Information note: Draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

October 2023

Context

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) carried out an extensive review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in 2018 and 2019. A key recommendation arising from that review was the need for an up-dated Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum spanning primary and post-primary education. The publication of the updated Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum (May 2023) and the opening of a public consultation on the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum mark important steps in this work.

Why change?

The main drivers for change in the SPHE curriculum can be summarised as:

- growing evidence of the challenges that young people in Ireland face as they navigate growing up today, coupled with evidence of the important role that school-based health education programmes can play in supporting young people's social, emotional and physical wellbeing.

- extensive feedback gathered through consultations in recent years during which students, teachers and school leaders shared their experience of SPHE in schools. Reports on these consultation are published on www.ncca.ie and clearly highlight the direction of change needed to provide more effective Social, Personal and Health Education for all children and young people. Of particular relevance are - The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality in Primary and Post Primary schools (2019); the Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE (2021) and the Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE (2022).

- national policy supporting the development of an updated SPHE curriculum that is inclusive, and age- and stage-appropriate across primary and post-primary schools. Such policies state that a redeveloped curriculum should specifically address gender equality; healthy and unhealthy relationships; consent; and domestic, sexual and gender based violence[1]

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[1] *Programme for Government*, 2020, *Report on the Citizen's Assembly on Gender Equality*, 2021 and *Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy for Domestic and Gender Based Violence*, 2022.

- international commitments to which Ireland is a signatory also have relevance for SPHE curriculum development work. In particular, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) are relevant.

What's currently provided in senior cycle?

In 2011, the NCCA published a Senior Cycle SPHE framework to support schools in timetabling and providing for SPHE for senior cycle students (apart from the approx. 5% of students undertaking the Leaving Certificate Applied [LCA] programme). Currently, the timetabling of SPHE for students in Transition Year (TY) and the Leaving Certificate Established programme is not mandatory. For this reason, provision of SPHE varies greatly within and between schools. According to Department of Education data from 2021-2022, most schools are not timetabling SPHE in senior cycle.

Year	Percentage of schools timetabling Senior Cycle SPHE
Transition Year (TY)	22% (out of the 690 schools offering TY)
Fifth Year	18%
Sixth Year	17.5%

Schools are required to provide a minimum of six RSE lessons per annum in senior cycle. According to the 2018 Life Skills Survey, a sizable minority of schools were either not providing RSE or were providing fewer than six lessons to senior cycle students. Just over half of the 297 principals responding to this survey indicated they were providing six or more lessons in RSE to 5th and 6th year students.

Since 2000, students following the LCA programme have a mandatory Social Education course made up of six modules, two of which are Social and Health Education 1 and 2. The aims and content of the Social and Health Education modules correspond closely to those of SPHE, with RSE included in Social and Health Education 1.

What is now proposed?

In February 2023, it was agreed by NCCA's Council that a Senior Cycle SPHE specification should be developed on the basis of Senior Cycle SPHE becoming mandatory and the same curriculum being accessed by all students in the final two years of senior cycle. The draft specification currently available for consultation is designed for 60 hours of classroom learning.

The provision of SPHE within Transition Year will be considered as part of NCCA's work to update the Transition Year Programme Statement.

Key features of the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

A mandatory specification for all students: It is proposed that all senior cycle students will engage with the same learning in SPHE for the first time, thus supporting equity of access to learning in this important area of the curriculum. This builds on proposals for a more integrated Senior Cycle curriculum, in which ring-fencing of the Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is further reduced.

Student-centred learning: The draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum is firmly rooted in the experiences and needs of young people growing up in Ireland today, with the focus on supporting them as they navigate the opportunities and challenges of becoming responsible and caring adults. The draft curriculum is informed by consultations and research and arising from this, there is a strong focus on supporting young people to a) build healthy relationships, b) maintain positive mental health and c) support them as they make the transition into adulthood and take greater responsibility for themselves.

Inclusivity: The draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum is designed to support high quality teaching and learning in order to meet the needs of all young people. Building on the updated Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum, the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum supports teachers in adopting an approach that is inclusive in accordance with principles of equality, human rights and responsibilities: *one that is inclusive of all genders, sexualities, ethnicities, religious beliefs, social classes and abilities/disabilities* (Rationale - page 7). Furthermore, the draft curriculum states that, *the learning outcomes should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons* (page 14).

