



NCCA

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

Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)

February 2023

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Introduction

To inform a review of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) as part of the broader redevelopment of senior cycle, a [Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE](#) was developed. This Background Paper was approved for consultation by Council on September 22nd, 2022, and the public consultation ran from October 3rd to December 6th, 2022.

The Background Paper provides a brief overview of the evolution of SPHE within the curriculum. It outlines relevant findings from the review of RSE¹ that was conducted in 2019 and considers some international perspectives on the practice of upper secondary SPHE/RSE in schools. Finally, the paper details the issues for consideration during the development of the updated curriculum and in planning for the implementation of Senior Cycle SPHE.

The aim of the consultation was to seek the views of interested parties in relation to the ideas and issues set out in the paper in order to inform the work of the Development Group in redeveloping the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

This report on the consultation presents an overview of the consultation process, followed by a summary of the feedback received, and explores key findings for the work of the Development Group as members progress their deliberations on a redeveloped curriculum for Senior Cycle SPHE.

¹ Further details on this review can be accessed [here](#).

Section One: Consultation process

Consultation is a key aspect of NCCA's work where advice is shaped by feedback from schools, education partners, wider stakeholders and the general public. This section presents an overview of the methodological approach employed during this consultation. Although consultation, unlike research, has a policy and practice rather than a theoretical focus, the methodological approach outlined in this section, is underpinned by the principles set out in NCCA's Research Strategy (2019) and provides a summary of engagement during the consultation.

Methodological approach

The consultation on the Background Paper and Brief for the review of Senior Cycle SPHE included multiple modes of engagement during the eight-week consultation process:

- An online survey
- Written submissions
- Focus group sessions
- An in-person consultation meeting with representatives from the Irish Second-Level Students' Union
- An online consultation event with agencies and organisations who work directly in SPHE or have expertise in a particular aspect relevant to SPHE

A self-selecting sampling approach was used for the online survey, written submissions, and focus group sessions. An open call to all schools invited expressions of interest to support the student voice and teacher engagement aspect of the consultation and was disseminated through education partners' organisational communications. The survey and written submissions facilitated the collection of data from a wide cross-section of respondents, while the online/face-to-face events supported more extensive discussion and exploration of the issues for consideration. The list of organisations which shared a written submission and wished to be named is included in Appendix A, and the list of organisations which attended the online consultation event are included in Appendix B.

Students aged 18 years and over consented to their participation in the consultation with parental consent and student assent sought for school visit participants under the age of 18. A detailed written record of all discussions was made during focus groups and school visits. Data gathered through focus groups and school visits was anonymised and transcribed, and all data from the consultation was stored as digital files in line with NCCA's Data Protection Policy (2020). The privacy of all participants has been maintained through anonymisation, except where an organisation has given explicit permission to be identified as contributing to the consultation.

A thematic approach was used for data analysis and was framed by the issues for consideration set out in the Background Paper. This helped to identify and analyse themes within the data gathered. The findings of this analysis are presented in Section Two of this report.

Consultation responses

Focus group meetings were conducted in five schools. In each school, separate meetings were held with between 4-11 6th Year students and with 1-3 teachers with recent experience of teaching Senior Cycle SPHE. In one of these schools, there was a focus group with 3 parents. In total, 39 students, 10 teachers and 3 parents participated in 11 school-based focus group sessions. A further 8 students participated in the ISSU consultation meeting, and 31 stakeholders from 25 organisations/agencies took part in an online consultation event.

Online survey responses were received from 386 students, 85 teachers and 400 parents. In addition, written submissions were received from 20 organisations/agencies and 24 individuals. Table 1 provides a summary of the data gathered.

Table 1: Summary of consultation responses

Consultation tool	Participants	Numbers
Focus groups	Senior cycle students	39
	SPHE teachers	10
	Parents	3
In-person consultation event	Irish Second-Level Students Union (ISSU)	8
Online consultation meeting	SPHE stakeholder agencies and organisations	31
Written submissions	Organisations	20
	Individuals	24
Online survey	Students	386
	Teachers <i>50 self-identified as SPHE teachers</i>	85
	Parents	400

With regards to written submissions from parent groups, and written submissions and survey responses from individual parents, it is worth noting that while some diversity of views was evident, in instances where critical perspectives were expressed, similar points were raised. In some instances, the points raised were almost identical both in substance and wording to those received in the recent consultation² on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification which closed on October 18th, 2022.

