



**NCCA**

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

# Consultation Report on the Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle SPHE

February 2022

# Contents

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<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 Overview .....	1
1.2 Consultation process and responses .....	1
<b>2. CONSULTATION FINDINGS</b> .....	<b>4</b>
2.1 Key ideas emerging from the consultation .....	4
2.2 Feedback from student consultation.....	5
2.3 Feedback from teacher consultation.....	7
2.4 Feedback from other stakeholders .....	10
<b>3. IMPLICATIONS OF THE CONSULTATION</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>4. CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Appendix 1: List of expert groups with whom meetings were held .....	16
Appendix 2: List of Organisations.....	17

# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1 Overview

The *Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle SPHE* was made available for public consultation from 28<sup>th</sup> September to 5<sup>th</sup> November 2021. The background paper provides a brief overview of the evolution of Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) within the junior cycle curriculum. It then looks at relevant findings from the recent review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools and considers international perspectives on the practice of SPHE/RSE in schools. Findings from an early insights review of the experience of Junior Cycle SPHE are also included in the paper. Finally, it sets out the brief for the redevelopment of the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

The aim of this consultation was to seek the views of interested parties in relation to the ideas set out in the background paper so as to inform the work of the Development Group in redeveloping the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

## 1.2 Consultation process and responses

There were three avenues for consultation feedback: focus group meetings with teachers and students; online surveys (one for students and one for teachers); and through a written submission template, designed to facilitate feedback from all other stakeholders and interested parties, including parents.

Focus group meetings were conducted in four schools, representing different school types and locations. Within each school, separate meetings were held with a focus group of 8-10 third year students and with 3-5 SPHE teachers. In total, 38 students and 17 teachers participated in 8 focus group consultations across the four schools.

In addition, meetings were held with experts in the areas of youth mental health, substance use, anti-bullying and RSE (Appendix 1) to discuss how these areas might be addressed within a redeveloped Junior Cycle SPHE specification.

The online surveys comprised a mixture of rating scale questions and space for free-text comments and suggestions. The surveys grouped questions under the following broad areas for feedback:

- Views on the current Junior Cycle SPHE short course and specifically suggestions for additional topics that should be included in a redeveloped course or topics that need to be addressed in more depth
- Suggestions for making the Classroom Based Assessment (CBA) more engaging for students
- Considerations to be taken into account by the Development Group in developing a redeveloped specification.

Online survey responses were received from 367 students and 49 teachers. The break-down of teacher and student online responses is shown below.

Boys Voluntary Secondary School	Girls Voluntary Secondary School	Mixed Voluntary Secondary School	Community School	Community College	Comprehensive School	Educate Together Secondary School	Other
9	14	11	5	4	1	2	3

Table 1: Teacher responses by school type

Second year	Third year	Transition year	Fifth year
31	279	50	7

Table 2: Student survey responses by year group

How students responding to the survey self-identified their gender	
Female/girl	188
Male/man/boy	175
Non-binary	3
Trans	1
<b>Total number of responses</b>	<b>367</b>

Table 3: Gender

In addition to the online survey responses, 10 written submissions were received from organisations and these are listed in Appendix 2. We also received 88 submissions from different respondents with considerable overlap of points raised within these submissions, which suggests that the responses were based on a petition-style communication emanating from one source.

Opportunities to participate in the consultation were promoted in several ways: notices were placed on the [ncca.ie](http://ncca.ie) website and via the *info@ncca* newsletter to subscribers; announcements were made on social media platforms; and requests for submissions were circulated via education partners to their members. In addition, an information webinar was hosted by NCCA on September 27<sup>th</sup> to provide an update on SPHE/RSE developments and invite participation in the consultation. This was attended by over 200 stakeholders, comprising of colleagues working in health promotion and education, in teacher education and in the support services and school leadership.

