pornography in the first place? To push for stricter laws to ensure under 18s cannot access this harmful adult content? Why don't teachers and principals outside the school building petition their union and the Irish government to strike at the heart of the problem, the pornographers and those facilitating access to pornography by children online? Why wait for the harm and then try to reverse the damage already done to children? The government has the ability to protect children as a first line of defense.

It simply isn't good enough to helplessly claim it is the state of play that children have access to pornography anyhow so let's bring it into school. Do we teach children in school how to shoot up illegal drugs on the basis that they will be exposed to them eventually? Of course we don't; we see illicit drugs as the evil they are and simply tell children never to take drugs. Why the different approach here?

We want our children educated on math, science, literature, language, etc. not pornography. I have never met a parent who has complained that their child is not taught enough on pornography in school, but many worry about the time focused on the basics of education.

There is an insidious push to try to distinguish "bad" porn from "ethical" porn. This comes under the shocking heading of "porn literacy". All porn is harmful, and it is of course particularly damaging to children. Do not open the door to pornography in our schools, teachers should protest against the government's stunning failure to protect Irish children from online porn by instead.

Yenor and Miller states that, "*The defense of teaching porn literacy begins with eliminating the stigma around watching porn, but ends with hopes to promote porn use and to encourage ever younger children to integrate porn into their increasingly active sex lives.*"

After reviewing Albury's article and other literature, Yenor and Miller conclude that, *This revolution will not stop at porn literacy for children. None of the several articles on porn literacy explicitly discuss childhood participation in pornography. The leap from porn literacy for children to porn involving children is not far. Nor would it be unexpected. The porn literacy movement, afoot in academia and moving toward the educational mainstream, embraces the idea of children watching many varieties of pornography. Children should watch it. Should they participate in it? That is against the law (for now), but perhaps there are additional "indirect strategies" to get around such prohibitions. Subverting these norms is part of the porn literacy game.*

*Ten years ago, no one thought young children could be legally castrated in the name of gender ideology. Is porn literacy as unthinkable as all that?*

*We are dealing with a rolling revolution—and rolling it back requires that we strike at its assumptions, not just its latest manifestations.*

<https://americanmind.org/salvo/why-cant-johnny-read-porn/>

Anyone who believes that teaching pornography to young children is in the child's best interest and is a completely safe and appropriate endeavour would benefit from reading the above American Mind article. We are sleepwalking into a nightmare with this content and people need to wake up fast.

**8. White Irish Male privilege doesn't exist, privilege is not an intrinsic characteristic that we are born with.**

It defies Irish lived reality to suggest that white Irish males are privileged. I would imagine many of the over 12,000 homeless Irish, including over 3,000 homeless white Irish children, do not consider themselves privileged and instead wonder why they are treated like second-class citizens and not offered homes to live in. I would imagine that the many thousands of Irish families who are struggling to put food on the table and heat their homes while paying crippling tax and watching the price of necessities inflate don't feel very privileged and they wouldn't know whether to laugh or cry at the suggestion.

The far-fetched notion of white Irish male privilege is designed to foster self-loathing in the Irish and envy and the feeling of victimhood in those that don't fall into that category. Our education system should seek to nurture feelings of self-worth, self-respect and pride in ones ethnicity and culture in all children. The fiction of white privilege denies that feeling for all children and will only set children against one another.

**9. This Curriculum does not have regard for the religious characteristic spirit of the school**

In 2021, 88% of schools in Ireland had Catholic patrons, 5.7% were controlled by the Church of Ireland and 1% by other religious organisations, leaving just 5.4% of our schools without a religious affiliation. Can the NCCA point to the regard afforded to the 94.7% of our schools' religious ethos as required by Section 9(d)? Does teaching transgenderism, gender theory, sexuality over sex education, pornography etc give the statutorily imposed regard for those religious entities?

The vast majority of schools are Catholic in Ireland. Parents are aware of this and clearly happy to have a Catholic ethos taught to their children. The proposed SPHE short course is completely at odds with the teachings of the Catholic church, violating Section 9(d) of the Act.

**Conclusion**

This course would have the effect of ripping apart the fabric of Irish society. Children will be left confused, ashamed, sexualised, traumatised and possibly believing that they are in the wrong body. They will feel compelled to support any type of sexual deviance because they were taught in school that there is no wrong sexual fantasy or act. If not Irish, white or male, they will feel they are a victimised minority and if Irish white or male, they will feel ashamed for being such.

The Government in Ireland is manufacturing a culture war. Hijacking our compassion, empathy and humanity. They are exploiting good nature of the Irish people and trying to do this under the guise of kindness and inclusivity. And now they are going after our children's innocence. Teaching gender identity as a fact is is homophobic. There are feminine boys and masculine 'tomboy' girls who do not conform to gender stereotypes. This diversity should be respected; it does mean that they are born in the wrong body!

Parents voices were ignored on the Junior Cycle SPHE consultation. Parents will not stand for this to happen again. The entire Secondary school SPHE course must be put on hold and a full and open debate, with parents as the primary stakeholder must take place where parents are the lead on the design of the SPHE curriculum. We will enforce our Constitutional rights as the primary educator of our children and we will tell the NCCA what can and cannot be put into the curriculum. It is the parents, not the UN, not the NGOs, not the Department of Education, not the government, who ultimately decide on the education of our children. We all seem to have forgotten that, this consultation process as well as the junior cycle consultation, was the wake up call to remind us all.

Please see the additional references below further backing up the risks associated with leading children down this irreversible path:

- [1] <https://www.belongto.org/funding-governance/annual-reports/belong-to-annual-report-2022/>
- [2] [https://twitter.com/gcraughwell/status/1702746240578916433?s=48&t=YCL0YmFgN0UeIYO9zaE0\\_w](https://twitter.com/gcraughwell/status/1702746240578916433?s=48&t=YCL0YmFgN0UeIYO9zaE0_w)
- [3] <https://westawake.substack.com/p/a-24-year-old-woman-speaks-out-about?sd=pf>
- [4] <https://gript.ie/a-state-funded-ngo-has-been-training-teachers-to-lie-to-parents-about-their-children/>
- [5] <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/leading-clinician-warns-of-hse-gender-care-dangers/a1246391788.html>
- [6] <https://cass.independent-review.uk/publications/interim-report/>
- [7] <https://www.transgendertrend.com/the-suicide-myth/>
- [8] <https://www.transgendertrend.com/the-suicide-myth/>
- [9] <https://nypost.com/2022/06/18/detransitioned-teens-explain-why-they-regret-changing-genders/>
- [10] <https://genspect.org/category/detrans/>



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

## Parents Rights Alliance

# Parents Rights Alliance

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

### Insert response here:

The aim is laudable but the content of the SPHE Specification is so loaded with the focus on sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual activity that it would not achieve these objectives.

Resilience is not likely when students are taught to doubt their own gender or sexual orientation. Empathy in relationships is not generated with the excessive focus on self and sexual activity in the SPHE curriculum. The main focus seems to be preparation for sexual relationships, which is misdirected for this age group, rather than building the qualities like self-control and commitment that lead to fulfilling relationships and resilient young adults. Also sexual activity belongs in the context of committed relationships which ideally lead to marriage;; nowhere is this referenced in the specification. Sexual activity is treated as a transaction between consenting people: this robs intimate relationships of their true meaning and purpose.

The objective to "empower students' should not be to cut off Parents and their values from their children in the key area of RSE. Children of this age are considered as 'minors' for a reason and its parents who should have the biggest role in determining what their children are taught, in accordance with the provisions of the Irish Constitution. The importance of the role and rights of parents in educating their children seems to be absent in the document and this is a fundamental and glaring omission.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

## Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

The learning outcomes look good but the values inherent in the course material and over sexualised focus will not create moral or psychologically sound young adults in view of the confusion and anxiety that it will create in young minds due to things like the uncertainty around gender identity and sexual orientation. These aspects impact on the mental health of young people, so the mixed messages in the material in the course are in conflict with the aims of the curriculum.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

2.1 Can we really speak of 'online relationships', let alone healthy ones? The two things do not go together – students should be warned about online contacts and so called 'relationships'.

2.2 Identity - There is an almost narcissistic focus on 'identity' in the curriculum. Could we teach young people to love and accept themselves without creating confusion with concepts of identity, especially the false theory of gender identity. Why is identity combined with sexual behaviour? Everything seems to have sexual activity as a reference point – this is pushing towards sexualising students

2.3 Discussing **sexual activity** in adult relationships is not appropriate for students who are below the age of sexual consent, and is leading them in the wrong direction. This is steering young students in the direction of sexual activity and normalizing it as part of relationships – thereby sexualising students.

The following definition of ‘**sexual activity**’ is given in the Glossary of Terms in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Specification: - ‘**Sexual activity**: 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**’.

The NCCA ‘sex is for pleasure’ approach pervading the whole RSE Curriculum is evident here: – no reference to the relationship context (eg sexual activity can be solitary). Sexual activity is not just physical recreation without the relationship context. This is a narcissistic focus on pleasure which is very detrimental to the development of students, as is the reference to sexual intercourse ‘in all its forms’ – sexual perversions are not something that should be taught to school children. This is completely the wrong emphasis for students: the focus should be on **commitment, trust, and communication** that are part of meaningful and fulfilling relationships, not just the focus on one’s own pleasure.

The definition of ‘**sexuality**’ in the Glossary is also skewed in an unhealthy sexualised way – ‘... include their biological sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual expression, sexual fantasies, attitudes and values related to sex. Aspects of sexuality can change as we go through different ages and relationships.’ This reflects a virtual obsession with the sexual aspects of a student’s life and directs students in the wrong direction at a formative stage of their development.

**2.7 Investigate the influence of pornography...** This is directing students to explore pornography: how could this be done without actually watching pornography, which portrays a complete distortion of a sexual relationships in a loving context. The assumption seems to be that all pupils in school would be watching pornographic material - in effect normalizing the viewing of pornography in this age group, with very detrimental effects in view of how pornography depicts sexual relationships and completely inappropriate. There is very simple and sound advice about this – not to watch pornography, an industry rife with exploitation and abuse which perverts the reality of the sexual aspects of loving relationships.

**2.8 discuss image-based abuse...** what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these - There may be some good in the above issues, but is it necessary to highlight **image based abuse**? This seems to be the question of intimate photos or images of young people circulating, or threatened to be circulated, on social media. If it warns students from taking intimate selfies or worse and sharing them on social media platforms it could be a good thing – but is this putting the very idea in young peoples’ heads.

**2.9 explore sexual and reproductive health** - all of these aspects arise from sexual intercourse or ‘sex in all its forms’ – is this appropriate for 16 year olds? Educating students on how to have ‘safe sex’, which seems to be the objective, is a myth, as sex often takes place in less than ideal circumstances, especially for young people. The course will teach them how to deal with unplanned pregnancy – no doubt they would be taught about the ‘morning after’ pill and abortion. Is this what we want 16 year olds to be taught? The above learning outcome normalize sexual encounters without the context of relationships or commitment, and would give students the impression that they can have safe sex, so that there is no need for inherent caution about sexual activity.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

#### **3.6 demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion’.**

Equity and inclusion are terms generally used by the NCCA to refer in particular to LGBTQ identified people, and these categories – ‘minority identified groups’ - are the prime focus of ‘allyship skills’ under this heading. The introduction to the above section states - ‘...to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality’. The ‘Allyship skills’ definition below is in the Glossary of Terms of this draft Senior Cycle SPHE Specification -

**‘Allyship Skills:..** Allyship involves recognising and using **one’s privileged status (for example as white or male or Irish person)** to support individuals from minority identity groups’.

This is an outrageous imposition of Marxist critical race theory on Irish school students, especially considering the long history of oppression of the Irish people. It is also a discriminatory statement against men and white people – this is a giveaway of how ideologically driven the NCCA school curriculum is, including gender identity and Queer theory, which have no place in the education of young people. This definition of allyship skills is strongly rejected.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

Insert response here:

#### **Appendix 2 Glossary of Terms used in Learning Outcomes**

Below are some controversial definitions in the Glossary of Terms which should not be included or radically changed in line with objective scientific fact -

‘**Gender**: gender means the **socially constructed roles**, responsibilities, characteristics...’

‘**Gender identity**: a person’s **felt internal and individual experience of gender**, which may or may not correspond with the sex registered at birth’. These definitions are based on gender identity theory – that a person’s felt gender may be different from their biological sex; ie ‘a boy could become a girl, neither or both’ – as set out in some of the NCCA SPHE resources. This is the false proposition that gender is socially constructed and unrelated to a child’s biological sex, which is a scientific fact. Gender ideology has no place in a school curriculum which will only confuse children and should be removed.

‘**LGBTQI+**: an umbrella term to signify gender and **sexuality diversity** and refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex people’. There is a completely disproportionate focus on LGBTQI issues and sexuality related matters in the SC SPHE course, and this is generally what the term ‘diversity’ refers to in the SC Specification.

‘**Sexuality**: the components of a person that include their biological sex, **sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual expression, sexual fantasies**, attitudes and values related to sex. Aspects of sexuality can change as we go through different ages and relationships. The highly sexualised nature of the SC SPHE course jumps out from this definition, including the implication that a person can have sexual relationships with different people over time; this is a far cry from the ideal of a committed relationship that culminates in marriage and family, the natural place for human flourishing, as shown by numerous social and mental health indicators. This definition shows an almost obsessive focus on things sexual – completely inappropriate and the wrong focus for 16 year olds, when 17 years is the age of consent.

‘**Sexual Orientation**: each person’s capacity for emotional and sexual attraction to, and **intimate sexual relations** with, individuals of a different gender or the same gender or more than one gender’. This points to ‘intimate sexual relations’ with more than one person and more than one gender, and a level of sexual promiscuity and experimentation which can only be psychologically harmful to children.

**Social Norms**... ‘it is important to interrogate, question and critique social norms, especially those which may be harmful, unhelpful or not reflective of **what people actually feel is important**’. This points students in the direction of the primacy of their feelings, rather than any objective set of values in the area of sexuality and relationships. And it directs students to critique social norms – no doubt the normal conventional morality of heteronormative marriage, or at least of committed heterosexual relationships and normal gender roles.

## Assessment in SPHE

SPHE is not an academic subject and the content is ideologically driven. Assessment has sinister connotations of pressurising children to show that they believe the false ideology of gender identity etc. as shown by the focus of assessment (p.16 of Draft SC SPHE): - ‘...a change or confirmation of beliefs/attitudes/assumptions/values’. This shows clearly the objective of the RSE content of the SPHE curriculum is to **change childrens’ beliefs**, as gender ideology is a belief system which is diametrically opposed to the Christian view of men and women, or indeed a common sense view. Assessment is completely inappropriate and should not be undertaken – the objective seems to be to ensure that children have in fact been brainwashed with the false and unscientific ideology embedded in the SPHE curriculum.

## Conclusion

The Glossary definitions are a real giveaway of the highly sexualised approach to Relationship and Sex Education underlying the SC SPHE Specification. The focus of SPHE should be the normal formation of children at a vulnerable age who undergoing unprecedented anxiety. Knowing their gender should be one their few certainties in life, but the focus on sexual orientation and the promotion of gender identity is likely to make them doubt even this. The logical follow on to all the sexual activity which is the focus of the RSE content should be the happy ending of marriage, but this is not mentioned.

The primary role of Parents in the education of their children, especially in the sensitive area of RSE, should be acknowledged. Parents have made huge sacrifices to bring up their children, and parents should be involved or at least consulted on aspects of the SPHE course that impinge on the moral and behavioural values that parents expect for their children, especially in schools that reflect the values of the parents – mainly Catholic schools. Accordingly the views of parents on the SC SPHE proposals should carry the most weight in deciding the final content of the curriculum. The role of parents and their values in the education of their children should be reflected in the content of the curriculum. The question of the ethos or characteristic spirit of a school is not mentioned in the document – this is very important for framing the overall values which guide young people in their dealings with others, and especially in their intimate relationships. Spiritual values are also absent from factors that are taken into account in the formation of children in RSE – this is the guiding light for the values of many parents and the ethos of Christian and minority religion schools and should be factored into the approach to RSE. The teaching of RSE should be within the context of the ethos of a school, and the teaching of Relationship and Sexuality Education should be subject to the values in the ethos of schools. The structure of the delivery of RSE should allow and enable this.

I trust that on this occasion, unlike the consultation on the Junior Cycle SPHE specification, that the NCCA will take on board the responses of parents and others who are concerned with the premature sexualisation of young children because of the excessive focus on sexual matters in various forms (including sexual activities, sexual orientation and identity) in the final version of the SC SPHE Specification.



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# **Contributor**

Patients for Patient Safety  
Ireland (PfPSI)

# Patients for Patient Safety Ireland (PfPSI)

## Question 1: Aim

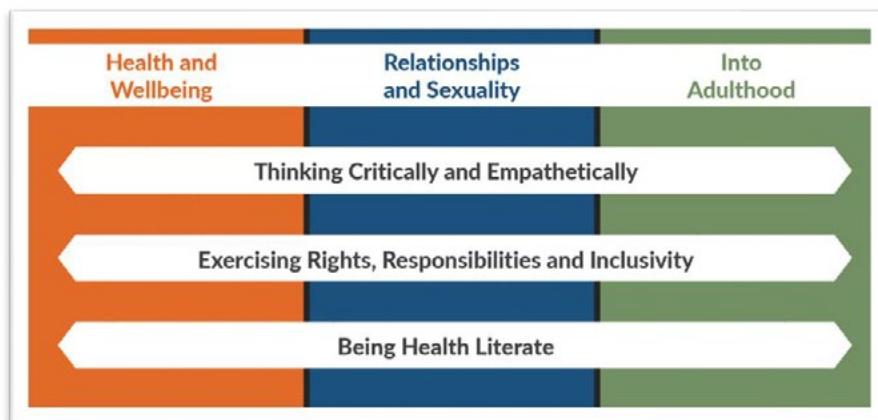
The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:** We agree, and would go further, to empower students with the knowledge, skills and confidence to actively participate in their communities, country and globally. PfPSI is primarily concerned with empowering people in Ireland to be active partners and advocates in their own health care and that of their loved ones.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11-15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

#### **Students should be able to**

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### **Insert response here:**

PfPSI suggests more emphasis in 1.7 on how to access help e.g. in the health service, how to navigate the system and some basic questions to ask so they can engage as partners and self-advocates. Also include access to relevant advocacy groups who may provide further support and education. Importantly, how to access credible sources of information.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

### Students should be able to

2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

No response from PfPSI

## Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

Same as question 1: demonstrate the knowledge, skills and confidence to be active partners and advocates in their own health care and that of their loved ones.

**Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

As we work under a World Health Organization programme, we would suggest an engagement with Prof. Dr. Orkan Okan, lead author of the WHO concept paper [Health literacy in the context of health, well-being and learning outcomes in schools \(who.int\)](#). Prof Okan is one of our key advisors for our Health Literacy initiative.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the development of a new Senior Cycle Social Personal and Health Education curriculum. Please see attached our submission. We would welcome the opportunity for further engagement – we are suggesting small changes to enhance the curriculum, but we believe that these changes will empower students to exercise their rights and responsibilities in accessing and using health services effectively.

PfPSI was formed nearly 11 years ago under the WHO [Patients for Patient Safety \(who.int\)](#) programme. We are a group of volunteers who work in partnership and collaboration with the Dept of Health, HSE, HIQA and other patient groups.

