



**NCCA**

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

# **Draft specification**

## **for Senior Cycle SPHE**

NCCA consultation, 2023

## NCCA consultation on draft specification for Senior Cycle SPHE

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The NCCA is currently updating the Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum and as part of this work an updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is now available for consultation. A key part of the consultation is feedback from individuals and groups who are interested in this area of young people's education. The consultation on the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum will remain open until October 18th . You can share your feedback by completing this template and sending it to: [SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie](mailto:SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie)

Before completing the template, please read the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum at this link: <https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/senior-cycle-social-personal-and-health-education-sphe/>

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## Senior Cycle SPHE – Feedback

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If you are contributing your views on behalf of **an organisation or group**, please provide details below

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Name of organisation/group:	Belong To – LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland
Does your organisation wish to be listed as a contributor	Yes

to this consultation on the NCCA website?	
Does your organisation wish to have this written submission published on the NCCA website?	Yes

## About Belong To

Belong To, LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland is a national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) young people. Since 2003, Belong To has worked with LGBTQ+ youth to create a world where they are equal, safe and thriving in the diversity of their identities and experiences.

The organisation advocates and campaigns with and on behalf of LGBTQ+ young people and offers specialised LGBTQ+ youth services in Dublin (including crisis counselling with Pieta) and supports a network of LGBTQ+ youth groups across Ireland. Belong To also supports educators and other professionals working with LGBTQ+ youth with training, capacity building and policy development.

Belong To strongly welcomes the published draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum, following extensive consultation with students, teachers, parents, academics and stakeholders. This is a hugely positive development for young people across Ireland, and builds upon the well-informed and comprehensive Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, which was rolled out to First Year students in September of this year.

## Belong To and LGBTQ+ Inclusive Education

Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark was launched in 2022, developing from the Safe and Supportive Schools pilot project. The LGBTQ+ Quality Mark is an evidence-based, holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusion in schools and alternative education spaces that involves the whole school community. The initiative follows the four key areas of Wellbeing Promotion as outlined by the Department of Education, namely Curriculum (Teaching and Learning), Culture and Environment, Policy and Planning, and Relationships and Partnerships. Over the course of 18 months, the LGBTQ+ Quality Mark model sets a number of goals and requirements within each of these areas, which combine to ensure a holistic approach to LGBTQ+ inclusion that involves the whole school community. Each of these requirements are evidence-based, and informed by the Department of Education's *Being LGBT in School* resource.

We support schools to attain these goals through dedicated resources, trainings and one-to-one supports. A total of 116 schools and Youthreach Centres have so far joined Belong To's LGBTQ+ Quality Mark journey to become an accredited safe and supportive school.

Belong To's annual Stand Up Awareness Week campaign is now in its 14th year. Stand Up Awareness Week is a national LGBTQ+ anti-bullying week running in second-level schools, Youthreach centres and youth services across Ireland each November. Stand Up Awareness Week is supported by the Department of Education and endorsed by major organisations in the post-primary school sector as follows: ETBI, ASTI, Teachers Union Ireland, Joint Managerial Body,

National Parents Council Post-Primary, Educate Together, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Irish Second-Level Students Association, Institute of Guidance Counsellors and the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals. The Department of Education's continued support for the campaign is named as an action under the 'Culture and Environment' section of Cinealtas: Action Plan on Bullying.

Stand Up Awareness Week aims to decrease bullying, isolation, self-harm, suicide ideation and mental health difficulties among LGBTQ+ youth. With the campaign, we also strive to increase peer support between LGBTQ+ youth and their classmates, and increase awareness of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students among the entire school community. We are proud to have seen a year-on-year increase in the number of post-primary schools participating in Stand Up Awareness Week, with 77% of second-level schools across Ireland taking part in 2022.

## LGBTQ+ Young People's School Experiences

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In partnership with the Teacher's College, Columbia University, Belong To conducted the Irish stream of the international School Climate Survey research model in 2019 and 2022. The research examines indicators of a negative school experience, the impact of the school environment on students, and school-based supports that can improve the lives of LGBTQ+ youth. The 2022 School Climate Survey: Key Findings report details the experiences of 1,208 LGBTQ+ students from Irish post-primary schools over the 2021/22 academic year, with all 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland represented.<sup>1</sup>

Regarding experiences of safety, 76% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe at school, with 3 in 10 LGBTQ+ students missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. School spaces most commonly avoided by LGBTQ+ students for safety reasons included bathrooms (45%), PE classes (39%), and sports facilities (29%). 69% of LGBTQ+ students heard homophobic remarks from other students, and 53% heard their peers make negative remarks about trans people. 56% of LGBTQ+ students reported hearing a homophobic remark from a teacher or staff member.

Compared to the general Irish youth population, this research found that LGBTQ+ students are nine times more likely to report being deliberately excluded by peers, nine times more likely to

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<sup>1</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

report being the focus of rumours or lies, four times more likely to report verbal harassment, and five times more likely to experience physical harassment. Additionally, 46% of LGBTQ+ students had been sexually harassed in the 2021/22 school year, and 41% reported experiencing cyberbullying.

These experiences cause many LGBTQ+ students to feel isolated and fearful at school, impacting their sense of belonging at school and their academic aspirations. The research found that LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher rates of homophobic and biphobic harassment and assault are 21% less likely to feel accepted by the student body. Compared to the general Irish youth population, LGBTQ+ students are four times more likely to feel lonely at school and three times more likely to feel like an outsider at school.

LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher levels of harassment and assault were twice as likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe as compared to those who experienced lower rates of harassment. One in ten LGBTQ+ students are unsure whether they will complete the Leaving Certificate; reasons for this include mental health challenges (71%), hostility from other students (29%), and feeling unsafe at school (18%).

In schools with higher levels of staff support for LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ students were 35% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, 33% more likely to feel they belong in school, and 21% less likely to be absent from school due to feeling unsafe. When school staff overheard homophobic remarks and proactively intervened, LGBTQ+ students were 13% more likely to feel accepted by the student body and 14% more likely to feel they belong in school.