² A report on the consultation on the draft JC SPHE curriculum specification can be accessed [here](#).

Section Two: Consultation findings

This section presents an overview of the feedback received during the consultation. The consultation focused on the issues for consideration identified in the Background Paper under two broad areas:

- what's most worth learning
- practical considerations.

The consultation generated a good level of interest and engagement. In general, the respondents agreed with the need for an updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum to build on the updated Junior Cycle SPHE course and meet the needs of adolescents living in today's world. There was significant agreement amongst students, teachers and parents on the topics that should be engaged with more deeply in senior cycle following on from learning in the updated Junior Cycle SPHE short course, and in relation to new topics that should be encountered in senior cycle.

A sub-group of parents who responded via written submissions and online surveys, together with a very small number of individual teachers who completed the survey, were critical of the inclusion of SPHE in senior cycle or specific content that may be included in the updated course. These criticisms and concerns echoed feedback received during the consultation on the draft updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum specification and, in the main, focused on relationships and sexuality content within SPHE.

Detailed feedback is presented in the following pages.

Overarching feedback

Most students, teachers, parents and stakeholders who participated in the consultation welcomed the development of an updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum and identified opportunities that this might bring for improved access to SPHE for students. The following reasons were most frequently mentioned by participants:

- it is timely as the recently updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum offers a solid foundation that can be built upon in senior cycle.
- updating the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum provides an opportunity to align it with the purpose and vision for a redeveloped senior cycle which prioritises the education of the whole person rather than educating for academic achievement alone.
- the current situation, where Senior Cycle SPHE is not timetabled in the majority of schools, means that there is a gap in supporting students in maintaining their wellbeing.
- young people in senior cycle need a dedicated standalone space to discuss specific stresses and challenges associated with this stage of their life, including exam stresses, decision-making in relationships, study/work/leisure balance, etc.
- school itself can be a source of stress and students need a timetabled space to step back from exam subjects.

- not all young people can discuss SPHE topics at home. For this reason, young people need to be facilitated in having thoughtful, informed and open discussions about SPHE topics with their peers in a safe classroom environment.
- SPHE has value for now and the future. That is, SPHE can support students to manage and balance the demands of life now and represents an opportunity to acquire knowledge and learn skills and habits for the future as students transition to adulthood.

A very small minority of students and teachers (online surveys) and a sub-group of parents (written submissions and online surveys) were resistant to the idea of SPHE being offered at senior cycle. Student opposition was based on negative personal experiences of SPHE, or on a perception that the value of SPHE was significantly outweighed by the need for more time for academic subjects in senior cycle. The most common critical points articulated by the sub-group of parents was that SPHE should not be addressed in schools because a) attention should be on academic subjects; b) students were already doing too much 'wellbeing' in junior cycle; or c) their child's experience of SPHE was not a positive or effective one. Some parents in this sub-group and a small number of teachers responding to the survey, stated that specific SPHE topics are more appropriately addressed by parents in their role as their children's primary educators. Feedback in relation to this last point is further detailed in the relevant section below.

Most important learning in senior cycle SPHE

To stimulate feedback on issues around continuity, progression and coherence, and alignment with government policies/strategies and international commitments, consultation participants were asked for their views on the most important learning for an updated Senior Cycle SPHE course, under two subheadings: building on junior cycle and new learning.

Building on junior cycle

Students, teachers and parents who participated in focus groups, together with stakeholders who took part in the online consultation event and/or submitted written submissions were prompted to review the draft updated Junior Cycle SPHE specification and then asked about the suitability of similar content in Senior Cycle SPHE. In general, these participants concurred that topics such as: emotional wellbeing/mental health, relationships and sexuality, healthy choices including addictive substances and behaviours, and staying safe and well on- and off-line are important to revisit in senior cycle. Online survey responses also referenced similar themes.

Consultation participants, especially students, teachers and stakeholders, also identified cross-cutting themes as being important to revisit and further explore in senior cycle. These include health literacy, and rights and responsibilities.