We would appreciate the opportunity to collaborate in partnership with the NCCA and the Dept of Education on our new initiative on Health Literacy, especially through SPHE, the aim being to empower students to exercise their Rights and Responsibilities and be active partners and advocates for their own care - the key Guiding Principle of Senior Cycle being Participation and Citizenship. Every person in Ireland will receive care from the health service at some point in their lives, so it is important that they have the health literacy skills, knowledge and confidence to access healthcare, navigate the service, ask the right questions and be active partners in their own care.

PfPSI will shortly be launching the health literacy initiative, which aims to empower every person in Ireland to be active partners and advocates for their own care and the care of their loved ones. We plan to launch the initiative in November, calling for health literacy to be an essential part of healthcare, included in school and adult literacy curriculums. We acknowledge the work currently ongoing, and are calling for a joined-up approach across education, healthcare and in the community e.g. including health literacy in SPHE, Junior Cycle Short Courses and TY Programmes. Attached a flyer with some information.

Our advisory group for the Health Literacy initiative includes [Prof Gerardine Doyle](#) from UCD, who provides the Irish research into the European Health Literacy Survey and [Kristine Sorensen](#), one of the leading thought leaders on health literacy worldwide. We have relationships with the professional colleges e.g. the RCPI, RCSI and College of Anaesthesiologists in Ireland. ISQua and the IHI are also supportive. Advocacy groups like the Irish Heart Foundation, the Irish Kidney Association and others.

For general health literacy we are proposing two well-established frameworks (also suggested by NALA):

**Ask Me 3** (from [Ask Me 3: Institute for Healthcare Improvement](#)):

1. What is my main problem?
2. What do I need to do?
3. Why is it important for me to do this?

**BRAN** (from [Choosing Wisely UK](#))

1. What are the Benefits?
2. What are the Risks ?
3. What are the Alternatives?
4. What if I do Nothing?

We will also include the HSE Your Health, Your Voice leaflets into which we provided input.

Of course, we would always be happy to provide a dedicated briefing to you and others in the NCCA if that would be more suitable.



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# Contributor

## Polycistic Ovary Awareness

# Polycistic Ovary Awareness

**Written submission for consultation on Draft Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) specification by National Council for Curriculum & Assessment (NCCA) - *the case for including Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) education on the curriculum.***

We are a collaborative group comprising representation from a patient support group (PCOS Vitality) and an academic team of clinical practitioners. It is our intention with this submission to bring the NCCA's attention to Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), a common endocrine disorder with symptoms that typically manifest during adolescence. PCOS is defined by a combination of irregular menstrual cycles, signs, and symptoms of androgen excess such as acne or unwanted hair growth (hirsutism), and polycystic ovarian appearances on pelvic imaging. Given that school is the main source of information for adolescents and that school based RSE has been found to have positive reported outcomes, we believe it is imperative for PCOS to be included in the curriculum[1]. Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) is a common endocrine disorder and the leading cause of anovulatory infertility. PCOS affects 3-11% of adolescent girls depending on the population studied and diagnostic criteria applied [2]. PCOS has psychosocial impacts and cultural differences in perception of symptoms including hirsutism, fertility and other complications. Limited education and awareness of PCOS results in inconsistent care and patient dissatisfaction.[3] Reproductive health information and education is enshrined in International agreements signed by Ireland including the Education 2030 Incheon Declaration which sets out the new vision for Education over the next 15 years[4].

PCOS education can be considered in line with the broader UNESCO definition of school-based sex education which seeks to embed positive values and attitudes towards not just sexual health but also reproductive health including self-esteem and gender equality [4]. While working definitions of school-based sex education differ, they share emphasis on the right to education about their bodies, relationships, and sexuality. In Ireland approximately one in six couples are affected by subfertility, with calls for it to be a component of school-based sex education. Education on PCOS, hormones and general knowledge of the reproductive system has the potential to increase awareness and health promoting behaviours. In addition to fertility awareness, there is a need for the appreciation of the importance of health care during pregnancy. For example, individuals with PCOS are at increased risk of pre-term birth and operative delivery so would benefit from awareness of these risks [5].

Inclusion of PCOS on the curriculum has the potential to extend student health literacy skills. Further, they can learn how to access, understand, critically appraise, and use information and services related to PCOS and their health and wellbeing. This will enable students to act upon their needs in a confident and safe manner using reliable evidence-based information. Critical appraisal is important in avoiding misinformation fuelled by social media. The ability to decide where to get relevant information and where to seek help is vital as students' progress into adulthood.

The International Fertility Education Initiative is a group of experts who argue for fertility and preconception healthcare to be included in health and education policy and practice. Research has shown knowledge on fertility education is low and that public education initiatives are needed to help people make informed reproductive decisions and have a full understanding of all aspects of their reproductive health[6]. Adolescents are one key target area that has been identified for these initiatives. A Teacher's Guide is currently in production.

Individuals with PCOS should be counselled on the risk of misinformation and guided to evidence-based resources. The diversity of the population should be considered also. Education resources are a high priority for individuals with PCOS and should be provided in a respectful and empathic manner. Strong recommendations have been made by the International PCOS Guideline Groups stressing the importance of evidence-based accessible information which promotes shared decision making and information provision.

**Inclusion of PCOS education in the curriculum can improve health and wellbeing. Many with PCOS are undiagnosed therefore awareness may prompt early help-seeking with the result of improved physical, emotional and sexual health[7]. This is important as there are links between reproductive health and mental health. Recognising the effect PCOS can have on your physical appearance and body image can foster positive mental health allowing students to draw on strategies to regulate and manage harmful thoughts. Girls with PCOS are at increased risk for eating disorders, increased weight, depression, anxiety, self-esteem and poor body image[8][9]. Raised awareness of PCOS is therefore important. Awareness of the increased risk of anxiety and depression associated with PCOS can enable students to seek help early. It can also help reduce stigma associated with mental health and encourage healthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety.**

With regards to relationships and sexuality, PCOS is an important consideration. Symptoms of PCOS can be seen as not conforming to social norms on gender [10]. It is important that students can recognise that attitudes perpetuated online and, in the media may be stereotypical and harmful. Having the ability to know that changes in their body because of the excess androgens is part of PCOS can empower students. It is also important that all students can learn about PCOS with the aim of fostering inclusiveness within our gender diverse community. Gender diversity has been found to be more common in those with PCOS [11].

Looking forward to adulthood, it is important that students recognise the long-term consequences of PCOS so that they can prevent the development of serious sequelae. Long term complications of PCOS can include and may not be limited to type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and endometrial cancer[12]. Provision of information can help lessen the impact of PCOS on girls and increasing help-seeking behaviour at an early stage to avoid profound consequences of the condition.

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# Contributor

## Pro Life Campaign

# Pro Life Campaign

## Questions to consider

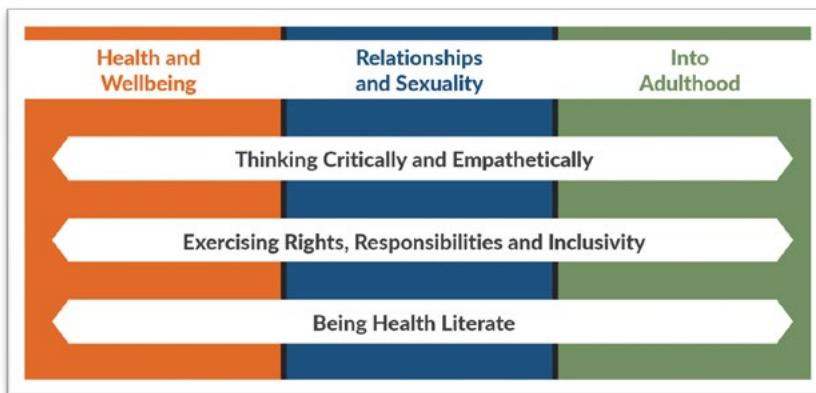
### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

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

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

#### Students should be able to

1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health

1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

### Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

This section states that students should be able to “explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.” This would inevitably touch on the issue of abortion.

Whenever the issue of abortion is discussed, students are entitled to be fully informed of the medical reality of abortion rather than a detached provision of information on its legal status and how to access an abortion provider. It is defined in the 2018 Act as a procedure “intended to end the life of a foetus.” This naturally raises very serious ethical questions which should be aired and discussed in the classroom in a respectful and balanced way.

Students are entitled to be informed about the peer reviewed evidence pointing to the negative after effects that abortion involves for many women.<sup>[1]</sup> They should also be informed on the reality of abortion regret. Studies show that a substantial minority of women who had abortions feel they made the wrong decision. Around a third of women feel the emotion of regret, even though many of these feel they made the right decision. Feelings of regret regarding abortion are complex phenomena and cannot simply be reduced to if one felt they made the right decision.

In an Irish context, organisations like Women Hurt have provided considerable first-hand testimony from women who regret their abortions and whose experiences should be considered by students. Awareness of these experiences and the research which points to the negative impact of abortion on the woman should be considered to ensure that any student who may later have an abortion is better able to achieve informed consent. An extract is provided below from a presentation by Women Hurt to the Oireachtas:

*“The heartbreak and pain of abortion for many women is also being totally suppressed in the present debate. We hear lots of talk about ‘women’s rights’ and wanting to give voice to the experiences of women. This rings very hollow to us. It’s clear that unless your abortion story makes the case for legalised abortion, it will be ignored. There are thousands of women suffering in silence after their abortions. We are here to reach out to them. Women deserve better than abortion. We also deserve better than State funded women’s groups only highlighting stories that fit in comfortably with a pro-abortion narrative. When pro-choice campaigners claim to speak for women who opt for abortion, they need to know they don’t speak for us or the countless women who have an abortion and subsequently live to deeply regret the decision.”*

Many women contact the Pro Life Campaign to express their appreciation for the information they received when they were conflicted about whether to have an abortion or not - information that led to them keeping their baby and that they are eternally grateful for.

Students have every right to be given the chance to hear arguments in defence of the right to life whenever abortion is being discussed as part of any school programme. This should include clear and accurate information on:

- The developmental milestones from the beginning of an unborn baby’s life right up to birth.
- Ethical, moral and human rights based arguments in defence of the right to life of unborn babies.
- The peer-reviewed research documenting the negative after effects of abortion for many women.
- Alternatives to abortion and the practical supports that are available for women should they decide to continue with their pregnancy.
- The reality of coercive abortion and the pressures placed on women and girls to opt for abortion.

[1] David M Fergusson, L John Horwood, Joseph M Boden, ‘Abortion and mental health disorders: evidence from a 30-year longitudinal study’ (2008), British Journal of Psychiatry.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

#### Students should be able to

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

As a human-rights organisation committed to defending human life at all stages from conception to death, the Pro Life Campaign is invested in ensuring that the topic of abortion is addressed in schools in a measured way which gives due consideration to the contentious nature and divided opinion on the subject.

A third of voters in 2018 opposed the repeal of the Eighth Amendment, and their views should not be discounted. The education system has a responsibility to recognise the diversity of opinion which exists in Irish society on issues like abortion. It has a duty to ensure these diverse views are presented in a fair, even-handed and respectful way.

The abortion legislation introduced in the aftermath of the 2018 referendum has been operational since 1 January 2019. Students should be informed on various aspects of abortion, including from a legal, medical, ethical, and philosophical perspective.

It is also important that students are made aware of the overlap between abortion and coercion, as seen in several media reports and studies which show examples of women who have been coerced into having an abortion by an abusive partner or family member. The recently revealed experience concerning abortion of well-known figures like popstar Britney Spears highlights this issue and could be relevant to students and classroom discussions.



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# Contributor

## Project One Sky

# Project One Sky

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:** I generally agree; however instead of just teaching students to understand others' feelings (empathy), we should aim to teach them compassion. Empathy alone can be used to manipulate others; compassion means understanding someone's struggle and also wanting to help. It's empathy guided by wisdom, and that's a powerful skill for our future adults to have.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
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1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs

1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
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1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

I Instead of just teaching students to deal with negative thoughts and emotions, we should also introduce habits and practices that actively promote positive thinking and emotional wellbeing. This includes helping students understand the purpose and context of their feelings.

Furthermore, the approach to social safety should shift from just being cautious to taking proactive steps in creating a safe space for themselves and others. This means teaching students about leadership and courage, and how to step up to ensure that their social environments are not just safe, but also supportive and respectful for everyone involved

[?]

**Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

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2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations

2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

In the curriculum for health and wellbeing, especially within SPHE, it is critical to address the topic of long-term, committed relationships. Instruction should encompass not only the dynamics between individuals in a partnership but also the broader implications and responsibilities of being part of a family unit and community. Students should be encouraged to explore the idea that relationships extend beyond personal satisfaction, contributing to the fabric of society and necessitating a sense of responsibility and commitment to the collective well-being.

When discussing gender, it's essential to provide historical context to deepen students' understanding of contemporary issues. This approach ensures that students are not only informed about current gender roles and expectations but also understand how they have evolved over time.

When educating students on the impact of pornography, it is also vital to examine its effects on the individual's general health and wellbeing, such as its impact on the brain's dopamine system. Students need to be aware of how the consumption of pornography can potentially alter the brain's reward pathways, affecting motivation and pleasure, and thereby having far-reaching implications on one's mental and emotional health.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

Incorporating a focus on self-management and self-care skills in the curriculum is essential, and this should indeed be expanded to include how students can achieve their potential. The curriculum should aim to develop a learning outcome around self-leadership, equipping students with the tools to cultivate positive mindsets, perseverance (often referred to as 'grit'), and the ability to set and achieve goals. Teaching students to envision their future selves and to map out the steps needed to get there can empower them to take charge of their personal and academic growth.

Additionally, when discussing concepts such as 'equity,' it's important to be precise about what is meant. The curriculum should clarify that the goal is to ensure equality of opportunity, meaning all students have the same chances to succeed. This differs from equality of outcome, which ensures everyone ends up in the same place regardless of effort or ability. The curriculum should articulate that while we strive to give each student the same starting point (equality of opportunity), how they move forward and what they achieve (equality of outcome) will be influenced by individual choices and effort. It should be acknowledged that choices and effort are also a consequence of opportunities, and so a delicate balance must be sought.

### **Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

I've spoken to teachers, parents and students about SPHE, and I feel it is undervalued as a subject. The lack of formal assessment makes it more challenging to shift attitudes and underscore its importance among teachers, parents, and students. Without tangible measures of success or progress, subjects like SPHE often risk being sidelined or not taken as seriously as more traditional academic subjects.

The introduction of formal assessment in SPHE could, in theory, elevate its status by providing concrete evidence of student learning and effort. However, formal assessments can also be problematic, as they may not accurately reflect the personal growth and nuanced learning outcomes that SPHE aims to foster.

Looking forward, AI could offer innovative solutions to this challenge. It has the potential to help gauge individual effort and progress in more subjective areas such as those covered by SPHE. This could involve tracking participation in class discussions, engagement in collaborative work, or even changes in student behaviour over time. AI-driven analytics could contribute to a more nuanced and personalised assessment system that recognises individual effort, which might then be integrated into broader evaluation frameworks like the Leaving Certificate.

As AI continues to reshape the job market, the non-cognitive skills that SPHE focuses on — such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, teamwork, and ethical decision-making — are increasingly valued by employers. These skills are becoming critical differentiators as cognitive tasks become more automated. Therefore, developing robust ways to assess and communicate these skills could make students more attractive to future employers and better prepared for the complexities of modern life.

Addressing the topic of gender identity within the educational framework, especially in SPHE, is a sensitive and complex issue. It's a topic that holds significant relevance for young people today and merits careful, thoughtful exploration within the curriculum.

When discussing "felt experiences," it's essential to acknowledge that while they are inherently personal, they can indeed be influenced by a variety of external factors, including societal norms, cultural expectations, and media representation. It's critical for educators to approach this topic with both compassion and scientific inquiry, ensuring that discussions are inclusive, evidence-based, and respectful of diverse perspectives. To navigate this topic effectively, teachers should be provided with comprehensive training and resources, enabling them to facilitate discussions that are not only informed and empathetic but also grounded in the latest scientific understanding of gender.

As society continues to evolve in its understanding of gender and self, so too must our educational approaches, ensuring they are rooted in both compassion and a robust understanding of the complexities involved.



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# Contributor

## Rape Crisis Network Ireland

## Introduction

Overall RCNI feel these specifications are a strong holistic framework in line with the redeveloped junior cycle and we congratulate the NCCA for their skilful work on this to date. The shift in this senior cycle, into critical and reflective capacity to engage with and navigate life as agentic adults is evident across this draft. It is well articulated in the rationale section and in the nuance articulated in the competencies. Our focus is largely on ways to further enhance this aspect and we have made suggestions below. We strongly welcome the explicit references to misogyny, specifically pornography. We welcome the references which acknowledge context and structural violence and inequality and their constraints on young people's agency, which is well articulated on pg 11 (under thinking critically and empathetically) could go further and make the following suggestions.

## The aim

*'This course aims to develop the knowledge, understanding, skills, dispositions and values that will empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'*

This aim encompasses well the scope of the course. We would offer some thoughts.

- At first reading, 'disposition' strikes us as not plain English and may be open to interpretation. That said it is a rich word, not easy to replace. It includes the meaning of a practice of discernment towards making agentic choices within a complex context. Well informed and robust disposition is exactly the depth of mature and complex skills that we need in the population in order to prevent and protect against sexual violence. It is what we would hope to be the outcome of the SPHE and a theme we return to below.
- 'resilience' is a word that carries potential unhelpful connotations. At worst it implies a child has responsibility to stoically withstand unacceptable conditions. What we think we are aiming for here is a person with critical thinking and self-reflective skills. Perhaps these words, already used in the Rationale section, can be used instead of 'resilience'? Self-confident or self-assured are also possible replacement words.
- Throughout we would recommend more emphasis on context and matters we encounter and must adapt to rather than can control. For that reasons we suggest that after 'opportunity' we add 'challenges', after 'life' add 'as part of community/society'.

## A note on language and terms:

Under Exercising Rights, Responsibilities and Inclusivity and elsewhere a range of phrases are used to name and/or list some of the axis of discrimination and difference central to sexual activity. We would suggest arriving at one encompassing formulation and using that consistently: our suggestion is 'sex, gender and sexuality' or if preferred 'sex, gender identity and sexuality.'

## **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Our feedback here is on the 'Factors' as outlined in 1.1 - 1.3

We feel the socio-economic factors, material realities and resources should be explicitly named in either 1.1 or 1.2

1.3 We appreciate that this section is focused on addressing consumption itself and not primarily the choices engaged in after consumption. However, it has become impossible to separate norms and expectations around alcohol and drugs from those surrounding sex, gender and sexuality. In terms of consumption, attitudes to alcohol and drugs are gendered, judgment regarding risk behaviour in consumption remain highly gendered. In addition, expectations of behaviour once under the influence, invariably facilitate and excuse speech and behaviours around sexual desire, sexual activity, harassment and violence. We would therefore advocate strongly for the addition of the words, 'sex, gender and sexuality' to be added alongside 'alcohol and drugs.' both in terms of consumption choices and in terms of enabling and excusing risky and harmful choices around sexism and sex.

## **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

We would recommend reordering some of this strand.