## 2. Consultation findings

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In general, the ideas set out in the background paper were very well received, with many respondents affirming the need for a redeveloped Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, grounded in an approach that is holistic, inclusive, and age and developmentally appropriate. The placing of students' needs at the heart of the curriculum development process was welcomed and regarded as important in ensuring that learning in SPHE is relevant and responsive to the reality of students' lives in diverse contexts and classrooms. While many respondents felt the current short course provides ample scope for rich and relevant learning, they welcomed the curriculum redevelopment process as it offers an opportunity to re-present the short course specification in a manner that provides clarity on the intended learning and is informed by evidence of the needs of adolescents living in today's world. There was significant agreement across teacher and student consultations on the topics that need to be added to or engaged with more deeply in a redeveloped short course. Feedback from both students and teachers offered a strong endorsement for the direction of change set out in the Brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE. That said, there was a group of parents who expressed criticism of both the consultation process and proposed changes to RSE.

Detailed findings are presented on the following pages.

### 2.1 Summary of the overarching ideas emerging from the consultation

- All the topics currently taught in JC SPHE were seen to be important although teachers and students agreed that certain topics were more important and merited extended learning in a redeveloped specification. Those ranked as most important were mental health/coping with stress, self-image/body image and self-esteem, alcohol, drugs and other addictions, relationship skills, healthy and unhealthy/abusive relationships, sexual identities, sexual orientation and healthy sexual expression. As regards topics that need less attention within a revised specification, students felt there was too much focus on nutrition/healthy eating, friendship, bullying and study skills/goal setting.
- Additional areas of learning that were suggested for inclusion in a redeveloped specification included consent, pornography, gender, critical media literacy and health literacy, online relationships and online safety. These came through across all the consultation formats.
- Teachers agreed that providing accurate and up-to-date information is an important part of SPHE, although the most important thing is to focus on the development of the social and emotional skills that young people need. Specifically, teachers wanted to see the

following skills highlighted in a redeveloped curriculum; self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship and communication skills, and social awareness/empathy.

- Students and teachers alike agreed that it was important for a redeveloped specification to explicitly focus on developing the skills needed to create inclusive, respectful relationships and specifically to support young people in challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, bi-phobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination.
- The importance of fostering skills of health literacy, so that young people know how to access appropriate and trustworthy information and services to support their health and wellbeing, came through strongly from teachers and other stakeholders consulted.
- Both teachers and students concurred that many topics need to be addressed sooner and require deeper engagement to support learning in tune with students' needs and their age/stage of development as they progress through junior cycle.

## 2.2 Feedback from student consultation

Students who contributed to both the online and focus group meetings placed considerable emphasis on the need for inclusive SPHE/RSE as typified by these comments:

*In RSE we need to learn about the "whole thing", the whole range of sexual types, not just heterosexual, the whole diversity. (Student focus group)*

*My rights and the rights of others, particularly in relation to racism, sexism and homophobia... It is important not to talk about LGBTQ+ community as 'that other community'. (Student online survey)*

They also communicated a clear desire that a redeveloped specification should to be relevant to their age and stage of development and for topics to be addressed in a timely manner, stating that currently many topics are addressed too late and in a way that is more suited to a younger age group. Comments such as the following were made frequently:

*A lot of repetition - told stuff I already know. (Student focus group)*

*The topics are useful but are done in a childish way. (Student focus group)*

*The "Sexual Health" chapter is important, but it should be more about consent. Have the conversations now before it is too late. (Student focus group)*

*Substance abuse needs to be earlier. And needs to include vaping as well.*

*It is too babyish, like if someone is bullying you online, it is only what we heard in primary school. (Student online survey)*

Students would also like a redeveloped curriculum to connect with their real-life experiences.

*Bullying not really dealt with in a relevant way, not dealing with the more insidious common types of bullying. Realistic scenarios needed. (Student focus group)*

*Keep it concrete and relevant to what our life is like in the here and now. (Student focus group)*

*Sexuality, we have never done sexuality, it would be more useful than water safety. (Student focus group)*

Feedback from students highlighted how they are keen to delve more deeply into topics rather than dipping into topics in a superficial manner. Mental health and relationships and sexuality were cited as the most important topics where they would appreciate deeper discussion and learning. Comments such as the following were frequently expressed:

*A lot more topics get brushed over, not going into depth, should take the students' life into account, it needs to be brought into the students' life. (Student focus group)*

*Maybe you could go more in depth into relationship issues and sexual safety and health. (Student online survey)*

*When it comes to mental health we need to know how to get help not just "go for a walk, or meditation, count to ten". How to manage our mental health in a realistic way, manage the ups and downs. And where to get support! (Student focus group)*

Students would also like a redeveloped curriculum to be framed more positively and in a more balanced manner.