Where LGBTQ+-related topics had been included in the school curriculum, LGBTQ+ students were 22% more likely to feel they belong in school, 11% more likely to feel accepted by the student body, and 8% less likely to be absent from school due to feeling unsafe. However, half of LGBTQ+ students reported that LGBTQ+-related topics were not covered at all in the 2021/22 school year. SPHE led as the subject with the highest reported representation of LGBTQ+ topics, however, only 35% of LGBTQ+ students received LGBTQ+ inclusive SPHE.

## Questions to consider

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### Question 1: Aim

The aim of the updated curriculum is to *'empower students to become healthy, resilient, responsible and empathetic young adults; nurture respectful and caring relationships; and prepare for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life now and beyond school.'*

Please state whether you agree this aim summarises the purpose of SPHE for senior cycle students and your reason for agreeing/disagreeing.

**Insert response here:**

The outlined aim is very welcome, and clearly summarises the purpose of SPHE for Senior Cycle students.

We feel it would be beneficial for this aim to be underpinned by a number of guiding principles, so as to provide clarity for students, parents/guardians, and teachers as to the purpose of SPHE class. These guiding principles should also support teachers in developing their lesson plans in relation to each of the outlined Learning Outcomes.

It is recommended that the following guiding principles underpin the teaching of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum:

- Appreciation and respect for diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.
- Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.
- Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.
- Positive and inclusive information on sexuality and sexual health.

**Appreciate and respect diverse experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.**

- It is welcome that equality and inclusion is included under Learning Outcome 3.6.
- However, as compared to the Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is lacking in developing upon the need to appreciate and respect diverse experiences, which have only been mentioned under Learning Outcomes 1.4, 2.3 and 3.6.
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Articles 28 and 29, the right to education should include “the development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms,” and “the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society.”
- Resources developed to support the teaching of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum should include a diverse range of stories and experiences, including LGBTQ+ identities, minority racial and ethnic identities, the Traveller community, and persons living with a disability.

**Provision of evidence-based, objective, and inclusive information.**

- The brevity and progressive nature of the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is very welcome, and marks a substantial step forward.
- However, it remains the case that a significant proportion of teachers who are scheduled for SPHE classes do not have specific training on areas covered by SPHE, or the curriculum itself.
- In light of this, and owing to the nature of areas covered by SPHE, particularly Strand 2, it is vital that the provision of objective, inclusive, and evidence-based information is a core element of the new curriculum.
- As such, we recommend that teachers be advised to follow resources and supporting materials produced or endorsed by the NCCA and the Department of Education when teaching this curriculum, particularly Strand 2.
- To ensure that this new curriculum is taught in full, including an LGBTQ+ Inclusive approach to all Learning Outcomes under Strand 2, it may be useful to consider including a review of SPHE teaching materials and lesson plans as part of school inspections.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt it would be helpful to have a feedback mechanism for students on a local (school) and more formal (NCCA/Department of Education/academic research) level as to their experience of being taught the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

### **Promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abuse, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence.**

- It is welcome that consent is named within Learning Outcome 2.3, and that healthy relationships are named under Learning Outcome 2.1.
- However, it would be beneficial for the promotion of consent, and prevention of bullying, abusive, and violence to be threaded through the teaching materials and resources developed for the Learning Outcomes of all Strands.
- For example, under Learning Outcome 1.3 ‘critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs’, the experience of peer pressure to consume drugs or alcohol could be framed within the language of boundaries and consent, relating to respecting a person’s decision not to consume drugs and/or alcohol.

### **Positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health.**

- The return of RSE to sit within the SPHE curriculum is a very positive development, and it is welcome that Strand 2 is dedicated to RSE.
- The inclusion of compulsory RSE within the Senior Cycle SPHE framework brings Ireland fully in line with a number of international human rights standards, including:
  - o meeting the recommendation of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education that comprehensive sex education be mandatory, available to all without discrimination from the early stages of life, and that this education should take a holistic, scientific, and pluralistic perspective.<sup>2</sup>
  - o meeting obligations under Article 24 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that State Parties “recognise the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health,” including sexual health and mental health.
  - o meeting the recommendation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stresses that sexual health education should be “based on scientific evidence and human rights standards”, with “attention... given to gender equality, sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health rights, responsible parenthood and sexual behaviour and violence prevention, as well as to preventing early pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.”<sup>3</sup>
  - o responding to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s specific concern at the “lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education” for young people

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<sup>2</sup> UN General Assembly, “Report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education: Sexual Education” A/65/162. [Available here.](#)

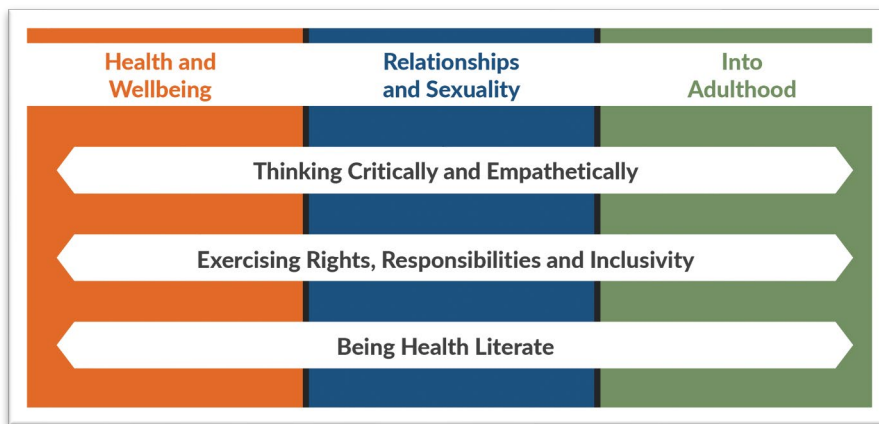
<sup>3</sup> UNCRC, “General Comment No. 20 (2016) on the Implementation of the Rights of the Child During Adolescence” CRC/C/GC/20 Para 61. [Available here.](#)

in Ireland, and meeting Committee’s resulting recommendation that sexual and reproductive health education be included as a mandatory part of the school curriculum.<sup>4</sup>

- Conversations around sexuality and sexual health are likely to arise under Learning Outcomes beyond Strand 2, for example in relation to alcohol and emotional wellbeing under Strand 1.
- As such, we recommend that positive and inclusive sexuality and sexual health be a key principle underpinning the entire Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum and resource, rather than for Strand 2 alone.

## Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three cross-cutting elements, illustrated below:



Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

**In the following section, we would value your feedback on each of the three strands.**

### Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing

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

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<sup>4</sup> UNCRC ‘Concluding Observations: Ireland’ (2016) UN Doc CRC/C/IRL/CO/3-4. [Available here.](#)



Students should be able to	
1.1	research the determinants of good health
1.2	discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance
1.3	critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs
1.4	explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self
1.5	recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour
1.6	draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health
1.7	recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed
1.8	discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety
1.9	explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed
1.1	discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 1, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) clarity on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) relevant to the lives and needs of 16-18 year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

#### **1.1 research the determinants of good health**

- We recommend that the wording of this Learning Outcome be updated to "determinants of good physical and mental health".
- Bodywhys, The Eating Disorders Association of Ireland, reports that "the average age of onset for anorexia nervosa is 14-18, 14-22 for bulimia nervosa and late teens to early 20s for binge eating disorder."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bodywhys (2023) 'Statistics', [www.bodywhys.ie](http://www.bodywhys.ie). [Available here](#).

- It is important that teaching under this Learning Outcome does not inadvertently reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' foods and behaviours, which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours.
- As such, we recommend that resource materials related to this Learning Outcome are developed in consultation with Bodywhys.

### **1.2 discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance**

- We welcome this learning outcome and encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission strongly expressed their frustration that what was discussed in SPHE in relation to wellbeing, mental health, and a healthy life balance, was not reflected in their schools' culture.
- In particular, young people felt that what was taught in SPHE was actively contradicted by stresses resulting from homework, study, assignments and exams. Young people expressed their frustration that teachers were reluctant to change their timelines if, for example, students had multiple essays due on the same day for different classes.
- In terms of understanding and enacting the SPHE curriculum as a "praxis", it is important that the cross cutting element 'Exercising Rights, Responsibilities and Inclusivity' is adopted in relation to the school environment, for example as part of teaching under this Learning Outcome.
- Upon developing resource materials for this Learning Outcome, we recommend including information on facilitating student engagement and feedback on the school's overall culture, promotion of wellbeing, and actions to enable a healthy life balance. This could take the form of an anonymous student survey with students given the option of putting their name forward for further discussion through a focus group.
- The above suggestion is in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which adopts the Lundy model of child participation for student participation.<sup>6</sup> As noted by the quality framework document, one of the four aspects of the Lundy model is that children/students be "facilitated to express their view", and that "the view must be acted on as appropriate".
- As such, we recommend that conversations around emotional wellbeing do not focus solely on what the student as an individual can do to protect and nurture their emotional wellbeing. Class discussions could explore what can be done on a collective, school, or community level to create more nurturing environments in which the emotional wellbeing

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<sup>6</sup> Department of Education. (2022). 'Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools'. Department of Education: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

of others is also protected. This approach brings the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum closer in line with the updated *Looking at Our School 2022* quality framework for post-primary schools, which names “Centrality of students’ wellbeing” as one of the ten key principles underpinning the framework.<sup>7</sup>

### **1.3 critically analyse the origins and effects of social norms and attitudes to alcohol and drugs**

- We welcome this learning outcome and strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission highlighted that abstentionist, or ‘just say no’, teaching towards drugs and alcohol was not helpful and often resulted in students disengaging during these lessons.
- Young people felt that it was important for SPHE teachers to acknowledge that a considerable number of students at Senior Cycle will have consumed alcohol and/or drugs at some point, and that education should be focused on a health and harm-reduction approach.
- Harm reduction is defined as “...the philosophical and practical development of strategies so that the outcomes of drug use are as safe as is situationally possible. It involves the provision of factual information, resources, education, skills and the development of attitude change, in order, that the consequences of drug use for the users, the community and the culture have minimal negative impact.”<sup>8</sup>
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have the right to “acquire life skills, to obtain adequate and age-appropriate information, and to make appropriate health behaviour choices.”<sup>9</sup>
- As such, the approach to teaching under this Learning Outcome should be to ensure that students are given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them.
- Development of resource materials related to this Learning Outcome would benefit from extensive input from the HSE National Social Inclusion Office, who recently rolled out the highly successful Safer Nightlife campaign relating to drug harm-reduction.

### **1.4 explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one’s sense of self**

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<sup>7</sup> Department of Education. (2022). ‘Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools’. Department of Education: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

<sup>8</sup> Watson, M. (1991) ‘Harm Reduction - Why do it?’ *International Journal on Drug Policy* Vol. 2 (5), pp. 13-15.

<sup>9</sup> UNCRC, “General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child” CRC/GC/2003/4 [Available here.](#)

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and recommend its wording be updated to include identity, reading:  
“explore the factors that influence mental health and wellbeing, including the influence of family, peers, identity, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one’s sense of self”
- The inclusion of ‘identity’ is important in acknowledging and understanding how being a member of a minority group, for example being an LGBTQ+ young person, young person of colour, Traveller young person or young person with a disability, can impact upon mental health and wellbeing.
- As detailed earlier in this submission, LGBTQ+ students experience higher rates of bullying and exclusion than the general Irish youth population.<sup>10</sup>
- In addition, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to experience mental health challenges; 93% of LGBTQ+ young people struggled with anxiety, stress, or depression during the Covid-19 pandemic compared with 53% of the general youth population.<sup>11</sup>
- Research identifies stigma and minority stress as two key factors in understanding poorer mental health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by members of the LGBTQ+ community. Stigma relates to negative attitudes to a person’s LGBTQ+ identity, and discrimination they may experience. These negative attitudes can be in the home, community, school, society, or political sphere. Minority stress is a result of this stigma. It relates to the excess stress that an LGBTQ+ person can experience as a result of discrimination or rejection based on their identity. Bullying and social exclusion are key factors identified as causing minority stress among LGBTQ+ young people.
- The LGBT Ireland Report found that age 12 is the most common age at which a person first realises their LGBTQ+ identity. However, the most common age of ‘coming out’, or telling others about one’s LGBTQ+ identity, is 16.
- As Senior Cycle is the time at which a majority of LGBTQ+ people in Ireland come out to others, it is important to include consideration of identity within this Learning Outcome.