Section 1

2.2 remove 'their'

Section 2

Section titled 'gender' should be retitled 'Culture and norms'

2.4 replace 'gender' with 'sex, gender and sexuality'

2.7 should be moved to section 2 and the word 'influence' changed to 'impact'.

In section 2 add a learning outcome around identifying and responding to peer pressure and trends and separating out own needs and desires from same. It is also possible that this learning outcome belongs after 2.2 in section 1

Section 3

2.5 add 'sexual exploitation' after 'relationships'.

The third section is discussing crime but makes no reference to the law. Introducing the law directly here would likely act to limit the open and exploratory conversation so we do not recommend leading the conversation with the law, however, the information that should be available to both teachers and students in plain English for reference. For an example see the Foróige Real U sexual violence modules where RCNI provide this resource and keep it updated.

2.6 we note this outcome includes culture (explain the root causes...) and identifying and responding (outline the supports available). Should this outcome be divided into these two aspects? And if divided does the discussion on VAWG belong in section 2 now renamed 'culture'?

2.5 add 'sexual exploitation' after 'relationships'.

The third section is discussing crime but makes no reference to the law. Introducing the law directly here would likely act to limit the open and exploratory conversation so we do not recommend leading the conversation with the law, however, the information that should be available to both teachers and students in plain English for reference. For an example see the Foróige Real U sexual violence modules where RCNI provide this resource and keep it updated.

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#### Section 4

2.9 add 'reproductive rights' into the list and add 'and proactive sexual healthcare.' at the end of the sentence.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

We feel there is an important missing outcome

3.5 concerns standing up for oneself and 3.6 concerns allyship to stand up for others, but there needs to be a step before that where we discern and respect disagreement and difference that is not hate or discrimination but is an enriching fact of life. These differences are aspects we might choose to acknowledge, respect, engage with or ignore rather than automatically defend against.

Therefore, before 3.5 we would add a new outcome on how to respect difference and critically engage with difference in opinions and behaviours. The critical skill is to be able to distinguish between things we tolerate in an inclusive and pluralistic society and things that we should stand up against. Treating all difference as intolerable is the opposite of inclusivity.



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# Contributor

## Rockbrook Park School

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**RPS Response (Q1):** *[Note: All footnotes are on the final page]*

As a Board of Management, we disagree.

To clarify, we totally *agree* that these aims are highly desirable, should be strongly fostered and in fact are largely, if not fully, happening through existing humanity, science, PE and other school subjects and through the normal school culture, especially through pupil mentoring programmes and other everyday school activities, all in keeping with our school's characteristic spirit.

However, for draft SC SPHE programme, and these aims, it's unclear why some elements are selected for inclusion in the programme and other elements, some of which could be argued to be more fundamental and crucial to SPHE learning, are omitted.

Be that as it is, in gathering the selected elements under the umbrella of the SC SPHE programme, as proposed, the key important question which arises and needs to be addressed is: what is the programme's underlying and underpinning vision of the human person. Every teacher and parent will recognise this as foundational to any SPHE programme. It is not only foundational for everything else envisaged under the SPHE programme aims as stated but also foundational to safeguarding and respecting a school's freedom and obligation to teach any SPHE programme in complete harmony with the school's characteristic spirit<sup>1</sup>. These two challenges need clarification in the proposed programme.

At best, in regard to the former challenge, there is no explicit statement of the foundational vision of the person. This is on the one hand. And on the other, there seems nonetheless to be a latent implicit vision and characteristic spirit. This is understandable as no SPHE programme, especially one as detailed as this, could be proposed without some underlying characteristic spirit. This latter unfortunately is probably the reason for various confused and contradictory messages, claims and expectations through the programme. Some of this is touched on in examples below, some of which have been attracting much media attention including international media<sup>2</sup>.

There is nothing explicit in the draft in regard to the second challenge above dealing with safeguarding a school's freedom and characteristic spirit which is present in all school teaching and is vital to a school's aim of 'educat(ing) the whole person' (p.4, NCCA's 2023 draft SC-SPHE programme). Both these points need addressing.

#### **The dignity of the person**

If the absence of a foundational vision of the person is intentional (though there is nothing to indicate that to be the case), as a way to be respectful of the freedom of schools to specify the foundations of their SPHE programmes in accordance with their own characteristic spirit and to adapt such programmes accordingly, this is to be welcomed, most appropriate but should be stated in a preamble to the aims. The benefits of such a declaration include making it clear to everyone, and especially school parents, what to expect in terms of the values and ideals which will be promoted<sup>3</sup>; facilitating a healthy diversity,

inclusivity, transparency and honesty; avoiding the danger of a state-imposed vision and characteristic spirit which would naturally be fluid, and would easily vary with whatever is the currently popular or reigning political and ideological thinking.

To achieve the purpose of an SPHE programme, and to be effective, that programme needs to be explicitly anchored in a clear definition and vision of the person, of their human nature, and of their social nature. Most schools with a religious-based characteristic spirit will have such clear definitions already in their characteristic spirit statements. Others may need help to formulate such definitions. Only with a more or less coherent vision of the person can a student understand, for instance, the essence of interpersonal relationships, and thereby address all the dimensions of such relationships in a holistic, healthy way, integrating the whole person spiritual, mental, psychological, emotional and physical health aspects, and having foundational criteria for 'making good decisions' (p.12, NCCA's 2023 draft SC-SPHE programme) about such relationships. Crucial matters, such as ethical decision-making, deciding what is healthy and unhealthy, the sense of personal dignity, and respect for the dignity of others, all hinge on one's view of the human person.

To put it another way and highlighting a weakness in the draft programme. As proposed, the draft uses words and expressions on which most people would agree. But what each person understands by those words will depend on how they understand the person, how they understand society, and their understanding of the meaning of life. Lack of clarity about foundations inevitably leads to an unintended, even chaotic, diversity of outcomes.

#### **Not an academic point**

To put it yet another way. The inherent and equal dignity of every person should be recognised and cherished, by everyone. Besides the foundation of this dignity and its universal acceptance requiring explanation, this should be the central message of the programme. If this is absent but you emphasise aspects like a person's sexual orientation, there is a big danger that the perceived message becomes "you should respect someone *despite* their sexual orientation" (or "race", "disability", "age," "sex" or similar). This is the opposite of the goal. If you make a big deal out of something private, even intimate and subjective, such as sexual orientation, you distort how that person is perceived, rather than emphasising and cherishing the inherent dignity of every human being.

The challenging question for this programme and for teachers teaching it, is: on what do you base the inherent dignity of the human being? Does it have an objective foundation on which a universal acceptance is posited? Schools with a Christian ethos have very clear well-known answers to such questions. They also usually declare them in their mission and ethos statements, for instance in their Admissions Policy.

If it is proposed that the SPHE programme be taught without such a solid foundation, as seems to be the direction taken in this draft, clearly then the proposed values and moral principles become just subjective preferences, personal feelings, or nice sounding words, which are of little worth or robustness, especially when challenging situations arise. This in itself is a characteristic spirit and, as some examples below illustrate, is characteristic of this draft even if not explicitly stated.

By way of example from the proposed draft, and related to this crucial point, is the reference to "Irish, white, male" privilege. It's a peculiar inclusion linked as it is to present USA political, ideological and cultural conflicts. (See, for instance, The USA's 'National Review' comments: "...*this entire ideology is an American export.*" M. B. Dougherty. 20 Oct 2023. <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/in-historic-turnabout-irish-admit-to-privilege/>) Being itself a clearly political and ideological premise, with overtones of a call to a particular hew of political activism, it should have no place in a health education programme. It also has the obvious flaw that there are all kinds of people, privileged and non-privileged, among the non-Irish, non-white, and non-males, just as there are among the Irish, white and male. So what? To categorise people in this way, by their race, skin colour and/or sex, is the very opposite of what an SPHE programme should do. Categorising people by their group identity, rather than by their individual behaviour, often with the implication of victimhood on one side, and guilt on the other, is reflective of a neo-Marxist philosophy and worldview, and out of place in such a programme. (Addressing such matters in an educational way might find a place, of course, in other subjects, such as history, politics, geography or sociology, but not in SPHE).

Once again, respect for human dignity by all, and for all, is what should be emphasised, with well-founded reasons explained and emphasised.

A final observation in relation to vision of the person in the draft: We note that it lists what it calls ‘guiding principles,’ (p.4, NCCA’s 2023 draft SC-SPHE programme). These are not in fact principles in any strict sense. They are rather more current observations of the senior cycle educational context. Appropriate principles can only be derived once a vision of the human person is defined. Nonetheless, calling them ‘principles’ implies a presumed, if unstated, vision of the person and hence also a presumed (also unstated) characteristic spirit! This needs addressing if respect for diversity and plurality in schools’ characteristic spirits is to pervade the programme.

#### **Preamble needed**

As has been argued above, a preamble is needed therefore, before stating the aims, which sets out the context and characteristic spirit of the programme, especially, the vision of the person on which it is based, and how this is to be made respectful of and consonant with the characteristic spirit of each school.

#### **Respect for school ethos is respect for natural and constitutional rights of parents<sup>3</sup>**

The vision and understanding of the person, and their human nature, are core to the *raison d'être* of most schools. Typically, as mentioned, they are made explicit in the statements of the school’s vision and ethos. Parents chose schools precisely for this vision and ethos. They want *their* values to be presented to their sons and daughters and to be reflected in all aspects of the school experience<sup>3</sup>.

Of course, there can be differences of vision and ethos between schools. But this is something to celebrate, not to fudge over, or pretend it doesn’t matter, or make it impossible accidentally or intentionally. Each school has a fundamental right to cultivate and follow its own characteristic spirit, exactly as formally declared to parents and to society (cf. endnote 3). In fact, it has an obligation to do so. As far as possible the state should respect this, i.e., practically welcome and support such diversity. (There can be limits of course, but here for brevity we’re considering only general principles). As it happens this mirrors the approach taken in England and Wales. To impose uniform “right thinking” from on high is itself disrespectful and unethical. It also directly opposes pluralism, diversity and inclusivity.

The new SPHE programme therefore needs to be clear, for instance in the preamble, in respecting, welcoming and facilitating the legitimate variety of ethos’s found around the country. That being explicit and integral to the programme would strengthen rather than weaken everything that follows.

## **Question 2: The Learning**

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to

- 1.1 research the determinants of good health
- 1.2 discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
- 1.3 critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
- 1.4 explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
- 1.5 recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
- 1.6 draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
- 1.7 recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
- 1.8 discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
- 1.9 explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
- 1.10 discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**RPS Response (Q2, Strand1):**

Again we endorse the selection of ideas here outlined, but point to a missing dimension.

Depending on one's view of the person, and one's vision of the purpose and meaning of human existence, a significant omission is evident, viz., spiritual health and wellbeing.

For a large proportion of the population, one's "[P]hysical, social, emotional and mental health" is seen as totally indivisibly integrated with one's spiritual health. All are seen as interconnected in the unity of the person, and are active and present in every human choice and action. The 1998 Education Act itself clearly seeks it. Error! Bookmark not defined. The different aspects need treatment as appropriate but always within the context of the 'whole person' and not in an isolated fragmented way as though the different aspects were somehow autonomous. Omitting the spiritual dimension is akin to omitting the foundation for the 'whole being greater than the parts' in whole person health and well being.

Hence, a more holistic vision of the unity of the person is needed to improve the clarity of these learning outcomes and make them relevant to the needs of most 16-18 year olds. Here, as elsewhere in the document, where a person's health is categorised under various aspects, 'spiritual health' should feature strongly. This is so even if different schools might have different traditions in dealing with the topic and in the importance they give to spiritual well-being.

Another obvious omission: 'alcohol and drugs' learning outcome, 1.4, should be expanded to 'alcohol, drugs, pornography, promiscuity, and gambling.' This would be a significant improvement to 1.4.

**Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to

2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**RPS Response (Q2, Strand 2):**

Clarity and relevance here are deficient. In some respects, one can endorse much of this section if it is taught in full harmony with a school's characteristic spirit. But in other respects, the document is deficient, ambiguous or unclear.

**An assumed worldview but one not made explicit**

Again, the draft here seems to assume a set of values that all "right-thinking people" adhere to, and which therefore are to be advocated, as self-evidently good. If so, what are these values? This is unclear. Is there a problem about making them explicit? Will they be compatible with Muslim, Jewish, Christian, secularist worldviews? We suggest again that any SPHE programme be open and welcoming to a variety of ethos and values and that this be explicitly set out.

**Diversity of values in society**

Aside from the ethos issue, on most of these topics, a very wide variety of values is found across society. Also, among those who declare themselves to belong to one of the LGBQ+ categories there is a similar variety of views and values, on identity, gender, marriage, promiscuity, fidelity, sexual relationships, societal perceptions, the nature of man and woman, personal identity, the family, and so on. Both within each category, and across categories, there is little agreement. Many of the topics are hotly debated. Sex and gender are frequently confused or conflated. The science on many of the debated issues is undecided, or almost non-existent, frequently being replaced by ideologies and dogmas. The full implication of recently formulated theories have yet to be seen, let alone verified as "good" for the individual and for society.

So what is the "right thinking" on these matters? We ask if teaching pupils an arbitrary take on such undecided issues is healthy and appropriate, for them and for society. To claim to be able to teach relationships and sexuality learning outcomes in a morally neutral way is contended, and in a school with a Christian characteristic spirit to putatively attempt to do so is to be in direct conflict with that spirit.

Again, by way of example: where the outline says "*examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media*", whose view, or definition, of "harmful" is being advocated? To put it another way, one might ask what would a "good attitude around gender" look like<sup>4</sup>? Based on what? Whose vision of the person, of society? And why this particular vision exclusively?

Hence, once again, there is a need for the programme to make explicit the freedom of educators and to allow inclusiveness of visions of the person different from the underlying characteristic spirit of this draft.

Similarly, we have concerns about the overriding note of this section which says "*Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons*".

There is an absence of clarity here. For instance, what values are being advocated here? On what are they based? And how are they to be fully integrated into teaching? Or harmonised with a school's ethos?

#### **For clarity there is a need also to include other visions**

Will such statements frustrate many schools, especially those with a Christian ethos, but also those of other faiths, and of none, to deliver an SPHE programme which aligns with their characteristic spirit and ethos? It's not clear.

A more careful and nuanced articulation of this section is required to make it possible to teach learning outcomes completely in harmony with a school's characteristic spirit, whether Christian, Muslim, Jewish, secular humanist, or unspecified.

#### **Absent words and concepts**

It is also remarkable that many key words and concepts of everyday relationships, sexuality and holistic health are absent here (and also missing from the glossary of terms). Also missing are related concepts in the learning outcomes. Examples are fatherhood, motherhood, father, mother, woman, man, spouse, marriage, procreation, pregnancy and life-affirming life-long spousal and family relationships ('unplanned pregnancy,' only, gets a mention). Friendship -the relationships and roles of the vast range of platonic friendships in healthy relationship lifestyles- is also missing.

Investigating the impact on holistic health of beauty & joy is a missing concept; for instance, a learning outcome which investigates: the beauty and joy of a pure and chaste love; the impact on holistic personal and relationship health of the mutual exchange of such love between spouses; the elements of empowerment, freedom and autonomy to support such a healthy lifestyle; etc. For instance, in line with learning outcome 2.4, the programme could include a learning outcome, 'examine how harmful attitudes towards chaste relationships are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives.'

#### **Problematic words**

'Reproductive health' is mentioned. This term is generally understood as a euphemism for the abortion of a child. Is this the intended meaning, or not? The ambiguity is problematic.

If the intended meaning is indeed the commonly understood one, this clashes with the ethos of those schools whose characteristic spirit affirms the equal dignity of every person from conception and proposes that the life of the mother and child be cherished alike.

(Needless to add, the fact that it is legally permitted to abort a child is a separate matter from the ethical, social, psychological and other considerations around abortion.)

#### **Child protection**

In the last decade, child protection measures have rightly been given enormous importance, with clear roles and procedures for all in the school community, now in place for some years but continuing to be refined. The implications for SPHE teachers in particular need to be addressed, especially when working on a number of the proposed learning outcomes and themes. For example, the lack of clarity on the (2.7) learning outcome on "investigating the influence of pornography" could lead to many practical and ethical questions and challenges arising. These include:

- a. How are the recommended teaching materials in relation to this learning outcome to be handled, sourced, shared, created?
- b. The production of pornographic material involves inherent abuse and disrespect for persons, objectifying and commercialising humans, and exploitation. What precautions should be in place to avoid school staff cooperating in this in any way?

- c. How does a teacher eschew the danger of creating problems for students at the time of teaching (including in home assignments, etc) and in later life (personal health, relationships' health, etc)?
- d. How does one constrain and set safe boundaries for teachers so as to avoid using sexually explicit material with children and how might oversight be exercised in this regard?
- e. What are the mitigating policies and procedures which should be in place to avoid viewing or normalising viewing of pornography, and so to thwart the powerfully addictive aspect of pornography (on which the enormous, exploitative, dark porn industry flourishes)?
- f. What antidote solutions if any exist and are put in place by parents, schools and SPHE teachers to counteract addiction (whether accidental, inadvertent or otherwise) arising out teaching this topic?
- g. What compensation schemes should be put in place before beginning to deal with such health-risk material, for the student and for teachers?
- h. What is the role of the school's Child Protection Officer in all this, if for example he or she is alerted by parents/teacher/school to some problem arising from the teaching material, or otherwise?

#### **Vulnerable children**

It is important to highlight the potential impact of parts of this draft SPHE programme on vulnerable children (including autistic, ADHD, special needs children, children in difficult family circumstances, and others). This, for instance, should be considered not just strand 2.7 and issues raised above, but also for strand 2.4. The special vulnerability of children exposed to incomplete gender dysphoria theories and practices should not be underestimated<sup>4</sup>. Teaching these learning outcomes seriously risks creating problems for vulnerable children, without supplying a capacity to solve them. Risks include immediate or down-stream health problems, increased school bullying due to disclosures, confusion of personal identity, depression, etc.

#### **Need for indemnity**

In other jurisdictions a steadily growing number of legal procedures have been taken against medical personnel and institutions<sup>4,5</sup>, by people who claim they were misled or misadvised while teenagers, for example about their sexual/gender identity. In most cases the courts are siding with the complainants, who argue that, at the time, they were too young to understand the life-long health implications of the decisions they were being advised to take. The potential questions and discussions and consequent personal decision outcomes which could arise within strand (2.4) for example (and following also on from the thrust of some of the 'affirming and celebrating' recommendations elsewhere in the programme and how that might be done in practice), and the ways they are dealt with by teachers, could expose teachers, school management, boards of management, and school trustees to future claims for damages and injuries. Will they be indemnified against such lawsuits? By whom?

#### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

#### **Students should be able to**

3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**RPS Response (Q2, Strand 3):**

Cf. Our response to Strand 2. The same deficiencies apply here for the same reasons as set out above. Please see also our response comments under Question 3 below.

**Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**RPS Response (Q3):**

**Respecting world-views**

To the extent that the proposed programme is informed by its own characteristic spirit, it comes across as secularist and relativist. It appears to embrace and promote ideologies which have become current in recent years, as well as particular views about gender and race. Many schools will want a different characteristic spirit to inform the programme they would deliver in their schools. There are various ways to facilitate this, without compromising what the programme sets out to achieve, in effect without compromising the aims. On the contrary, explicitly embracing the diversity would enhance the programme's quality and effectiveness. The recommendations mentioned in this context above, especially those under Question 1, would facilitate this improvement to the programme.

