

**Template for submissions on:**

**Background paper and brief for the  
redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE**

NCCA consultation

September 2021

The NCCA is updating junior cycle Social, Personal and Health Education. The *Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of junior cycle SPHE* sets out the background and context for redeveloping junior cycle SPHE and proposes a brief for guiding the work in creating a new course.

We would really value feedback by using the template on page 4 and sending it to [SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie](mailto:SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie) The consultation will remain open until Tuesday, November 5<sup>th</sup> 2021

You can read the *Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE* at <https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/>.

Extracts from this are provided on the following page.

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### **Date Protection Statement**

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Any data from this will be further anonymized and aggregated and only made available after the final report is completed. This is expected to be in January 2022. Where a respondent selects 'yes' to the question *Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation*, respondents are consenting to having their name / organisation's name published with the list of written submission on [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

### **Please complete the following:**

**Name: Fay White**

**Email address: fayw@nwci.ie**

**Are you contributing views as**

a. An individual Yes/No

b. An organization Yes/No

Name of organisation: National Women's Council

Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation? YES/NO

***Brief for the review and redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE*** (an extract of full paper, pp 34-36)

The specification will be at a common level. It will be designed to be taught and assessed in a minimum of 100 hours and structured around strands and learning outcomes.

The development of the new specification will

- Take account of research and international good practice in the field of SPHE/RSE as well as the experiences of teachers and students in Ireland who have shared their suggestions and insights through recent reviews and consultation processes
- Be conscious of how the specification relates to and supports learning within the wider junior cycle Wellbeing programme while avoiding any unhelpful overlap of learning
- Embed the key skills of junior cycle in the learning outcomes of the specification and make explicit how SPHE links to the six indicators of wellbeing
- Address continuity and progression: aware that a redeveloped SPHE short course is a first step in creating an integrated updated SPHE curriculum that provides progression of learning from early childhood to upper secondary education
- Be grounded in an approach to SPHE/RSE that is holistic, student-centred, inclusive, age and developmentally appropriate and whole school (as set out in the NCCA's 2019 *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools*)
- Present RSE as part of an integrated SPHE curriculum
- Include specific mention of topics identified by this report and the NCCA's Report on the Review of RSE as important for young people's learning today<sup>1</sup>.

More specifically, the development of the new specification will consider the following questions.

- What is the aim and rationale for the SPHE short course in the current context?

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<sup>1</sup>Topics suggested in the Report include consent, healthy, positive sexual expression, the effects of the internet and social media on relationships and self-esteem, pornography, gender and sexual discrimination and violence, social and cultural norms and expectations as they relate to relationships and sexuality and LGBTQ+ matters.

- How should the course be organised and will it continue to be structured around its existing four strands, associated topics and learning outcomes?
- What adjustments might be needed in relation to the Classroom-Based Assessment for SPHE?
- How can the specification empower students and teachers to adopt a collaborative, dialogical, and reflective approach to teaching and learning in SPHE?
- How can the specification be flexible and sensitive to accommodate a range of school contexts and student needs while providing clarity on what is the important knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that students should gain during the three years of SPHE within junior cycle?

## Questions to consider:

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

The National Women’s Council is encouraged to see the recognition that RSE must have a greater role within the wider SPHE curriculum. The most important consideration for us is the need for the curriculum development to take a gender-sensitive and feminist approach. A feminist analysis of SPHE is necessary to reduce the gender inequalities and gender asymmetry within the current curriculum which lead to stigma, shame and harm around health and sexual health for many women, girls, intersex, and non-binary people. By adopting a gender-sensitive approach to SPHE for junior cycle, we can enable young people to recognise the differences in their bodies, understand their individual needs and provide both girls, boys, intersex and non-binary people with the knowledge about female anatomy and pleasure. As Better Outcomes Brighter Futures recognises, girls and boys (sic) experience and deal with their health differently<sup>2</sup>. Within that, 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 girls and girls with disabilities. International studies have shown that the wider socioeconomic context of the household that young people belong to is a key factor explaining multiple sexual health behaviours in adolescence<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, the curriculum must reflect the broader context in which education takes place and reflect the distinct experiences that students may have. By creating a more inclusive, feminist curriculum, we can support girls, boys, intersex and non-binary people to understand themselves and their peers more holistically in a way that can be built upon in more depth in senior cycle. As cited within the NCCA consultation with students, many students want more information about self-esteem and positive body image within the curriculum. This must consider the gender differences in how girls and boys experience body image and self-esteem and the issues which disproportionately affect girls, such as eating disorders. In 2020, 95% of all hospital admissions for eating disorders under 18 were female<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the biological aspect