Focus on developing competencies: In the draft curriculum, there is a strong focus on developing and deepening competencies, specifically self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, reflective and critical thinking, social awareness and health literacy skills. By encouraging students to become thoughtful and active agents in their own lives, Senior Cycle SPHE plays an important role in fostering self-confidence and self-efficacy and helps students prepare for the transition to life beyond school.

An overview of learning in the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

Visual overview of draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum
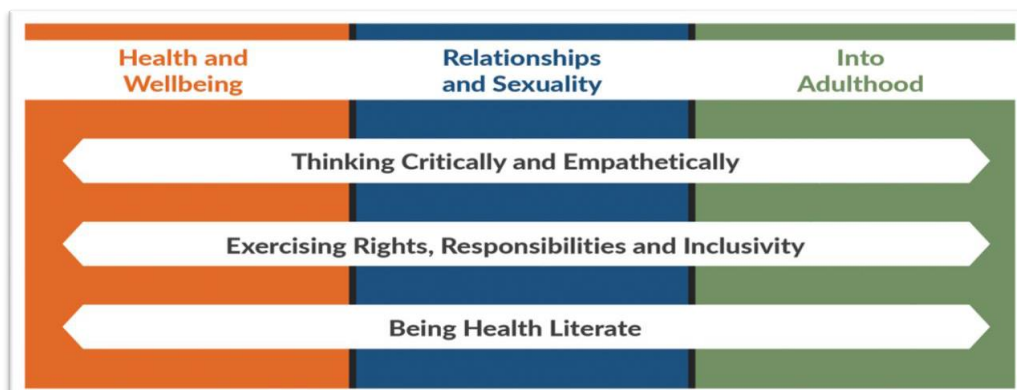
Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

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

Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives, with a particular focus on learning how to create and maintain respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students in being able to recognise and respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

Strand 3: Into Adulthood

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

The draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum can be accessed at https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/senior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe/

The curriculum development process – how does it work and who has a say?

Like all curriculum and assessment work carried out by the NCCA, including the redevelopment of the Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum, the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum has been informed by extensive research and by work with schools and the education partners, and is now the focus of extensive public consultation until November 3rd, 2023. This partnership approach to curriculum development, adopted by the NCCA, is explained further below.

Research:	The curriculum development work is informed by extensive national and international research, and by commitments set out in international conventions to which Ireland is a signatory, and commitments set out in Government of Ireland policies and strategies.

Work with schools:	Schools provide important feedback to NCCA on ideas and approaches under consideration as well as providing feedback on draft curricula.
Consultation:	Consultation is a key aspect of the curriculum development process. Multiple modes of consultation are used to enable everyone who wishes to contribute to do so. The NCCA analyses and reports on all feedback received through consultation and gives careful and deep consideration to the findings and their implications for the curriculum/programme in question. Changes made to draft curricula are reflective of the serious consideration that NCCA gives to consultation feedback. Consultations are publicised via www.ncca.ie and NCCA social media channels (Twitter @NCCAie, Instagram @NCCA_irl and Facebook @NCCA).
Deliberations:	Deliberations by the members of Council, its three Boards and Development Groups provide a further important source of expertise and advice. The members of these representative structures draw on the research, consultation findings and work with schools and other settings. The final decisions about the advice being provided to the Minister are made by the Council. The membership of the Council, Boards and Development Groups is published on the NCCA website at Council 2022-2026	NCCA and Boards and Development Groups	NCCA. In addition, notes of current relevant Development Group meetings are published at Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (ncca.ie) and Wellbeing	NCCA.

How can you contribute to the consultation?

The NCCA welcomes and encourages feedback from all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers and wider civic society. We work hard to provide different response formats for consultation participants and these can be accessed via Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (ncca.ie).

The consultation will run from July 12th to November 3rd, 2023.

Can parents withdraw their child from SPHE or aspects of it such as Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)?

Parents are the primary educators of their children and important partners in the education process within schools and beyond. Parents have a right to request that their child opt out of any learning that contravenes their conscience, including SPHE. Once a student turns 18 they have a right to decide for themselves if they wish to particate in learning.

Relevant links

The draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum can be accessed at https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/senior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe/

To view the updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum go to JC_SPHE_Short_Course_2023.pdf

To view Junior Cycle SPHE toolkit for teachers go to SPHE toolkit (curriculumonline.ie)

The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality in Primary and Post Primary schools (2019)

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