**Indemnity**

As mentioned, there is a need to indemnify educators, schools, school trustees, et al, against the likelihood of future lawsuits and claims for damages (e.g., today, the UK's Tavistock Clinic legacy<sup>4</sup> or the USA's Chloe Cole's case<sup>5</sup>), for example arising from the promotion, celebration, affirmation of certain gender theories, and the handling of other topics. Future sufferers from gender dysphoria, confusion of identity, character disorientation, and similar challenges could easily attribute them, in part or in whole, to the effects of teaching the SPHE programme as currently proposed in their school.

**Child Protection**

Child Protection Procedures (CPP 2023) clearly come into play, as indicated above (under Question 2, Strand 2), and thus should be fully addressed in the programme proposal.

**The family**

The future of humanity goes by the way of the family. All the available scientific evidence shows that by far the best model of the family involves a stable and loving relationship between a mother and a father. If so, is there any reason not to put this ideal before teenagers preparing for adult life? If the SPHE programme achieved only that, would it not be a worthwhile contribution, to individuals, to society, and to future generations?

Or have we rather given up, lost belief in the idealism of youth, and instead focussed on the difficulties, as if they are all too much for us?

**Implications for timetables and delivery of Leaving Certificate programmes**

An important practical issue and recommendation: The two-year, 60-hour allocation proposed for the SPHE programme is equivalent to 45 periods per year. These periods will have to be taken from existing Leaving Certificate subjects. If evenly spread this amounts to a reduction of approximately 9 hours teaching per subject, for pupils taking 7 LC subjects. This significant reduction will undoubtedly reduce teachers' capacity to cover their syllabi and will have a negative impact on student performance in the LC examinations. It is therefore recommended that the allocated time be reduced (bearing in mind especially what was noted in the first paragraph under Question 1) and that its introduction be considered only in the context of the promised comprehensive review of the whole SC LC programme.

**Conclusion**

If one point is to be highlighted as of fundamental importance it is that the 'senior cycle educates the whole person' (p.4, NCCA's 2023 draft SC-SPHE programme) and thus if this programme or any SPHE-type programme is to assist in that, then (as has been dealt with in some detail above) the vision of the human person is paramount. The draft does not advance such a vision, though crucially it seems not to recognise that. As such visions are typically embedded in a school's characteristic spirit, the programme needs to recognise that and hence to call on schools to adapt whatever the final template programme is to fully reflect their characteristic spirit.

**END NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The Education Act, 1998, “Section 9d “A recognised school shall provide education to students which is appropriate to their abilities and needs and ... 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, ...”

<sup>2</sup> E.g., <https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/in-historic-turnabout-irish-admit-to-privilege/>

<sup>3</sup> Parents have a natural and legal right to expect their children’s school to abide with the published characteristic spirit of the school in all that happens in the school and Trustees have corresponding statutory duties and legal obligations as well as moral obligations. The natural and inalienable rights of parents in this area correspond also to their rights and duties under articles 41 and 42 of the Irish Constitution. These are further mirrored in international treaties and human right declarations to which Ireland is party (e.g., European Convention on Human Rights, ECHR, a.2, protocol no.1; the EU charter of Fundamental Rights (2000), No.14; and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in ICCPR, 1966, a.18), and in a number of well-known international court judgements.

<sup>4</sup> Camilla Cavendish “Time to Think — what went wrong at the Tavistock gender clinic.” Financial Times, 14 Feb. 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/a45a9a0b-5d2f-4c4a-b2ef-6a8796ea5d10>;

<sup>5</sup> Chloe Cole’s case, July 2023. <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/03/07/legal-action-may-change-transgender-care-in-america>



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## Shout out

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

### Insert response here:

This aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students very well as it recognises the importance of social and personal education in student's lives now and after they leave school.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:

Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour

1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The focus on mental health as connected to overall health is very encouraging to see. Mental health wellbeing is relevant to the lives of 16-18 year olds today as they go through the Leaving Cert which can bring up a lot of stress and anxiety. There should also be recognition of factors that affect young people's mental health which are outside of their control such as poverty, discrimination, isolation, etc and how they can still have healthy ways of dealing with mental health issues caused by things outside of their control.

LGBTI+ young people suffer from disproportionately worse mental health than that of their peers, and LGBTI+ adults are at risk of higher rates of alcohol and drug use than straight and cisgender people (LGBTIreland Report, 2016). In addition, LGBTI+ people are less likely to engage in sport and physical activity due to negative experiences or a lack of inclusive policy, with long term impacts on physical and mental wellbeing. An awareness of these heightened risks should be embedded in teacher education and curriculum materials, with signposting towards tailored local supports for LGBTI+ people. These local supports should include mental health supports, sexual health services, and peer support groups.

Negative school experiences are listed in the LGBTIreland report as a key risk factor for poor mental health, and students should be made aware of the impact bullying and hostile school climates can have on the mental health of LGBTI+ people. Teachers should also note that some LGBTQI+ youth may be nervous to engage mental health supports for fear of having to out themselves to their parents in order to access support.

With the determinants of good health, it should also include different types of bodies including trans and intersex people and how healthy can look different to everyone. There's no wrong way to have a body. This could also be used to teach students the importance of having a healthy body image and the effects of social media and influencers on how young people perceive their bodies. With photoshop, filters and the growing influence of AI, photos can be easily edited and manipulated to show something that isn't real. Students should be encouraged to think critically about beauty standards and why the media pushes these standards so heavily.

Under the Health and Wellbeing strand more broadly, students should be supported to develop self-advocacy skills in healthcare settings. This is relevant for LGBTQI+ students, who may need to navigate complex interactions in sexual healthcare, intimate healthcare, and counselling, but also for female students, or students at a higher risk of marginalisation because of other protected characteristics e.g. disability.

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to

2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

The recognition that Strand 2 should be taught in a way that LGBTQI+ identities, relationships and families are fully reflected in teaching and learning is positive to see, we would agree with this note.

This must not be seen as something that schools or teachers can opt out of. It's essential that LGBTQ+ identities are discussed and integrated through all strands, not just Strand 2. LGBTQI+ identities pertain to many aspects of a person's life and experiences, beyond simply relationships and gender. LGBTQI+ identity may impact an individual's experience of school, work, community, sports, family, and more besides. As such, LGBTQI+ identities should be considered throughout the curriculum to support normalisation of LGBTQI+ identity and reduce bullying and misinformation.

In order to effectively include LGBTQI+ identities within the curriculum, teachers must be fully supported with up-to-date teaching resources, CPD in LGBTQI+ specific content, and ongoing training in inclusive pedagogical practices.

The learning outcome for item 2.4 should explore the impact of gender stereotypes on all individuals, but with particular reference to the impact of these norms and stereotypes on LGBTQI+ communities. Gender stereotypes limit many members of society, but can prompt violence and harassment of those who are gender-non-conforming.

Facilitating an understanding of these factors may include discussion of harmful attitudes towards gender-non-conforming, trans and non-binary people. This discussion may ask how students can challenge those attitudes within their own communities. Media literacy should be included in this point as online and traditional media are sources of disinformation on trans, non-binary and intersex identities. Students should be encouraged to look into the kind of media they consume and where it is coming from.

Under 2.8, LGBTQI+ identities may require additional attention as LGBTQI+ young people are at particular risk of online harassment, blackmail, or threats of “outing” linked to their LGBTQI+ identity.

Discussions around violent and abusive relationships should also cover how students can recognise abusive or toxic behaviours within themselves, including discussions on how to ask for consent and what consent looks like. Discussions on gender-based violence should also be inclusive of the LGBTQI+ community and a range of gender dynamics, to consider examples of how abuse can look in non-straight relationships.

Dating apps are an important aspect of young people’s lives, many people will get into relationships with those they’ve matched with online. Strand 2 should teach young people how to be safe on apps like Tinder, Grindr and HER. It is worth noting that apps for LGBTQI+ users may come with particular safety concerns which may be unique to those apps or the LGBTQI+ community.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

We welcome the opportunity for students to build up the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others and how to demonstrate allyship skills to support greater equity and inclusion. It's important for students who are becoming adults to have the skills they need to flourish and promote equality in their communities.

3.4 emphasises the importance of rights-based education which is vital for LGBTQI+ young people. We note with regards to students' rights and responsibilities online that this aspect must foster an awareness of the definition and impact of hate speech and online harassment. With regards to workplace rights, many students will be moving onto the workplace after completing their Leaving Cert so it's essential that they understand their rights as workers including the protections guaranteed to LGBTQI+ workers under the Equal Status Acts. Students should also understand the supports available to them in vindicating those rights, for example trade unions, free legal aid centres, ombudsmen, and equality bodies. Another aspect that could be included in point 3.4 is their rights if they are arrested or dealing with An Garda Siochana.

Under 3.5, students should be supported to understand the impact of hate crimes on vulnerable communities, and how to access support if they witness or are a victim of a hate crime. They should also be empowered to recognise discrimination in education, work, or broader society, against themselves or others, and to consider how they may report or challenge an instance of discrimination in different contexts. This piece, for example, may ask students to explore the impact of direct vs indirect discrimination, strategies for recognising and tackling each, and the supports available under Irish law.

We particularly support the inclusion of point 3.6 with note to its relevance for LGBTQI+ students and their peers. Allyship should be emphasised as a key skill for all students to develop in order to protect and support their peers from the LGBTQI+ or other marginalised communities. We wish to emphasise the importance of intersectionality in this topic - recognising that LGBTQI+ individuals themselves may be in a position to support other members of the LGBTQI+ community, that LGBTQI+ individuals may be at risk of marginalisation among multiple axes (e.g. class/disability/race), and that this risk of multiple marginalisation / discrimination may make an individual more vulnerable.

**Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

When carrying out the SPHE curriculum, teachers should have continuous professional development and training especially when it comes to more triggering topics such as lessons on abusive relationships and sexual violence. Dedicated LGBTQI+ training should be available to all SPHE/RSE teachers to engage with to ensure that all students get the most out of the SPHE curriculum. This training should support teachers to explore these topics with confidence, and to embed LGBTQI+ identities across the curriculum in a meaningful, consistent, and respectful manner.

LGBTQI+ identities, relationships and families must be included throughout the whole curriculum, not just in Strand 2 as LGBTQI+ identity shapes many aspects of an individual's life and future.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

## The Shona Project

# The Shona Project

Dear Senior Cycle SPHE Development Group Members,

I am writing to you on behalf of The Shona Project Youth Ambassadors, in collaboration with the Vicky Phelan Tribe and the Endometriosis Association of Ireland.

The Shona Project Youth Ambassador Programme has 110 members. We have 90 Junior Ambassadors who are aged 16-18 years and 20 Senior Ambassadors aged 18 and over. This letter has been created, approved and signed by many of these young women. Our Junior Ambassadors are leaders who have been nominated by their schools to join our programme. This means that their voice is one that represents others in their school community.

The Shona Project's mission is to address gender inequality, empowering the next generation of girls to become leading changemakers. We believe that every girl should feel accepted, included and encouraged to become the best versions of themselves. We are a Non- Profit organisation, working in schools across Ireland, to spread a message of positivity, kindness and resilience through our workshops and programmes. As part of that, we are encouraging girls to prioritise their health.

Vicky Phelan was a good friend of Tammy Darcy, our CEO and Founder. Vicky spoke at our Shine Festival and we have now named our Online Shine Festival, Women's Health stage as 'The Vicky Phelan' stage. We would like to remind you of Vicky's parting words: "I hope I have fought enough for your future but now it's time for you to take the baton and stand up for yourselves, question everything. This fight was for you". We as an organisation are adamant that we continue to fight for better education and healthcare for girls and women. We need to equip girls with the knowledge that will enable them to advocate for themselves and believe that increased focus upon gynecological health and general physical health in the SPHE curriculum is essential for the youth of Ireland. Previous generations deserved more, and our proposed curricular changes can ensure that the legacy of women like Vicky, and all others who have suffered due to inconsistencies in healthcare, can be one of change for the better.

We are aware that the current curriculum does contain some coverage of women's health in the Gender studies strand where students learn about human experiences of health and wellbeing. They also explore sexual and reproductive health. However, there is no specific mention of what aspects need to be addressed in relation to gynecological, andrological and general health. The newly proposed specification does mention general physical and reproductive/fertility health in Learning Outcomes: 1.1, 2.9 and 3.1. However, once again there is no specific mention of common conditions that individuals with gynecological health needs face every day.

The new Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum needs to be more specific in its coverage of physical health. The area of women's health has been under-researched, under-diagnosed and under-represented in education spaces for far too long. We are adamant that increased education on the area will be exceptionally beneficial. By educating students from an early age on inflammatory, chronic or gynecologically specific conditions such as Polycystic Ovary Syndrome, Endometriosis, Adenomyosis, gynecological cancers and their general menstrual health, we can ensure that students know what is normal and what needs further investigation. This will result in a better-informed generation of young people and enable them to become better advocates for their own health. The more educated people are, the more they will push for increased research and bring about improved healthcare in the long-term.

Whilst the format of this letter is one that is very focused upon gynecological health, it must be noted that more needs to be done to address physical healthcare needs for all. These topics can be taught in all schools, to all students. Topics like breast health are important for everyone, as diseases like breast cancer can affect anyone. While a person might not be able to specifically relate to discussion around painful periods, HRT or testicular issues; they will come across people in their lives who do. Teaching each of these topics to all students, will also ensure that those in the LGBT+ community feel included.

We would also like to applaud many aspects of the new specification. Specifically, its focus upon gender identity, mental and emotional health, healthy and abusive relationships, general wellbeing and Equality and Inclusion. Thank you for all the work that you are doing for our young people. We hope that you look favourably upon our suggestions and look forward to reviewing a newly updated draft of the Senior Cycle SPHE Specification soon.



**NCCA**

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

# Contributor

The Countess Advocacy  
CLG

# The Countess Advocacy CLG

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

*The Countess* is a non-profit, volunteer-led organisation formed to promote the rights and interests of women and children in Ireland. Inspired by her significant contribution to Irish public life, we take our lead and our name from Countess Constance Georgine Markiewicz who, as Minister for Labour in the First Dáil, was the first female cabinet minister in Europe. Countess Markiewicz was at the vanguard of a social revolution that envisioned an Ireland that cherished all her children equally, irrespective of socio-economic status, religion, sex, or other social markers used to limit life choices and chances.

A fundamental part of the Irish revolution championed by Markiewicz and her contemporaries was achieving equality for women and affording adequate social and economic protection to all children. Sadly, the rights of women and safeguarding of children have remained elusive for much of our first century as an independent State. *The Countess* was formed to address these failings through campaigning, awareness raising, policy development, advocacy, and constructive dialogue.

## OUR WORK

We have a broad interest in women's rights and child safeguarding, *The Countess* was established in 2019 to focus attention on the unintended consequences of the Gender Recognition Act 2015 on the rights of women and its impact on all aspects of safeguarding. We promote constructive, respectful, and rights-focused dialogue on this issue, and wish to see a balanced approach to gender recognition that will:

- Vindicate the rights of women.
- Achieve best practice in safeguarding for children and young people.
- Defend the hard-won rights of same-sex attracted people.
- Ensure those with gender-questioning identities are treated equally to all others in society.

At our core is the belief that by virtue of our common humanity, all groups in society must be afforded the ability to live with dignity, respect, and safety.

## MEMBERSHIP

Our membership comprises a diverse cross-section of people concerned by the conflict of rights and child safeguarding issues arising out of gender self-ID. Our membership draws on a range of individuals including doctors, lawyers, writers, IT specialists as well as students, carers, full-time parents, and anyone willing to contribute their time and skills to further our mission. We are volunteer-led, self-funded, and not affiliated with any political party or religion.

## DEFINITIONS

As an organisation, *The Countess* is concerned with preventing the erosion or erasure of clear, sex-based terms that are important to how most people describe and think of themselves. With that in mind, and for the avoidance of doubt, the following are the interpretations of those words applied in this submission and in all our work that have become contested within debates around gender and sex. They are:

- Woman: 'Adult Human Female'
- Man: 'Adult Human Male'
- Girl: 'Female child or adolescent'
- Boy: 'Male child or adolescent'
- Sex: 'Either of the two categories (male and female) into which humans and most other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions'

To use any other interpretation of the terms listed above makes it impossible to guarantee enduring clarity and consistency in the use and interpretation of the language used to craft law or State policy. This submission, therefore, applies these meanings to these words.

## QUESTION I: AIM

The aim of the updated curriculum is to:

'Empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

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

Insert response here:

Disagree.

The aim of the updated curriculum is to 'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'

The course cannot meet its stated aims because:

1. It fails to observe some of the explicitly stated guiding principles of the Senior Cycle
2. Uses language that indicates a commitment to the 'affirmative' model of care for gender-dysphoric people.

3. The curriculum draws on ‘critical theories’ including queer theory, critical social justice, and critical race theory. These theories directly undermine the formation of a stable identity, undermine resilience, and destroy relationships.

#### I. Failure to observe explicitly stated guiding principles of the Senior Cycle

**Choice and flexibility** – this principle asserts that the Senior Cycle (SC) provides ‘flexibility and coherence’ for students. The draft SC SPHE specification undermines the coherent teaching of the SC biology curriculum because it does not provide a definition of sex and repeatedly conflates sex and gender.

It is not possible to coherently teach the SC biology curriculum AND teach that gender identity is a fact. Learning outcomes in the SC biology curriculum include, among others:

‘An understanding of the general structure of the reproductive system – male and female. Functions of the main parts. Role of meiosis (cell division) in the production of sperm cells and egg (ova). Definition of “secondary sexual characteristics.” Role of oestrogen, progesterone, and testosterone. The menstrual cycle: the events and outlined role of oestrogen and progesterone. Copulation, location of fertilisation, implantation, placenta formation and function. Birth – outline of process, milk production and breastfeeding.’

It is not possible to coherently teach this aspect of the curriculum and fail to define what sex is in the SC draft SPHE curriculum. In order to claim that everyone has a gender identity it is necessary to obscure what the differences between sex and gender are. The SPHE specification only offers definitions for gender, gender identity, and gender expression. Not sex. Failure to define sex undermines the student’s ability to challenge the sexist stereotypes and assumptions that underpin the concept of gender identity. A person’s sex is not a feeling. It is a biological reality. 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)

Teachers have an obligation as set out in Section 2.1 of the Teaching Council’s code of conduct ‘to act with honesty and integrity in all aspects of their work’. To teach that sex is fiction and gender identity is fact is a professional dereliction of duty.

How can teachers uphold their professional duty to ‘take all reasonable steps in relation to the care of pupils/students under their supervision, so as to ensure their safety and welfare’ (Section 3.1 of the Teaching Council’s Code of Conduct) while also teaching that sex is not binary and immutable. Such a claim has profound implications for the coherent teaching of safe sex and the avoidance of unplanned pregnancy. What measure of protection from pregnancy does being non-binary afford a female student? Is a non-binary boy unable to impregnate a female partner depending on where he locates himself on the ‘sex spectrum’? The incoherence is obvious once critically evaluated. What response will students or teachers who point out these evident inconsistencies receive?

Failure to be clear about what these terms mean will potentially lead to errors in the application of the Children First Act 2015 and the Equal Status Acts (ESA) 2000 – 2015.