Emotional wellbeing/mental health and related topics received a lot of attention across all consultation modes and cohorts. For example, students and parents who responded via the online survey overwhelmingly focused on emotional wellbeing/mental health issues as being amongst the most important learning in Senior Cycle SPHE, with stress, coping strategies, managing emotions and building resilience commonly mentioned. In their focus groups, students noted that emotional wellbeing/mental health was of the utmost importance, not just because of exam-related stress, but because of the challenges associated with their increasing responsibilities, relationships and out-of-school activities, including part-time work.

Students argued that the focus should be on learning *how* to nurture and maintain their emotional wellbeing, rather than on being told to 'be resilient'. They were interested in learning more about the connection between their emotional wellbeing and other areas of their life, their online world, relationships, use of alcohol/substances, and the impact of Covid-19 on mental health. They highlighted that they want to address the stigma around mental illness, know how to talk to their friends and family members about their own mental health and offer support in turn, especially in cases where someone they care about is experiencing mental health difficulties. Finally, they want to know how to access reliable information, supports and services. Teachers who responded via the online survey were also focused on student stress and their ability to cope, with some references to the value of teaching basic Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) skills, knowing the physiological response of the body to stress, and coping strategies such as journaling.

RSE was emphasised as being especially relevant for young people in senior cycle, in part because they may now be engaging in romantic relationships. It was suggested that senior cycle represents an opportunity for deeper exploration of the connection between one's values, decisions and the kind of relationships young people develop. Consultation participants also talked about the requirement for RSE to build upon the junior cycle curriculum and further explore healthy/unhealthy or toxic relationships to include, for example, coercive control, harassment and stalking, including online, and image-based abuse, the legislation protecting against these abuses and where to go for support. They advocated that students should be empowered to mitigate against the emotional impact of, and examine how to remove themselves from, unhealthy relationships.

Consultation participants also expressed the view that Senior Cycle SPHE should go deeper into the topic of boundaries and consent, considering their importance in all aspects of interpersonal relationships with peers, friends, family members, work colleagues, as well as in sexual interactions. Finally, there was a sense that students need to be equipped with enhanced communication skills for dealing with relationship difficulties, including handling conflict.

Parents and stakeholders in particular expressed concerns about the volume of sexually implicit and explicit material, including pornography, encountered by young people in advertisements and in the media generally, and the impact that this has on understandings of sexual relationships, on attitudes to gender stereotypes and equality. These participants felt strongly that Senior Cycle SPHE should encourage learning to identify and challenge unrealistic expectations about sexual behaviour while encouraging positive sexuality.

Many students and teachers in focus groups and online surveys said that the RSE aspect of Senior Cycle SPHE should be underpinned by an empathetic, equality-based and inclusive approach, with references to members of the LGBTQI+ community becoming normalised as a way of eliminating '*bigotry and prejudice*'. Participants across several student and teacher focus groups mentioned wishing to better understand how gender identity impacts on all young people, that is, what it is like to be male, female or non-binary in today's world. Some teachers referenced the difficulties and confusion faced by male students who are increasingly aware of negative societal attitudes towards men.

As previously noted, a sub-group of parents who participated in the consultation either as individuals (online surveys) or as part of an organisation (written submissions), together with a

very small number of teachers (online surveys) raised concerns about specific SPHE content, largely relating to relationships and sexuality. Their main critique related to the topic of gender identity. These parents and teachers pointed out that gender identity is a highly contested and sensitive topic. Some articulated strong resistance to gender identity being included in the curriculum, based on the view that this could lead to questioning, confusion and even harm to young people. Some parents argued that any conversation about gender identity should be dealt with in the context of the home and/or with trained professionals. They highlighted that teachers are not psychologists or counsellors, a point that was echoed by a small number of teachers (online survey) who expressed feeling ill-equipped or insufficiently expert to address this topic.

Consultation feedback, particularly from students, teachers and parents affirmed the importance of physical exercise, nutrition, sleep, self-care and hygiene as being important for all aspects of wellbeing and health. Parents and stakeholders mentioned the need to consistently revisit the consequences of peer pressure and the online world on students' decision-making in relation to unhealthy choices. Issues related to body image, self-image, self-esteem and the gendered influence and impact of social media and social influencers, were frequently mentioned by stakeholders and participants in focus groups. These participants articulated that Senior Cycle SPHE should replicate the messages of the junior cycle specification and avoid stigmatising body types, use factual information to encourage the view that there is no '*wrong way to have a body*', and enable students to critically analyse information about eating habits and physical activity found online.

