



BeLong To Youth Services Submission on the Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE

5th November 2021

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Template for submissions on:

Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE

NCCA consultation

September 2021

The NCCA is updating junior cycle Social, Personal and Health Education. The *Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of junior cycle SPHE* sets out the background and context for redeveloping junior cycle SPHE and proposes a brief for guiding the work in creating a new course.

We would really value feedback by using the template on page 4 and sending it to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie The consultation will remain open until Tuesday, November 5th 2021

You can read the *Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE* at <https://ncca.ie/en/updates-and-events/consultations/>.

Extracts from this are provided on the following page.

Date Protection Statement

The NCCA is committed to protecting your privacy and does not collect any personal information about you through this survey, other than information that you provide by your own consent. Any personal information you volunteer to the NCCA will be respected in accordance with the highest standards of security and confidentiality in accordance with GDPR (2016) and the Data Protection Acts (1998 - 2018). NCCA, as a public body operating under the Open Data and Public Service Information Directive (2021), is required to publish publicly funded research. Further information on the NCCA's Data Protection Policy can be found [here](#).

Any data from this will be further anonymized and aggregated and only made available after the final report is completed. This is expected to be in January 2022. Where a respondent selects 'yes' to the question *Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation*, respondents are consenting to having their name / organisation's name published with the list of written submission on www.ncca.ie

Please complete the following:

Name: Moninne Griffith

Email address: moninne@belongto.org

Are you contributing views as

a. An individual Yes/No

b. An organization **Yes**/No Name of organisation: BeLonG To Youth Services

Are you willing to be listed as a contributor to the consultation? **YES/NO**

Brief for the review and redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE (an extract of full paper, pp 34-36)

The specification will be at a common level. It will be designed to be taught and assessed in a minimum of 100 hours and structured around strands and learning outcomes.

The development of the new specification will

- Take account of research and international good practice in the field of SPHE/RSE as well as the experiences of teachers and students in Ireland who have shared their suggestions and insights through recent reviews and consultation processes
- Be conscious of how the specification relates to and supports learning within the wider junior cycle Wellbeing programme while avoiding any unhelpful overlap of learning
- Embed the key skills of junior cycle in the learning outcomes of the specification and make explicit how SPHE links to the six indicators of wellbeing
- Address continuity and progression: aware that a redeveloped SPHE short course is a first step in creating an integrated updated SPHE curriculum that provides progression of learning from early childhood to upper secondary education
- Be grounded in an approach to SPHE/RSE that is holistic, student-centred, inclusive, age and developmentally appropriate and whole school (as set out in the NCCA's 2019 *Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools*)
- Present RSE as part of an integrated SPHE curriculum
- Include specific mention of topics identified by this report and the NCCA's Report on the Review of RSE as important for young people's learning today¹.

¹Topics suggested in the Report include consent, healthy, positive sexual expression, the effects of the internet and social media on relationships and self-esteem, pornography, gender and sexual discrimination and violence, social and cultural norms and expectations as they relate to relationships and sexuality and LGBTQ+ matters.

More specifically, the development of the new specification will consider the following questions.

- What is the aim and rationale for the SPHE short course in the current context?
- How should the course be organised and will it continue to be structured around its existing four strands, associated topics and learning outcomes?
- What adjustments might be needed in relation to the Classroom-Based Assessment for SPHE?
- How can the specification empower students and teachers to adopt a collaborative, dialogical, and reflective approach to teaching and learning in SPHE?
- How can the specification be flexible and sensitive to accommodate a range of school contexts and student needs while providing clarity on what is the important knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that students should gain during the three years of SPHE within junior cycle?

Questions to consider:

1. Having read the above, what stands out for you as the most important consideration in updating the junior cycle SPHE curriculum?

The importance of SPHE/RSE in the formal junior cycle education system cannot be understated. Research shows between 6–10% of any group of young people may identify as LGBT+¹ and 2% identify as Intersex². The 2016 LGBTIreland Report states that the average age a young person realises they are LGBT+ is 12 and the average age they tell someone for the first time is 16³. LGBT+ young people experience twice the level of self-harm, three times the level of suicidal ideation and four times the level of extreme stress and anxiety when compared with their non-LGBT+ peers³.