Section II of the Children 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’ undermines pupils’ 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.

**Inclusive education and diversity** – this guiding principle states that ‘the educational experience in senior cycle is **inclusive of every student**, celebrating, valuing and **respecting diversity** and the contribution each student can make’. The SC SPHE draft undermines this principle by presenting certain modes of thinking as accepted and universal, e.g., the belief all humans have a gender identity. For those students who do not accept this belief, whether for religious, philosophical, or scientific grounds, their diverse view will be interpreted as bigotry and transphobia. Diversity of thought is not possible when one point of view (that everyone has a gender identity) is granted a privileged position protected from critique.

**Challenge, engagement, and creativity** – this guiding principle states that students should ‘experience challenging **high quality education** with opportunities for new and deep learning and for **critical**, creative and innovative thinking.’ Elements of this SC SPHE draft specification fail to offer high quality education and opportunities for critical thinking because it presents gender identity as a fact when it is a highly contested and unscientific belief system. Where schools have facilitated the social transition of students, introduced mixed-sex toilets, or engaged with or relied on resources provided by third party providers such as BeLonGTo, ShoutOut, or TENI it will be clear to students that the school has adopted the ideological position that humans can be born in the wrong body. Students will be intimidated and will not criticise gender identity theories. The opportunity for critical evaluation or questioning is undermined by a whole school adoption of a belief system that has no basis in science or fact.

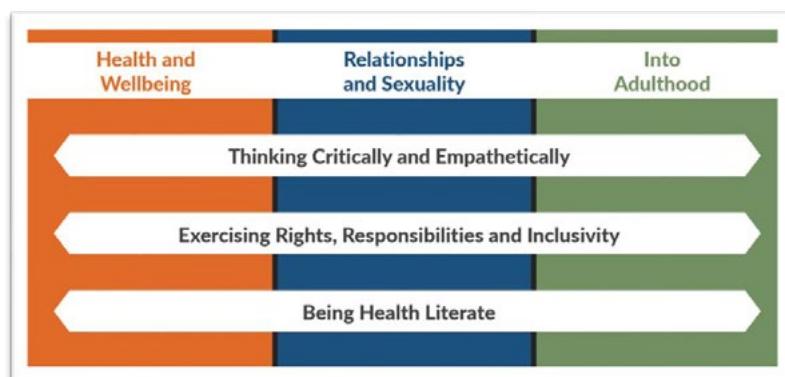
- I. **Uses language that indicates a commitment to the ‘affirmative’ model of care for gender-dysphoric people.**

The Senior Cycle curriculum specification states that SPHE teaching and learning in senior cycle should ‘affirm diversity.’ This request is not neutral as it states this ‘affirmation’ involves ‘using inclusive and affirming language.’ This is a clear direction to teachers to use language that endorses a particular approach to gender distress called ‘social transition.’ The Cass Review Interim Report on the Gender Identity Development Service

(GIDS) at the Tavistock in London, stated clearly and unambiguously that social transition is ‘not a neutral act’ and that social transition ‘may have significant effects on the child or young person in terms of their psychological functioning’. The ‘affirmation model’ not only affects the child being affirmed but co-opts the entire school community into the ‘affirmation’ process. Teachers are not equipped to facilitate this powerful psychological intervention that lacks robust, peer-reviewed evidence in support of its efficacy and safety for use on distressed children and by extension their peers.

## QUESTION 2: THE LEARNING

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp. 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional, and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques, and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to:

- 1.1 research the determinants of good health.
- 1.2 discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance – including study, work, play, sleep, people, ‘me time,’ and ways to manage greater balance.
- 1.3 critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs.

1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol, and drugs, and one's sense of self.
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour.
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health.
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed.
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety.
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand I, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16–18-year-olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

The intention of Strand I is well meaning but will fail to address the complexities and dangers in offering the ‘affirmative’ model of care to gender dysphoric students if teachers are instructed to ‘affirm diversity’ and use ‘affirming language’. The Interim Cass Review<sup>1</sup> into the care provided by the largest gender identity service in the UK stated that:

**‘There is lack of consensus and open discussion about the nature of gender dysphoria and therefore about the appropriate clinical response.’**

and

**‘Social transition – this may not be thought of as an intervention or treatment, because it is not something that happens within health services. However, it is important to view it as an active intervention because it may have significant effects on the child or young person in terms of their psychological functioning.’**

Teaching Gender Ideology is negatively impacting students’ mental health.

In a recent article<sup>ii</sup> on the impact of teaching Gender Ideology in schools Genspect relied on research gathered from the My World Survey<sup>iii</sup>: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland, conducted by UCD. They reported that the numbers of students in Irish secondary schools who do not identify with their birth sex has been increasing steadily from 1% in 2012 to 6% in 2023.

The My World Survey<sup>iv</sup>: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland also reported that:

- In 2023, 94% of secondary school students who do not identify with their birth sex reported having some mental health difficulties, and 61% rated their mental health as 'not good'.
- In 2023, 50% of secondary school students who do not identify with their birth sex identified gender identity as one of their top stressors.
- There has been a dramatic increase in referrals of Irish children and young adults for treatment for gender dysphoria.
- The rate of LGBT+ youth feeling unsafe at school is increasing (in 2022 76% reported feeling unsafe, up from 73% in 2019)

There can be no doubt that Genspect is correct that:

'Since gender ideology was introduced into Irish schools, there has been an increase in gender questioning, confusion, and declining mental health among significant numbers of Irish school children'

It is incumbent on the NCCA to address this issue of gender-identity confusion in a cautious manner that prioritises evidence-based approaches and the long-term wellbeing of all students.

While any attempt to give students the skills to 'take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible' is laudable, this strand will fail to enable students to '[gain] awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing' by refusing to acknowledge, in the specification and resource toolkit, all evidence critical of 'affirmative' treatments/interventions employed to address gender-related distress/dysphoria.

The opportunity to critically assess treatments for gender-related distress will be significantly undermined in schools where;

- gender identity is taught as fact, rather than as a belief system
- students are 'affirmed' through social transition
- mixed-sex toilet facilities have been introduced
- preferred pronoun use is encouraged and lack of pronoun use is deemed 'hateful.'

How will teachers facilitate students who may wish to draw their classmate's attention to the experience of desistance and detransition? 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. This is important information. Research conducted by statsforgender.org<sup>v</sup> shows that gender dysphoria recedes in 80% of cases if not actively affirmed.

Students must be protected from accusations of bigotry and transphobia if they, for instance, draw attention to the fact that individuals who held a firm conviction that they had a trans or non-binary identity and took social or medical/surgical steps to 'affirm' that conviction stopped believing they had a trans or non-binary identity. This experience of 'desisting' and 'detransition' is real and worthy of report in a curriculum that aims to encourage young people to make healthy, evidence-based decisions.

### QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

A recent editorial<sup>vi</sup> in *Nurse Education Practice* addressed significant concerns about the uncritical adoption of gender ideology in health and social care education, specifically the affirmative model and its application to the care and treatment of children and young people experiencing gender dysphoria. The authors provided a list of very important questions for every teacher to consider before approaching this topic. We recommend the adoption of these or similar questions before teaching addressing this subject with any student at Junior or Senior Cycle level.

- Are sex and gender synonyms for the same concept or do they mean different things?
- What are the issues involved with informed consent for transition in children and young people, especially in the context of vulnerable and or extremely distressed individuals.
- What evidence is there to support the claim that people can literally change sex?
- What explanations have been put forward for the very significant rise in the numbers of young people, many with co-existing mental health issues, autism, and histories of abuse, who present with gender dysphoria?
- Why are girls overrepresented in those seeking gender reassignment?
- What evidence is there for and against the use of puberty blockers in the treatment of young people with gender dysphoria?
- What is known about the long-term outcomes for young people who transition in terms of their mental and physical health?

### STRAND 2: RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge, and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring, and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

**Students should be able to:**

- 2.1 demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
- 2.2 reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values, and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships, and sexual behaviour
- 2.3 discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy, and mutual pleasure
- 2.4 examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
- 2.5 identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
- 2.6 explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
- 2.7 investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours, and relationship expectations
- 2.8 discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
- 2.9 explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

Strand 2 is the only strand that is accompanied by a specific instruction for how the strand should be taught. This is cause for concern. The strand learning outcomes are preceded by a note that states:

‘[students] should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lesson’

This instruction force-teams lesbian, gay, and bisexual people’s experiences with those of the trans, queer, and + people. It suggests that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual is an identity. Homosexuality and bisexuality are not identities. They are sexual orientations based on same-sex attraction. The NCCA must clarify if it uses sex and gender as synonyms or if the NCCA considers these words mean different things? Trans, queer, and + are not defined in the glossary. If this strand is to be taught with integrity it is essential that the draft specification define all the following terms:

- Sex
- Homosexuality
- Heterosexuality
- Gender
- Transgender
- Queer
- +

The current glossary defines ‘gender.’ It does not define sex, homosexuality, heterosexuality, transgender, queer, or +. Definitions of all terms listed will enable students and teachers to see the clear difference between sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) and subjective identities (trans, queer, and +) and to confidently address those differences.

In centring LGBTQ+ the NCCA has elevated this group above all others. There is no instruction to fully integrate and reflect the disabled, economically disadvantaged, different ethnic groups, heterosexuals, or people of faith. In directing teachers to integrate the ill-defined LGBTQ+ group in all lessons, teachers are being coerced into teaching gender ideology and identity politics.

Learning outcome 2.2 states:

**'Identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour.'**

It must be made explicit that sexual orientation is based on sex, not gender or gender identity. It is profoundly homophobic to suggest that same sex-attraction is socially constructed. Sexual orientation can be empirically measured using physiological response tests. To suggest sexual orientation is socially constructed is to suggest it can be deconstructed or erased. Gay and lesbian students are not attracted to the same gender, but the same sex students must not be taught otherwise.

The glossary states that gender is 'socially constructed' and pointedly fails to define sex. This is a deliberate attempt to make students accept that sexual attraction is not based on our physical bodies but on what we THINK about our physical bodies. This gives licence to heterosexual males to declare that they are girls/women and to assert that they are lesbians and coerce nascent lesbians into believing they are 'bigoted' for not accepting males who identify as lesbians into their dating pool. It gives licence to heterosexual females to assert that they are gay boys/men. This places those females in danger by convincing them that their perception of themselves as male is shared by society and encouraging them to enter male spaces where they may be targeted based on their female sex regardless of how they see themselves. To promote this idea is a dereliction of safeguarding and makes a mockery of the intention of learning outcome 2.6 to:

**'Explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available'**

Women and girls are victims of sex-based violence not because they identify as women and girls but because they ARE women and girls. The curriculum elevates 'identity' above physical reality. When taken to its conclusion, the positive and important learning opportunities available in learning outcome 2.6 are lost because accepting gender identity theory implies that to avoid sexual violence females could simply 'identify out' of their sex because as stated in the glossary gender is 'socially constructed.' This is illogical, dangerous, and intellectually dishonest.

Learning outcome 2.9 aims to:

**'Explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices.'**

How can safe sex be advocated for if students are told that 'identity' and not the physical body has primacy? How can teachers uphold their professional duty to 'take all reasonable steps in relation to the care of pupils/students under their supervision, so as to ensure their safety and welfare' (Section 3.1 of the Teaching Council's Code of Conduct) while also teaching that sex is on a spectrum as opposed to binary and immutable? Such a claim has profound implications for the coherent teaching of safe sex and the avoidance of unplanned pregnancy. What measure of protection from pregnancy does being trans identifying afford a female student? Is a trans identified boy unable to impregnate a female partner depending on where he locates himself on the 'sex spectrum'? The incoherence is obvious once critically evaluated.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to;

- 3.1 explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
- 3.2 demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
- 3.3 explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
- 3.4 summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
- 3.5 consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
- 3.6 demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18-year-olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

Insert response here:

Strand 3 learning outcome 3.6 contains elements that are deeply alarming in tone and uses terms that require an urgent response from the NCCA as to their intent. The tone of this strand promotes the teacher as a conduit to political activism. The role of the teacher is to educate not proselytise or politicise students. There are complex issues addressed in this strand however they are not addressed in a serious manner. **It appears that it is more important that students are taught to show solidarity than to understand highly complex issues.**

## IF A STUDENT IS NOT AN 'ALLY,' ARE THEY AN ENEMY?

Allyship is defined in the draft specification glossary as:

'Refer[ing] to the actions, behaviours, and practices used to support, advocate, and collaborate with others, in support of justice and equity. **Allyship** involves recognising and using one's privileged status (for example as white or male or Irish person) to support individuals from minority identity groups understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.'

Allyship is a neologism that is not used widely or understood beyond academic and activist spheres. The word is ideological and its use in this context is cynical. Allyship is not friendship. On the surface the word appears to promote solidarity, but this is not its intention. Allyship destroys harmony within groups by demanding that the individual commits themselves to an idea and to the collective. It destroys collaboration.

Allyship requires the breaking of bonds between students so that they are in service to an idea (allyship) not in service to one another. In breaking these human bonds, the individual can be convinced that their duty is to an idea even when that idea undermines their own self-interest or the welfare of others e.g., girls are encouraged to share bathrooms with males or include males in their sports to demonstrate their allyship with those who identify as trans.

Allyship does not promote tolerance; quite the opposite, it encourages a profound intolerance of dissident voices. The 'best' practitioners of allyship will be those who believe it is their ethical duty to bully and harass those who do not share 'approved' views. Allyship replaces concepts of tolerance with the endless search for opportunities to be personally offended or offended on behalf of someone else.

How are those who are not 'allies' going to be defined? As enemies? Neutrality on any issue will not be an option. Those who practice allyship lay claim to a sort of enlightenment that is exceptional. Those who are 'unenlightened,' neutral, or disagree can be dismissed, ignored, or punished. The term allyship is intrinsically linked to 'critical theories' including 'anti-racism' which paradoxically seeks to address racism via racism. Anti-racism is not the same as not being racist. Allyship is a one-dimensional and shallow means of addressing complex problems. It offers no historical perspective or context and fails to analyse the effect of sex, class, or income on inequality. It relies on facile simplifications and reduces complex individuals to their immutable characteristics.

How 'privileged' is a white, male, Irish 16-year-old student living in Cabra West or Priorswood in Dublin (both described on the Pobal index of deprivation as 'extremely disadvantaged') when compared to a black, female, and Irish 16-year-old student living in Malahide East or Rathmines West (both described on the Pobal index of deprivation as 'very affluent'). Asking teenagers to recognise their 'white privilege' does nothing to materially change the circumstances of the poor and marginalised. There is no single solution to the problem of racism and we need to hear from various perspective to find the best way to deal with it.

We do not assert that the NCCA is teaching pure ‘critical race theory’ as theorised by Derrick Bell or Kimberlé Crenshaw however we are concerned that a watered down but no less corrosive version of this theory is being introduced into the curriculum. This is manifest in the call to recognise the privileged position occupied by white Irish males and the promotion of transformative social and emotional learning. This submission will address transformative social and emotional learning in due course. If the curriculum were serious about addressing racism it would encourage the exploration of differing views including those who disagree with ‘critical race theory’ such as American academics Glenn Loury, John McWhorter and Erec Smith.

In line with the approach taken by Dr Martin Luther King students should be encouraged to judge people on the content of their character rather than the colour of their skin. This is a sensible approach shared by most reasonable people, save for a handful of far-right and far-left activists and academics.

That is not to suggest that the concept of race doesn’t exist. Race is a concept designed to legitimise injustice. The question is how will teaching ‘allyship’ and power and oppression narratives stop these injustices? How does encouraging students to fixate on their ‘privilege’ and, more destructively, on the ‘privilege’ of others promote inclusion? Ultimately it is self-sabotaging.

The black Irish author and academic Emma Dabiri illustrates the limitation of discussing race in a vacuum. She said:

‘I say you might not experience racism as a white person but that doesn’t mean that your life isn’t sh\*\*, that you don’t experience other forms of oppression and inequality and have your life opportunities diminished in certain ways. We can start to see this and see the struggles as interlinked – for example in America in the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Irish indentured labours and the enslaved Africans were fighting the landlord classes but once [the concept of] race was introduced it stopped these solidarities from occurring.’

In a recent presentation to Equiano Project<sup>vii</sup> conference, author Ayishat Akanbi commented that:

‘.. the dangers of hyper focusing on racism have been acknowledged by social justice activists like Bell Hooks and Toni Morrison. In his collection of sermons “Strength to Love” first published in 1963 Dr Martin Luther King declared “we have foolishly minimised the internal of our lives and maximised the external” [...] the very best way of ensuring that views are heard is to highlight [that] the small print baked into [anti-racism] messages in its current iteration is disempowering, condescending, and infantilising. A movement that has gained speed because not enough people recognise the resemblance between the racist ideas that justified the worst historical racial violence and the messaging promoted by modern anti-racists. Both think of themselves as safer amongst their own, both believe it’s a struggle to relate to creative works from people who don’t look like them and ultimately both believe that black people’s salvation comes from somewhere outside of themselves. What a low estimation of such a broad complex and distinct set of individuals and this is precisely how anti-racism in trying to fight for the humanity of black people ends up denying it by making it harder for them to express themselves without being vilified.’

performance of virtue and reflect whether promoting ‘allyship’ will improve or undermine students’ ability to recognise their common humanity.

‘The assumption of good faith is dead. What matters is not goodness but the appearance of goodness. We are no longer human beings. We are now angels jostling to out-angel one another. God help us. It is obscene.’

### Equality or equity?

The word ‘equity’ is referred to in learning outcome 3.6. It is used four times in the full document, ‘equality’ is used twice, and ‘inequality’ is used once. These terms are not defined in the glossary. It is essential that they are defined.

Equity is not equality. Students may believe they are the same, but they are not. And given the ideological tenor of the draft specification it is reasonable to assume that ‘equity’ is used in a way that would be understood as promoting ‘critical social justice’ as opposed to ‘social justice.’ The document refers to ‘social justice’ twice but again fails to define it.

### Social justice or critical social justice?

The term social justice was coined by Sicilian Jesuit scholar Luigi Taparelli d’Azeglio in the mid 1800’s. While the term is Catholic in origin, it was adopted by various secular movements related to human rights, climate change, anti-war efforts, racial and gender equality, and economic justice. There are conceptions of social justice that are conservative or liberal or socialist. All are equally entitled to call themselves ‘social justice.’ This is not the same as the specific set of doctrines of Critical Social Justice (CSJ), which is profoundly cynical and dehumanising. Proponents of CSJ would have students believe that there is no such thing as goodness in the world; that the default setting of all human beings is a malevolence that can never be undone. It must be relentlessly exposed and punished in service of a moral vision that is based on the belief that we live in a society made entirely of bigotry. CSJ relies on a fallacy of composition – that all people are stereotypes. It denies that individuals are complex, have agency, or can exercise free will.

One of the ‘guiding principles’ of the Senior Cycle curriculum is that students should ‘experience challenging... high quality education with opportunities for new and deep learning and for critical, creative and innovative thinking.’ CSJ offers the exact opposite of deep learning and critical thinking. Rather than promoting a world view that seeks out grievances, Senior Cycle students would be better served by being taught how to think critically and recognise that adaptability and resilience are the key to empowerment not seeking offence or obstructing free speech under the pretence that words cause ‘harm.’ Dr Erec Smith: Associate Professor of Rhetoric, York College and Co-Founder of Free Black Thought says that:

‘When the word harm is used in reference to ideas or words it taints civil society and what keeps us civil.’