When referencing the need for Senior Cycle SPHE to address addiction, participants commonly talked about alcohol, food, nicotine, including e-cigarettes/vaping, substances, digital devices, gambling, including online, and pornography. They reasoned that by using factual information and realistic scenarios, students should be enabled to recognise addiction and learn about the impact of addictions on emotional wellbeing, on decision-making and on family and friends.

Students were more interested in learning how to stay safe in face-to-face interactions than online, for example, how to stay safe when out and about in different scenarios, including when they or their friends are drinking; how to avoid the dangers of overconsumption of alcohol, spiked drinks, getting involved in physical conflict, and becoming the victim of a sexual assault. They maintained that young people should be able to '*explain what a safe night out looks like*' and that moderation, rather than avoidance, is a more realistic approach when discussing alcohol and substance use (student focus groups).

In focus groups, online consultation and written submissions, there was a strong sense that a Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum should see a more nuanced approach to health literacy. From the respondents' perspective, health literacy in senior cycle should emphasise not only knowing where/how to access relevant information, supports and services but empower students to act upon this knowledge. For example, teachers in focus groups maintained that it is not enough for students to know where to go for emotional wellbeing/mental health information, support and services but that students should be enabled to put this into practice. Stakeholders also pointed out that health literacy was an important tool in countering misinformation and disinformation, particularly online.

In their written submissions, stakeholders alluded to the need to give young people information, examples, the skillset and encouragement to participate in active bystander behaviours,³ for example, in cases of sexual violence, transphobia, racism and other forms of discrimination, as a way of reducing the harm caused by these attitudes/actions. Teachers responding to the online survey referenced responsibility at interpersonal and societal levels and made a connection between a greater sense of belonging as a positive by-product of the exercise of responsibility.

New learning

There was a strong sense coming through all consultation feedback that students are often unprepared for life after school and that the updated Senior Cycle SPHE course should support young people to gain specific additional knowledge and develop the skills to manage the transition to adulthood.

When giving examples of additional knowledge and skills in preparing for 'the real world' and the increased autonomy and responsibilities that comes with adulthood, participants frequently mentioned living independently away from the family home, self-management skills for achieving in further/higher education settings and transitioning into the world of work, the knowledge and skills needed to access services and entitlements, to manage personal finances, how to have a healthy life and communicate and build relationships with people from all walks of life.

Students in focus groups recognised that they should know the rights and responsibilities applicable before and after they become legal adults at the age of 18 years, and where they stand relative to the law on relevant SPHE topics. They recognised that this knowledge is particularly important for young people where parents are not supportive or able to help. Some examples cited were knowing their rights/responsibilities online and rights and responsibilities with regards to moving out of the family home. Parents who mentioned rights/responsibilities focused on rights in relation to part-time work, access to contraception and reproductive health services.

Teachers and parents asked that through their learning in SPHE, senior cycle students would be encouraged to think critically and independently. Survey respondents who mentioned critical thinking often did so from the perspective of equipping young people to question societal norms and to engage critically with social media and the online world generally.

Across all consultation modes, most students, teachers, parents and stakeholders expressed a desire for additional, age- and stage-appropriate topics to be introduced for senior cycle students, including, for example, safer sexual practices for all, sexual pleasure, options and information

³An active bystander is a person who witnesses and recognises a harmful or potentially harmful act and doesn't ignore it or walk away.

about contraception and pregnancy, domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (on- and off-line), and how to deal with loss and change.

As outlined in the *Background Paper and Brief* (pages 4-5), the development of Senior Cycle SPHE will be informed by key government policy initiatives and international commitments around children's rights and the provision of quality health and wellbeing education concerned with relevant, contemporary challenges such as consent, gender equality and equality more generally, gender identity, inclusion, online harassment and exploitation, participation, protection, sexual and gender-based violence, and the influence of pornography. As noted, most, although not all, of the consultation feedback was supportive and encouraging of the inclusion, in an age- and stage-appropriate manner, of many of these themes.

