November 2023

NWC Submission on the Draft specification for Senior Cycle SPHE
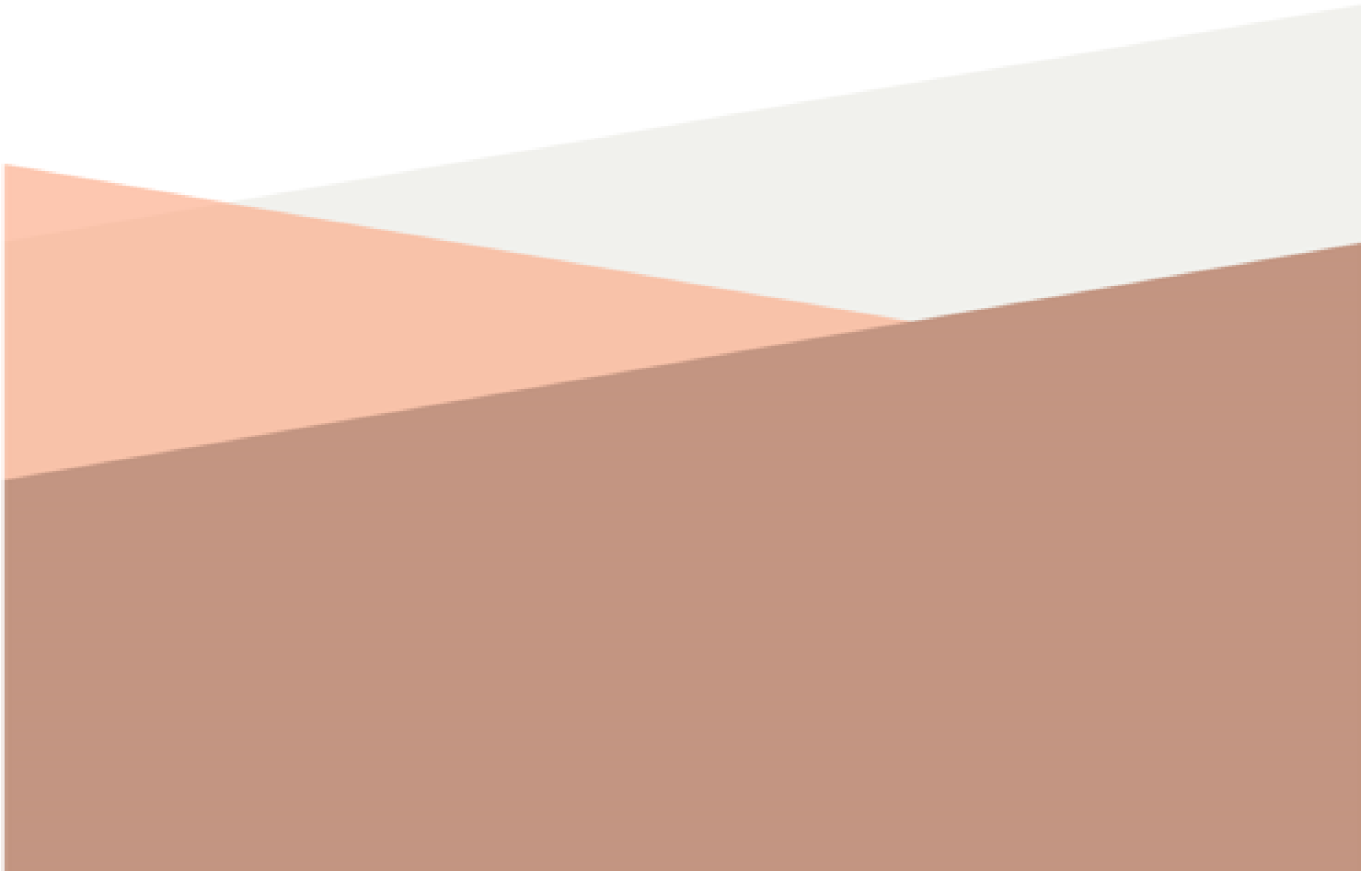
nWc
National Women's Council