Words can hurt feelings, but speech is quite literally the opposite of violence. Surely the goal of an education system that claims to prepare young people for the adult world must be to prepare them to defend their views with reason and rhetoric not with censorship or the imposition of a punitive morality that relentlessly seeks thought offenders to punish. It is misguided to limit the expression of ideas, including bad ideas, and replace truth with dogma. Adherence to dogma limits the individuals’ ability to develop the intellectual resilience needed to defend their views. How can students be engaged to change the world if the truth of it is obscured?

### QUESTION 3: ANY FURTHER SUGGESTIONS

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

Insert response here:

#### Social and Emotional Skills/Social and Emotional Learning

The glossary refers to students developing social and emotional skills (SEL) as set out in the CASEL Social and Emotional Skills Framework. SEL is not defined or explained. CASEL stands for Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning. CASEL.org produces and markets proprietary SEL resources and is described on its website as a:

‘US based nonprofit, nonpartisan leader in SEL, we are uniquely positioned to evaluate programming, curate research, inform legislation, and partner on implementation.’

The Freedonia Group, a business market research company, states that the estimated sales of social-emotional learning (SEL) instructional materials were \$1.725 billion for the 2021–022 school year; representing an increase of 25.9% over the previous year and that the market will continue to grow.

#### Which version of SEL does the NCCA propose to promote to Irish schools?

Researcher Max Eden addressed the US Senate on Appropriations<sup>viii</sup> (the US version of the Public Accounts Committee) in April 2022 and stated that CASEL redefined SEL as ‘Transformative SEL’ in 2020.

In 2019 the ‘competencies’ SEL taught were ‘self-awareness’ and ‘self-management’. The new 2020 version of ‘Transformative SEL’ encompasses,

1. ‘Identity’ with identity defined now through the lens of ‘intersectionality.’
2. ‘Self-management’ encompasses ‘agency’ with ‘agency’ defined through ‘resistance’ and ‘transformative/justice-oriented’ citizenship

### 3. 'Transformative SEL' also embraces 'culturally relevant/responsive' pedagogy.

Mr Eden commented that:

'Whether or not one chooses to call the set of related ideological impulses that CASEL has embraced "Critical Race Theory," they are clearly not morally or politically neutral. Indeed, CASEL's public documents and leadership statements suggest an open embrace of leveraging social and emotional learning toward political and ideological ends. In its "Roadmap to Re-Opening," CASEL defines "self-awareness" as "examining our implicit biases," and defines "self-management" as "practicing anti-racism." CASEL's former CEO, Karen Niemi, declared "we believe that our work in Social and Emotional Learning must actively contribute to anti racism," and that SEL can "help people move from anger, to agency, and then to action.'" [emphasis added]

We are deeply alarmed that the revised SPHE curriculum may leverage SEL to deliver political or ideological goals.

In the United States CASEL is delivered via school surveys. These surveys ask students invasive questions about their 'mood, their beliefs, their family and even their sexuality.' We have specific concerns about the information gathered by SEL processes. Specifically,

- What rights will parents have to refuse permission for their children to engage in such data mining exercises?
- Will schools be instructed to ensure all students require parental permission to opt in or will a de facto opt out system be introduced?
- Who will own the data gathered and how will it be used or monetised?

SEL demands that teachers seek out 'trauma' and become therapist/social worker/chaplain<sup>ix</sup> with a keen interest in the students' beliefs, attitudes, and values. And when those beliefs, attitudes, and values do not match those prescribed by the SEL resources as 'correct' what will teachers do?

#### Toolkits

The draft curriculum directs teachers to the SPHE online toolkit. The current toolkit continues to centre the deeply ideological University of Limerick/TENI<sup>x</sup> resources, among others. The contents of the UL/TENI toolkit contradict elements of the draft SC SPHE curriculum, in particular definitions included in the glossary. This must be addressed otherwise the UL/TENI resource undermines coherent teaching and delivery of the curriculum and undermines child safeguarding. The toolkit must be made available for inspection before the final curriculum is implemented.

## Assessment

The specification states:

**'Detailed guidance on assessment and reporting in Senior Cycle SPHE (including sample assessment tasks) will be developed upon finalisation of this specification and published at Senior Cycle (curriculumonline.ie)'**

It is imperative that any guidance on assessment including sample assessment tasks is made available for public inspection and feedback prior to implementation.

## Praxis – Engaging Students In Political Activism

The word 'praxis' is defined on pg. 10 of the draft SPHE specification as an 'ongoing process of critical reflection and action, nurtured by dialogue with others.' The idea of praxis has been discussed by philosophers including Aristotle, Sarte, Marx, and Arendt. The overall tenor of the draft SPHE senior cycle curriculum suggests that the NCCA has adopted a version of praxis that relies upon awakening in some students a sense of personal oppression. This is essentially the raising of an individual's 'critical/political consciousness' – identifying how one is oppressed in relation to others.

While there are positive aspects in making students aware of social inequalities, the draft SPHE document points to an adoption of a radical version of praxis that does not simply encourage reflection but requires 'action.' The NCCA has not detailed what this 'action' might entail and therefore leaves 'action' open to the personal interpretation of individual teachers and resources providers, including third party facilitators and educational textbook publishers.

**It is not the responsibility, obligation, or right of any teaching professional to educate students into activism. The NCCA must clarify what it means by using the word 'praxis' in the context of the curriculum and what 'action' it is referring to. Teachers are not cheerleaders for political fads.**

## GLOSSARY – ERRORS AND OMISSIONS

**Consent** – The definition of consent refers to sexual consent among other contexts. How are students to understand what sexual consent is if sex is not defined in the curriculum and when gender and sex are conflated? The Junior Cycle SPHE revised curriculum includes in its definition of gender the following important proviso which must be included in the SC curriculum.

**It is important to distinguish gender from 'sex' which refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that are defined as being male and female. (Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum definition)**

**Sex** – The draft specification fails to define sex. This must be rectified.

**Gender** – The definition of gender is confusing and again fails to differentiate gender from sex. In the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum the distinction is made as noted in our comment on consent. The definition states that 'understanding of gender differs across contexts and over time.' If gender is expanded to include biological sex this statement is untrue. The concept of sex does not change over time because sex is not a concept. It is an empirically observed fact of life.

**Gender Identity** – This belief is presented as a fact. It is more accurate to say that 'some people believe they have a gender identity' and then define what a gender identity is.

**LGBTQI+** – Strand 2 of the draft specification refers to LGBTQ+. The glossary refers to LGBTQI+. Why are different acronyms used? What does the 'I' refer to? Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people experience same-sex attraction not same-gender attraction. The NCCA describes 'gender' as 'socially constructed.' The LGB needs to be decoupled from the TQ+ in this definition to avoid the homophobic suggestion that being gay is a social construct that can be deconstructed or undone. What is trans? What is Queer? What is +?

## CONCLUSION

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 Senior Cycle SPHE. However, we have specific concerns which can be summarised as follows;

2. The specification uses language that indicates a commitment to disputed 'affirmative' model of care for gender-dysphoric people.
3. Strand 2 addresses relationships and sexuality. It is accompanied by a specific instruction that centres LGBTQ+ experiences. By giving this instruction the NCCA has elevated this group above all others. There is no instruction to fully integrate and reflect the experiences of the disabled, different ethnic groups, heterosexuals, or people of faith.
4. The draft specification fails to offer coherent and high-quality education with opportunities for new and deep learning and for critical, creative, and innovative thinking.

5. The draft specification fails to be inclusive of every student. It does not celebrate, value, or respect diversity of thought, opinion, or belief.
6. Allyship requires the breaking of bonds between students so that they are in service to an idea (allyship) not in service to one another. The individual can be convinced that their duty is to an idea even when that idea undermines their own self-interest or the welfare of others e.g., girls are encouraged to share bathrooms with males or include males in their sports to demonstrate their allyship with those who identify as trans. Allyship does not promote tolerance; quite the opposite, it encourages a profound intolerance of dissident voices. The 'best' practitioners of allyship will be those who believe it is their ethical duty to bully and harass those who do not share 'approved' views. Allyship replaces concepts of tolerance with the endless search for opportunities to be personally offended or offended on behalf of someone else.
7. Equity is not equality. Critical Social Justice is not Social Justice. Given the ideological tenor of the draft specification it is reasonable to assume that 'equity' is used in a way that would be understood as promoting 'critical social justice' as opposed to 'social justice.'
8. The current toolkit continues to centre the deeply ideological University of Limerick/TENI resources among others. The contents of the UL/TENI toolkit contradict elements of the draft SC SPHE curriculum, in particular definitions included in the glossary. This must be addressed otherwise the UL/TENI resource undermines coherent teaching and delivery of the curriculum and undermines child safeguarding.
9. The introduction of CASEL into any level of the Irish education system is cause for serious concern. The NCCA must address
  - CASEL's claims to 'evidence-based' practice;
  - how data required to implement TSEL (transformative SEL) will be collected, retained, or monetised;
  - the safety and legality of unlicenced teachers practicing 'therapy' in the classroom;
  - the financial costs of implementing SEL; and
  - the potential for SEL to be introduced into primary education if SEL is introduced into secondary schools.
10. We are deeply alarmed that the revised SPHE curriculum may leverage SEL to deliver political or ideological goals.
  - I. [cass.independent-review.uk/publications/interim-report](https://cass.independent-review.uk/publications/interim-report)
  - II. [genspect.org/gender-ideology-and-the-breakdown-of-the-chain-of-trust-in-irish-education-part-1](https://genspect.org/gender-ideology-and-the-breakdown-of-the-chain-of-trust-in-irish-education-part-1)
  - III. [researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/f028b522-c3ed-4e3a-8ffe-e1578443f885/details](https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/f028b522-c3ed-4e3a-8ffe-e1578443f885/details)
  - IV. [researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/f028b522-c3ed-4e3a-8ffe-e1578443f885/details](https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/entities/publication/f028b522-c3ed-4e3a-8ffe-e1578443f885/details)
  - V. [statsforgender.org/desistance](https://statsforgender.org/desistance)
  - VI. Robin Ion et al., *Nurse Education in Practice*, [doi.org/10.1016/j.nep.2023.103788](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nep.2023.103788)
  - VII. [youtube.com/watch?v=7a5Md4FMkmc](https://youtube.com/watch?v=7a5Md4FMkmc)
  - VIII. [docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP07/20220406/114597/HHRG-117-AP07-Wstate-EdenM-20220406.pdf](https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP07/20220406/114597/HHRG-117-AP07-Wstate-EdenM-20220406.pdf)
  - IX. Robert Pondiscio. American Enterprise Institute. The Unexamined Rise of Therapeutic Education: How Social-emotional Learning Extends K–12 Education's Reach into Students' Lives and Expands Teachers' Roles.
  - X. [ul.ie/gender-identity-school-resources](https://ul.ie/gender-identity-school-resources)



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

## Teachers' Union of Ireland

# Teachers' Union of Ireland

The TUI represents teachers and lecturers (20,000+) employed by Education and Training Boards (ETBs), voluntary secondary schools, Community and Comprehensive (C&C) schools and the institutes of technology and technological universities.

The TUI would like to thank the NCCA for this opportunity to make a submission on the draft specification for Senior Cycle SPHE.

## **Background**

Ireland has an internationally acknowledged, high-performing education system and a respected teaching profession (Teaching Council, 2010; OECD, 2013; DES, 2018a; OECD, 2015a; NAPD, 2016; Comhairle na nÓg, 2017; Growing Up in Ireland, 2017; IPSOS MRBI Trust in the Professions Survey, 2017; Boyle, 2017; Boyle, 2019; Scanlon & McKenna, 2018; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; Kantar Millward Brown, 2018; EU Commission, 2018; EU Commission, 2019a; EU Commission, 2019b; Social Progress Initiative, 2018; United Nations Development Programme, 2018, Irish Survey of Student Engagement, 2018; HEA, 2019; Coolahan, 2017; Eivers, 2019; CSO, 2019a; McKeown et al., 2019; CSO, 2020b; OECD, 2020a; Eurofound, 2020; McNamara et al., 2020; Clerkin and Perkins, 2020; Clark & Kavanagh, 2021; OECD, 2021a; CSO, 2021; EU Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2021; Indecon, 2020; Purdy et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; DE, 2021b; Smyth et al., 2022; Gabriel et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2022; Delaney et al., 2022; Clark et al., 2023).

That is despite Ireland spending relatively little on education (OECD, 2015b; SJI, 2018, NERI, 2018, OECD, 2019a; UNDP, 2019; OECD, 2021a; Kovacic et al., 2021; CSO, 2022a; Clark et al., 2022; OECD, 2023) and experiencing historic underinvestment (DES, 2018b). QQI (2023) also acknowledged a need for significant capital investment, especially in FE buildings in the ETB sector. The CSO (2022a) has stated that real expenditure per student in post-primary fell 5.8% between 2008 and 2018, and real expenditure per student in higher education fell 35%. Ireland also has the 8<sup>th</sup> largest class sizes in upper secondary in all of the EU/EFTA and EU candidate countries. In higher education, Ireland has extraordinarily large class sizes by international comparison i.e 23:1 compared to 15:1 (OECD, 2021a). Despite this, citizen satisfaction with the education system in Ireland is the highest of any of 22 European countries studied by Boyle (2018) whilst parent satisfaction with the Irish education system was the second highest out of fifty-six countries in Clerkin et al. (2020). Boyle (2021) found a high level of citizenship satisfaction with the education system in Ireland as well as Ireland being fourth in Europe in its ability to meet the needs of a competitive economy and also a greater ability by students in Ireland than the European average to deal with unusual situations and to overcome difficulties. Boyle et al. (2022) made broadly similar findings.

It is also worthwhile noting that 2019 data (OECD, 2019b) shows that both citizen satisfaction with the education system, and the economic return to the taxpayer of investment in education, are both extraordinarily high in Ireland compared to international norms (see also Smyth et al., 2022). An Ipsos MRBI survey in 2019 found extraordinarily high levels of public trust in teachers, much higher than for journalists, Gardai, civil servants, politicians, business leaders, social media influencers, bankers or even the “ordinary person in the street” (Irish Times January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019). ESRI (2020) found very high levels of trust of young people in the Irish education system.

Ireland has a very young population (Eurostat, 2015; Government of Ireland, 2019; DCYA, 2020). In 2008, we had the second highest proportion of 10–14-year-olds in the European Union (CSO, 2009). The high birth rate in Ireland (CSO, 2017; Eurostat, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2019) and rate of natural increase (CSO, 2022c; CSO, 2022d) indicates that the population of young people is likely to remain high for the foreseeable future. The DE (2021a) has estimated that the student population in post-primary will rise by approximately seven thousand students per year until reaching a peak enrolment of c.408k in 2024/25. Student numbers in higher education are also projected to rise substantially (DES, 2018d). In this context, it is not sufficient to suggest that a world-class child-centred society can be achieved with inadequate resources of time or personnel. Population growth generally is very significant and this has implications for the entire lifelong learning agenda. CSO data has shown that the overall population rose 97,600 in the year to April 2023, and one-fifth of the rise was natural increase (Irish Times, September 26<sup>th</sup> 2023). In terms of overall expenditure on education, Ireland and Greece were the only EU member states in 2015 to spend significantly less than the UN SDG 4 minimum of 4% of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2022). The DES (2018b) has itself acknowledged “historic underinvestment”.

The resilient economy (ESRI, 2021; EU Commission, 2021; OECD, 2021b; IBEC, 2021; Central Bank, 2022; IMF, 2021; CSO, 2022b; ESRI, 2022a; ESRI, 2022b; CSO, 2023a; IBEC, 2023; Central Bank, 2023), and healthy Government finances (CSO, 2023b) means that Government is in a good position to make a meaningful contribution to continue supporting students with additional needs or from under-represented target groups and/or migrant and refugee communities.

#### **View of the TUI**

The TUI welcomes the draft specification. The context in which Irish education operates has changed significantly in the last twenty years and a new specification is timely. However, it is important to make a number of key points in relation to the review.

The TUI agrees with the thrust of the specification. However, it is important to emphasise from the start that the support of the TUI for the draft specification is contingent on commitments being given by the relevant Government departments and agencies for teachers to be provided with resources such as CPD, appropriate class sizes and factual classroom materials to enable the successful implementation of the draft specification.

Schools have a clear responsibility for delivering the SPHE 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 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 SPHE programme to be constrained by what may or may not have been the case in years gone by. They have had to take into consideration developments in the intervening period. Therefore, they routinely address matters such as bullying, alcohol use and misuse, drug misuse, marriage equality, LGBTQ+ issues, consent, contraception, safe use of social media etc. Indeed, not only are these matters addressed through SPHE but are also often captured as part of other subjects such as Religious Education, Politics and Society, Computer Science and are also expected be included in forthcoming revised subject specifications for Leaving Certificate Applied.

Schools need to be able to decide which teachers are best suited to teaching sensitive matters such as SPHE and the RSE component in particular can often raise sensitive matters. 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. Teachers who are interested in teaching this important curricular area, and who are properly trained in doing so, are the ones best placed to ensure best practice. CPD is vital. It must be high-quality, ongoing, and accessible to all, not just those who can commit to post-grad studies. The delivery should be much more frequent than was previously the case.

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 need for access to RSE for all students is highlighted by the findings of Nolan & Smyth (2020) i.e.:

- At age 13, 55 per cent of young people reported that they had received relationships and sexuality education (RSE) at school, and this proportion had increased to 92 per cent by age 17. At both ages, females were more likely to have received RSE than males, and those who were in later stages of education were more likely to have received RSE. There was significant variation in RSE receipt across individual second-level schools.
- At age 13, 45 per cent of young people reported that they had discussed sex and relationship issues with their parents. By age 17, this proportion had increased to just under 60 per cent. Better-quality relationships with parents were associated with a higher probability of reporting these discussions.
- A significant minority of 13-year-olds – a third of males and a quarter of females – reported no RSE or parental discussions about sex. This group was predominantly from disadvantaged social backgrounds. At age 17, while the proportion reporting no RSE or parental discussions was less than 5 per cent, young males were more likely to belong to this group.
- There was a clear gender divide in reports of ease of discussions with parents about sex; young women found it easier to talk to their mothers, while young men found it easier to talk to their fathers. However, nearly 60 per cent of young men reported finding it difficult or very difficult to talk to their fathers about sex.
- Similar patterns were evident in parents' reports of whether they had discussed five key issues with their child: sex and sexual intercourse; sexual feelings; contraception; safer sex; and sexual orientation. Less than 50 per cent of fathers had discussed each of these issues with their son or daughter by age 17, and rural fathers were significantly less likely to discuss these issues with their children than urban fathers.
- At age 17, 33 per cent of young people reported having had sexual intercourse.
- Nearly 90 per cent of young people who have had sexual intercourse reported using contraception when first having sex. Nearly a quarter of young people expressed regret over the timing of first sex, and this proportion was substantially higher among young women (31 per cent, almost all of whom wished they had waited longer) than young men (16 per cent, most of whom wished they had waited longer).
- The source of information was significant, with those sourcing most of their information on sex from their friends significantly less likely to report having used contraception when they first had sexual intercourse.
- For those that are sexually active, just under 80 per cent reported 'always' using contraception, and 56 per cent reported using a condom 'all the time'. There was little variation in these proportions by individual, school or peer group characteristics.