Practical considerations

Target group, status and time allocation

Across the consultation modes and notwithstanding the staffing and timetabling challenges, there was a strong consensus that SPHE should be mandatory across all senior cycle programmes, with all Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) and Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) students experiencing the same course. The most common reasons cited were that young people face particular struggles and have unique needs in Transition Year (TY), 5th and 6th Years, and not all students have someone outside of school to whom they can reach out.

'It's good when you're in a class of 20 boys going through the same thing and asking questions that you might not ask at home.' (Student focus group participant)

Additionally, teachers and young people in focus groups and stakeholders in the consultation event stated that one curriculum for all students, regardless of programme, could potentially contribute to greater social integration.

Our LCA class tend to be on the periphery. Their timetable is stand alone. They feel isolated. (Teacher focus group participant)

Stakeholder organisations and agencies were particularly strong in their articulation of an equity and rights-based perspective, arguing that SPHE is a right for all students at all stages of education, regardless of programme.

We need to look at it in the context of children's rights - [SPHE] needs to be equally available to all children to promote equity and children's rights. Need to ensure that all students have access to the same learning. (Stakeholder, online consultation meeting)

There was widespread recognition of the particular importance of and the need for RSE, with respondents stating that RSE should be mandatory for all senior cycle students.

As you get older you begin to reflect on things, how you think about things changes. You need to be equipped to do this. I don't think the same way as when I was 13. Your world expands as you get older, and it can be terrifying. A lot of the RSE conversations that were theoretical become real. (Student focus group participant)

Most participants agreed that Senior Cycle SPHE needs a minimum of one hour per week, with many stating that in an ideal world SPHE would be given even more time, for instance, a double period. The reasons given largely relate to the nature of the pedagogy required and topics in focus, where 40 minutes was considered insufficient. Teachers and students alike agreed that classroom dialogue is key to learning in SPHE, and this requires time, as well as skilful teacher facilitation.

Although there was consensus on a minimum allocation of one hour per week, online survey feedback where respondents were prompted to indicate their level of agreement with statements about mandatory SPHE for Transition Year, 5th and 6th Year respectively, shows a more complex and nuanced spectrum of views.

Table 2: Online survey views on the timetabling of SPHE in senior cycle

Online survey	Students	Teachers	Parents
Percentage wishing to see SPHE for all year groups and across all schools	63.5%	74.1%	67.4%
Percentage wishing to see SPHE in Transition Year	85.1%	90.6%	77.9%
Percentage wishing to see SPHE in 5 th Year	73.4%	80%	72.8%
Percentage wishing to see SPHE in 6 th Year	50.3%	67.1%	61.6%

63% students, 74.1% teachers and 67.4% parents who responded to the online survey agreed that SPHE should be compulsory in senior cycle, across all schools and for all year groups. While 85.1% students, 90.6% teachers and 77.9% parents agreed with a statement that SPHE should be allocated time in Transition Year, a statement that 'Senior Cycle SPHE should be compulsory for all 6th Year students' elicited agreement from 50.3% students, 67.1% teachers, and 61.6% parents. The decreasing level of agreement between the Transition Year and 6th Year statements is notable.

The mixture of views expressed via the survey about the timetabling of SPHE mirrored statements by students and teachers in focus groups about SPHE in the final year possibly meeting resistance given the focus on exam subjects. A significant minority of students and parents who responded in the online survey maintained that SPHE should be optional in 6th Year, as exam pressure builds. Some teachers and stakeholders highlighted the importance of flexibility and school-based decision-making in relation to timetabling of SPHE; while a sub-group of parents responding in online surveys were firm in their view that SPHE should be optional, and some indicated that they would exercise their right to remove their children from some or all SPHE lessons.

The naming of this curriculum area

Mixed views were expressed in response to the suggestion to change the name of SPHE. Although most people responding to the online survey were unsure or disagreed with a statement about the need to rename SPHE, a sizeable minority agreed. Across all consultation modes, while there was agreement that the reputation and provision of SPHE needs attention, many participants questioned whether this was sufficient reason for a name change. Some of those who

disagreed with a name change claimed that a renaming at senior cycle would lead to a disconnection with Junior Cycle SPHE.