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2014) Better Outcomes Brighter Futures. Available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/23796/961bbf5d975f4c88adc01a6fc5b4a7c4.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> ESRI (2020) Talking about sex and sexual behaviour of young people in Ireland, Research Series Number 112. Available at: [https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS112\\_1.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS112_1.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Health Research Board (2021) Annual Report on the Activities of Irish Psychiatric Units and Hospitals 2020. Available at: [https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2.Plugin\\_related\\_files/Publications/2021\\_publications/NPIRS/AIPUH\\_annual\\_report\\_2020.pdf](https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2.Plugin_related_files/Publications/2021_publications/NPIRS/AIPUH_annual_report_2020.pdf)

of SPHE must support a better understanding of female anatomy. A recent UK study found that the majority of adult participants surveyed could not correctly label all parts of female genitalia<sup>5</sup>.

An SPHE curriculum which is designed and delivered taking into account the distinct needs of young girls cannot do so effectively if it is implemented in isolation. A good curriculum is participatory and needs to be backed up by a whole school-approach and parental or carer support. By embedding this within the education system with support from parents or carers, this can lead to greater gender equality within society at large. A gender-sensitive and feminist approach should also be considered in relation to all school policies.

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

### **Harm Reduction and Abuse Disclosure**

Mandatory SPHE for junior cycle is a vital opportunity to identify and prevent harmful or abusive behaviour, which is particularly important for girls and women because girls are more likely to be victims of sexual abuse in childhood and across the life course. In particular, young women are twice as likely to be subjected to sexual harassment and violence than older women, with 1 in 5 women experiencing some form of abuse from a current or former partner with 51% before the age of 18<sup>6</sup>. Women with disabilities are four times more likely to experience sexual violence<sup>7</sup>. There is good international evidence that school-based education programmes help children to recognise what constitutes abuse or inappropriate behaviour, and increase the likelihood that children are able to disclose experience of abuse<sup>8</sup>. The WHO estimates that child sexual abuse contributes to 7 - 8% of the global burden of disease for females<sup>9</sup>. SPHE and RSE which is framed through a harm reduction and abuse prevention lens can contribute to upholding Article 19 of the UN Convention on the

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<sup>5</sup> Morgan, E. (2021) Viva la vulva: why we need to talk about women's genitalia. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/oct/16/viva-la-vulva-why-we-need-to-talk-about-women-genitalia>

<sup>6</sup> National Women's Council (2021) NWC Submission on the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence. Available at: [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>7</sup> NWC Submission on the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

<sup>8</sup> Walsh K, Zwi K, Woolfenden S, Shlonsky A. (2015) School-based education programmes for the prevention of child sexual abuse. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2015, Issue 4. Available at: <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD004380.pub3/epdf/full>

<sup>9</sup> Walsh K, Zwi K, Woolfenden S, Shlonsky A. (2015)

Rights of the Child which states that governments should "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse". By developing the SPHE and RSE curriculum to provide young people with the knowledge and understanding of their own rights and needs, as well as those of others, we can ensure an equitable health and sexual health education of young people who may not be receiving it at home. A US study of 2000 10- to 16-year olds<sup>10</sup> found that those who received school-based education "were more knowledgeable about sexual abuse, more likely to report using self-protection strategies, more likely to report protective efficacy, more likely to have disclosed their victimisation, and less likely to engage in self-blame". It is essential that the curriculum is not just a platform to inform, but uses the space for students, particularly boys, to critically engage with the topics and challenge the problematic norms they have been exposed to within wider society which may be influencing their actions. This is fundamental to ensuring that young people understand their responsibility to treat others with respect, as well as an individual's right to be treated with respect. It is important to address this for this age group in order to enable understanding of consent within sexual relationships. EU research has shown that 21% of Irish adults agreed that sex without consent was justified under certain circumstances<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, consistent awareness-raising and critical engagement throughout the education system of violence against women and abusive behaviours can lead to an increased recognition of harm and increased disclosures throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