### **1.5 recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk and how these can affect emotions and behaviour**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and recommend its wording be updated to include ‘in themselves and others’ as per Learning Outcome 1.7, reading:

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<sup>10</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here.](#)

<sup>11</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2021). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later*. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

“recognise unhelpful thinking patterns and negative self-talk in themselves and others, and how these can affect emotions and behaviour”

- LGBTQ+ youth consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission highlighted the need for young people to be equipped with the skills to recognise when their friends are struggling with mental health challenges, and how to support them.
- Irish research has shown that many LGBTQ+ young people’s self-assessment of their mental health difficulties acts as a barrier to seeking support. Compared to their LGBTQ+ peers, many LGBTQ+ young people “expressed the belief that... their mental health problem was not bad enough to access treatment and they did not want to waste scarce resources by accessing services or affecting access for other people whom they perceived to be in greater need”.<sup>12</sup>
- Peer support can therefore act as a useful bridge to support students, and particularly LGBTQ+ students, to acknowledge the challenges they are facing and seek support before these difficulties become more severe.

#### **1.6 draw on a variety of strategies that can help regulate and manage harmful thoughts and emotions in order to nurture positive mental health**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- To support this learning outcome, it would be helpful for an ‘online hub’ of resources designed for young people to be made directly available to students, which teachers can direct them to while teaching material related to this Learning Outcome.
- Within this online hub, we recommend including Belong To’s Better Out Than In mental health hub, which includes practical steps that LGBTQ+ young people can take to address anxiety, low mood and sleeping difficulties.<sup>13</sup>

#### **1.7 recognise the signs and symptoms of stress and anxiety in themselves and others and recognise when help should be sought, where to go and how to access help if needed**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and strongly encourage its retention.
- As detailed previously, the inclusion of recognising signs of mental health challenges in others is particularly important for LGBTQ+ youth, many of whom avoid seeking mental health supports due to the feeling that their challenges are “not bad enough” compared to their LGBTQ+ peers.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Higgins *et al.* (2021) ‘LGBT+ young people’s perceptions of barriers to accessing mental health services in Ireland’, *Journal of Nursing Management*, (29) 58-69. [Available here.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Belong To (2023) *Better Out Than In*. [Available here.](#)

<sup>14</sup> Higgins *et al.* (2021) ‘LGBT + young people’s perceptions of barriers to accessing mental health services in Ireland’, *Journal of Nursing Management*, (29) 58-69. [Available here.](#)

- Student and staff resources accompanying this Learning Outcome could include a comprehensive list of available support services, compiled by the NCCA and made directly available to students both via an online hub and in SPHE textbooks.
- It is important that this list includes support services that are less formal and/or youth focused. Research shows that LGBTQ+ young people are largely unaware of youth-friendly mental health services, and had negative perceptions of more formal mental health services.<sup>15</sup>
- We recommend that this list include a breakdown of free support services, such as the HSE 50808 text line; specialised support services, such as Belong To's supports for LGBTQ+ youth including crisis counselling with Pieta; sources of information on youth mental health, such as SpunOut and Jigsaw; along with the process of referral to CAMHs, and an online list of local mental health and youth mental health support services broken down by location.

### **1.8 discuss healthy and unhealthy ways of responding to stress and anxiety**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and encourage its retention.
- As detailed more extensively under Learning Outcome 1.1, it is important that that teaching under this Learning Outcome does not inadvertently reinforcing a binary view of 'healthy/good' vs. 'unhealthy/bad' foods and behaviours, which can be triggering for those experiencing disordered eating and other disordered behaviours.
- As such, we recommend that resource materials related to this Learning Outcome are developed in consultation with Bodywhys.
- Similarly, as detailed more extensively under Learning Outcome 1.3, it is important that teaching related to drugs and alcohol under this Learning Outcome take a harm reduction approach.
- Adopting a harm reduction approach ensures that students are given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them.

### **1.9 explain the pathways towards addiction, the signs and consequences of different kinds of addictions and where to go and how to access help, if needed**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and strongly encourage its retention.

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<sup>15</sup> 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. [Available here.](#)

- As detailed previously, LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission highlighted that abstentionist, or 'just say no', teaching towards drugs and alcohol was not helpful and often resulted in students disengaging during these lessons.
- Additionally, the focus group voiced that it is important for this Learning Outcome to address dependency and addictive behaviours that do not fall within the stereotypical understanding of addiction. Examples given by young people included dependence on weed to manage mental health challenges, and alcohol dependence where a person may not drink every day, but also may not be able to cope with social gatherings without alcohol.
- Young people also felt that it was important for SPHE teachers to acknowledge that a considerable number of students at Senior Cycle will have consumed alcohol and/or drugs at some point, and that education should be focused on a health and harm-reduction approach.
- Harm reduction is defined as "...the philosophical and practical development of strategies so that the outcomes of drug use are as safe as is situationally possible. It involves the provision of factual information, resources, education, skills and the development of attitude change, in order, that the consequences of drug use for the users, the community and the culture have minimal negative impact."<sup>16</sup>
- In accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have the right to "acquire life skills, to obtain adequate and age-appropriate information, and to make appropriate health behaviour choices."<sup>17</sup>
- As such, the approach to teaching under this Learning Outcome should be to ensure that students are given all necessary information and supports to empower them to keep themselves safe, to understand the contexts in which their decisions are made, and to make the choices that are safe for them.
- Finally, LGBTQ+ young people who attended Belong To's focus group highlighted the need for this Learning Outcome to be taught in a non-judgemental way, so as to avoid stigmatising students, their friends and/or family members who may have experience of addiction.

**1.10 discuss and devise ways to safely manage social situations where their own or others' health or safety may be at risk.**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome, and strongly encourage its retention.