Draft specification

for Senior Cycle SPHE
NCCA consultation, 2023

NCCA consultation on draft specification for Senior Cycle SPHE

The NCCA is currently updating the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and as part of this work an updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is now available for consultation. A key part of the consultation is feedback from individuals and groups who are interested in this area of young people's education. The consultation on the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum will remain open until October 18th. You can share your feedback by completing this template and sending it to: SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie

Before completing the template, please read the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum at this link: https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/senior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe/

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Senior Cycle SPHE – Feedback

If you are contributing your views **an individual**, please provide details below

Name:	
Email address:	
Do you wish to be listed as a contributor to this consultation on the NCCA website?	Yes/No
Do you wish to have your written submission published on the NCCA website?	Yes/No

If you are contributing your views on behalf of **an organisation or group**, please provide details below

Name:	' Poushali Kundu
Email address:	Poushalik@nwci.ie
Name of organisation/group:	National Women's Council Ireland (NWCI)
Does your organisation wish to be listed as a contributor to this consultation on the NCCA website?	<mark>Yes</mark>/No
Does your organisation wish to have this written submission published on the NCCA website?	<mark>Yes</mark>/No

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[1] and Senior cycle background submission[2] 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.[3] Public health promotion in Senior Cycle SPHE should include key learning objectives on contraception,

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[1] 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
[2] 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
[3] Ibid.

pregnancy choices, female anatomy, menopausal health, and responsible substance use.[4] 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.

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.[5]

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.[6]

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.[7]

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.[8] 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.[9]

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).

[4] 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
[5] 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
[6] 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
[7] Ibid.
[8] 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_GENIA_Toolkit_18.pdf
[9] Ibid.

- 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.

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.[10]

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".[11] 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.[12]

NWC's recent Call for Inputs: Online Safety[13] 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,[14] and disabled women are four times more likely to experience sexual violence.[15] Gender-based

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[10] 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
[11] CSO (2023)Recorded Crime Victims 2022 and Suspected Offenders 2021
https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rcvo/recordedcrimevictims2022andsuspectedoffenders2021/keyfindings/
[12] 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
[13] NWC (2023) NWC Call for Inputs: Online Safety
https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final_Media_Commission_Submission.pdf
[14] SPHE Network (2018) Diversities: Interpretations through the Context of SPHE.
https://sphenetwork.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/conference_proceedings_2018.pdf
[15] 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

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.[16]This is preventable and it is recognised within the Third National Strategy on Domestic Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

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,[17] 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".[18] 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.

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[16] SPHE Network (2018) Diversities: Interpretations through the Context of SPHE.
https://sphenetwork.ie/wpcontent/uploads/2021/06/conference_proceedings_2018.pdf
[17] UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.
https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf
[18] 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

Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:
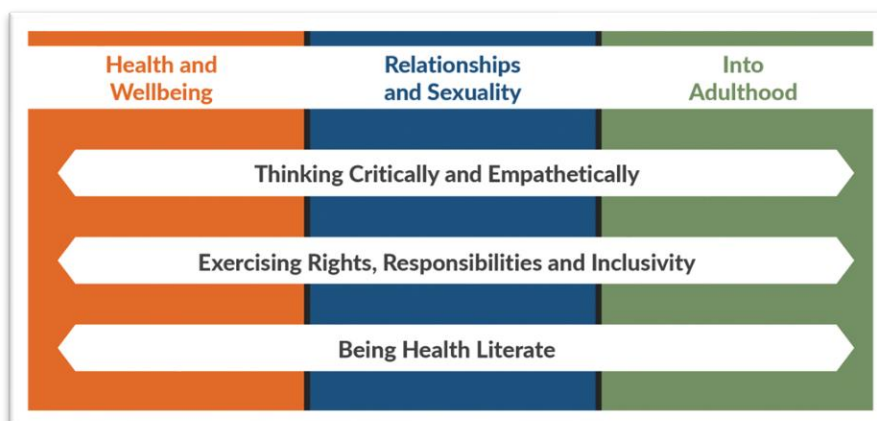
Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

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.