### **Positive Sexuality, Social Media and Pornography**

As well as helping to prevent and identify behaviours and attitudes which harm women and girls, a comprehensive feminist approach to RSE and SPHE can also support equal and pleasurable sexual encounters when the individuals are ready<sup>12</sup>. It is particularly important for this age group to be supported to have a positive relationship with their body and sexuality in order to combat harmful norms and expectations which can arise as young people enter adulthood. Gender-sensitive RSE

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<sup>10</sup> Walsh K, Zwi K, Woolfenden S, Shlonsky A. (2015) School-based education programmes for the prevention of child sexual abuse. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews* 2015, Issue 4. Available at: <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD004380.pub3/epdf/full>

<sup>11</sup> ESRI (2020) Talking about sex and sexual behaviour of young people in Ireland, Research Series Number 112. Available at: [https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS112\\_1.pdf](https://www.esri.ie/system/files/publications/RS112_1.pdf)

<sup>12</sup>European Women's Lobby (2020) Ensuring safe, uncoerced, egalitarian and mutually pleasurable sex and relationships for the next generation: a synthesis report. Available at: [https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/lef\\_sexeduc\\_web.pdf](https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/lef_sexeduc_web.pdf)

should empower both girls and boys to understand their burgeoning sexuality and fulfil their right to healthy, safe and pleasurable sex where informed consent is given and when they are ready<sup>13</sup>.

In the NCCA's consultation with students and their experiences of SPHE, students expressed a desire for a greater focus on the influence of social media on relationships within the curriculum. We encourage a greater inclusion of social media and the internet within the curriculum taking into account the particular gender differences in social media usage. In Europe, 9 million girls have experienced some kind of cyber violence by the time they are 15 years old<sup>14</sup>. The curriculum must take account of the role of social media, pornography and the internet in the perpetuation of violence against women and girls. A recent study found that many young people turn to pornography for sexual education in Ireland and 20% of those who took part in a survey found pornography to be a useful source of sexual education<sup>15</sup>. Robust research in the UK has shown that children as young as 7 have come across pornography, with 66% of 14-15 year olds having viewed pornography, either intentionally or unintentionally<sup>16</sup>. This is of profound concern due to pornography being consistently shown to be harmful to women and frequently objectifies and humiliates women. Pornography can distort understandings of what a healthy, consensual and mutually fulfilling relationship looks like with a particularly adverse impact on women. The SPHE/RSE curriculum must account for the harmful effects of pornography and support this through the provision of accurate and inclusive education about health and sexual health for young people in this age group, with a particular emphasis on consent education which builds upon what is taught in primary school.

### **Fostering a Safe Space**

The curriculum should consider how the contents of the material can be delivered in a way that fosters a safe, protective space for students. Training for teachers should take account of how best to deliver the material in a way that fosters a supportive environment. In order to support teachers

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<sup>13</sup> European Women's Lobby (2020) Ensuring safe, uncoerced, egalitarian and mutually pleasurable sex and relationships for the next generation: a synthesis report. Available at: [https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/lef\\_sexeduc\\_web.pdf](https://www.womenlobby.org/IMG/pdf/lef_sexeduc_web.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> European Women's Lobby (2020) Ensuring safe, uncoerced, egalitarian and mutually pleasurable sex and relationships for the next generation: a synthesis report.