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<sup>16</sup> Watson, M. (1991) 'Harm Reduction - Why do it?' *International Journal on Drug Policy* Vol. 2 (5), pp. 13-15.

<sup>17</sup> UNCRC, "General Comment No. 4 (2003) Adolescent Health and Development in the Context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child" CRC/GC/2003/4 [Available here.](#)

- Young people in both Belong To’s focus groups and focus groups conducted by the NCCA<sup>18</sup> highlighted the need for students to be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to keep themselves and their peers safe while socialising, particularly in a nightlife context.
- A clear recommendation from LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To was the need to ensure that this Learning Outcome was not taught in a way that involves ‘victim blaming’ in relation to sexual violence, i.e. advising students that a victim of sexual violence could have avoided the assault had the consumed less alcohol and/or drugs.
- Resource materials related to this Learning Outcome should clearly name and explain the ongoing importance of consent – socially and legally – in the context of nightlife, drinking and drug use, including recreational drug use, “date rape” drugs, and spiking.
- Students and staff resources developed to support this Learning Outcome would be greatly strengthened through consultation with the HSE National Office for Social Inclusion, in relation to their roll-out of the CRISSCROSS project in Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

## Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality

Within this strand students will explore the wide range of relationships that are important for their lives with a particular focus on gaining the awareness, knowledge and skills to support them in creating and nurturing respectful, caring and healthy relationships. This strand also supports students to recognise and be empowered to respond to instances of abuse or violence in relationships.

**Note:** Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.

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Students should be able to

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<sup>18</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here.](#)

<sup>19</sup> CRISSCROSS is an intervention program in nightlife, leisure and socialization venues to raise awareness and prevent GBV behaviours - including LGBTIphobia - linked to sexual violence and substance use. The main goal of CRISSCROSS is to combat gender-based violence in nightlife, leisure and socialization venues frequented by youngsters and young adults (16-24 y/o) through the design, testing and evaluation of innovative pilots based on the behaviour change wheel methodology, with the aim to raise awareness, change attitudes and prevent GBV behaviours -including LGBTIphobia-linked to sexual violence and substance use. Further information is [available here.](#)



2.1	demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict
2.2	reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour
2.3	discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure
2.4	examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives
2.5	identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control
2.6	explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available
2.7	investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations
2.8	discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these
2.9	explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 2, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16-year olds today. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

#### **Recommended inclusion – reproductive healthcare and accessing termination of pregnancy services**

- It is recommended that an additional Learning Outcome be included to specifically cover reproductive healthcare and access to termination of pregnancy services.
- The purpose of this recommendation is to ensure that teaching on responses to a pregnancy and accessing termination of pregnancy are not overlooked within the broad Learning Outcome 2.9.
- We recommend that student and staff resources explicitly name the HSE My Options website and helpline as the source for reliable and unbiased information on the options available to pregnant people.
- We recommend that teaching materials cover where and how to access information on termination of pregnancy (GP, HSE My Options, and family planning centres).

- Teaching materials should also explicitly address the existence of ‘rogue crisis pregnancy agencies’; unregulated crisis pregnancy services which present as unbiased but may provide unreliable or anti-abortion information.<sup>20</sup>
- Resources for teachers should make clear that information provided to students must be objective and evidence-based and that a school’s ethos or patronage cannot be a barrier to objective teaching on this topic.

**Note: Each of the learning outcomes below should be taught in a way that LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families are fully integrated and reflected in teaching and learning, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.**

- We welcome this note to Strand 2, and very strongly encourage its retention.
- Students and teachers consulted by the NCCA during the development of this curriculum noted the need for “references to members of the LGBTQI+ community [to be] normalised as a way of eliminating ‘bigotry and prejudice’.”<sup>21</sup>
- As mentioned previously, in the 2021/22 academic year, only 35% of LGBTQ+ students were taught LGBTQ+-related topics in SPHE.<sup>22</sup>
- Integrating LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and families throughout Strand 2 is important not only for LGBTQ+ students, but also to foster empathy and understanding for LGBTQ+ people and their experiences among the general youth population.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To on the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum stressed the need for the entire SPHE curriculum to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons. Young people noted that, throughout their lives, students will encounter LGBTQ+ people, identities and experiences in a range of settings, and so having stand-alone lessons on LGBTQ+ topics doesn’t accurately represent how non-LGBTQ+ people will interact with LGBTQ+ people in their lifetime.

### **2.1 demonstrate the awareness and skills needed for nurturing healthy in-person and online relationships, including respecting boundaries, communicating feelings and needs and preventing and managing conflict**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.

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<sup>20</sup> Ryan, O. (2022) ‘Frightening’ language and no abortion information: Warning issued over rogue pregnancy services’, *thejournal.ie*. [Available here](#).

<sup>21</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>22</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To in advance of this submission repeatedly expressed the need for SPHE to address topics including understanding, creating and respecting boundaries; how to communicate clearly and respectfully, what good communication looks like, and skills for communicating feelings, particularly when feeling frustrated or upset; and dealing with challenges and disagreements between friends, classmates, family members and colleagues.

## **2.2 reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and suggest that it be rephrased to include 'family', so this reads:  
"reflect on how their attitudes, beliefs, values and identity can influence the dynamics of friendships, family, relationships and sexual behaviour".
- The inclusion of family relationships is particularly important for LGBTQ+ young people, 56% of whom are not fully accepted in their home environment,<sup>23</sup> and over half of whom described their home environment as "not good".<sup>24</sup>
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To as part of this submission stressed the high number of LGBTQ+ youth whose parents and/or families are not accepting of their identity, or struggle initially when a young person comes out. The focus group felt that it was important that this Learning Outcome address what difficult family dynamics might look like, and ways for a young person to protect their wellbeing in a difficult home environment,
- Additionally, LGBTQ+ young people noted that, both in schools and in society, there is a stereotypical view of domestic violence as being between a couple. However, the group felt that it was important for all young people to be aware that physical, psychological and emotional abuse perpetrated by parents against their children is also a form of domestic violence.

## **2.3 discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To very strongly voiced the need for both consent and mutual pleasure to be included in SPHE classes, and felt that this was an important and progressive inclusion in the draft Senior Cycle curriculum.