The TUI is aware of reports that some materials and/or speakers being used to support the delivery of SPHE 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 SPHE 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. This has already been provided for Junior Cycle SPHE and a similar and larger list of 'approved' materials would not only reduce teacher workload but also provide protection to teachers in using recommended, scientifically based, resources.

The issue of cyber-security has received significant attention in recent years. Matters such as the risks associated with sexting for example are clearly part of good quality RSE. 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. However, the TUI would like to remind the DoE 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 speaking to strangers online (RTE News February 5<sup>th</sup> 2019). Materials must include teacher notes and lesson plans. In the past materials for Senior Cycle (e.g. Physical Activity & Nutrition module) were merely HSE leaflets on food, sleep etc with no notes on how to facilitate the discussion, what to avoid, how to negotiate the topics of eating disorders etc. Current JC materials are very good, but there appears to be none for 2nd or 3rd year for the 2016 spec (delayed through Covid, now possibly abandoned). At other times SPHE topics have been shunted in to the packed curriculum through 10-16 week programmes such as "Lockers", "B4U Decide" etc. The teacher must then decide where to fit these lessons, whether to complete the programme or select particular lessons, what to drop from the specification to allow time for these programmes etc.

A more cohesive approach to resources needed.

## **Conclusion**

The TUI would like again to thank the NCCA for this opportunity to make a submission. The draft specification is welcomed by the TUI, subject to the necessary resources being provided to schools. Schools have an important role to play in the area of SPHE but responsibilities also fall to parents, communities and the DoE. The great educational theorist Larry Cuban once said that “when society gets an itch schools get scratched”. Schools have responsibilities but so too does society. Schools are neither the cause of all societal problems nor the solution to all of society’s ills.

## **Ends**

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**NCCA**

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# Contributor

## Ubuntu Network

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

#### Insert response here:

- Overall, we feel that this is a broad and inclusive aim for the SPHE specification. It is in keeping with NCCA and DoE move to reflect key competences rather than key skills.
- We are concerned with the use of the term 'young adults' in the aim. The learning from this programme will contribute to their wellbeing as adolescents in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year of post-primary education, as well as in adulthood. This should be clear and celebrated. We must acknowledge that the learning associated with SPHE is a life long endeavour. The programme will contribute to that journey, but they will continue to learn through adulthood as a lifelong endeavour.

*Suggestion: Change 'young adults' to 'people'.*

- We feel that links to the environment are missing here. Wellbeing of the person is inextricably linked to one's sense of place. Connecting with nature can contribute immensely to wellbeing. The importance of respecting and preserving the environment is fundamental to the wellbeing of all people now and in the future.

*Suggestion: Change 'nurture respectful and caring relationships' to 'nurture respectful and caring relationships with people and planet';*

- We feel criticality is missing in the aim. Students must develop the capacity to be critical thinkers in their engagement with challenging, controversial and sensitive issues. They must adopt a problem-solving attitude to support their wellbeing and the wellbeing of others and the planet. They must also be open to listening to and appreciating the diverse perspectives of their peers, teachers, media and other information outlets. They must be critical consumers of information.

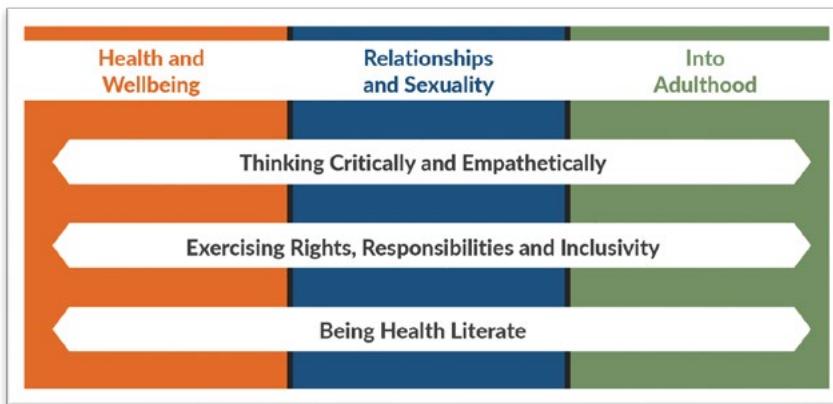
*Suggestion: Change 'healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic' to 'healthy, resilient, responsible, critical and empathetic'*

- In line with our commitments to integration Education for Sustainable Development into curriculum, it is important to acknowledge that the world is challenging, ever changing and unequal. This links to the Irish Aid (Department of Foreign Affairs) strategy on Global Citizenship Education and the Department of Education/Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development.

*Suggestion: Add 'in a challenging, ever changing and unequal world'*

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

- Linking to our response to Question 1, this should include a link to the environment and nature.

*Recommendation: In 1.1 explain determinants e.g. good diet, exercise, connecting with nature, maintaining positive relationships with people*

- Recommend that a LO be dedicated to understanding the self/self-reflection.

This would include building skills to understand the self, reflect on own values, our world views, our personal identity and what makes that up, reflecting on what we think/why... the things that influence our world views (religion, tradition, family, social norms, life experiences). It might include managing expectations of the self, care of the self – what that looks like, how to achieve, how to manage feelings/emotions, how to build resilience in a hectic/threatening/pressurising world, understanding real world issues (and global development issues). This is important for all strands – linking to mental health, sexuality, dealing with difficult things in life (whether it be bereavement, housing crisis, climate change). To understand the self provides a solid basis for understanding how we are in relationship and with the world in general.

*Recommendation: Include LO dedicated to: Explore their personal attitudes, beliefs, values, worldview and identity to better understand their view of the world.*

- We note that Learning Outcomes 1.3 and 1.4 reflect complex and contested concepts (e.g. social norms and attitudes, media, technology, sense of self) that are open to interpretation, rooted in diverse belief and value systems, and challenging to address in a classroom setting. We recommend that these learning outcomes be explored more generally from the perspective of 'developing positive relationships with the world', and avoiding/dealing with negative relationships, and that this can then lead into an exploration of relationships with alcohol, drugs, people. Perhaps this precursor could be integrated into 1.2.

*Suggestion: Change 1.2 to read "discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance and building positive relationships - including study, work, play, sleep, people, nature, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance"*

*Suggestion: In relation to these LOs, we advocate that teachers are provided with appropriate professional support (through Oide, recognised experts) to construct and implement units of learning and lesson plans for constructive execution.*

- Omission – the programme does not address the learner's relationship with schooling, particularly their relationships with teachers and subjects. These can effect wellbeing. How they relate to the rest of curriculum. How you are getting on with education? How you relate to school/subject?

## **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

- In line with our second suggestion in strand 1 (in relation to personal attitudes, beliefs, values, worldview and identity),

*Suggestion: change LO2.2 to read – Reflect on the factors that influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour.*

- We feel that this section should support the learner to think beyond the self, with a view to developing empathy and solidarity with other people. This broadens the scope to the wider world e.g. local, national, global contexts. Our rationale for this is that the individual cannot exist without the wider community and world. This unit should explore them as a part of society, their role in care for other people and stewardship of the environment. This can support the development of empathy and a sense of responsibility towards others that links to Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development. This might include the importance of social enterprise, volunteer work and advocacy for those in disadvantage or marginalised.

*Suggestion: Include LO – explore relationship with other cultures, nationalities, marginalised, generations*

- As with learning outcomes in strand 1, we acknowledge the complexity of addressing 2.4, 2.6 and 2.7. We would argue that we do not have a shared understanding of these issues. There will be variation in our students/teachers/others perceive them. How will teachers address them in a balanced manner? What moral/political/cultural/religious ideologies influence dominant narratives? How might school ethos/patronage/school context influence/restrict how these LOs are addressed? How might media influence views or common narrative on these issues? How do we navigate Western perspectives/lenses applied to cultural practice? How do these issues relate to basic human rights, the Sustainable Development Goals?

*Suggestion: A considered plan of support for teachers delivering SPHE, including Oide, recognised experts, researchers in these areas.*

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### **Insert response here:**

- As with question 1, we feel that the title is problematic. It suggests that these skills are not important for adolescent children. They are valuable throughout life.

*Recommendation: Change title to 'Programme for living' or an alternative that does not distinguish adulthood.*

- Omission – We feel that this section can enable the learner to consider local and global development issues (e.g. homelessness, climate change) and our response to them. This might be framed using the Sustainable Development Goals.

*Recommendation: Include LO – 'Consider local and global challenges of our time and how to respond to them as agents of change'.*

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

Generally, this needs to move beyond the self, to position the self in the wider community and the global context. It needs to align with Education for Sustainable Development, our national commitment to the SDGs, and developing critical thinking skills relating to our action/inaction to societal/environmental challenges of our time.

Start with an exploration of the self (as suggested in strand 1). Build this to explore relationship with others (friends, marginalised, disadvantaged) and with the planet (environmental awareness). The importance a healthy society and planet cannot be overlooked when exploring SPHE. We feel that the learner should gain an understanding of their position in the world, why things are how they are, feel a sense of agency and responsibility and feel empowered to take action.

The strands of SPHE should be interconnected. Teachers moving across strands. The skills necessary to understand the self, and one's position in relation to social, personal and health issues and challenges are relevant across all aspects of the subject.

Teacher capacity is instrumental to the successful implementation of a specification such as this. It is important that teachers are supported to draw upon Oide, researchers, advisors and experts in niche areas to unpack such difficult and challenging concepts.

We would query if the specification should acknowledge ethos/patronage/school context in relation to the enactment of learning outcomes. We would argue that school ethos/patronage etc should not impact/restrict the delivery of curriculum.



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# Contributor

## Women's Aid

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

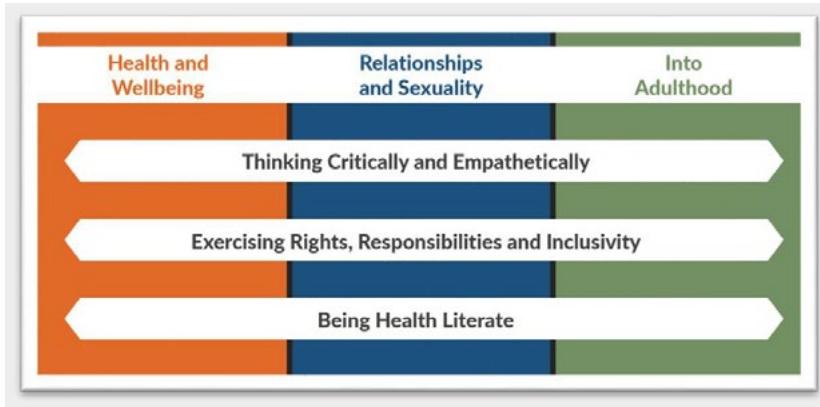
Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing.

**Insert response here:**

Women's Aid agrees with the aim above, but we would suggest changing the wording from "empower students to become" to "empower students to be" as current wording infers that students are not already empowered, especially as they will have already undertaken SPHE at Junior Cycle and this will be building on that.

### Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three crosscutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

#### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time,' and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol, and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

Women's Aid would like to make the following suggestions in relation to Strand 1:

- 1.2 add 'relationships' so that it reads:  
*discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, relationships, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance.*
- 1.4 include "partners" so that it reads:  
*explore the factors that influence mental health and well-being, including the influence of family, partners, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self*
- 1.10 reword to ensure it is clear that there is no victim blaming if things go wrong during social events and that it is not always possible for people to manage theirs or others safety
- include content on eating disorders in all competencies referring to mental health or as a stand-alone point
- 1.9 Women's Aid recommends updating this point to take strengths-based approach, including both positive and negative coping mechanisms. This will educate young people to identify what they are already doing well and can build on, as well as where they may need some support. It is important to include in the curriculum that negative coping mechanisms can be taken up to deal with the abuse in abuse relationships, and so it is important that no victim blaming framing or language is employed. Therefore, we suggest updating this point to:

*Equip young people with the tools to support their wellbeing, including positive coping mechanism, identifying negative coping mechanism, online critical awareness, etc., where to go and how to access support and help, if needed.*

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

### Insert response here:

Women's Aid would like to make the following suggestions/observations in relation to Strand 2:

- 2.2 there needs to be explicit reference to how sexist double standards and victim blaming negatively influence students' dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour.
- 2.3 Women's Aid welcomes the inclusion of consent as an essential component of sexual activity and suggest to also include 'equality' as a core principle, for example:  
*discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by equality, care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure.*  
Moreover, the negative impact of sexist double standards or victim blaming should be included here too.

- 2.4 Women's Aid warmly welcomes the discussion on harmful attitudes around gender, which should include addressing sexism and the importance of achieving gender equality. It is important to take a strengths-based approach to this topic— not only to highlight negative but also stress positive behaviours. It is also vital that this topic is discussed in all schools, including single sex school, particularly boys only schools. In single sex schools it is important to include a gender sensitive perspective to ensure that the discussions arising will be balanced and challenge beliefs which perpetuate inequalities.
- 2.5 Women's Aid strongly supports the inclusion of this competency, identifying signs of abusive relationships. We would like to ensure reference to learning about different 'forms/types' of abuse (i.e. naming emotional, physical, sexual, economic abuse and coercive control) are included and that students are supported to identify 'signs' more easily and as soon as possible. Therefore, we suggest rewording this point as follows:

*Identify and consider common forms of abuse including coercive control, and recognize early warning signs of abusive relationships.*

Note: It is also very important that resources for this topic are comprehensive and up to date. We note that the current Personal Safety resource pack is out of date and at times incorrect (for example it implies one needs to experience physical abuse to get a barring order, references the Domestic Violence Act 1996 which has been superseded by the 2018 Act, the case studies are all of older married people and not relevant to young relationships) Correct legislation should be noted in particular the Domestic Violence Act 2018 and the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020

Up to date and relevant resources on relationship abuse, specific to young people, need to be provided to teachers to be able to teach this competency.

Women's Aid would be happy to review and support the updating of resources. We also suggest including in the resource pack for teachers references and links to our Too Into You resources ([www.toointoyou.ie](http://www.toointoyou.ie)) and to Teenline ([www.teenline.ie](http://www.teenline.ie))

- In 2.6 Women's Aid believes that this piece should be connected to the wider context and look at gender-based violence in a global context as is done in the Introduction of Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy on DSGBV (Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence). This piece should also make explicit the links between gender inequality and Gender-Based Violence. As well as exploring the roots of gender-based violence, it would also be important to include information on the structures which uphold inequality, and specifically, gender inequality which allows domestic, sexual and gender-based violence to persist.
- In 2.7 Women's Aid warmly welcomes a focus on pornography and its negative impacts on young people and their development of healthy intimacy and sexual relationships. We note that the research is unequivocal that pornography brings no benefits to young people and does demonstrable harm, including to the individuals in the pornography trade itself. It is also very worryingly leading to an increase in sexual abuse and violence by minors (mostly boys) against minors (mostly girls). While it is important to facilitate young people to open up a useful conversation on pornography to allow students them to find out how severe its impacts can be through this process rather than just being 'told' that porn is harmful, we suggest replacing the current word 'investigate' with '**explore**' and call on the NCCA to ensure that all course materials are informed by a robust and 'porn-critical' lens. Drawing on excellent materials such as those provided as open source by [www.Culturereframed.org](http://www.Culturereframed.org) and resources from campaigns like [www.fightthenewdrug.com](http://www.fightthenewdrug.com) are recommended.

- In 2.8 Different **types** of sexual abuse, including image-based abuse, should be discussed here, including early warning signs /grooming. As in 2.5 there should be information included on what to do if students or someone, they know has experienced sexual violence. It is important to include information on specific supports, including hotline.ie (<https://www.hotline.ie>) in relation to getting support removing content posted because of image-based sexual abuse/intimate image abuse.
- In 2.9 This point should include a piece around sexual coercion, access to contraception and abortion and access to information on same. Information and links to IFPA/Positive Options should be included here.
- General Note on strand 2: it is vital that supporting information and resources related to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are linked up and up to date. Resources including information about relevant services should be made available. Relevant specialist services should be consulted in compiling accurate resources.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

Women's Aid would like to make the following suggestions/observations in relation to Strand 3:

- Re-word the overall aim of Strand 3 to ensure there is recognition that choices can be restricted and that it is not all on the students to look after themselves, but that they will be supported to do so, including by provision of resources. For example:

*This includes being able to manage choices (**recognising that there may be barriers and choices may be restricted**), develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge **by providing relevant resources, information and links to support as needed**, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.*

- Adding in an outcome that explicitly names that young people will '**Gain knowledge of resources and information available to access support for challenging situations and experiences**' should be considered.
- In 3.3 include the term 'harm', to read:  
*explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss, heartache or harm*
- In 3.6 The concept of 'allyship' should be defined as it can be interpreted many ways. Women's Aid recommends that when defining allyship that there is an explicit effort to use the concept to promote equality in an unequal society. It should be based on principles of solidarity, inter-dependence and mutual reinforcement. It will be important to highlight some individuals or groups may need allyship because of living in an unequal society and recognise that this need can fluctuate over time depending on contextual circumstance, environment, and resources available to them. It will be important to clarify that allyship should not be taken as a license to speak over an individual or group and should not be hierarchical but encourage peers to actively listen to one another and offer support depending on the views of a negatively impacted individual and/or group as they see fit.

In 3.6 The term 'equity' is not the same as 'equality'. Women's Aid recommends the use of the latter term here.

### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

#### Insert response here:

We would like to include here a few overarching considerations on the Specifications for all three strands. The SPHE Curriculum should ensure that it has an explicit intersectional equity lens. **All** strands should:

- There is a need to ensure reference to **structural contexts** are made explicit for the topics covered in this curriculum. DSGBV happens within the broader context of 'gender inequality' and is based on 'historic unequal power relations between men and women'. Therefore, this structural social context needs to be named for students to understand that a gender unequal society is the baseline for engaging with the topic of DSGBV. We note that this is the language used in the introduction to the 3<sup>rd</sup> National DSGBV strategy so it also can be easily applied here also for congruence.
- Ensure a gendered analysis of (in) equality is also explicitly woven through the entire curriculum, given that all children are born and socialised into a gender unequal (i.e.sexist) society. This impacts on all strands and not just Strand 2 whereby sexist behaviours, attitudes and stereotypes pervade many of the issues dealt with in strands 1 & 3 also.
- There is a need to ensure **greater precision** of language in the curriculum materials regarding *sex/gender, gender identity, and sexuality* as distinct and different terms., For example, the Glossary should include sex/gender, gender identity and sexuality as distinct terms. These different terms should also be referenced throughout the curriculum materials in appropriate points (e.g. 2.4, or where there may be reference to LGBTQ+) to ensure that there is not confusion between sex/gender (as a binary concept) and gender identity and/or sexuality. This curriculum should mirror the language used in the new *Anti Bullying Action Plan* for schools which refers to 'sexist' 'gender identity' and 'homophobic' bullying as distinct and different (though sometimes overlapping depending on an individual young persons experience). Responses and understanding must be nuanced, recognise and cater to distinct and different lived experiences.