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.[19] In this learning outcome, it's vital to support teachers in understanding the human rights situations of diverse communities including Traveller and 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.[20]

- 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.[21] 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.[22] 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.[23] In NWC's Gender-sensitive Mental Health report, a study examining the effects

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[19] 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.

[20] WHO (2021) Gender and Health https://www.who.int/news-room/questions-and-answers/item/gender-and-health

[21] 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.

[22] 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

[23] 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.

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.[24]

- 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.[25] Students should be provided with information on the range of mental health services and supports available for young people in communities across the country.

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[24]For example see: Department of Justice (2017) National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-21; HSE, Glen, BelongTo, TCD (2016) The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland; and Mental Health Reform & Simon (2017) Homelessness and Mental Health: Voices of Experience

[25] 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

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 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.[26]

- 2.1. Should also include normalisation of disclosure of sensitive sexual and related issues including knowledge of pregnancy, HIV positive status, and sexual abuse.[27] 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.[28]

- 2.4. To promote gender equality, it's imperative to discuss measures to combat harmful social and cultural biases, dispel misconceptions, and counter prejudice.[29] 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 orientations and gender identities.[30] 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.[31]

- 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".[32]

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[26] 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
[27] UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf
[28] Ibid.
[29] 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
[30] Ibid.
[31] 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
[32] UNESCO (2018) International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pubpdf/ITGSE.pdf

- 2.6. Students should be aware that gender-based violence can take any form of physical, sexual, financial, emotional, or psychological abuse.[33] 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.[34]

- 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.[35] 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.[36] 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 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.[37]

- 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.[38]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.[39] Provide

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[33] HSE (n.d.) Appendix 1 Categories of Abuse
https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/socialcare/safeguardingvulnerableadults/appendix%201-3.pdf
[34] NWC (2023) NWC Call for Inputs: Online Safety
https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final_Media_Commission_Submission.pdf
[35] DSGBV Implementation Plan (2022)
https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/228481/69e48889-49ea-49d6-8143-982f6cc28bac.pdf#page=null
[36] Beyond Exploitation (2020), Submission to Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

[37] NWC (2023) NWC Call for Inputs: Online Safety
https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/Final_Media_Commission_Submission.pdf
[38] 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
[39] Ibid.

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.[40]

- 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.[41] 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.[42]

- 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.[43]

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[40] The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust (2020) Menopause Easy Read Information https://www.sath.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Menopause.pdf

[41] Fertility Europe (2021) European Atlas of Fertility Treatment Policies https://fertilityeurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/FERTIL-Atlas_EN-2021-v10.pdf

[42] Fertility Europe (n.d.) Fertility Awareness Project – FActs! game https://fertilityeurope.eu/fertility-awareness/

[43] 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

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.

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. [44]

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[44] 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

- 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.[45] 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.[46]

- 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.[47] 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.[48]

- 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.[49]

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[45] 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/

[46] Jigsaw (n.d.) https://jigsaw.ie/information-and-elearning/?bring=a-young-person&cat=&search=&pagesd=1

[47] 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

[48] USI (2020) Sexual Experiences Survey 2020 https://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SES-published-report.pdf

[49] HSA (n.d.) https://www.hsa.ie/eng/education/health_and_safety_courses_online/online_courses_for_students/

- 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.[50] It highlights the role of bullying outside the school premises and under such circumstances it is essential to understand who will be held responsible.[51]

- 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.[52] 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.[53]

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 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

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[50] ISPCC (2022) Bullying and the role of the 'Bystander' https://www.ispcc.ie/bullying-and-the-role-of-the-bystander/

[51] 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

[52] 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

[53] 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

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.[54] 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.

