

Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE)

At the request of the Minister for Education and Skills, a major review of RSE in primary and post-primary schools was undertaken from June 2018 to March 2019. The review examined the experience of teaching and learning in RSE including; the curriculum, the approach to learning, the supports needed, and ways to improve the experience of RSE for students. Engagement in the review was considerable and signals the level of interest and concern people share in relation to this aspect of education. We are now engaging in consultation to ensure the findings and draft advice is reflective of the needs of students, schools, and parents.

In responding to the findings and draft advice on the future directions of RSE it is recommended that you read the draft report or the summary of the draft report both of which are available here <https://www.ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/review-of-relationships-and-sexuality-education-rse>.

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Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).

BeLonG To Youth Services is the national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI+) young people in Ireland. Since 2003, we have worked with LGBTI+ young people, between 14 and 23 years, to create a world where they are equal, safe, and valued in the diversity of their identities and experiences. We also advocate and campaign on behalf of young LGBTI+ people, and offer specialised LGBTI+ youth services with a focus on mental and sexual health, alongside drug and alcohol support. We respond to the needs of LGBTI+ young people in Ireland and we help them thrive.

The approach

Across all stakeholders, there was strong agreement that RSE needs to be more than information about biological aspects of growing up and sexual activity. It needs a holistic approach that balances discussion about the risks and dangers associated with relationships and sexual activity with discussion about the positive, healthy and enjoyable aspects of relationships. A holistic approach can be understood as teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of relationships and sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realise their health, wellbeing and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own wellbeing and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the proposed direction on the approach to RSE that has emerged from the review? Please tick your response in the box below.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
YES			

What are the aspects of the proposed approach that you agree/disagree with?

We believe that a holistic and comprehensive approach to sexual health and wellbeing is key. Social and emotional learning should be recognised as core competencies within the RSE curriculum, with a particular focus on self-awareness, distinguishing between healthy and unhealthy relationships and identifying of toxic relationship 'red flags' from as young an age as possible.

What else is important when considering the approach for teaching SPHE/RSE in schools?

Needs to start early, start in junior infants talking about consent
Why separate it out? consent=self-worth assertiveness, same as confidence in other areas of life

The curriculum

The Review highlighted the need to create a single integrated curriculum that sets out the learning for SPHE/RSE as one subject and incrementally provides continuity of experience from early childhood to post-primary. In the immediate term the NCCA will develop interim guidelines to support the current curriculum on how it can be approached in a more holistic way and provide clarity on how topics can be taught in an inclusive manner to incorporate current themes identified by the review.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the need for a single integrated curriculum for SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
yes			

Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

Some of the issues that are paramount for inclusion in the curriculum are:

- **Consent** is of foundational importance to all healthy relationships, not just sexual ones. Principles of understanding, respecting and communication in negotiating consent should be strengthened as a core and consistent part of RSE, beginning at the very start of a child's education and carrying all the way through to adulthood.
- **Contraception and STIs**
RSE should provide a practical knowledge around the use of a wide range of contraceptives, with a due regard for the needs of all forms of consensual sexual relationships, including education and signposting to appropriate services such as providers of free and affordable contraception. RSE should include non-stigmatising and up-to-date information about the effective treatment of HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections.
- **Sexuality Online**
Online sexuality is a large part of many modern relationships, and RSE must prepare students to safely navigate the realities of dating apps, sexting, and social media. The RSE curriculum must also reflect the impact of pornography in a stigma-free, evidence-based way.
- **LGBTI+ Inclusion**
It is essential that RSE provides for the needs of all students regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTI+ inclusion must run through RSE to demonstrate visibility, value and inclusion. The curriculum should promote healthy LGBTI+ relationships, reflect on societal gender roles, and educate on transgender identities.

The ways in which substance use and misuse can effect judgement and ability to consent needs to be explicitly addressed in the report also more intrinsic issues within this for the LGBTI+ community such as chemsex

Dating apps need to be addressed within the context of the report

Creating the conditions for effective RSE

The Review makes it clear that teachers need in-depth and sustained training and support in the area of SPHE/RSE. Consequently, access to professional development needs to be enhanced at pre-service and in-service levels. The Review also identified the need to take stock of current teaching and learning resources available in this area.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree with the Review's findings on the necessary conditions for effective SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
yes			

Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

All students must have access to reliable, informed and up-to-date sexual health education, regardless of school ethos, facilitated by a teacher, wellbeing officer, or appropriate external educator. Ideally, a mandatory accredited programme should be put in place, for all educators, to provide a positive impact on the consistency and quality of rolling out the programme to ensure they can direct students to the right sources of information and to provide a healthy and holistic atmosphere for discussion.

What else do you consider important in order to create the conditions for effective SPHE/RSE?

- Teachers need to learn youth work approaches / skills
- Learning from non-formal education
- Requires different approach to teach this effectively e.g do course like speakeasy/Sexual Health training from youth work sector
- The individual delivering the program needs to value RSE/SPHE
- They need to have qualifications, self-select and be given the opportunity to better their skills in the context of training. This is potentially best housed amongst caring role in the school already existing such as the guidance counsellor or the chaplain

Other considerations

The Review concluded that comprehensive oversight and support for SPHE/RSE is required to meet the needs identified in the review process. The Review also found schools cannot do it alone and parents must be encouraged and supported in assuming their responsibility for their child's learning. In addition, it suggests that post-primary schools require further support and guidance in planning for junior cycle wellbeing in order to enhance students' learning in SPHE/RSE.

To what extent do you broadly agree/disagree that these are important considerations for SPHE/RSE? Please tick your response in the box below.

Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
yes			

Please provide a reason for your level of agreement/disagreement.

We believe the RSE curriculum should be regularly reviewed to ensure an ongoing commitment in keeping the curriculum current, engaging and up to date to meet the needs of modern Irish young people.

We believe that the voices, opinions and experiences of young people themselves must be central to the construction and review of the RSE curriculum, and that active engagement with students and their representative organisations will always be key.

Are there any other considerations that should be highlighted in the advice for SPHE/RSE?

- There needs to be a clear, strong mandate for schools, teachers on curriculum and guidelines
- Need for improved collaboration between DES + HSE on this issue and need to address the barriers to external providers who have been filling the RSE lacuna
- Interim period measures need to be created in collaboration and with existing external providers, best practice is out there. no need to reinvent the wheel
- Teachers should get training but in the interim, the youth sector is an excellent resource to provide RSE to young people
- There needs to be greater consultation- external stakeholders have now been identified and are ready to collaborate
- There is bias within the report against external providers some deserved but not entirely

- Interim guidelines provided / developed by whom? teachers, NGOs, HSE, DES & young people
- 3 pronged approach = parent/guardians, Teachers, Young people
- There is a need for greater resources that potentially have an Irish focus/context to them
- Needs to be intersectional – look at class, race, gender, ability and, sexual orientation
- Continuous feedback/evaluation from students to ensure the curriculum is up to date
- Whole school inspectors need to be involved in monitoring and evaluation
- HSE sexual health training strategy (2019-2029) relevant
- HSE 10 day foundational course - add ons speakeasy
- Need S.A.R (attitudes and values) training for teachers
- Core curriculum but needs to be updated regularly with help from HSE and external providers
- Sex ed teachers need supervisors/peer networks to support them
- Health promotion officers HSE could potentially act as these supervisors

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