There was general agreement that subjects that can be shortened to acronyms are off putting and unhelpful. Participants who were in favour of a name change mostly suggested 'Lifeskills,' 'Skills for life' or 'Personal Development'. These suggestions were usually motivated by the view that a rebranding would help to counter the historically low status of SPHE and move the subject away from perceived challenges that schools have faced with wellbeing at junior cycle, and/or by a belief that another name could better reflect the increased stage of maturity of senior cycle students.

The conditions needed to support effective SPHE in senior cycle

The issue of the conditions needed to support effective SPHE in senior cycle was raised in the Background Paper. In response, consultation participants agreed that there are a range of supports which they saw as conducive to the successful enactment in schools. Amongst the most common conducive conditions referenced were the support of school leadership, the allocation and expertise of teachers, the availability of appropriate, relevant and stimulating teaching and learning resources, the correlation between school ethos and family values, and the collaboration and partnership with parents/guardians.

The role of school leadership in supporting effective implementation was commented upon by stakeholders and teachers, with specific reference by teachers to the need for management to be educated about the value of SPHE and their role in supporting more effective practice. Teachers also argued that management respect for the value of the subject should be visible in school communities. They said that school leadership is critical to ensure sufficient time for SPHE planning and on the timetable, facilitate teacher capacity building, and support the creation of a core SPHE team made up of teachers who are interested and trained.

A consistent message in NCCA consultations in recent years has been the importance of teacher professional development as the key enabler when it comes to successful implementation of SPHE.⁴ During the consultation, students were very clear that the value they attribute to SPHE is influenced by teacher interest and capacity.

It is not enough to have a class, you have to make it important and the people who make it important are the teachers. If teachers aren't comfortable then students aren't comfortable and then they are not able to apply it to the real world. (Student focus group participant)

⁴ NCCA (2019). *Report on the Review of RSE in primary and post primary schools*, p.75; NCCA (2022). *Report on the consultation on the draft Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum*, p.15.

Some stakeholders (written submission and online consultation) and teachers (focus groups) commented upon and welcomed recent moves by the Department of Education to support the provision of a dedicated SPHE post-graduate diploma in Dublin City University. Even with this recent development, there remains a concern amongst consultation contributors about the small number of qualified teachers, low levels of confidence and skill amongst SPHE teachers, which at best makes SPHE much less interesting and relevant and, at worst, has the potential to cause harm when topics are not skilfully and sensitively facilitated.

Up-to-date, stimulating and relevant teaching resources, such as case studies, scenarios and films were recognised as playing an important role in supporting good pedagogical practice in SPHE. Students referenced wanting resources that facilitate dialogue and support teachers to ask open rather than leading questions. Additionally, and where necessary, some students talked about the need for teachers to be expert enough to adapt or move beyond textbooks and resources. Teachers complained about a general lack of resources, which meant that they had to dedicate too much time to research and lesson planning. They specifically referenced insufficient availability of resources to support teaching and learning in RSE and especially from LGBTQI+ perspectives, explaining that this left them feeling exposed, unprotected, fearful of saying the wrong thing and potentially adding to student anxieties. Most parents who commented on resources spoke about their desire for their children to be presented with '*real facts*' and '*real life situations*'.

Feedback from some groups and individual parents suggested that Senior Cycle SPHE should include references to morality, moral teachings, Christian values, the religious beliefs of families and/or that schools should be able to adapt the curriculum to suit their characteristic spirit and context. This perspective was countered by arguments by students, teachers and some stakeholders for the removal of all references to school ethos and religion and the introduction of legal changes to ensure that all schools implemented SPHE in an '*objective, critical and pluralistic manner*' (Stakeholder, written submission).

Participants across all modes of consultation mentioned the importance of parents as key partners in education, particularly in the context of SPHE. In recognising the important role of parents, some teachers expressed the desire that parents be educated about SPHE so that they could work collaboratively and reinforce the learning at home. Some parents said they wanted consistent and clear communication from schools so that they can be prepared to answer questions that might arise following specific lessons. As previously stated, a sub-group of parents indicated that they do not want SPHE, in its entirety or specific topics, to be dealt with in the school context.

Section Three: Key findings for subject development

The findings of the consultation indicate that the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is timely and widely welcomed, and that the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of SPHE provides a comprehensive overview of the issues that will need to be considered by the Development Group. This section of the report identifies some of the key findings for the redevelopment of the subject arising from the consultation.