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<sup>23</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

<sup>24</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2020). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

- Young people also felt that discussing care, respect and pleasure together with consent was a good way of teaching consent and boundaries, as it moves away from a purely legal understanding of consent, and allows space to discuss how consent requires ongoing communication and can be retracted at any time.
- There is a clear evidence base for the need to address consent, and the related elements of sexual behaviour including care, respect, intimacy and pleasure, with young people in Ireland.
- A recent survey by Active\* Consent found that 29% of female, 10% of male, and 18% of non-binary third-level students reported “non-consensual penetration by incapacitation, force or threat of force” during their college years.<sup>25</sup>
- Published in 2019, the RCNI *Storm and Stress* report found that 80% of adolescents had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the previous 12 months.<sup>26</sup> While 20% of all adolescents had experienced serious sexual harassment, this figure stood at 68% among LGBT+ youth.
- Similarly, the *2022 School Climate Report* found that 46% of LGBTQ+ students had been sexually harassed at school in the 2021/22 academic year.<sup>27</sup>
- To normalise the concept of consent in sexual relationships, it is important for other Strands to acknowledge that consent is a cross-cutting approach that applies to situations other than sexual/intimate relationships, including friendships and family relationships.
- Resource materials for this Learning Outcome would benefit from reference to the ‘OMFG’ (ongoing, mutual, and freely given) model of consent, and engagement with the Active\* Consent project at the University of Galway.

#### **2.4 examine how harmful attitudes around gender are perpetuated in the media, online and in society and discuss strategies for challenging these attitudes and narratives**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt that it was extremely important to address gender stereotypes, gender norms and attitudes towards gender in SPHE.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people, how understanding men as ‘rational’ and women as

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<sup>25</sup> L Burke *et al*, (2020) The Active\* Consent / Union Of Students In Ireland Sexual Experiences Survey 2020: Sexual Violence And Harassment Experiences In A National Survey Of Higher Education Institutions (NUIG and USI 2020). [Available here.](#)

<sup>26</sup> Rape Crisis Network Ireland (2019) *Storm and Stress*. [Available here.](#)

<sup>27</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here.](#)

'emotional' negatively impacts men's mental health, and how gendered subject choices, such as Home Economics and Woodwork rarely being made available in single-sex boys and girls schools respectively, impact our understanding of gender roles in society.

- It is important that resource materials developed for this Learning Outcome do not focus only on attitudes towards women and girls.
- It is also important these resource materials look at and understand gender as a way that we organise society, and how harmful attitudes to gender and gender stereotypes limit all people in society, not just women and girls.
- As teachers and young people consulted by the NCCA expressed a desire to better understand non-binary identities, and gender identity more broadly,<sup>28</sup> resource materials for this Learning Outcome could include information on what gender identity is, and how cisgender people experience gender in a way that is different to trans and non-binary people.

## **2.5 identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships, including coercive control**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- This Learning Outcome may benefit from being expanded to name relationship types, reading:  
"identify and consider common signs of abusive relationships (including family, friendships and romantic/sexual relationships), including coercive control.
- LGBTQ+ young people in Belong To's focus group highlighted how abusive behaviours within friendships is rarely discussed in detail, beyond the context of bullying.
- Young people also stressed the need for SPHE to include teaching on abusive family relationships, as this can be hidden to those outside the family unit and may not be well understood by those experiencing the abuse.
- The inclusion of family relationships is particularly important for LGBTQ+ young people, 56% of whom are not fully accepted in their home environment,<sup>29</sup> and over half of whom described their home environment as "not good".<sup>30</sup>
- Addressing abusive friendships within the context of abusive relationships is also particularly important for LGBTQ+ students, who are much more likely to experience behaviours linked to relational bullying than the general youth populations.

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<sup>28</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. Available at: [https://ncca.ie/media/5974/bgp-sc-sphe\\_consultation-report\\_0223.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/5974/bgp-sc-sphe_consultation-report_0223.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2020). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report*. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

<sup>30</sup> Belong To Youth Services. (2020). *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: Key Findings Report*. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here.](#)

- As mentioned previously, compared to the general Irish youth population, LGBTQ+ students are nine times more likely to report being deliberately excluded by peers, nine times more likely to report being the focus of rumours or lies, four times more likely to feel lonely at school, and three times more likely to feel like an outsider at school.<sup>31</sup>

**2.6 explain the root causes and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV), with a particular focus on violence against women and girls, and outline the supports available**

- This Learning Outcome is welcome, and we strongly encourage its retention.
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt that it was extremely important to address gendered violence.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people and how gender stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality and GBV.
- Similar to Learning Outcome 2.4, it is important these resource materials look at and understand gender as a way that we organise society, and how harmful attitudes to gender and gender stereotypes limit all people in society, not just women and girls.
- As mentioned under previous Learning Outcomes, it would be helpful for supports available to be clearly listed in SPHE textbooks, and for information on these supports to be made directly available to students via an online SPHE hub,

**2.7 investigate the influence of pornography on attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations**

- We welcome the inclusion of this Learning Outcome, and strongly support its retention.
- Research by the University of Galway shows that the proportion of young people who first saw pornography between the ages of 10-13 was 53% of boys and 23% of girls.<sup>32</sup>
- Between one-fifth and one-quarter of respondents to the above research indicated that, from watching pornography, they had learned ways to communicate verbally and non-verbally during sex, ways to initiate sex, and how people behave, including gender roles, during sex.<sup>33</sup>
- This research highlights a clear need for young people to receive objective, evidence-based information on how pornography influences our attitudes, behaviours and relationship expectations.

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<sup>31</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

<sup>32</sup> Dawson, K. et al. (2021) *The Porn Report*. Active\*Consent. [Available here](#).

<sup>33</sup> Dawson, K. et al. (2021) *The Porn Report*. Active\*Consent. [Available here](#).