*People at our age don't have sex usually but we have started puberty and we have feelings, attractions. Should talk about it- it is not a bad thing - sexual feelings. (Student online survey)*

*We don't talk about the positives of social media - Too much focus on negative aspects of being online. (Student focus group)*

*Focus is on staying away from things as opposed to how to get off it and/or manage it. (Student focus group)*

*We are always told study is good but there is no talk about workaholics and if you study too much, no talk about the other end of the spectrum. Even with healthy eating, we are told about it but not about what could happen if we take it to the other end if we go too far with healthy eating. (Student focus group)*

Specific additional topics raised in the student consultation that merit consideration by the Development Group are racism and discrimination, gaming, gambling and vaping along with the topics already mentioned on page 4 of this report.

As mentioned previously, students felt there was too much focus on nutrition/healthy eating, friendship, bullying and study skills/goal setting. This may be a reflection of the focus given to these topics in support materials, rather than the specification itself giving these emphases.

As with other junior cycle short courses, students are required to complete one CBA in SPHE and this can be completed at any time during second or third year. In the consultations, the majority of students were positively disposed to doing a CBA in SPHE provided they could choose from a broad range of projects and display their learning in different formats.

Students valued flexibility and choice and stressed the importance of being able to research and present their learning on a topic of particular interest to them and one that has a practical application. Finally, they wished to be able to work in pairs or small groups.

The following comments provide a flavour of students' views on the CBA:

*SPHE is for the real world so the CBA should ask you to do something practical.*  
(Student focus group)

*An idea – give students a scenario and ask them to decide how they would deal with the scenario/problem – not necessarily a right or wrong answer or one answer to this. It would assess students' ability to find relevant and reliable information and find supports/services. It would also assess their decision-making and problem-solving skills.* (Student focus group)

*Include a research element or survey that involves other students.* (Student focus group)

*Give a wide variety (of choices) that will suit everyone but not too wide so you can't decide.*  
(Student focus group)

*I hate to say, but I think it is quite important to have assessment in SPHE. If it is all just chat then we don't know what we've learned. We have a copy, but we need to encourage projects throughout the year, maybe so kids remember what goes on in class to reflect on it.* (Student focus group)

## 2.3 Feedback from teacher consultation

There was a clear convergence of views between student and teacher consultation feedback, across both the online surveys and focus group consultations. Many teachers spoke about the need to be 'brave' in responding to the real needs that young teenagers are bringing into the SPHE classroom. They also expressed an awareness of currently touching on topics too late and not having time to explore them in a meaningful way.

*The course is excellent...we cover so many topics but a lot on the surface. (Teacher online survey)*

*When students are ready (for a topic) that is the best approach. 'Lockers' is too late in 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> year. We feel that we are hitting everything too late. (Teacher focus group)*

*Need to ensure that the new curriculum is brave and is related to their lives in the way young people are living today. (Teacher focus group)*

*I believe some of the material included in SPHE is overly simplistic and does not really reflect the level that Junior Cycle students are at. The learning outcomes reflect this. (Teacher online survey)*

*Often students in 3<sup>rd</sup> year are 16 and need guidance and information about topics such as consent and pornography. We have to be brave and respond to the real world needs of our young people. (Teacher focus group)*

In general, teachers agreed that a redeveloped specification should place a greater emphasis on the development of social and emotional skills over the transmission of facts and information.

*Not lists of content... less focus on the facts and more on social emotional skills. (Teacher focus group)*

When teachers were asked to name additional topics that should be taught as part of Junior Cycle SPHE that are not currently included the most common suggestions related to relationship education as illustrated in the word cloud below.



Figure 1: Suggestions from teachers for additional topics

The majority of teachers who participated in the consultation have not yet conducted CBAs with their SPHE students. Just five of the 49 teachers who responded to the survey had completed a CBA. The gradual transition to 400 hours of wellbeing and associated gradual take-up of the wellbeing short courses has contributed to the low level of engagement with the SPHE CBAs and the pandemic has also interrupted engagement with CBAs generally.