<sup>15</sup> Youth Work Ireland (2018) Young people turn away from teachers and parents towards the internet for sex education. Available at: <https://www.youthworkireland.ie/what-we-do/news/young-people-turn-away-from-teachers-and-parents-and-towards-the-internet-f>

<sup>16</sup> BBFC (2019) Children see pornography as young as seven, new report finds. Available at: <https://www.bbfc.co.uk/about-us/news/children-see-pornography-as-young-as-seven-new-report-finds>



and school staff to effectively identify potentially problematic or harmful behaviour as well as disclosures of sexual abuse, disclosure training using specialised sexual support services can support teachers to both respond to a disclosure and the procedure to be followed and also refer students who have been victims of sexual abuse or violence to appropriate support services. Adequate training and support for teachers must be provided to foster confidence in discussing potentially difficult topics to support not only the students, but to ensure the teachers are supported when discussing potentially triggering topics.

### **Reproductive Health throughout the life cycle**

Students expressed dissatisfaction in the consultation with the over-emphasis on puberty within the current SPHE curriculum. Adequate health education must take account that reproductive health matters at all stages of our lives. It begins before adolescence with sexual health education and continues beyond the years of reproduction with post-reproductive services. Early education about the changes that affect women and girls must include an introduction to the changes that occur in midlife, such as the menopause. This is essential not only to instil a holistic understanding of the changes that take place in bodies throughout the life cycle, but to promote empathy and understanding towards a parent or carer who may be experiencing the menopause. In September 2020, the UK included the menopause in their curriculum for PSHE (SPHE) for junior cycle after campaigning by women's groups. Introducing this topic and instilling an understanding in young people that bodies change and that these changes can also have psychological effects is essential to promoting a positive relationship with their own bodies and contributing to breaking the taboo about women's reproductive health needs.

### **Inclusivity and Diversity**

A development on the nuanced perspectives from a diversity perspective is important to be as inclusive as possible in recognising the intersectionality of each young person's individual needs. Inclusivity should be at the heart of the delivery of the programme. The content of the curriculum must be reflective of the diverse personal and familial circumstances which the students may be experiencing and ensure that young people are not alienated and can see themselves reflected within the content being discussed. Examples of family structures must account for lone parent families, young people in state care, LGBTQI+ families, intercultural families. Consideration from an inclusivity perspective must capture beyond what is considered the 'average' young person's experiences:

- e.g. The differences of students in a classroom being anyone who may be of a different race or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, consideration of disability & illness.
- It is important to note that coming from any background mentioned above (not limited to these) will give each child a different perspective of learning and application of said learning.
- Eg. Sexual health may look completely different to a young person of the LGBT+ community than it would their straight counterparts or a young Black person to their white counterparts, or a young person with a disability etc.

The SPHE curriculum must comply with and be underpinned by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in order to be inclusive of girls with disabilities. The contents of the curriculum must be inclusive of disabled people when discussing relationships, marriage and having children, as many disabled women and girls are subject to stereotypes throughout their lives that they cannot experience the same things as their peers. This must be age-appropriate as disabled students have said that often the information they are given about RSE is aimed at younger groups.

### **Independent from Ethos**

It is essential that SPHE and RSE education is delivered without the influence of a school's religious ethos. Young people have the right to be informed about health and sexual health without the influence of distinct ideologies which may inhibit their knowledge. Sufficient training of teachers must be developed to ensure that teachers of any religion have the confidence and knowledge to deliver the curriculum.

As part of its submission to the current Dept of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth consultative review of the Equality Acts (Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 and the Employment Equality Acts 1998-2015), The National Women's Council will be recommending the removal of Educational establishments – special exemptions (Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act). NWC believes this use of the religious tradition (Ethos) of the school undermines the rights of young people to objective sexual health & relationship education, undermines the achievement of a social good and conflicts with the public sector duty to positively ensure the promotion of equality on the gender ground.

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>17</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Teach Don't Preach (2020) Religious ethos will sabotage any new sex education curriculum. Available at: <https://www.teachdontpreach.ie/2020/11/religious-ethos-sex-education/>

The National Women's Council consulted our members for this submission and would like to acknowledge The M Project, USI, Atheist Ireland, NWC'S Disabled Women's Group and Re(al) Productive Justice for their input.

Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us.

Please email this document to [SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie](mailto:SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie) by November 5<sup>th</sup> 2021.

The report on this consultation will be available on [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) early 2022.