- Promote awareness and understanding of structural inequality, and consequently barriers and enablers will be different for everyone. The curriculum should promote the understanding that structural inequality is a societal problem, and not the fault of an individual or group, and those who are ‘othered’ in society face increased barriers, while privilege of any kind (male privilege, white privilege, socio-economic privilege etc.) often acts as ‘enabler’, regardless of merit. Therefore, it is important that class-based activities and discussions use an equality framework, as this will demonstrate that challenges faced by individuals or groups in society are not the fault of the individual / groups but of the systems and structures which do not meet their needs, while benefitting others.
- Promote resilience by systematically including in all strands reference to supporting material and especially signposting to relevant supports that young people can access themselves (ideally) or be referred to.

### **Implementation**

- Women’s Aid strongly supports indications that these Specifications may become mandatory in guidance for schools for Transition Year.
- We believe all students and society as a whole would benefit from this curriculum being taught in all schools and to all students, with no opt outs.
- Additional consideration should be given to how effectively teach the curriculum in single sex schools – and particularly in all male schools and how it can be approached and delivered using creative pedagogies and in such a way as to avoid ‘defensiveness’ (especially to thread 2) and be genuinely supportive and empowering of male students, in terms of building healthy respectful, egalitarian relationships and friendships and really seeing/hearing/understanding how the experience of girls in the world can be very different to their own due to sexual and sexist stereotypes, reductive (and sometimes harmful) behaviors and attitudes.
- Consideration should be given to how this curriculum can be connected to Safeguarding of Students and Teachers, including ensuring supports will be provided for teachers/designated schools staff to recognize and respond to difficult issues that may be disclosed in school through supporting and empowering young people to share what is happening for them. An example may be ensuing a number of key staff receive training for disclosures of suicidal ideations (e.g. ASSIST training).
- The curriculum should connect with the values of the school, the teaching community and institutions, so that there is a cultural mindset shift at ‘whole school level’ not just in a single class/classroom. This should consciously be developed and nurtured in schools grow over time, with direction and support from the NCCA and Department of Education. Taking a ‘whole school’ approach would mean that the principles and objectives of SPHE does not fall to one individual or small group of individuals. Strategies to deliver success may include ‘SPHE Champions’ and representatives throughout the school including on the Board of Management, Parents Associations and Student Representative Groups.
- Consideration should be given, and clear commitments made to indicate how the SPHE curriculum will be evaluated and updated and how its consistent and universal delivery will be monitored.
- As already mentioned, Women’s Aid strongly believes that up to date, accessible, age, gender and culturally appropriate resources are key to the success of this curriculum. A clear system to system for collating, maintaining, reviewing and evaluating these resources needs to be put in place. Women’s Aid is available to support this process.



**NCCA**

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

# **Contributor**

## World Wise Global Schools

# World Wise Global Schools

## Questions to consider

### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to '*empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.*'

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

**Insert response here:**

World Wise Global Schools (WWGS) welcome the process of consultation.

We recognise this new updated curriculum as an addition to the holistic development of the young person and feel that the guiding principles of Senior Cycle are well represented throughout the Specification.

WWGS believe that the following points should be included and/or further expanded upon within the Aim and right across the SPHE specification:

- Reflecting the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, 2014,), WWGS advocate for a clear emphasis within the Aim on the **student as an active, connected and healthy citizen in the here and now** (Devine and Cockburn, 2018). While emphasising the preparation for future life, and 'Into Adulthood' (Strand 3, see below), WWGS point out the need to focus on the current and ongoing health and well-being of the student as they navigate their daily lives. This SPHE programme aims to contribute to the lifelong learning and wellbeing of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year students, young people as they are now, not yet 'young adults'.

Suggestion: Change to '*empower students to be healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young people in the here and now, as well as into their futures;*'

- Reflecting the Senior Cycle key competency of 'thinking and solving problems'; the SPHE element 'thinking critically and emphatically'; and the emphasis on criticality in Global Citizenship Education, we suggest including a reference to **critical thinking** within the Aim. Critical thinking is key for students to engage with the challenging, complex, and often emotive issues relating to the health and wellbeing of themselves, others and the planet. Taking a critical and analytical approach allows learners to unlearn and reconstruct taken for granted norms and discourses; to examine their own perspectives and biases, and those of others (including the media, peers, teachers etc) and how this interconnects with individual and collective health and well-being.

Suggestion: Insert '**critical**'; *healthy, resilient, responsible, empathetic and critical..*'.

- WWGS welcomes the reference to the nurturing of *caring relationships*, however we would like to see a greater emphasis on care and an **ethic of care** in the Aim and right through the Specification. Such care relates to care of self, care of others and care of the planet. By emphasising the interdependent and relational nature of care (Cockburn, 2005; Noddings, 2012), there is potential to build upon the Junior Cycle wellbeing indicators, in particular '**being connected**'; being 'connected, respected and contributing to their world' is also one of the five goals set out within the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (DCEDIY, 2014). Highlighting '*being connected*' in the Aim has the potential to focus attention to collective health and well-being, to centralise the significance of relationships with other people and with the planet and to move beyond an individualistic understanding of self and well-being.

Suggestion: Change to '*nurture respectful and caring interdependent relationships with people and planet*';

- Reflecting the Senior Cycle guiding principle of 'participation and citizenship; the SPHE element of 'exercising rights, responsibilities and inclusivity'; and in line with the National Strategy for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making (DCEDIY, 2015), we advocate for a greater emphasis within the Statement on the **voice and participation of young people in decision making** in their schools and communities, and with regard to their own health and well-being. By specifically emphasising rights in the Aim, agency and participation can be brought to the fore-front of the Statement, highlighting how rights exist within relationships with others-with adults, with other young people and with citizens globally (Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018; Kallio, Wood and Häkli, 2020).

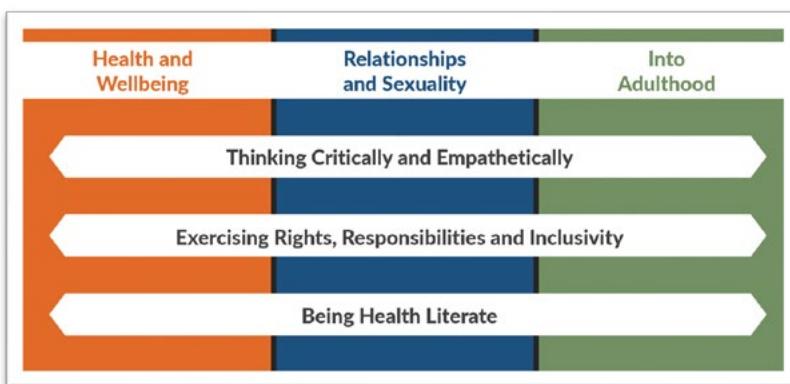
Suggestion: Change to '*nurture rights-respecting and caring interdependent relationships with people and planet*';

- We suggest incorporating a **more global perspective** to the SPHE specification and within the Aim. By embedding the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the Specification and within the Aim, issues relating to the complex, interdependent and interconnected world we live in may be explored more fully. The inclusion of an SDG framework, also has the potential to overlap and connect with wider national policy concerning the 'whole-of Government' approach to the implementation of the SDGs. In line with the objectives of the National Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development- ESD to 2030 (Department of Education, 2022) and Irish Aid's (Department of Foreign Affairs) Strategy on Global Citizenship Education (2021, Government of Ireland), we feel it is significant to acknowledge the **complexity of the ever-changing world** we live in.

Suggestion: Change to, '*prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school, in the context of the ever-changing, complex and unequal world we live in*'.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

Within this strand, students will explore the factors that influence their physical, social, emotional and mental health and the relationships between these aspects of health. They will learn ways to take care of themselves and stay as healthy as possible, with a particular focus on gaining awareness, skills, techniques and information to protect their mental health and wellbeing.

Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.2	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.3	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.4	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.5	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.
1.1	

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

In line with the emphasis on self-reflection and life-long learning in the Rationale, we recommend incorporating a greater focus on an **understanding the self** or learning to know the self, into Strand 1. This would facilitate an interrogation of the complex and emotional factors relating to; care of the self, managing positive and negative emotions, change and continuity, sexuality, expectations, mental health, relationships, anxiety, love. These aspects could be explored in the context of the ever-changing, complex, digital and global world we live in. Building on the understanding of the self, and reflecting our response to Question 1, we see the need for a greater acknowledgment of the **relational aspect of health and wellbeing**. We suggest including a reference to the interdependent and connected nature of individual health and well-being to ongoing and future relationships with people and planet.

We feel that there is potential within Strand 1 to focus on **human rights**, and how rights are intrinsic to factors which influence positive physical, social, emotional and mental health (for example access to health care, education, housing as well as wider rights relating to freedoms, equality and active citizenship). By emphasising human rights, there is also an opportunity to incorporate a more global perspective, and highlight how agency, voice and participation not only intersect with health and well-being but also potentially empower students to raise awareness and create change towards more positive individual, collective and environmental health and well-being.

Given the complexity and sensitivity of some of the issues covered in Strand 1, as well as the rapidly-changing discourses and perceptions relating to a number of these topics, we feel that a specific reference is needed regarding the **professional supports and resources** available to teachers in exploring these issues. Such supports should refer to professional (and personal) development, by OIDE for example; as well as workshops, training, dedicated subject resources, lesson plans and links to the SDGs, offered by WWGS, amongst other providers in the field of Global Citizenship Education.

**In relation to specific learning outcomes (LO):**

- LO 1.1- we recommend expanding or defining what 'good health' means; we suggest providing some indicators or examples here, which includes a reference to '*relationships with people and planet*'.
- LO 1.2- we suggest including '*relationships with nature and animals*' as enablers of managing a healthy life balance.
- LO 1.2- we encourage acknowledging the complexity of the world we live in as influential in enabling and/or creating barriers to managing a healthy lifestyle. We suggest including the following at the end of the sentence; '*..and ways to manage greater balance, in the context of the complex, ever-changing, and unequal world we live in*'.
- New LO/or relating to LO 1.2- make reference to the influence of socio-economic factors on access to 'good health'; consider this in local, national and global contexts and make a connection to the SDGs.
- LO 1.4- in exploring the factors which influence mental health and well-being we suggest foregrounding the understanding of and relationship with the self, followed by relationships with others, and then the world at large. This reflects Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, as referenced in the Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (DES, 2019).
- New LO- we encourage the inclusion of an LO which focuses specifically on positive values, emotions and relationships. In particular we suggest including an emphasis on the development of empathy and solidarity and how this interlinks with individual and collective health and well-being. The development of the values of empathy and solidarity also work towards empowering learners to raise awareness and create meaningful change not only to address their own well-being, but also that of others and of the planet.

- New LO (or expansion of LO 1.8) -we encourage the inclusion of an LO which relates to the recognition of and response(s) to youth stresses and anxiety associated with online and virtual relationships, access to (mis)information, and engagement with extreme sentiments.
- New LO -the addition of a LO which specifically refers to the recognition of and response(s) to youth anxiety surrounding climate and environmental crises.

### Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

Students should be able to	
2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

We feel that there is great potential in this Strand to emphasise the relational aspect of health and well-being; how it burgeons from the relationship with the self (explored in Strand 1) to interconnect and overlap with the self in relation to others, the planet and the wider world

(Moosa-Mitha, 2005, Warming, 2019). We advocate for a clear move towards recognising the **interdependencies of the self and the wider local, national, global and online communities**. Here also lies potential to bring in a focus on the ethic of care; care and empathy for one another as global citizens and care and stewardship of our shared and finite planet. This relational focus which incorporates care and interdependence also makes space for a more global perspective, the inclusion of the SDGs, and incorporating a Global Citizenship Education approach to the teaching and learning in SPHE.

In considering the relational aspect of health and well-being, we encourage that the inherent **power relations which exist between young person-and-adult and student-and-teacher** be addressed, particularly in the context of schooling and school contexts. These unequal relations not only impact on the exploration of student health and well-being, but also have an influence on young peoples' rights to participation, their agency and citizenship within school (DCYA, 2017; Forde, Horgan, Martin and Parkes, 2018), and in wider local and global contexts. We suggest including a learning outcome which critically examines these significant and impactful relationships in terms of students'/young people's social, personal and emotional well-being.

Mirroring our suggestion for Strand 1 above, **teacher training and supports are key** to achieving these learning outcomes. The complexity of the issues, as well as teacher and student personal, historical, cultural, class, religious, ethnic and gender dispositions, will have a significant influence on how this Strand will be approached and explored in classrooms. A human rights framework or an approach guided by the SDGs may be useful in providing support, and structure to teachers.

#### **In relation to specific learning outcomes (LO);**

- LO 2.2- in line with taking a critical and reflective approach, we suggest making a reference to the GCE principle of 'unlearning and reconstructing'; in particular emphasising the time and space needed to explore and reflect on dominant attitudes, perceptions and unconscious biases and how these can influence the definitions, boundaries and dynamics of relationships. This critical approach would then move on to incorporate multiple voices, narratives and discourses, to work towards reconstructing attitudes and perceptions regarding the understanding and practice of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour.  
Suggestion: '*critically reflect, analyse and deconstruct attitudes, beliefs, unconscious biases and values regarding the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour; encourage well-informed and inclusive reconstructions of the dynamics of these relationships.*'
- LO 2.4- we suggest including the underlined words here; 'critically examine how harmful attitudes, stereotypes and unconscious biases around gender....'. This is to encourage criticality and the unlearning and reconstructing necessary to explore definitions, and/or misconceptions and preconceptions regarding gender, gender roles and gendered positions in society.
- LO 2.6- is very welcome and could be made more critical by including a glance at toxic masculinity, a wider investigation into our patriarchal society and the origins of gender inequality. We also suggest making reference to the 'supports available for victims and perpetrators'.
- LO 2.8-we suggest including the word 'consent' here.

- LO 2.9 -we suggest including case studies on the HIV and AIDS crisis-in particular access to medicines as part of the right to health. The intellectual property trade system that prevented people (particularly marginalised people) from accessing antiretroviral medication is a potential way to help students critically question society's response to health and wellbeing.

### Strand 3: Into Adulthood

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and workplace rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

#### Insert response here:

Reflecting our response to Question 1, we advocate for a **change to the future-focused title of 'into Adulthood'** and instead to emphasise students identity as selves and citizens in the here and now (Devine and Cockburn, 2018; National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014). Our rationale for this rests in the recognition of the young person in their present and current social, personal, physical and emotional development; that the learning outcomes (E.g. 3.1 self-care) relate to and are significant for the students' lives in the now, as well as being important to their future adult lives. In addition, the future-focused title 'Into Adulthood' suggests a devaluing of the significance of the lived experience of adolescence.

Reflecting the emphasis in senior cycle on **key competencies**, we encourage the addition of the word **competencies** to the learning outcomes in Strand 3; for example LO 3.5 'consider the skills and competencies needed....'. This could reinforce the new emphasis within senior cycle redevelopment on the key competencies, the three components of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions and the desired impact of enriched, engaged and competent learners (NCCA, 2023).

#### In relation to specific learning outcomes (LO):

- LO 3.1- in addition to referring to 'health' here we would encourage including a reference to the self-care needed for well-being and positive mental health.
- LO 3.2- there is an opportunity here to refer to 'skills and competencies necessary for life-long learning, including competencies for students' self-management in the current and present time'. An explicit link to the senior cycle key competencies could be helpful for teachers here, especially the competencies 'managing learning and self' and 'cultivating well-being'.
- LO 3.4- we are concerned with reference to 'rights and responsibilities before the law'; this phrase overlooks how rights and responsibilities are relational, lived, learned, and experienced between people, in everyday practices, in a range of contexts (Baraldi and Cockburn, 2018; Delanty, 2003; Warming, 2019). We suggest including a reference here to reflect the understanding of citizenship as lived and active. We suggest the following; 'summarise accurately their own rights and responsibilities as legal duties and obligations, in addition to the practice of rights and responsibilities in everyday relationships and contexts'.
- LO 3.5- there is an opportunity here to incorporate agency and participation, in particular students' roles as agents of change in local, national, global and online contexts. We suggest including the statement, 'consider and practice the skills and competencies needed to stand up for themselves and others, to exert agency and express their voices, in local, national, global and online contexts, where such challenges and opportunities might arise'.
- LO 3.6- we see a distinct opportunity here to draw a connection to Global Citizenship Education, in particular the values of diversity, equality and inclusion and the relational practices of active citizenship. There are also opportunities to incorporate a more global perspective here in exploring inequality and inclusion, with the SDGs providing a framework to explore these issues. We suggest some changes to the wording here; 'practice and demonstrate the skills and competencies needed to challenge unfair, unequal and abusive systems, structures, and behaviours, and to promote global citizenship by actively working towards creating meaningful change for a more just, equal and sustainable world for all'.
- New LO – interconnected with LO 3.5, we suggest the inclusion of an additional learning outcome which enables the student to explore global justice issues through the lens of global citizenship education; this could be framed using the SDGs and grounded in a human rights perspective. The objective would be to enable the learner to understand and critically engage with the complexities of rights, responsibilities, ethics, and (in)equality, at local, national and global levels, in the context of the multifaceted, ever-changing and unequal world we live in.

#### Question 3: Any further suggestions

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

#### Insert response here:

- We welcome the emphasis in the Rationale that learning in SPHE is a 'praxis' involving the process of ongoing **critical reflection and action**; however we feel that these dimensions need be more strongly represented in the overall Specification. GCE is well suited as an educational process through which young people are enabled to engage in critical reflection and action while exploring issues relating to the health and well-being of themselves, others and our planet.

- Interconnected with this point, we feel that this Specification needs to acknowledge the self as a relational and social being, and that social, personal, and emotional health and well-being are influenced and shaped by the **relationship with the self, relationships with people and relationships with the planet**. Recognising the relationality of the self, incorporates attention to care and emotionality, and how as global citizens we are all interconnected and interdependent; these affective and relational dimensions have a significant impact on our health and well-being. So too do human rights, in this case especially access to health care and the inequalities and injustices which exist, both locally and globally. We advocate that learners cannot be enabled to fully engage with and critically reflect on their own and others health and well-being without centralising the interdependent and relational aspects of health and well-being. By foregrounding **an inclusive, and global perspective** this Specification becomes aligned with national commitments to the SDGs and with the Education for Sustainable Development Strategy; it would also then naturally **overlap and integrate with GCE**.
- There is potential to embed the Senior Cycle **key competencies** more deeply into the Strands of SPHE by making explicit the links between specific learning outcomes and relevant competencies. The senior cycle key competencies are also aligned with a number of GCE key components and skills, providing an opportunity to demonstrate the natural overlaps between GCE-and-Senior Cycle-and-SPHE. WWGS note the commonalities between Senior Cycle Curricula, SPHE and GCE, an area we are ready to support schools and teachers with.
- We recognise that **teacher capacity and competence** are key to the successful implementation of this Specification and that a diversity of experience and expertise exists among teachers with regard to this SPHE Specification. In addition to encouraging critical engagement by teachers, it may be necessary to address the issues of up to date terminologies, definitions and practices with regard to gender, sexuality, pornography and online behaviours. We recommend that training, materials and supports are provided for teachers and such supports are stated and made clear within the Specification. OIDE will play a key role in this support, in addition to experts, researchers, practitioners in the field of GCE. Among colleagues in the field of GCE, WWGS is uniquely placed to provide support and assistance to schools to guide staff to build their capacity to deliver quality GCE with the backing of useful resources, online videos, CPD, and Education Officers placed throughout Ireland.

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