When questioned about this, teachers expressed very diverse views in regard to the potential role and value of a CBA in SPHE. Those who questioned the value of a CBA gave one or more of the following reasons: formal assessment in SPHE is not appropriate or needed; applying quality descriptors to student work in SPHE is problematic; students are stressed with an overload of assessment and SPHE should not be adding to this.

Those teachers who commented positively on the CBA saw its potential as a useful learning experience and suggested ways that the CBA could be made engaging for students. Echoing the students, the teachers' suggestions included: providing lots of choice of topics and flexibility in how students engage in the CBA; encouraging students to base their CBA on a real-life scenario or question of interest; asking students to create an awareness tool or create advice/guidance for their peers or enabling them to engage in activism on a particular issue of concern. The following sample comments represent suggestions made by teachers as regards the CBA.

*They need to pick a topic themselves that they are interested in. (Teacher focus group)*

*Keep it flexible, open and manageable. (Teacher focus group)*

*If working in groups – pick one topic but each person would look at it from different perspectives – that would expose the students to multiple perspectives which is good and also make the work manageable. (Teacher focus group)*

*The presenting can be stressful so to avoid anxiety allow different ways of demonstrating the learning. Presenting shouldn't always mean standing up with a PPT. (Teacher focus group)*

*Build assessment practices throughout the three years and avoid what is causing so much anxiety for students. (Teacher focus group)*

*Could the CBA ask students to set certain goals? And then set out their steps for achieving that goal and track their progress and explain how they have worked to achieve that goal. E.g. goal of healthy life-style, goal of becoming more confident, etc. (Teacher focus group)*

And when asked in focus group settings, what success would look like at the end of three years of Junior Cycle SPHE, many teachers referred to students gaining specific skills and dispositions.

*I would want each student to gain the capacity to develop and maintain healthy relationships, and to develop critical social and emotional skills including self-management, communication, coping strategies, critical thinking and problem-solving. (Teacher focus group)*

*Able to make relationships and able to take care of themselves. (Teacher focus group)*

*That they are able to deal with their mental health and know the support mechanisms that are available. (Teacher focus group)*

*Tools and strategies to deal with difficult situations. Knowing who to go to and where to go when seeking help and assistance for anything. (Teacher focus group)*

*Valuing their own and others' uniqueness, building empathy, acceptance of difference without judgment. (Teacher focus group)*

In addition to the specific feedback that will inform the ongoing development work, professional development was highlighted by teachers as being critically important when it comes to the successful implementation of a redeveloped SPHE specification. Echoing previous consultations, including that of the review of RSE in 2018 and 2019, teachers spoke about the need for enhanced CPD support to build teachers' confidence and competence in teaching the full range of topics that need to be addressed within a redeveloped curriculum.

In addition, teachers talked about the need for quality, up-to-date teaching and learning resources linked to the strands of the SPHE short course and expressed appreciation for the recent development of SPHE online toolkits for teachers at [www.curriculumonline.ie](http://www.curriculumonline.ie) and would like this to be developed further in line with a redeveloped specification.

Finally, many teachers commented on the perceived low status of SPHE, relative to other subjects, and wished to see greater understanding and appreciation of its value and role in supporting student wellbeing. In this context, the fact that SPHE is the only mandatory subject at post-primary level that can be taught without a formal qualification or Teaching Council accreditation was mentioned as impacting negatively on the subject.

## **2.4 Feedback from other stakeholders**

The NCCA received 10 written submissions which broadly affirmed the direction of change as set out in the background paper and agreed that junior cycle students need quality, up-to-date SPHE that is delivered in a timely and age-appropriate manner.

Submissions from the Irish Family Planning Association (IFPA) and the Ombudsman for Children Office (OCO) stressed the importance of framing a redeveloped SPHE/RSE

curriculum within a rights-based framework, referring to international treaties that are binding for all states and which uphold children's right to education, right to health care and right to non-discrimination. Furthermore, the OCO stressed the importance of *taking a child-centred approach by engaging with children across the age ranges and ensuring their views and ideas are to the fore* throughout the curriculum development process.

