



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
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National Council for
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Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE

For consultation

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1. Introduction

The Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA, 2022) was published in March 2022 following the response from the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, TD. The report records and responds to the views of teachers, students, parents, and stakeholders gathered during the four-year review about how Senior Cycle could evolve to meet the needs of all our young people. It provides strong foundations for the phased redevelopment of Senior Cycle in the coming years.

Actions outlined in the Advisory Report include a review of existing curriculum components – both subjects and modules – and scoping the need for new curriculum components. In the case of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), NCCA's *Review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools* (2019) provides important information and recommendations to inform redevelopments in this area. This paper provides a background for the review of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and forms the basis for a consultation which will seek to elicit the views of a range of interested parties, including teachers, school leaders, students and parents, to contribute to the development of a new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

The paper begins by considering the historical and policy contexts (including the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools) that will inform senior cycle redevelopments in SPHE (Section 2). Section 3 presents an overview of current provision and enactment of Senior Cycle SPHE. Section 4 considers international practice in SPHE at upper secondary level across a selection of countries/jurisdictions while Section 5 draws on the previous sections to set out some issues for consideration in the development of a new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. The final section sets out a proposed brief for the development of the new curriculum.

It is intended to disseminate this paper for wide consultation. The feedback from this process will inform the work of the Development Group in updating SPHE at senior cycle.

2. Background and context

Current health and education policies, reports and strategy documents highlight the importance of Social, Personal and Health Education (including Relationships and Sexuality education) as part of young people's experience of learning within school settings and there is a growing consensus on the need for such a curriculum to be comprehensive, inclusive and age-appropriate across all stages of education from early childhood to upper secondary.

While many of the topics that arise in SPHE require a wider societal response, nonetheless, school settings, and the SPHE classroom in particular, provide an important dedicated space where students can, over time, develop knowledge, skills, dispositions and values to help them live healthier lives, make informed decisions and develop caring relationships, now and into the future.

This section sets out a brief overview of the evolution of SPHE as part of the curriculum, takes a look at the wider policy context and presents key findings from the *Report on the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education in primary and post-primary schools* (NCCA, 2019), all of which are relevant to current curriculum development work in senior cycle SPHE.

Evolution of SPHE/RSE within the curriculum

In Ireland, the origins of SPHE can be traced back to the pastoral care/tutorial system of the mid 1970s, and later more structured programme initiatives, such as the North-western Health Board's *Life Skills for Health* (1979) and *On My Own Two Feet* (1991). In 1994, the then Minister, Niamh Breathnach established an Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality. Their work led to the publication of the *Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education* (1996). Department of Education Circular M4/95 asked schools to commence a process of developing a school policy and prepare to include RSE in their curricula and Circular M20/96 set out further details regarding time requirements, training and support for SPHE. This was followed by the introduction of SPHE (including RSE) as a curriculum subject in primary (1999) and within junior cycle and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (2000). This gave structure and coherence to that which was often informally in place in Irish schools and secured dedicated space for SPHE on the timetable for the first time.

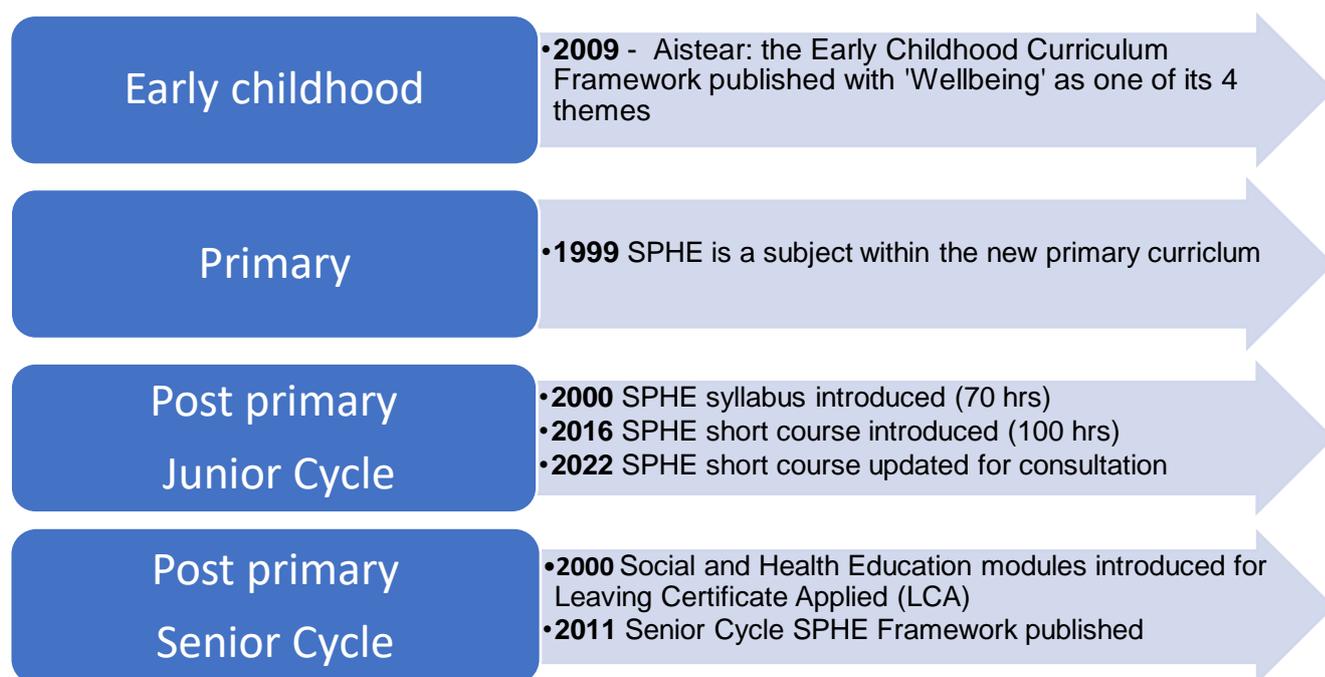


Figure 1 Sectoral timeline of SPHE curriculum development

In considering the historical development of SPHE, the creation of a separate curriculum and guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the mid-1990s, is noteworthy. Although subsequent SPHE curricula for both primary and post-primary presented RSE as an integrated component of a broader SPHE curriculum, we are still dealing with the legacy of this early separation. At school level, this has led to the separation of RSE from SPHE when it comes to classroom planning and teaching as well as a high reliance on outside speakers, while at system level it has led to the separation of CPD for SPHE and RSE. Keating (2018) provides a fuller discussion on the historical background to the development of RSE and SPHE in the curriculum.