- Parents consulted by the NCCA in advance of the draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum “felt strongly that Senior Cycle SPHE should encourage learning to identify and challenge unrealistic expectations about sexual behaviour”, in the context of “concerns about the volume of sexually implicit and explicit material, including pornography, encountered by young people”.<sup>34</sup>
- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To also shared the view that this was an important topic to address, as they felt that some young people relied on pornography to learn about sexual behaviour in the absence of pleasure, intimacy and boundaries being taught during SPHE.
- The inclusion of this Learning Outcome also meets a recent recommendation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, that States take a holistic approach to addressing the risks posed by digital media, including pornography.<sup>35</sup>
- It is vital that teachers are well resourced and provided with training on this nuanced area.

## **2.8 discuss image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape and what to do if they or someone they know has experienced any of these**

- We welcome the inclusion of this Learning Outcome, and strongly support its retention.
- It is important that resource materials related to this Learning Outcome address the personal, social and legal consequences of these actions, including the impact on victims.
- Both this Learning Outcome and related teaching materials must ensure a non-judgemental approach, which acknowledges the reality that many victims of online sexual harassment/abuse through intimate images have shared that image initially with someone they believed to be trustworthy.
- It is vital that students who may be impacted by image-based sexual abuse, online targeted harassment, and cyberbullying are not deterred from seeking support should they feel that they have not behaved in a ‘responsible’ way.
- Both SPHE textbooks and an online hub available to students should clearly outline legislation related to image-based abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape, with a detailed list of victim support services, along with sources of information for victims who wish to take legal action.
- Published in 2019, the RCNI *Storm and Stress* report found that 80% of adolescents had experienced some form of sexual harassment in the previous 12 months.<sup>36</sup> While 20% of

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<sup>34</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>35</sup> UNCRC, “General Comment No. 25 (2021) on Children’s Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment” CRC/C/GC/25/. [Available here](#).

<sup>36</sup> Rape Crisis Network Ireland (2019) *Storm and Stress*. [Available here](#).

all adolescents had experienced serious sexual harassment, this figure stood at 68% among LGBT+ youth.

- In addition, *Belong To's 2022 School Climate Report* found that 46% of LGBTQ+ second-level students had experienced sexual harassment in school.
- As such, teachers undertaking SPHE classes must be supported in taking a trauma-informed approach, to prioritise the mental health and wellbeing of all students.

### **2.9 explore sexual and reproductive health, including fertility, safer sexual practices, possible responses to an unplanned pregnancy, and how to access sexual health services.**

- We welcome the inclusion of this Learning Outcome, and strongly support its retention.
- As outlined at the beginning of this section, we recommend that this Learning Outcome be separated out to create an additional learning outcome specifically addressing reproductive healthcare and access to termination of pregnancy.
- Teaching materials related to this Learning Outcome must be LGBTQ+ inclusive, to ensure that LGBTQ+ young people are provided with reliable and evidence-based information and are not reliant on seeking information related to their sexual health online.
- LGBTQ+ youth who joined *Belong To's* focus group on the draft SPHE curriculum voiced their frustration of the absence of sexual health education in their schools or, where it was provided, a focus on preventing pregnancy rather than a holistic approach to sexual health.
- Research conducted by *Belong To* in 2021 found that, during the year prior, only 51% of sexually active LGBTQ+ youth aged 18 and over used protection when engaging in sexual activity, and 76% did not access a sexual health check-up.<sup>37</sup>
- This research demonstrates the need for comprehensive and inclusive sexual health education from a young age, including information on how and where to avail of free or low-cost sexual health check-ups.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

Within this strand students will gain specific knowledge and skills to support them as they make the transition to adulthood and learn how to take greater responsibility for themselves. This includes being able to manage choices, develop the skills that are needed to plan for the future, establish and maintain good habits, and achieve goals. It also supports students in learning how to take care of themselves in times of change or challenge, understand their rights and

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<sup>37</sup> *Belong To Youth Services. (2021). LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later. Key Findings Report. Belong To Youth Services: Dublin. [Available here.](#)*



responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.

Students should be able to	
3.1	explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health
3.2	demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life
3.3	explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times
3.4	summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights
3.5	consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise
3.6	demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.

Having considered the learning outcomes in Strand 3, please comment on whether you think the learning outcomes provide (a) **clarity** on expectations for learning in Senior Cycle SPHE and whether you consider the learning outcomes to be (b) **relevant** to the lives and needs of 16–18 year olds. Please also let us know if you think anything important is missing from this Strand.

**Insert response here:**

### **3.1 explore strategies for self-care that can help maintain health and prevent ill-health**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- To support this learning outcome, it would be helpful for an 'online hub' of resources designed for young people to be made directly available to students, which teachers can direct them to while teaching material related to this Learning Outcome.

### **3.2 demonstrate self-management skills necessary for life**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and suggest that it be expanded, with suggested phrasing below:  
"demonstrate skills necessary for life, relating to self-management, finances, the workplace and further education"
- The suggested expansion is in light of the fact that some young people, including LGBTQ+ youth and care-experienced young people, are less likely to have an ongoing support network into early adulthood, relating to housing and finances.
- This Learning Outcome is a good opportunity to provide all students with the basic life skills needed should they become independent of their parent, caregiver or family in early adulthood.
- To support this learning outcome, it would be helpful for an 'online hub' of resources designed for young people to be made directly available to students, which teachers can direct them to while teaching material related to this Learning Outcome.

### **3.3 explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss or heartache and discuss how to care for themselves and/or others during these times**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.

**3.4 summarise accurately their rights and responsibilities before the law as a young adult with reference to online communicating, age of consent, alcohol and drug use, their right to access services and work-place rights**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- SPHE textbooks and resource materials should clearly outline the rights and protections afforded to people covered by the nine grounds of discrimination under the Equal Status Acts, along with details as to the forms of discrimination outlawed under the Equal Status Acts and Employment Equality Acts.

**3.5 consider the skills needed to stand up for themselves and others, and the range of situations where this might arise**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.