The National Women's Council (NWC) stated that the most important consideration for the Development Group in redeveloping the curriculum is to take a *gender-sensitive and feminist approach*. This view was echoed and developed by Women's Aid in their submission as follows:

*Women's Aid believes that schools have an essential role to play in promoting gender equality and preventing relationship violence. [...] Therefore, the SPHE curriculum should include; education on gender equality and harmful gender stereotypes; relationships and sex education, including consent; the promotion of healthy/safe relationships; the impact of social media, online abuse and harassment and image-based abuse; how to identify unhealthy relationships and where to look for support. ... The SPHE curriculum should also address the impact of pornography on children and young people. Pornography harms both girls and boys, by influencing expectations, normalising disrespectful sexual behaviour and promoting a misogynistic, and often abusive and violent, models of sexual expectations.*

Most submissions affirmed the importance of a redeveloped specification being inclusive of all students to *ensure that young people are not alienated and can see themselves reflected within the content being discussed* (NWC). In addition, it was suggested that the Development Group must ensure that *the updated SPHE curriculum is inclusive, flexible and responsive to the different needs and changing lives of young people, as well as to the variety of settings and environments where SPHE may be taught, including Youthreach settings*. (Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health, HIV Ireland).

Staying with the theme of inclusion, the joint submission from the Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools, Catholic Education Partnership and Catechetical Council restated its commitment to inclusive SPHE/RSE.

*Our schools are inclusive and our pupils reflect the rich diversity of the Irish population. We would like the programme to reflect the needs of all our students, and perhaps contain explicit reference to the inclusion of students from all faiths and no faiths, from different cultural and religious backgrounds and a wide variety of personalities, abilities and sexual orientation. Catholic schools support the Junior cycle programme, including a comprehensive, relevant and age appropriate SPHE / RSE curriculum specification. However, as parents are the first educators of their children, their views must be considered and respected... We would like to see included practical skills training that would include knowledge of and building of resilience as a core skill, appropriate use of social media and technology, issues*

*dealing with online dating Apps, as well as the adverse effects of pornography on mental health and wellbeing. (Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools, Catholic Education Partnership and Cathethetical Council)*

The National Parents Council Post Primary (NPCPP) suggested that a redeveloped curriculum needs to be cognisant of *the diversity of families in Ireland today* and how *Irish society has changed radically in terms of religious, cultural, ethnicity and acknowledged sexuality* and suggested that such diversity should be framed as a resource for learning.

*Respect for diversity and an understanding of how difference can be a strength in our communities and the world today is a central tenet to a respectful and progressive society. This positive message, which creates an awareness and respect for self and all others, must be central to the RSE and SPHE curriculums in our schools...*

*Curriculum and teaching must be responsibly based on fact, respectful and aware of realities in today's world to effectively promote personal wellbeing and to prepare our youth to live happy, healthy and productive lives. (NPCPP submission)*

Atheist Ireland's submission sets out reasons why a redeveloped curriculum for SPHE/RSE needs to be accompanied by legislative change in order to reduce the influence of school ethos. They contend that in order for the content to be delivered objectively without religious influence, the law will have to be amended. Specifically, Atheist Ireland recommends amending Sections 9(d), 15(2)(b) and 30(2)(b) of the Education Act and Section 37 of the Employment Equality Act.

When reviewing the 88 individual submissions, a common set of concerns was evident which mainly focused on the right of parents to have a say in curriculum developments related to SPHE/RSE, the need for Catholic morals and school ethos to be accommodated within SPHE/RSE and the desire to see SPHE and RSE as separate (as opposed to an integrated curriculum). Sample views on these matters are included below.

*What especially concerns me is that the Background Paper appears to totally ignore the role of parents in the education of their sons and daughters. (Individual written submission)*

*I believe that RSE and SPHE curriculums should be separate and not one so that parents can withdraw their child from RSE class if what is being taught is contrary to their religious and moral beliefs and values. (Individual written submission)*

### 3. Implications of the consultation findings

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It was evident from the consultation that despite some concerns, the Background Paper and Brief for the review is welcomed by many. This section of the report looks at ways in which progress can be made on key points raised in the consultation relating to the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE and identifies wider considerations which also need to be attended to.