The policy context

The socio-cultural context in which SPHE is being enacted has changed considerably since the introduction of SPHE and this, in turn, has influenced government policy in Ireland and elsewhere in relation to this area of the curriculum. The introduction of SPHE was influenced three decades ago by society wishing to respond to the social issues of the day, in particular, high levels of crisis teenage pregnancies and a HIV crisis. Similarly today, there is an impetus to update the SPHE curriculum so that it addresses some of the burning issues in society, such as gender equality, gender identity, sexual and gender-based violence, consent, online harassment and exploitation, and the influence of pornography. Equally, there is a recognition of the rights of young people to an education that helps them to realise and protect their rights as individuals and equips them to deal with the challenges of growing up in today's world.

Some key government policy initiatives that are relevant to the development of an updated senior cycle SPHE curriculum are listed below:

- The Programme for Government (2020) states that *'this Government will develop inclusive and age-appropriate curricula for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) across primary and post-primary schools, including an inclusive programme on LGBTI+ relationships'* (p.95).
- The Report on the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality (2021) includes wide ranging recommendations, one of which relates directly to SPHE redevelopment work. Recommendation 27 states: *Curriculum review and development should: (a) Promote gender equality and diversity and (b) Explicitly cover gender power dynamics, consent and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence – both online and offline – within the revised Relationships and Sexuality curriculum.* (p.75) The NCCA was invited to present on how these actions are being progressed at the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Gender Equality on July 14th 2022.
- *Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy for Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV)* was published in June 2022 along with an ambitious implementation plan. NCCA's work is linked to a number of these actions including *updating of the primary, junior cycle and senior cycle SPHE/RSE curriculum specifications* (p.12) and the *provision of online toolkit* (p.13). Specific areas to be addressed include healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, domestic and gender-based violence and coercive control, safe and responsible use of the internet and social media and LGBTQI+ matters.

- The Government has undertaken a review of the 2013 Action Plan on Bullying and procedures on bullying. This review specifically considered areas such as cyber bullying, gender identity bullying and sexual harassment and, arising from this work, updated anti-bullying procedures for schools are due to be published soon.
- The focus on wellbeing across education policy and practice has heightened awareness of the importance of SPHE as a core pillar of a wellbeing curriculum. *The Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019)* provides space and opportunities for schools to review the role of SPHE/RSE in supporting students' wellbeing.

Within the boarder context, Ireland is accountable for a number of international commitments, with the following being of particular importance:

- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is seen as the most far-reaching and widely supported legal framework of rights for children and young people. Although the right to mandatory school-based health and sexuality education is not explicitly named, the provision of such is seen as an enabler for children in realising and protecting a range of rights, including rights to health and wellbeing, protection, participation, identity and equality (Bourke, 2022). Observations made by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to the Irish State, 29th January 2016 expressed '*concern at the severe lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education*' and asked that Ireland would '*adopt a comprehensive sexual and reproductive policy for adolescents and ensure that sexual and reproductive health education is part of the mandatory school curriculum*' (par 58).
- The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, (Istanbul Convention) was agreed in 2011 and came into force in 2014.
This states: *Parties shall take, where appropriate, the necessary steps to include teaching material on issues such as equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect, non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships, gender-based violence against women and the right to personal integrity, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners, in formal curricula and at all levels of education* (article 14).
- In September 2015, Ireland adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The focus of the 2030 Agenda is the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their respective 169 sub-targets. A number of the goals and targets are relevant to SPHE such

as SDG 3 – *to ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all*; SDG 4 – *to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education*; SDG 5 – *to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*; and SDG 16 – *to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development*.

The Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools

Between June 2018 and December 2019, the NCCA conducted a major review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools during which a wide range of education stakeholders and interested parties were consulted.

When asked to comment on their experience of SPHE, these were some of the key messages expressed by senior cycle students and published in the report:

- Students said that teachers focused mainly on teaching about health and nutrition, bullying, substance misuse and biological aspects of RSE, in particular conception, contraception and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). A small number of senior cycle students said they had discussed consent in the context of SPHE/RSE and where this occurred it was limited and unsatisfactory.
- Generally, students said that topics were addressed in a manner that was ‘too little, too late and too biological’ and they expressed a wish to discuss the emotional and interpersonal dynamics of relationships more.
- Students were critical of a ‘risk and danger’ approach to teaching about topics which they said was not helpful or effective.
- Students critiqued the heteronormative lens through which SPHE was taught and the lack of opportunities to learn about different sexual orientations.
- When it came to RSE, students expressed frustration and felt very let down because they generally felt they were not receiving the education in this area that they needed.
- Students felt that SPHE classes were out of touch with their lived experience and topics were not pitched in a manner that was relevant to their age and stage of development.

The topics identified by 500+ students (respondents to an online survey that formed part of the review) as most important to address in SPHE were: LGBTQ+ and sexual orientation, healthy relationships and consent.