The absence of opportunities to discuss LGBT+ issues in a positive and respectful way, especially in junior cycle, can perpetuate negative beliefs and attitudes; whereas raising the issue in class in a positive way provides opportunities for teachers to challenge negative beliefs and attitudes, and promote respect and dignity for all. According to the 2019 School Climate Survey carried out by BeLonG To and Columbia University, more than two thirds (68%) of LGBT+ students report they were not taught anything positive about LGBT+ identities in school⁴. It is unsurprising then that 73% of young LGBT+ people in Ireland do not feel safe at school, 77% of LGBT+ students are verbally harassed based on their sexual orientation, gender, gender expression or ethnic origin, and the majority of LGBT+ students (86%) felt deliberately excluded by peers with 74% experiencing being the focus of rumours or lies³.

Including LGBT+ identities in the curriculum is a great way to include positive representation of LGBT+ identities and help all students learn about diversity. Including LGBT+-related issues in the curriculum in a positive way may make LGBT+ students feel like more valued members of the school community and LGBT+ students are 26% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, 20% more likely they belong at school, and 9% more likely to not miss days of school due to feeling unsafe³.

With this research in mind, BeLonG To strongly recommends the aim, rationale and learning outcomes for the SPHE short course is revised taking into account the current context. The background paper notes we are still dealing with the legacy of separate curriculum and guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in the mid-1990s. This is still evident in the 2016 SPHE short course and in the reported implementation issues identified in the background paper. The Life skills survey (DES, 2017), reported that almost 50% of schools provided just one to two RSE classes per year or none, and ‘that they give less emphasis to: teenage pregnancy, sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections and contraception.’

Our work with schools and the education sector over the past decade as part of Stand Up LGBT+ Awareness Week has focused on bringing conversations and information on sexual orientation, gender identity, and equality into classrooms across Ireland. In 2021, some 68% of second-level schools nationwide took part in the week-long event. Young people have been calling for improvements to RSE for many years now. They are frustrated with the lack of information available to them and eager to see significant improvements.

With this review process, we hope that the implementation of RSE will be mandatory for all schools, and that schools will receive the resources, encouragement and support they need to talk about sexuality and relationships. We look forward to the next generation of LGBT+ young people receiving relevant, realistic information about relationships and sexuality to better equip them for the real world.

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1. Dooley, B, O’Connor, C, Fitzgerald, A, & O’Reilly, A (2020). My World Survey 2: National Study of Youth Mental Health in Ireland. Jigsaw and UCD School of Psychology
 2. Blackless, M., Charuvastra, A., Derryc, A., Fausto-Sterling, A., Lauzanne, K. and Lee, E. (2000), *How sexually dimorphic are we? Review and synthesis*. Am. J. Hum. Biol., 12: 151-166
 3. Higgins A. et al. (2016). The LGBTIreland Report: national study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people in Ireland. Dublin: GLEN and BeLonG To Youth Services
 4. Pizmony-Levy, O., BeLonG To Youth Services (2019). The 2019 Irish National School Climate Survey Report. Research Report. New York: Teachers College, Columbia University.

2. How should the course be organised and will it continue to be structured around its existing four strands, associated topics and learning outcomes?

BeLong To **strongly agrees** with the following assertions and suggestions from stakeholders contributing to the 2016 SPHE Junior Cycle Short Course Review:

- a. ‘..the name of Strand 3 (Team Up) be changed to reflect the focus in the learning outcomes in that strand on relationships, including a broad range of sexual relationships.’
- b. ‘..the design and layout of a new specification merits consideration so that the integrated nature of the learning across the strands can be visually depicted (in contrast to the current layout of the four strands and learning outcomes in a linear fashion).
- c. ‘..the approach to RSE needs to be one that is grounded firmly in the needs and rights of young people and should be age and developmentally appropriate, culturally and contextually relevant, inclusive in its approach and holistic in addressing all aspects of relationships and sexuality.
- d. ‘The learning outcomes that relate directly to RSE should make explicit the topics that teachers are expected to address, such as contraception, consent, pornography, the impact of social media on self-esteem and relationships, and sexual and gender-based violence.’
- e. ‘..students who participated in a student consultation meeting want SPHE lessons to be:
 - a. relevant – ‘Talk to us about real life problems’.
 - b. inclusive – ‘Sexual education NOT only for heterosexual couples’.
- f. ‘..the revised specification embed the need for greater consultation and collaboration with students in planning relevant teaching and learning in SPHE?’ (DE Inspectorate)
- g. The majority of students consider their experience of RSE within schools to be poor and summed up their experience as ‘too little, too late and too biological.’ (NCCA, 2019, p.71) Across all ages, students felt that lessons were often out of touch with their needs.
- h. Many students also said they would like opportunities to learn about the diversity of relationships and sexual identities that exist and would like to see LGBTQ+ lives recognised within SPHE lessons.