Learning in Senior Cycle SPHE

In updating Senior Cycle SPHE, many of the themes from the updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum will need to be revisited and further explored, as appropriate and reflecting the age and stage of the young people concerned. Learning in Senior Cycle SPHE will require the introduction of additional themes to meet the needs of students at this stage of their development, to support them in their preparation for life beyond school as young adults and to take account of national and international policy commitments. However, care will need to be taken to avoid curriculum overload and to strike the correct balance around the depth and breadth of the course.

The demands placed on Senior Cycle SPHE to meet the needs of all students will need to be balanced with expectations around what SPHE teachers, even with increased time allocation, improved teacher capacity and the realisation of the other conducive conditions, can hope to achieve in terms of supporting students at this important stage in their development.

Target group, time allocation and timetabling

The majority of consultation participants favoured the development and implementation of the same SPHE curriculum for all senior cycle students. The ongoing work on the revision of the TY Programme Statement is timely and will be informed by this finding. In relation to the work of the Senior Cycle SPHE Development Group, it will be necessary to consider how, in the design and technical form of the curriculum, all students in the final two years of senior cycle will be able to access the same SPHE curriculum.

The feedback around the timetabling of SPHE for each senior cycle year, particularly the weight of support for SPHE in Transition Year and the arguments around increased academic pressure in 6th Year, will need to be given careful consideration in terms timetabling guidance for schools.

The naming of this curriculum area

The consultation has identified a range of advantages and disadvantages of renaming SPHE. Further consideration of these different perspectives is needed in order to balance the issues raised around dis/continuity with junior cycle and the relative value of a name change.

Conducive conditions for SPHE

Effective support from school leadership, the allocation and expertise of teachers, the availability of resources, and collaboration between schools and with parents/guardians are some of the conducive conditions for the successful implementation of Senior Cycle SPHE. These conditions, especially the allocation and expertise of teachers, will require ongoing attention and support at a system level in the coming years.

Furthermore, wider system level consideration will be required to address the potential for emerging tensions between the right of the parent to withdraw their child from SPHE or aspects thereof and a student's right to a broad and balanced education, including comprehensive health education.

Conclusion and next steps

The consultation on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) generated rich discussion and led to useful and thoughtful feedback from multiple perspectives. The level of engagement of those who participated in the consultation must be acknowledged. Feedback was open, honest, committed, experience-based and expert.

NCCA would like to thank all of those who participated in focus groups, completed the online survey, or made a written submission. Furthermore, NCCA is grateful to the school leaders who facilitated teachers in participating in the focus group events and to all of those who supported student participation in the consultation.

The consultation findings indicate there is strong support for the direction of change set out in the brief for the updating of Senior Cycle SPHE, but a minority of parents and a small number of teachers made critical points about SPHE and/or RSE topics and expressed the view that religious values and school ethos should be accommodated within SPHE. Nonetheless, the opportunity to create an updated and relevant specification for Senior Cycle SPHE is welcomed and seen as a potential catalyst for improving the experience of SPHE for teachers and students alike.

This report has presented an overview of the range of views and perspectives across the consultation process. The findings presented in this report will provide direction and guidance for the Development Group which was recently convened to undertake the task of developing a new curriculum for Senior Cycle SPHE. The Development Group will continue their work, informed by the findings outlined in this report, and it is anticipated that a draft curriculum will be available for public consultation in Q3, 2023.

Appendix A

The following is a list of organisations who shared a written submission and wished to be named:

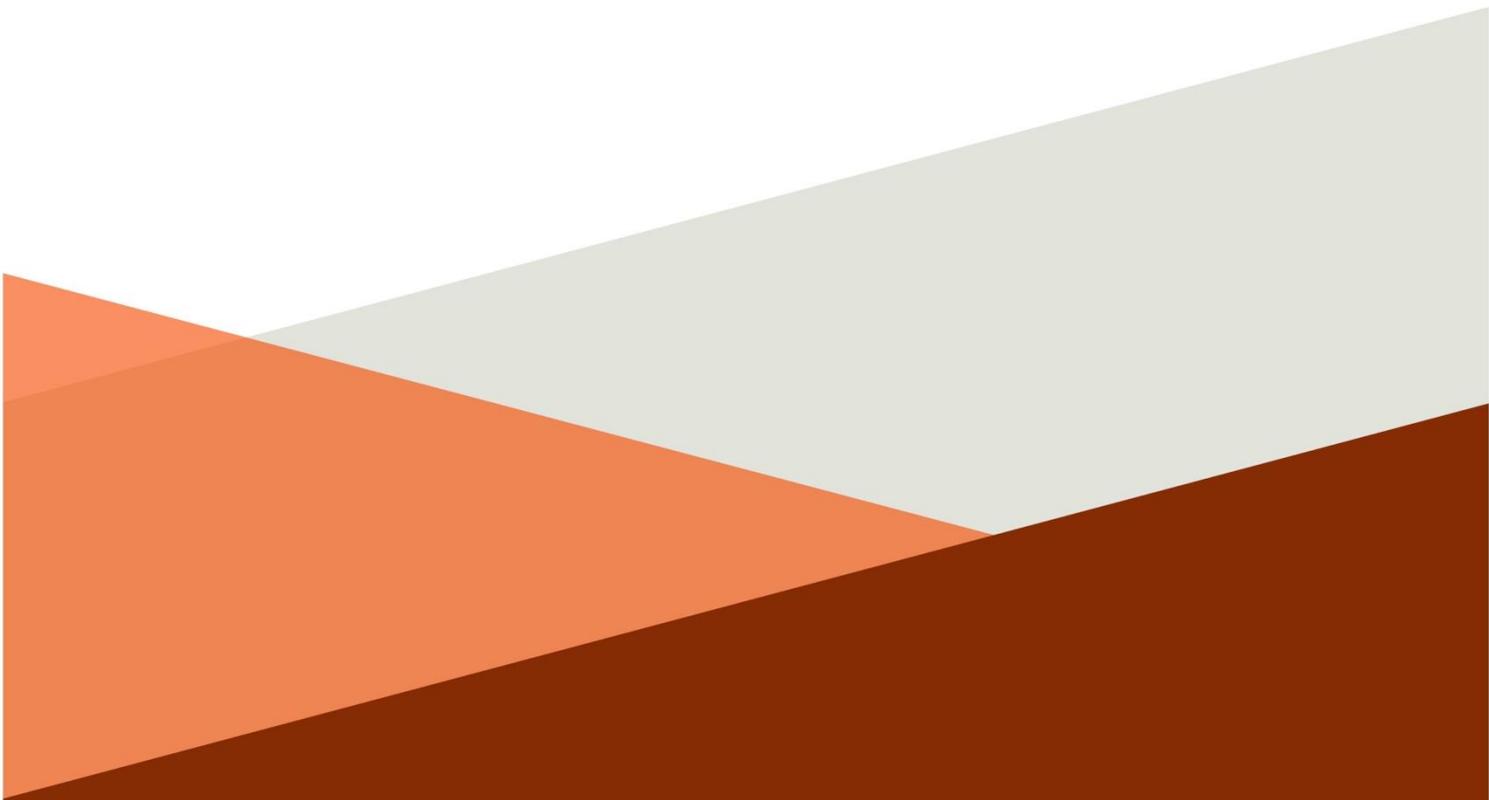
Written submissions:

Association of Patrons and Trustees of Catholics Schools (APTCS)
Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI)
Atheist Ireland
Catholic Secondary School Parents Association
Educate Together
Fingal Comhairle na nOg
Genspect
Irish Film Institute
IONA Institute
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)
Joint Managerial Body (JMB)
Mindfulness Teachers Association Ireland (MTAI)
National Women's Council
National Parents Council
Rockbrook Park School
ShoutOut
The Countess
Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI)
Women's Aid

Appendix B

The following is a list of organisations represented at an online consultation event for stakeholders on November 28th 2022:

Accord
BelongTo
Bodywhys
Children's Rights Alliance
Church of Ireland Board of Education
Department of Education
Educate Together
GOSSH Ireland
Health Service Executive (HSE)
Irish Episcopal Conference
Irish Heart Foundation
Jigsaw
Joint Managerial Board (JMB)
Junior Cycle for Teachers (JCT)
Kildare Education Support Centre
National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
National Women's Council
National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)
Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST)
Rape Crisis Network Ireland
Sexual Health West
ShoutOut
South Eastern Technological University
Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI)
University College Dublin (UCD)



NCCA

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