Sample comments from senior cycle SPHE students:

We just talked about sex like the kind of diseases and protection but not about the relationship things like how to break up with someone. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We never learned about relationships and what's a valuable relationship and that's more important. (Transition year student, post-primary focus group)

We just did about diet, nutrition and bullying all the time. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

We're never told about the emotional side... It's too much about the dangers. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

It sometimes feels like the teacher is scared of stuff like RSE. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

RSE is something we should be doing but aren't doing. It's often used for other things such as career guidance or last year it was all about drugs and alcohol. (Sixth year student, post-primary focus group)

Teachers consulted as part of the review of RSE affirmed the value of SPHE/RSE within the curriculum and agreed on the importance of teaching in an open, dialogical and non-judgmental manner. However, many teachers felt they lacked the necessary training to enable them to effectively and confidently teach SPHE, and this was more frequently noted by those teaching senior cycle students. They recognised the need for a curriculum that is relevant to young people's real-life questions and concerns but felt they needed further training and supports as well as clarity on what topics should be taught at different stages of learning. Many were critical of the lack of time for planning and coordination of SPHE across both junior cycle and senior cycle.

Across all stakeholders, a strong consensus emerged from the review that the future development of RSE needs to be grounded in affirming the rights and responsibilities of young people, responsive to students' identified needs, and age and developmentally appropriate, inclusive and holistic in its approach.

Section summary

Key events in the evolution of SPHE within the curriculum can be summarised as follows:

- Publication of the Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education (1996)
- SPHE included as a subject within the new primary curriculum (1999)
- SPHE introduced on a mandatory basis for all junior cycle students and as part of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme (2000)
- A framework to support schools who wish to provide for senior cycle SPHE published (2011)
- Junior cycle SPHE short course published (2016)
- Junior cycle SPHE short course updated and open for consultation (2022).

Looking at some contextual factors that will shape the development of senior cycle SPHE, the following are noteworthy:

- The wider socio-cultural environment and specific social issues have influenced the topics included for learning within the SPHE curriculum. So too, any redeveloped SPHE curriculum will seek to address the real-world issues that matter for young people's health and wellbeing today.
- Specific government priorities, policies and commitments will influence the nature of provision of SPHE in senior cycle and inform the selection of topics included in an updated curriculum. Ireland's commitments at an international level also have relevance for SPHE and all curriculum development work in this area will need to be aligned with these.
- A further important consideration relates to the findings from the *Review of Relationships and Sexuality in primary and post-primary schools (2019)* which provided clear evidence of the need for an up-to-date, inclusive and comprehensive curriculum that is age and developmentally appropriate across all levels of education. The importance of professional development and other supports for teachers in this area of the curriculum was strongly voiced throughout the Review.

3. SPHE in the curriculum

This section sets out an overview of SPHE within the Irish curriculum and then concludes with findings from a selection of reports from the Department of Education (DE) Inspectorate on the quality of work in SPHE within schools.

Early childhood and the primary curriculum

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework is for children from birth to six years. It describes children's learning and development using four themes. These are Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. Wellbeing is about children being confident, happy and healthy and focuses on both psychological and physical wellbeing.

The primary curriculum is presented in seven areas, one of which is Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE). SPHE has a broad set of aims and learning objectives and is taught from junior infants to sixth class. As set out in the *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (2020)*, a curriculum area named 'Wellbeing' is proposed as part of the redeveloped primary curriculum. This area would include learning associated with SPHE/RSE and PE. Under these proposals, SPHE would have significantly more time than in the current primary curriculum, which suggests a weekly allocation of 30 mins.

Junior Cycle SPHE

In April 2000, the Department of Education and Science approved the Junior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) syllabus and directed that 'all second level schools must timetable Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) as part of the Junior Cycle core curriculum from September 2003' (Circular M11/03).

The Junior Cycle SPHE syllabus (2000) was designed to support 70 hours of learning and teaching (one class period per week across the three years of junior cycle) in accordance with Circular M22/00 and M11/03.

The syllabus set out the learning across ten modules:

- Belonging and integrating
- Self-management: a sense of purpose
- Communication skills
- Physical health

- Friendship
- Relationships and sexuality
- Emotional health
- Influences and decisions
- Substance use
- Personal safety.

Arising from the *Framework for Junior Cycle (2015)*, the NCCA developed a 100-hour SPHE short course which was published in 2016. The learning outcomes were set out across four strands:

Strand 1: Who am I? This strand focused on developing self-awareness and building self-esteem.

Strand 2: Minding myself and others. This strand provided opportunities for students to reflect on how they can best take care of themselves and others.

Strand 3: Team up. This strand focused on students learning about important relationships in their lives and building relationship skills.

Strand 4: My mental health. This strand focused on building positive mental health, examining young people's experience of mental ill health and learning how to support themselves and others in challenging times.

An updated Junior Cycle SPHE short course is scheduled to be implemented in schools in September 2023. Informed by the findings of the Review of RSE (NCCA, 2019) the redevelopment of the Junior Cycle curriculum commenced in 2021 with a review of the 2016 SPHE short course. A summary of the findings from this review is included in the *Background paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle SPHE* (NCCA, 2021). The NCCA Council approved the draft updated Junior Cycle SPHE short course in June 2022 and the consultation on this draft curriculum is open until October 18th.

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

Like its predecessor, the learning is built around four strands, with the addition of three cross-cutting elements (awareness, dialogue, and reflection and action) as illustrated below.