  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

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[54] Atheist Ireland (2021) https://atheist.ie/2021/11/school-ethos-sphe-rse/

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.
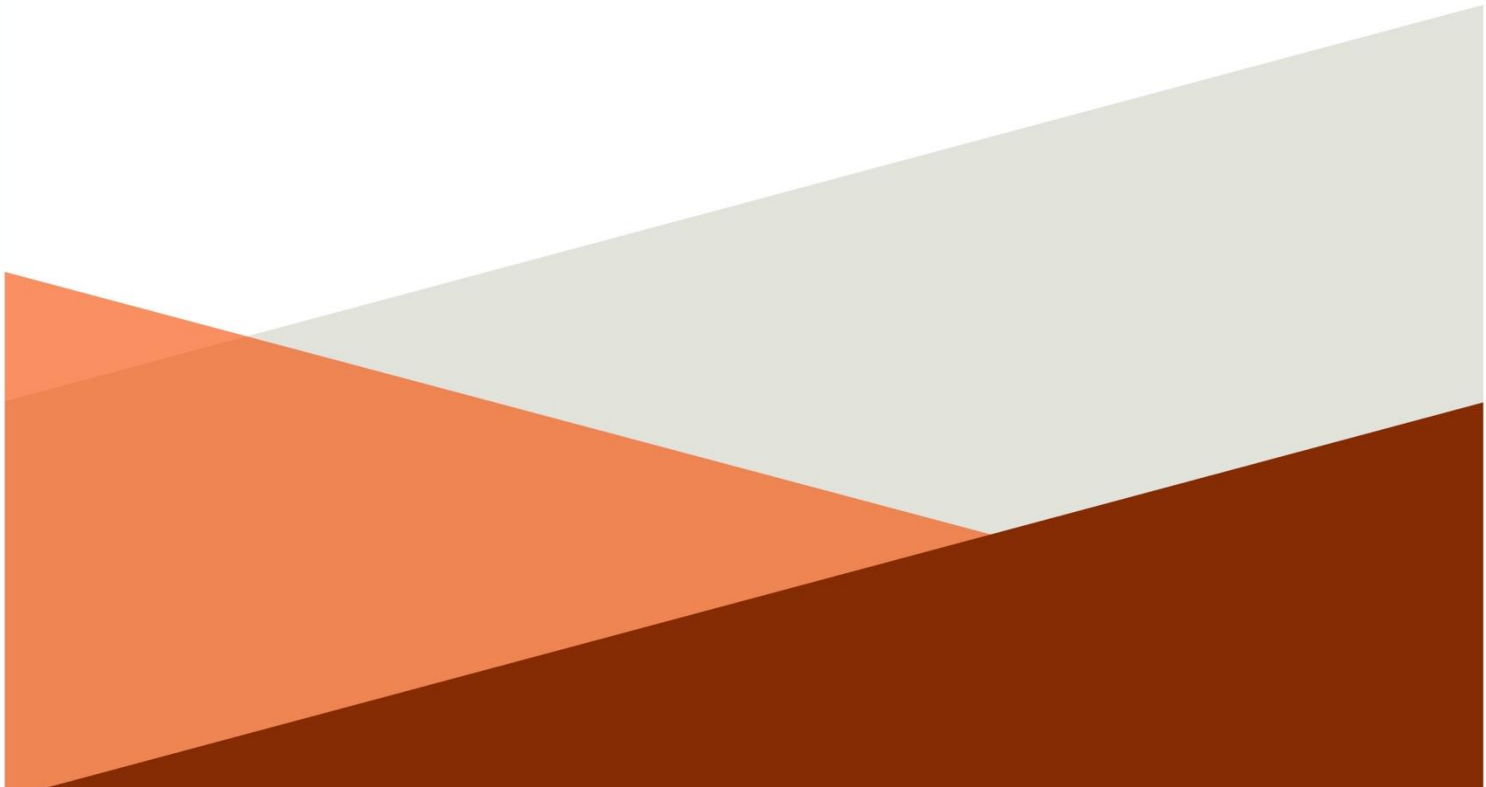
A nuanced understanding of diverse viewpoints and experiences to be as inclusive as possible in recognising the intersectionality of each young person's individual needs.55 An intersectional approach is needed so that girls are not treated as a homogenous group. The health and sexual health experiences will be different for girls from a migrant background or ethnic minority, LGBTQI+ girls, Traveller and Roma girls and disabled girls.56 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 before October 18th, 2023

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[55] NWC (2021) Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE
https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_SPHE_submission.pdf
[56] Ibid.