3. What adjustments might be needed in relation to the Classroom-Based Assessment for SPHE?

2021 sees the 12th year of BeLong To’s Stand Up Awareness Week in Ireland with almost 70% of post-primary schools in Ireland taking part. BeLong To would be happy to work with the NCCA to share a wide variety of student work and CBAs based on LGBTI+ related topics which could be made available on www.curriculumonline.ie.

4. How can the specification empower students and teachers to adopt a collaborative, dialogical, and reflective approach to teaching and learning in SPHE?

- a. BeLonG To welcomes the idea of including a glossary of action verbs as an appendix in the revised short course specification (in line with what has already been done with the latest (2021) version of the Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) short course and other junior cycle subject specifications.
- b. BeLonG To recommends that young people have the opportunity to engage in reflective practice and outline their needs when planning how the content meets the short course learning outcomes. Active learning methodologies which empower teachers to elicit student voice should be included in the resource supports for the revised course www.curriculumonline.ie toolkit.

5. How can the specification be flexible and sensitive to accommodate a range of school contexts and student needs while providing clarity on what is the important knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that students should gain during the three years of SPHE within junior cycle?

- a. BeLonG To welcomes the commitments to include specific mention of topics identified by the NCCA's Report on the Review of RSE as important for young people's learning today, as follows: consent, healthy, positive sexual expression, the effects of the internet and social media on relationships and self-esteem, pornography, gender and sexual discrimination and violence, social and cultural norms and expectations as they relate to relationships and sexuality and LGBTI+ matters.
- b. While flexibility is important, BeLonG To are keenly aware that 'it is important that all students have the opportunity to engage with core learning and that teachers don't 'cherry-pick' safer topics or those they consider to be important and leave out others. The Life skills survey (DES, 2017), reported that almost 50% of schools provided just one to two classes per year or none and 'that they give less emphasis to: teenage pregnancy, sexual orientation, sexually transmitted infections and contraception.'
- c. Educators want increased specificity and clarity around the intent of the learning outcomes, particularly those that relate to relationships and sexuality. 'The LOs are way too broad and not directive enough considering no initial teacher training and not sufficient ongoing CPD'. (Teacher)'

6. Are there further suggestions or considerations that you would like the Development Group to consider when updating junior cycle SPHE?

a. Teacher Education:

SPHE/RSE modules should be provided in all initial teacher education programmes and should be delivered by experienced practitioners with an explicit focus on the four neglected areas mentioned in the DES 2017 Life Skills survey (included sexual orientation, sexual transmitted diseases), and those requested by young people who fed into the NCCA review of RSE in 2019. BeLonG To also propose that all student teachers engage in wellbeing area of learning with an overview of the place of SPHE/RSE as a core curriculum component.

Joined up SPHE/RSE capacity building for teachers is needed in order for teachers to recognise and capitalised upon the various opportunities for embedding RSE throughout the revised short course – with an explicit focus on the four neglected areas mentioned in the DES 2017. Life Skills survey (included sexual orientation, sexual transmitted diseases), and those requested by young people who fed into the NCCA review of RSE in 2019.

b. SPHE Status:

BeLonG To would like to see a guaranteed move to the 400 hours of wellbeing at junior cycle from Sept 2022. There should be no further delays and there should be clear and timely communication to schools about SPHE/RSE.

BeLonG To also recommend that the Department of Education issue a circular specifically for SPHE/RSE to include:

- i. A statement about the important/valuable place of SPHE/RSE in the wellbeing area of learning.
- ii. A strong recommendations on the need for capable and interested SPHE/RSE teachers and stability for those who teach across the three years of junior cycle.
- iii. Sufficient time for planning and collaboration.
- iv. The importance of school management support (especially in terms of facilitating attendance at SPHE/RSE CPD events).

c. Resources

Resources and supports for short courses, especially SPHE, should match those that are in place for other junior cycle subjects. The online toolkit on www.curriculumonline.ie should be maintained in line with the revised short course. BeLonG To would be happy to work with the NCCA to create :

- i. sample units of work based on learning outcomes with both explicit RSE content and learning outcomes which can be used as pathways to RSE related issues. BeLonG to has reviewed 14 junior cycle subject to highlight opportunities and give suggested way to integrate LGBTI+ relationships, families, identities and history.
- ii. ‘champion’ teachers videos which could be made available on NCCA/curriculum online.
- iii. ‘Growing Up LGBT’ is an excellent SPHE/Resource which needs to be updated and available on www.curriculumonline.ie.
- iv. BeLonG To have launched a revised 90-minute version of their E-learning module – Supporting LGBTI+ Young People. It is suggested that this is available on www.curriculumonline.ie and promoted to all school staff. Almost 4,000 educators have engaged with this resource with some describing it as ‘the best CPD they have completed in their professional career’. This can be accessed here: <https://training.belongto.org>

d. Supporting SPHE Across the School:

BeLonG To welcomes the Junior Cycle review and greatly values the integration of RSE into formal education and the SPHE curriculum, but we do agree with the assertion from the background paper that there must be an awareness that this aim cannot be the exclusive remit of the SPHE class and that every class teacher can and must contribute to this learning.