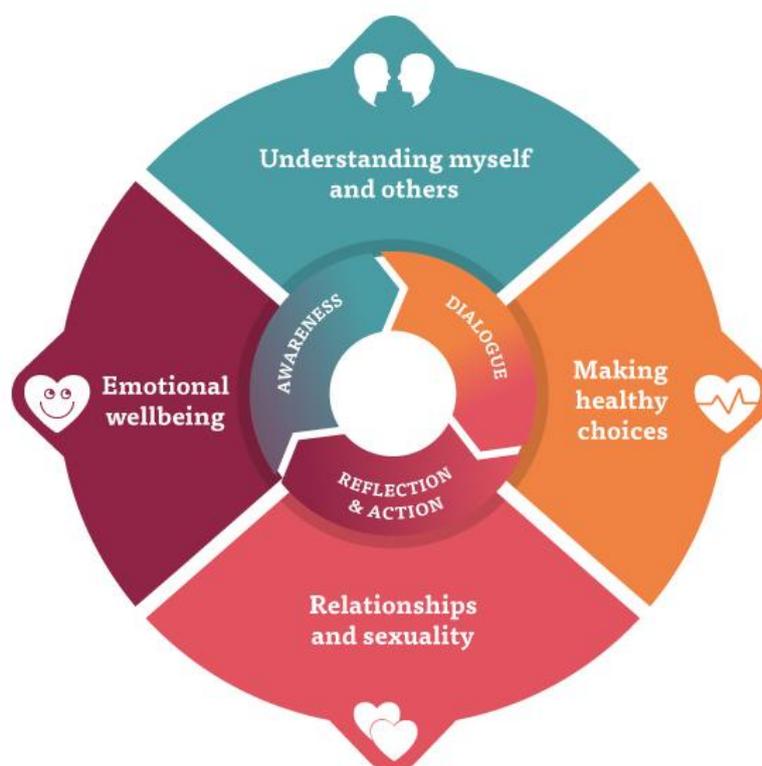


Figure 2: Structure of draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum

Strand 1: Understanding myself and others This strand focuses on developing self-awareness and self-esteem and building some of the foundational skills and dispositions needed for healthy relationships and to thrive in life (including communicating and negotiating, listening, showing empathy, respecting difference, self-management/self-regulation).

Strand 2: Making healthy choices This strand offers opportunities for students to consider how they can make healthy choices to support their wellbeing. It explores what does being healthy look like for a teenager, what helps or gets in the way of making healthy choices and how to access reliable information to support good choices. Students will also practice the skills needed for making healthy decisions and come to understand contextual factors, such as peer, family, media and social pressures, that influence decisions.

Strand 3: Relationships and sexuality This strand explores the cognitive, physical, emotional and social aspects of relationships and sexuality through a positive, inclusive and rights-based approach. The focus is on family relationships, friendships, romantic/intimate and potential sexual relationships in the future.

Strand 4: Emotional wellbeing This strand primarily focuses on nurturing emotional wellbeing and promoting positive mental health. It helps develop problem solving and coping skills for dealing with the emotional ups and downs of life, explores how to support themselves and others in challenging times and discusses where/how to find support, when needed.

The draft updated junior cycle SPHE specification can be viewed [at this link](#).

Senior Cycle SPHE

The timetabling of SPHE across senior cycle education is not mandatory, although schools are required to provide a minimum of six lessons per annum in Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE). For this reason, provision of SPHE for senior cycle students varies greatly within and between schools. The following table provides the most recent data (provided by the Department of Education) on current provision of timetabled SPHE across different senior cycle programmes from 2021-2022 and shows that the majority of schools are not timetabling SPHE for their senior cycle students.

Table 1: Number and percentage of schools providing time-tabled SPHE at senior cycle during 2021-2022

Year	Number of schools time-tabling SPHE	% of schools
Transition Year	152	22% of 690 schools offering TY
Leaving Certificate Year 1 (5th yr)	131	18% of all post-primary schools
Leaving Certificate Year 2 (6th Year)	128	17.5% of all post-primary schools

In the case of students undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme, the Social Education course is a compulsory component of this programme. Social and Health Education 1 and 2 account for two of the six modules in Social Education. The aims and content of Social and Health Education in LCA correspond closely to those of SPHE. Social and Health Education module 1 includes topics such as self-awareness, assertive communication, taking care of your health and relationships and sexuality education while Social and Health Education module 2 includes topics that build on the learning in module 1 and also focuses on responsibilities in relation to parenting and coping with problems and crisis situations. The Social Education modules for LCA have not been updated since they were introduced in 2000.

To date, schools who wish to time-table SPHE for their senior cycle students (apart from those undertaking LCA) have been guided by the *Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework* published by the NCCA (2011). The five areas of learning for Senior Cycle SPHE set out in this framework are:

- Mental health
- Gender studies
- Substance use
- Relationships and sexuality

- Physical activity and nutrition.

As mentioned, schools are not required to time-table senior cycle SPHE, but they are required to teach a minimum of six lessons annually (generally assumed to be 35/40 minute lessons) of RSE. A variety of approaches are in evidence when providing these RSE lessons such as teaching RSE as part of another subject (e.g. R.E. or Biology), blocked workshops and the use of visiting speakers. According to the 2018 Life Skills Survey a sizable minority of schools were either not providing RSE to senior cycle students or providing fewer than six lessons. Just over half of the 297 principals who responded to the survey said they were providing six or more lessons in RSE to 5th and 6th year students (see table 2 for responses).

Table 2: Provision of RSE to senior cycle students as reported by 297 school principals (2018)

Number of class periods timetabled for RSE in Transition Year	No of responses	% of responses
No planned programme or 0	49	16.5%
1-2 classes	77	26%
3-5 classes	33	11%
6-8 classes	91	30.5%
9+ classes	47	16%
Number of class periods timetabled for RSE in Leaving Certificate Year 1	No of responses	% of responses
No planned programme or 0 Count	28	9.5%
1-2 classes	75	25%
3-5 classes	35	12%
6-8 classes	107	36%
9+ classes	52	17.5%
Number of class periods timetabled for RSE in Leaving Certificate Year 2	No of responses	% of responses
0 Count	41	14%
1-2 classes	71	24%
3-5 classes	31	10%
6-8 classes	102	34.5%
9+ classes	52	17.5%

Note: The timetabling of six lesson (minimum) RSE per annum is mandatory across all year groups

Insights from the SPHE Inspection Reports (2018-2020)

The DE Inspectorate is responsible for the evaluation of primary and post-primary schools and centres for education. In fulfilling that responsibility, the Inspectorate carry out inspections in schools and centres for education, and subsequently publish reports on the quality of work in specific curriculum areas within a school/centre. A review of 16 SPHE inspection reports undertaken between 2018 and 2020, provides helpful insights into features of quality practice in regard to the provision of teaching and learning in SPHE as well as challenges that exist.