#### **A holistic, student-focused, and age and developmentally appropriate approach**

There is broad agreement that the redeveloped specification needs to be grounded in an approach that is holistic, student-focused, inclusive, and age and developmentally appropriate. To achieve this, there is an awareness that the curriculum needs to address topics in a timely and relevant manner.

#### **A focus on skills and knowledge**

Alongside gaining knowledge, there was strong agreement that a redeveloped specification should place a strong focus on the development of important life skills that young people need growing up in a fast changing and complex world. Specifically, the Development Group can focus deliberations on how best to incorporate learning to support the development of the core social and emotional skills of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness and relationship skills.

In addition, the consultation suggested that a redeveloped curriculum should be framed positively and affirm young people's strengths and capacities as active agents in their own lives and build their capacity to care for their own health and wellbeing and that of others. In this context, the Development Group can consider how the learning outcomes could include a focus on developing their health literacy competencies, i.e. the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to access appropriate and trustworthy information and supports related to all aspects of health and wellbeing.

Furthermore, the Development Group can consider reducing the range of existing learning outcomes to enable deeper and more meaningful engagement with learning that has been identified as most important for young people's health and wellbeing at this stage of their development.

## **Inclusion and diversity**

The consultation on the background paper also endorsed the idea that in redeveloping the specification attention should be given to ensuring that inclusion and diversity is reflected consistently in the language of the entire specification, as well as including learning outcomes that focus specifically on promoting respect for diversity and inclusion.

## **Assessment**

The consultation provided a range of creative and practical suggestions for how the SPHE CBA might be made more engaging, relevant and manageable and these will help inform the Development Group in deliberating on this matter.

## **Availability of sufficient and adequate resources and teacher CPD**

Professional development and the timely availability of quality, up-to-date teaching and learning resources linked to the strands of the SPHE short course was highlighted by teachers as being critically important when it comes to the successful implementation of a redeveloped SPHE specification. NCCA will continue to update the DE and teacher support services in relation to the professional development requirements associated with this development work, and will further develop the SPHE online toolkit in line with a redeveloped specification.

## **Specialist training and accreditation**

Having been raised previously in the review of RSE (NCCA, 2019), NCCA is in discussions about this with colleagues in the Teaching Council and the TES.

## **Communication and consultation**

While explicit feedback was not sought in relation to this point, the consultation has highlighted the importance of maintaining regular and timely communication on curriculum developments in SPHE and providing information about the timing of the consultation on the draft specification when it is ready. It is vital that every stakeholder is updated and will have the opportunity to contribute to the development of the final specification.

## 4. Conclusions

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The consultation process was very informative and beneficial. The level of engagement of those who participated in the consultation must be acknowledged and NCCA is grateful for the open, honest, committed, experience-based and expert feedback received.

The consultation findings indicate strong support, particularly from students, teachers and the organisations who responded, for the direction of change set out in the brief for the review and redevelopment of SPHE. Alongside this support, concerns were raised by individual parents in relation to the need for specific religious values and school ethos to be accommodated within SPHE/RSE.

Overall, the opportunity to create a redeveloped and relevant specification for junior cycle SPHE is welcomed and seen as a potential catalyst for improving the experience of SPHE for teachers and students alike. Attending to creating the conditions conducive for effective implementation of a redeveloped specification will be important during the coming year.

## Appendix 1: Expert groups with whom meetings were held

- HSE Alcohol programme
- HSE Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Research Office
- HSE Midwest Drug and Alcohol Services
- HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy programme
- National Anti-Bullying Centre, DCU
- National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS)

## Appendix 2: Organisations which made written submissions

The following is a list of organisations which provided a written submission and wished to be named:

- Joint submission from the Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholic Schools, Catholic Education Partnership and Catechetical Council
- Atheist Ireland
- BeLonG2 Youth Services
- GOSHH (Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health, HIV) Ireland
- Irish Family Planning Association
- National Parents' Council Post Primary
- National Women's Council
- Ombudsman for Children Office
- Rockbrook Park school
- Women's Aid



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