In August 2021, the report from the research ‘LGBTI+ Youth in Ireland and across Europe: A two-phased landscape and research gap analysis’⁵, commissioned by Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, recommended the following:

- i. ‘there should be explicit school-level policies and adequate teacher and school personnel training before LGBTI+ issues are added in the curriculum. These findings highlight the importance of a holistic, whole-school approach. Ad-hoc, tokenistic actions will not have the same effect as interventions that are rooted in evidence and
- ii. implemented on the basis of consensus of all stakeholders, with all of them actively being involved.’
- iii. ‘Ideally, development of school curricula and implementing other inclusive school activities do not simply seek to raise LGBTI+ inclusivity but recognise that the oppression of sexual and gender minority individuals (just like other marginalised groups) is part of a more general cultural and societal pattern which needs to be challenged (Formby, 2015).’
- iv. ‘Issues of gender expectation, non-conformity and gender roles are relevant to all youth. Besides teaching about sexual orientations and sexualities, including gender identity development in curricula can help students better understand gender diversity (Boskey, 2014).’
- v. ‘Teaching LGBTI+ issues alongside concepts like compassion, empathy and social justice (Riggle and Rostosky, 2012) may have an added pedagogical value.

e. The LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools Project

The ‘LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Whole-School Community Model’ was developed by Michael Barron and Lisa O’Hagan for both BeLonG To and Health Promotion and Improvement (Health and Wellbeing Division - Health Service Executive). It is informed by national and international good practice. The Model comprises of six key areas that overlap and interlink to provide a comprehensive approach to developing an LGBTI+ safe, supportive and inclusive school that includes:

- Ensuring that staff are LGBTI+ aware and equipped to address LGBTI+ issues and support vulnerable students.
- Creating a supportive school culture and environment for all students, including LGBTI+ students. Developing and implementing effective school policies and plans.
- Implementing a curriculum that supports diversity and respect.
- Providing direct supports to LGBTI+ young people through the appropriate school structures.
- Working with the community outside the school gates, including any local LGBTI+ youth projects/groups, parents and community organisations to promote a wider LGBTI+ inclusive community

The Model was intensively piloted in two post-primary schools in Donegal and comprehensively evaluated by National University Ireland, Galway. The learnings from this pilot were integrated into a revised version of the SASS Model in 2019. LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools Model Accreditation: LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools (SASS) Project The LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools (SASS) Project 2020 was established to develop and pilot the revised Model as a Whole School Community approach, designed to create schools that are fully inclusive of LGBTI+ young people.

5. Költő, A., Vaughan, E., O’Sullivan, L., Kelly, C., Saewyc, E. M., & Nic Gabhainn, S. (2021). LGBTI+ Youth in Ireland and across Europe: A two-phased landscape and research gap analysis. Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

In December 2020, this scaled-up second phase of the LGBTI+ SASS pilot was launched in 20 ETB post-primary schools across Ireland, aiming to create a practical and sustainable format that can be rolled out across Ireland. The impact of the LGBTI+ SASS Project is being assessed by Dr Seline Keating, Assistant Professor in Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and Wellbeing, and Research Fellow with the National Anti-Bullying Centre.

For the purposes of the LGBTI+ SASS Project, BeLonG To has created minimum requirements within each of the six key areas of the Model that schools must meet to become accredited LGBTI+ Safe and Supportive Schools. The Project integrates all-staff training (teaching and non-teaching) along with implementation of key actions in each area of the Model.

In the Curriculum area, schools are asked to deliver lessons from the resource 'Growing Up LGBT' and include LGBTI+ representation in at least five subject areas. The BeLonG To Junior Cycle Resources support this whole school engagement.

Funding for the national roll out of this model in all post-primary schools, would ensure that RSE is discussed across the whole school environment and community. It would open the door to normalising discussion around RSE and provide support for fully inclusive policy and practice.

Please email this document to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie by November 5th 2021.

The report on this consultation will be available on www.ncca.ie early 2022.