Where practice was found to be very good, the following features were evident:

- collaborative subject planning and collegial practice
- lessons were student-centred, relevant, age-appropriate and engaging
- there was a positive class atmosphere conducive to learning in SPHE
- teachers were consulted before being deployed to teach SPHE and facilitated in participating in relevant CPD
- there was a core committed team of SPHE teachers
- provision and support for SPHE was prioritised by school leadership.

Where inspections found curriculum implementation challenges these were often linked to

- insufficient use of appropriate pedagogies
- lack of clarity of purpose of the intended learning
- a need for more consideration of the usefulness and relevance of SPHE resources for the target group (particularly in the context of age-appropriateness)
- a need to consider ways of assessing progress in learning in SPHE
- lack of subject department collaborative planning
- absence of a core SPHE team.

These inspection reports provide a helpful context for discussions as the new senior cycle SPHE curriculum is developed.

Section summary

- SPHE was first introduced as a core part of the curriculum at the turn of this century and is now strongly embedded in the curriculum across primary and junior cycle.
- The time-tabling of SPHE across all senior cycle programmes is not mandatory. Recent data shows that the majority of schools are not time-tabling SPHE for their senior cycle classes, with the exception of students engaging in Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programmes, within which Social and Health Education modules are compulsory. This means that only students in a minority of schools (<20%) currently have access to learning in SPHE beyond junior cycle.
- Although schools are required to provide a minimum of six lessons per annum in RSE across all classes and year groups, approximately half of schools (based on a sample of 297) are not meeting this requirement at senior cycle, with more than a third of school principals saying that they provide either no RSE lessons or just 1-2 class periods.
- Inspection reports highlight the features of quality practice in SPHE and are helpful in informing discussion about conducive conditions and supports that will be needed for the successful implementation of an updated senior cycle SPHE curriculum.

4. International practice in upper secondary SPHE

Provision for Social, Personal and Health Education in schools internationally has a history of more than half a century. Responsibility for developing a curriculum can vary from country to country with the Ministry for Education taking the lead or the Ministry for Health. Schools are recognised worldwide as important settings for health and wellbeing education as it is during childhood and adolescence that most future health-related lifestyles, behaviours, habits and attitudes are formed. Research on the link between provision of quality school-based SPHE/RSE and positive student health outcomes has created heightened awareness of the importance of this area of education across the world. (UNESCO, 2018).

This section provides a summary of SPHE provision in the equivalent phase to senior cycle in three jurisdictions. These jurisdictions were selected for review as they offer SPHE as part of the upper secondary curriculum (although they name the subject differently); promote a comprehensive, rights-based and inclusive approach; and the curriculum is taught through English. To further place the NCCA's work in reviewing the SPHE/RSE curriculum in the international context, a summary of themes suggested for sexuality education for 15-18 year olds in the [International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education](#) (2018) is also provided at the end of this section.

Table 3 Jurisdictions reviewed – equivalent to senior cycle SPHE

Jurisdiction	SPHE taught as:	Senior cycle equivalent phase
New Zealand	<i>Hauora</i> ¹ and health and physical education (HPE)	Years 11-13, ages 15-18 Levels 6-8 of The New Zealand Curriculum
Ontario (Canada)	Health and physical education (HPE)	Grades 9-12, ages 14-18
Scotland	Health and wellbeing (HWB)	Secondary 4-6 (S4-6), ages 15-18 Curriculum for Excellence, fourth level

¹ Hauora is the Māori philosophy of health and wellbeing

New Zealand

Place of SPHE in the curriculum: *Hauora* and health and physical education (HPE) is one of eight learning areas in the curriculum for the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA), the senior secondary leaving certificate.

Aim: HPE is about taking action to enhance wellbeing. Through the subjects of health studies, home economics and physical education, students learn that wellbeing is a combination of the physical, mental and emotional, and social and spiritual aspects of people's lives. The aim of HPE is to enable young people to develop the knowledge, values, and competencies to live full and active lives, and to take responsibility for improving their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their communities. Alongside a focus on personal development and taking personal responsibility there is an equal focus on developing young people who are grounded, connected, critical thinkers who have a sense of social responsibility/social justice and connection to the people, communities, and environments around them and can positively contribute to the health and wellbeing of others.

The HPE learning area is based on these underlying and interdependent concepts:

- Hauora – a Māori philosophy of wellbeing that includes dimensions relating to spiritual, mental and emotional, physical, and social wellbeing.
- Health promotion – a process that helps to develop and maintain supportive physical and emotional environments and that involves students in personal and collective action.
- The socio-ecological perspective – a way of viewing and understanding the interrelationships that exist between the individual, others, and wider society.

Areas of learning

The **seven key areas of learning** are:

- mental health
- sexuality education
- food and nutrition
- body care and physical safety
- physical activity
- sport studies
- outdoor education.

In addition, **four strands** set out achievement objectives and at level 8 (17/18 yrs) they include:

- Personal health and physical development:

- personal growth and development
 - regular physical activity
 - safety management
 - personal identity.
- Movement concepts and motor skills:
 - movement skills
 - positive attitudes
 - science and technology
 - challenges and social and cultural factors.
- Relationships with other people:
 - relationships
 - identity, sensitivity and respect
 - interpersonal skills.
- Healthy communities and environment:
 - societal attitudes and values
 - community resources
 - rights, responsibilities and laws
 - people and the environment.

