



NCCA

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

Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE

NCCA consultation

Draft specification for Junior Cycle SPHE - NCCA consultation

The NCCA is currently updating the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and as part of that work an updated junior cycle SPHE short course 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 will remain open until Friday, October 14th 2022.
You can send us your feedback by using this template and sending it to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie

Before completing the template please read the draft junior cycle SPHE short course at this link: <https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/>.

Extracts from this are provided below.

Date Protection Statement

The NCCA is committed to protecting your privacy and does not collect any personal information about you through this survey, other than information that you provide by your own consent. Any personal information you volunteer to the NCCA will be respected in accordance with the highest standards of security and confidentiality in accordance with GDPR (2016) and the Data Protection Acts (1998 - 2018). NCCA, as a public body operating under the Open Data and Public Service Information Directive (2021), is required to publish publicly funded research. Further information on the NCCA's Data Protection Policy can be found [here](#).

Any data from this will be further anonymized and aggregated and only made available after the final report is completed. 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

SPHE Short Course - Feedback

Name: Comhairle na nÓg National Executive: a group comprising one young person nominated by each of the 31 Comhairle na nÓg youth councils in each Local Authority around Ireland.	Email address: renagh.hayden@youthparticipation.ie karyn.farrell@youthparticipation.ie suzanne.byrne@youthparticipation.ie
Are you contributing views as:	Yes
An organisation	Yes
Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation on the NCCA website?	Yes
Name of organisation Comhairle na nÓg Comhairle na nÓg are local youth councils in each local authority, providing youth input into local policy. Every two years a National Executive is appointed by these local youth councils to work on an area of concern for young people nationally. At Dáil na nÓg 2022 young people voted that the National Executive would progress reform of RSE on behalf of all the Comhairlí.	

Questions to consider:

Question 1.

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

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

Insert response here:

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

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

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

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

Question 2.

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

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

Insert response here:

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

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

Strand two:

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

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

Strand three:

- "Explore human sexuality" – while we really welcome the inclusion of this on the curriculum, we feel that this section needs more detail. It should be expanded as this is too vague. Teachers could say they "explored" human sexuality but might not have. We suggest that the NCCA expands this into the following to ensure all aspects of sexuality are explored: "explore the full spectrum of human sexuality to include all LGBTQIA+. This should be gender-equality based, with an explanation on what sexuality is, as well as how it is different to sexual activity".
- The sections on 3.3. and 3.4. could be similar enough to have as one learning outcome.
- We welcome that consent is learning outcome 3.7. This is a fundamental issue for young people and it links up so much with forming positive relationships and positive communication with peers. The concept of "consent" can feel daunting, it should be age appropriate and relevant. There needs to be positive resources developed to help teachers communicate simply what consent means, how you get it and how to continue that conversation throughout sexual activity and relationships.

- In relation to learning outcome 3.8 – the group feel that there's a need to look at the stigma around it, give resources and information. There should be information on the effect of contraception (for example mood swings, physical effects, etc.).
- Reproductive/fertility education is not in the specification. We feel it should be as some behaviours that some young people engage in are directly linked to fertility issues in later life. As such, education on this is important for this age group
- Menstrual education is of concern to young people and should be included in the curriculum. Its stigma is a concern amongst young people, and it should be an emphasising part of the strand
- In relation to learning outcome 3.10 there should be confidential places to get free condoms and STI testing. There needs to be access/information to/about health care professionals.
- LGBTQIA+ needs to be more explicitly mentioned – more emphasis needs to be placed on this as we know that young LGBTQIA+ people feel very unrepresented in their schools and especially in their SPHE classes.
- We think it's important to include Gender Based Violence, Intimate Partner Abuse and Sexual Harassment in one of the learning outcomes. Noting signs of abusive relationships in all its forms and in all kinds of relationships. This needs to be addressed in a classroom setting. All young people need to learn about it.
- We welcome the inclusion of learning outcome 3.9 “investigating the influence of digital media” as we do feel that young people need to look at the impact of social media and pornography on their expectations around sex and sexual expression.

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

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

Question 3.

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

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

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

Insert response here:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Question 4.

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

Insert response here:

Rights-based approach to RSE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Stronger inclusion of LGBTQIA+

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

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

Continuous Consultation

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

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

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

Teacher training

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

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

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

Reform Agenda

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

Implementation of curriculum

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

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

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

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

Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us. Please email this document to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie before Friday, October 14th 2022



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