Within this senior phase of education, the HPE (Health Studies and Physical Education) curriculum is also expressed as a Learning Matrix of 'Big Ideas' and 'Significant Learning'. Significant Learning is learning that is critical for students to know, understand and do by the end of a curriculum level. Teachers use the Learning Matrix as a tool to construct relevant learning programmes for their students. A programme of learning might begin with a context that is relevant to the local area of the school or something that students are particularly interested in.

Time allocation: There is no specific guidance on the time to be allocated to the teaching of the HPE programme.

Features of the New Zealand HPE curriculum includes

- awareness of the importance of the local context and student needs in planning a relevant learning programme while at the same time setting out learning that is 'not to be missed'.
- a balancing of personal, interpersonal and societal perspectives on health and wellbeing and an awareness of the interconnectedness of all three.
- a strong message that health and wellbeing is more than a matter of personal choice and individual responsibility and hence many of the learning objectives at upper secondary

level ask students to 'critically evaluate' and 'critically analyse' societal attitudes and practices (see [achievement objectives](#)).

- an understanding that a variety of health-promotion actions are needed at personal, interpersonal, and societal levels to enhance health and wellbeing
- a holistic approach that is underpinned by principles of social justice, fairness and inclusion.

Ontario

Place of SPHE in the curriculum: Students follow Health and Physical Education (HPE) courses throughout senior secondary education (Grades 9-12, ages 14-18. In upper secondary, the Ministry of Education does not mandate the courses to be taken from a range of Healthy Active Living Education (HALE) courses and students are required to earn one credit in HPE to complete their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). In their final years, students can earn credits for courses focused on specified activities and learning that provide an academic grounding for post-secondary studies in areas related to HPE (such as health and fitness, health promotion and recreation studies).

Aim: HPE aims to help students develop physical and health literacy by developing the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in life as active, healthy, and socially responsible citizens. It aims to help students to make healthy and safe choices at home, at school and in the community; develop healthy, active living habits to enhance their physical and mental wellbeing for the rest of their lives; understand themselves and others; think critically; develop and maintain healthy relationships, social skills and emotional wellbeing; understand equity and fair play; and develop respect for diversity.

Areas of learning: There are three strands in the Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum:

Strand A – Active living: active participation, physical fitness, and safety - the skills and knowledge to enjoy being active and healthy throughout life, taught through opportunities to participate regularly and safely in physical activity and to learn how to develop and improve personal fitness.

Strand B – Movement competence: movement skills and concepts, and movement strategies - the skills to participate in a range of physical activities, taught through opportunities to develop movement skills and apply movement concepts and strategies in games, sports, dance, and other physical activities.

Strand C – Healthy living: understanding health concepts, making healthy choices, and making connections for healthy living. This includes healthy eating; personal safety and injury prevention; substance use, addictions, and related behaviours; human development and sexual health; and learning about the factors that contribute to healthy development (e.g. a sense of personal responsibility for lifelong health, and an understanding of how living healthy, active lives is connected with the world around us and the health of others).

Strand C, *Healthy Living* is the stand that corresponds most closely with SPHE in an Irish context. The topics addressed in Grade 12 Healthy Living (age 17/18) are summarized below.

Table 4: Topics addressed in Grade 12 Healthy Living (age 17/18)

Healthy eating		Making healthy eating decisions in different contexts	Personal circumstances and healthy eating
Personal safety	Harassment, violence, abuse – effects, legal implications and responses	Using living skills and supports to reduce vulnerability to harassment, violence, abuse	Harassment, violence, abuse in local and global contexts – resources, supports and responses
Substance use, addictions and related behaviours	Consequences of substance misuse – short-term, long-term, legal	Developing resilience – making healthy choices	Local and international trends and issues
Human development and sexual health	Skills and strategies for evolving relationships	Identifying personal aptitudes and interests: developing life plans Maintaining health and wellbeing when independent	Bias and stereotyping in media portrayal of relationships

Time allocation: A full credit Healthy Active Living Education (HALE) course requires a minimum of 110 hours of instruction time and each course is taught over the course of one year. Students may take more than one course in each of Grades 9, 10, 11 and 12.

Features of the Ontario curriculum include a focus on:

- promoting personal and interpersonal skills as well as skills of creative and critical thinking.

- highlighting the relationship between students' health and wellbeing and the world around them and building awareness of how their choices impact on others.
- building awareness about the wider social, cultural and economic context and determinants of health and wellbeing beyond those which students can control as individuals.
- promoting health literacy skills, understood as 'the skills needed to get, understand and use information to make good decisions for health'.

Scotland

Place of SPHE in the curriculum: Health and wellbeing (HWB) is one of eight curriculum areas of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). The fourth level of CfE relates to students in secondary years 4-6 (ages 15-18).

Aim: HWB aims to ensure that young people develop the knowledge and understanding, skills, resilience, capabilities and attributes they need for mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing now and in the future. It aims to enable young people to make informed decisions to improve their mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing; experience challenge, enjoyment and positive aspects of healthy living and activity; apply their mental, emotional, social and physical skills to pursue a healthy lifestyle; make a successful move to the next stage of education or work; and establish a pattern of health and wellbeing which will be sustained into adult life, and will help to promote the health and wellbeing of the next generation of Scottish children. It also aims to enable some to perform at high levels in sport or prepare for careers within the health and leisure industries.

Areas of learning: HWB is organised in six sub-areas/strands:

- mental, emotional, social and physical wellbeing
- planning for choices and changes
- physical education, physical activity and sport, and physical activity and health
- food and health
- substance misuse
- relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP).

Learning outcomes: The broad expectations for learning in all aspects of health and wellbeing are set out in Experiences and Outcomes (see [Curriculum for Excellence: Health and Wellbeing](#)).

More detailed learning intentions and lesson plans to support teachers in teaching about relationships, sexual health and parenthood (RSHP) is available at www.rhsp.scot

Time allocation: Curriculum for Excellence sets out what a young person should be able to do and the experiences that contribute to their learning, rather than detailed definitions of content or prescribed hours of study.

Features of the Scottish HWB curriculum include

- a rights-based approach which sets out to provide comprehensive information to young people across all aspects of health and wellbeing
- a central focus on healthy relationships
- a focus on helping young people become critically aware of the influences that shape their decisions and behaviours so that they can make healthy choices
- an emphasis on health and wellbeing being the responsibility of all teachers and an awareness of how learning through HWB in addition to learning about HWB, promotes confidence, independent thinking and positive attitudes and dispositions for success in learning, life and work.

International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education

Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) is an integral and critically important part of SPHE. It is also the aspect of SPHE, that attracts most attention and discussion, not only in Ireland, but across the world. In this context, it is helpful to consider how international guidance on Sexuality Education can contribute to discussion about the redevelopment of a curriculum for senior cycle SPHE. [International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education](#), developed by the United Nations Population Fund (UNPFA) which is the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency, is a technical tool that presents the evidence base and rationale for delivering comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to children and young people. Developed through a consultative process, with input from practitioners, experts and young people around the world, it identifies the characteristics of effective CSE programmes; provides guidance on developing relevant, evidence-informed, age- and developmentally-appropriate CSE curricula and teaching and learning materials that are culturally responsive; and recommends the key concepts that should be covered in curricula for all learners. These key concepts are broken down into essential curriculum topics and learning objectives for four phases (ages 5-8; 9-12; 12-15; 15-18+).

The table which follows presents the key concepts and topics for comprehensive sexuality education for students aged 15-18 and is presented along with a selection of key ideas that are recommended for exploration at this stage of learning. (See *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, pp.36-80.)

International Technical Guidance on Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Table 5: Overview of key concepts and topics and some sample key ideas for 15-18 years

Concept	Topics	Sample key ideas for 15-18 (not an exhaustive list)
Key concept 1: <i>Relationships</i>	1.1 Families 1.2 Friendship, love & romantic relationships 1.3 Tolerance, inclusion & respect 1.4 Long-term commitments & parenting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships • Different ways to express affection and love • Marriage and long-term commitments can be rewarding and challenging
Key concept 2: <i>Values, rights, culture & sexuality</i>	2.1 Values & sexuality 2.2 Human rights & sexuality 2.3 Culture, society & sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing one's own values, beliefs and attitudes • There are laws and international agreements that address human rights and sexual and reproductive health • It is important to be aware of how social and cultural norms impact sexual behaviour while developing one's own point of view
Key concept 3: <i>Understanding gender</i>	3.1 The social construction of gender & gender norms 3.2 Gender equality, stereotypes & bias 3.3 Gender-based violence (GBV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging one's own and others' gender biases • Gender inequality, social norms and power differences influence sexual behaviour and may increase the risk of sexual coercion, abuse and GBV
Key concept 4: <i>Violence & staying safe</i>	4.1 Violence 4.2 Consent, privacy & bodily integrity 4.3 Safe use of information & communication technologies (ICTs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone has a responsibility to advocate for people's health and wellbeing free from violence • Consent is critical for healthy, pleasurable and consensual sexual behaviour with a partner

<p>Key concept 5: <i>Skills for health & well-being</i></p>	<p>5.1 Norms & peer influence on sexual behaviour 5.2 Decision-making 5.3 Communication, refusal & negotiation skills 5.4 Media literacy & sexuality 5.5 Finding help & support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual decision-making has consequences for oneself and others • Effective communication is key to expressing personal needs and sexual limits
<p>Key concept 6: <i>The human body & development</i></p>	<p>6.1 Sexual & reproductive anatomy & physiology 6.2 Reproduction 6.3 Puberty 6.4 Body image</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bodies change over time, including human reproductive and sexual capacities and functions • Unrealistic standards about body image can be challenged
<p>Key concept 7: <i>Sexuality & sexual behaviour</i></p>	<p>7.1 Sex, sexuality & the sexual life cycle 7.2 Sexual behaviour & sexual response</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexuality is complex and includes biological, social, psychological, spiritual, ethical and cultural dimensions that evolve over the lifespan • Engaging in sexual behaviours should feel pleasurable and comes with associated responsibilities
<p>Key concept 8: <i>Sexual & reproductive health</i></p>	<p>8.1 Pregnancy & pregnancy prevention 8.2 HIV & AIDS stigma, care, treatment & support 8.3 Understanding, recognising & reducing the risk of STIs, including HIV</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contraceptive use can help people who are sexually active to prevent pregnancy, or plan if and when to have children, with important benefits for individuals and societies

A review of SPHE provision at the upper secondary stage of learning in New Zealand, Ontario and Scotland shows interesting similarities and differences.

Similarities include:

- A shared sense of purpose with the curriculum aiming to enable young people to lead healthy and active lives, create caring relationships and take responsibility for themselves and others.
- A strong focus on the social dimension as well as a focus on personal development and on taking personal responsibility. Students are encouraged to look at issues not just in personal or local contexts but also to adopt 'socio-ecological' perspectives so that they can better understand the interrelated factors that may be shaping their decisions and behaviours.
- An emphasis on developing critical thinkers who have the skills to critically analyse and evaluate both personal and societal attitudes and practices.
- An emphasis on health literacy skills understood as 'the skills needed to get, understand and use information to make good decisions for health' (Ontario curriculum).

Distinguishing features include:

- The area of learning that we in Ireland know as SPHE is named differently in other jurisdictions – Health and Physical Education (HPE) in New Zealand and Ontario and Health and Wellbeing (HWB) in Scotland.
- PE is included as part this area of learning in New Zealand and Ontario
- There is a vocational focus to the learning in some jurisdictions with the learning in HPE (Ontario) and HWB (Scotland) preparing students for careers in the health and leisure industries.

The *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, although by no means providing a prescription for a redeveloped SPHE curriculum within an Irish context, does provide a useful further reference point when discussing essential topics and learning outcome for senior cycle SPHE/RSE.

5. Issues for consideration

Drawing on the preceding sections, this section sets out issues for consideration during the development of the updated curriculum for senior cycle SPHE and in planning for its implementation.

The target group/s for an updated curriculum

Currently, there is a difference in the content and status of the SPHE curriculum provided for students across senior cycle depending on the programme they study. Students following the LCA programme engage in SPHE through Social and Health Education modules which are mandatory; whereas, a non-mandatory Framework for Senior Cycle SPHE is available to support planning for SPHE for all other students. In the context of removing barriers between LCE, LCA and LCVP, as announced by Minister for Education, Norma Foley TD on 29th March 2022 as part of her plans for the redevelopment of senior cycle, it is now timely to consider whether a single Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum should be designed to address the needs of students engaging in all senior cycle programmes. This will necessitate immediate consideration about the nature of the curriculum component(s) to be developed.

Status and time allocation

Clarification on the target cohort for the updated SPHE curriculum prompt two further issues for consideration: status and time allocation. It is clear from the data set out in section 3 that the majority of schools do not timetable SPHE classes in the final years of post-primary education. In order to ensure that all students have equal access to learning through SPHE, it will be necessary to consider if SPHE should be a mandatory component of a redeveloped senior cycle, and if so, what time should be allocated to this curriculum component.

The naming of this curriculum area

The question of whether SPHE might benefit from renaming merits discussion. In previous discussions, it was suggested that a 're-branding' could help in launching a new curriculum for this area of learning in senior cycle. Such renaming could point to what is at the heart of the learning and thereby also help in clarifying the core identity of this curriculum area. Perhaps a shorter title than Social, Personal and Health Education would be helpful. On the other hand, a new title for senior cycle might lead to loss of continuity with Junior Cycle SPHE.

Supporting continuity, progression and coherence in SPHE curriculum developments

There is agreement across the education stakeholders that all SPHE curriculum development going forward will be grounded in an approach that is holistic, student-centred, inclusive and age/developmentally appropriate.² There needs to be consideration of how an updated senior cycle SPHE curriculum can build on the foundations laid by the updated junior cycle specification and provide both continuity of approach and a progression of learning across an integrated SPHE/RSE curriculum.

Alignment with government policies/strategies and international commitments

SPHE curriculum developments will need to be cognisant of government policies, strategies and commitments which are relevant to this work, some of which are mentioned in Section 2.2 of this paper. These have implications for concepts and themes that need to be considered in an updated senior cycle curriculum. For example, the NCCA is committed to addressing gender equality, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and consent education through a revised SPHE curriculum and associated resources that will be developed to support an updated curriculum.

The conditions needed to support effective SPHE in senior cycle

An up-to-date curriculum, supported by teaching resources and guidance documents all play an important role in supporting good practice in SPHE. However, to effectively implement an updated senior cycle curriculum teachers will require enhanced professional development opportunities. NCCA consultations³ have consistently shown that the key enabler to more

² NCCA, Report on the Review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools (2019)

³ Such consultations include those held as part of the review of RSE in primary and post primary schools (2018-2019) and the consultation on the Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle RSE conducted in 2021.

effective teaching and learning in SPHE is teacher confidence and competence and this is more acutely felt when facilitating senior cycle SPHE classes. Attending to the creation of the supports conducive to effective implementation of an updated senior cycle SPHE curriculum will be important during the coming year.

6. Brief for the review of senior cycle SPHE

NCCA will establish a development group to undertake the task of developing an updated curriculum for senior cycle SPHE. The work of the Development Group is, in general terms, agreed by the NCCA Board for Senior Cycle and by the Council in the form of the brief set out below.

Senior cycle SPHE will be developed to support the realisation of the purpose and vision for a redeveloped senior cycle as set out the Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA, 2022). In addition, the Development Group's work will take account of national and international research and good practice in the field of SPHE/RSE as well as the NCCA's review of RSE in primary and post primary schools, and other recent relevant consultations.

Assessment in senior cycle SPHE will be classroom based and formative in nature. The learning will not be subject to external assessment by the State Examinations Commission.

The curriculum will be student-centred and outcomes-based and the time allocation will be agreed on foot of the consultation on this paper.

More specifically, the development of the new curriculum will address

- How the curriculum can affirm the agency and rights and responsibilities of young people; is responsive to their identified needs; is age and developmentally relevant and is genuinely inclusive and holistic in its approach.
- How to support continuity and progression, including how to connect with and build on learning set out in the updated junior cycle SPHE course and in other senior cycle subjects and modules as well as future learning in life, study, further and higher education, apprenticeships and traineeships, and the world of work.
- How the curriculum can respond to and support government education policy priorities and strategies, such as those aimed at promoting gender equality and addressing sexual, domestic and gender-based violence.
- How, in its presentation and learning outcomes, the curriculum can provide clarity on the expectations for learning so that the important knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and dispositions that students should gain during senior cycle SPHE are evident and unambiguous.

- How to provide for the variety of school and classroom contexts and facilitate student voice in shaping the learning at local level while at the same time setting out learning that is not to be missed.
- How the curriculum can support the further development of students' social and emotional skills, health literacy skills and their skills in critical and independent thinking.
- How to balance personal, interpersonal and social perspectives when learning about health and wellbeing while building awareness of the interconnectedness of all three.
- What resources will be necessary for the provision of the curriculum to ensure fidelity to the intended learning.

The work of the Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this brief. In the course of the work and deliberations of the Development Group, elaborations of some of these points and additional points may be added to the brief.

The curriculum will be available for public consultation in Autumn 2023.

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