**3.6 demonstrate allyship skills to challenge unfair or abusive behaviours and support greater equity and inclusion.**

- We welcome this Learning Outcome and encourage its retention.
- SPHE textbooks and resource materials should clearly outline the rights and protections afforded to people covered by the nine grounds of discrimination under the Equal Status Acts, along with details as to the forms of discrimination outlawed under the Equal Status Acts and Employment Equality Acts.
- We also recommend that external resources be made available to SPHE teachers for this Learning Outcome, including *Belong To's Allyship Guide*, contained in the *Stand Up Awareness Week 2023 Resource Guide*.<sup>38</sup>

### **Question 3: Any further suggestions**

We would appreciate any further suggestions for how the draft updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum could be improved?

**Insert response here:**

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<sup>38</sup> *Belong To (2023) Stand Up Awareness Week Resource Guide. [Available here.](#)*

## Teacher Training

The draft Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is comprehensive, well thought through, and broadly reflects the needs and lives of young people in Ireland today.

As highlighted by teachers who took part in the NCCA's consultation on the redevelopment of Senior Cycle SPHE, there is an urgent need for access to professional development courses for those teaching SPHE.<sup>39</sup> This access is vital to the successful implementation of the updated Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. As voiced by students consulted by the NCCA, LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To also expressed that the benefit and value of SPHE classes is much more closely related to a teacher's interest and knowledge in the subject than the curriculum itself. LGBTQ+ young people felt a great deal of sympathy for well-meaning teachers who were well intentioned, but poorly equipped to teach the SPHE curriculum in full.

Belong To welcomes the dedicated SPHE post-graduate diploma in Dublin City University, but recommends that investment in comprehensive SPHE training through a variety of means be made a priority by the Department of Education, to ensure that schools and teachers are facilitated to ensure that the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum is taught in a manner that reaches the Department's quality framework standard. It is also important that both SPHE and LGBTQ+ inclusion be integrated to initial teacher education.

In the interim, it is recommended that all teachers timetabled for SPHE classes undertake Belong To's e-learning module 'Creating Inclusive Schools and Youth Services'<sup>40</sup> alongside the use of resources on LGBTQ+ inclusion developed by the NCCA and/or the Department of Education, such as the *Being LGBT in School* resource.

## LGBTQ+ Inclusion

As detailed earlier, LGBTQ+ students face disproportionately high rates of bullying and exclusion as compared to the general Irish youth population.<sup>41</sup> Proactive staff support for LGBTQ+ students,

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<sup>39</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>40</sup> Available at: <https://www.belongto.org/support-for-someone-else/at-school/post-primary/training-for-educators/>

<sup>41</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

and the inclusion of LGBTQ+-related themes in the curriculum, reduce the rates of absenteeism among LGBTQ+ youth, and result in a higher rate of LGBTQ+ students feeling safe and that they belong in school. The positive impact of these actions on students' mental health and wellbeing is important in addressing school retention among LGBTQ+ students; as detailed above, one in ten are unsure they will complete the Leaving Certificate with leading reasons including mental health challenges and hostility from other students.<sup>42</sup>

It is very welcome that a specific note is included under Strand 2: Relationship and Sexuality Education that this strand is to be taught in a fully LGBTQ+ inclusive manner. For the wellbeing and inclusion of LGBTQ+ students, and broader education and awareness of the student population more generally, it is important that LGBTQ+ inclusion is threaded throughout all three strands of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum. This would be best achieved through the learning resources and training provided to teachers to support their teaching of the curriculum.

## Media and Digital Literacy

Teachers and parents consulted by the NCCA on the redevelopment of the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum highlighted the need for SPHE to address “think[ing] critically and independently” so as to equip “young people... to engage critically with social media and the online world generally”.<sup>43</sup> Existing references to critical thinking, critical engagement and digital literacy across Strands, for example in Learning Outcomes 1.3, 1.4, 2.4 and 3.4 are very welcome. However, it is recommended that a specific, stand-alone Learning Outcome related to media and digital literacy is included in the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.

In recent years, the public have become increasingly aware of the prevalence of misinformation and disinformation that circulates online. The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), an international organisation that seeks to analyse disinformation, reported in May of this year that “mis- and disinformation targeting the LGBTQ+ community is one of the most present and consistent in the European Union”.<sup>44</sup> Research conducted in 2021 found that LGBTQ+ people

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<sup>42</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

<sup>43</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2023) *Consultation report on the Background Paper and Brief for the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE)*. [Available here](#).

<sup>44</sup> Panizio, E. and Canetta, T. (2023) ‘Rights in the time of conspiracies and fake news: disinformation against LGBTQ+ in the EU’. European Digital Media Observatory: Italy. [Available here](#).

experience 50% more online hate and harassment than any other minority group.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, 87% of LGBTQ+ youth in Ireland have seen or experienced anti-LGBTQ+ hate and harassment on social media. Only 21% of LGBTQ+ young people who reported this content to a social media platform saw action, such as removing the content or banning the account, from the platform.<sup>46</sup>

Within this context, it is incredibly important that all post-primary students are equipped with the digital literacy and critical thinking skills necessary to evaluate the trustworthiness of information they see online; to know how to find reliable, fact-based information online; and to be critical consumers of digital and traditional media.

## Appendix: Belong To focus group with LGBTQ+ young people on the draft Senior Cycle SPHE Curriculum

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### Introduction

In advance of Belong To's submission to the NCCA on the draft revised curriculum for Senior Cycle SPHE, it was decided that a focus group should be conducted with the young people engaged in Belong To's youth groups.

In September 2023, two focus groups were conducted with young people engaged a group for young people who are trans, non-binary, or questioning their gender identity, and the Under 18s Group, a group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer young people aged 14-17. The focus groups were supported by Belong To volunteers, and facilitated by Belong To's Policy and Participation Coordinator and Youth Participation Officer.

So as to allow an open, non-guided discussion on the draft curriculum, it was suggested that a discussion within the groups framed by the three strands of the draft curriculum would work best. The young people agreed with this approach.

The three strands under the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum are 'Health and Wellbeing', 'Relationships and Sexuality', and 'Into Adulthood'. Learning Outcomes within each strand were grouped, and young people were invited to write what they felt would be important to include within each Learning Outcome on post-it notes stuck to large posters. Together, the group

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<sup>45</sup> ADL Centre for Technology & Society (2021) *Online Hate and Harassment: The American Experience*. ADL: New York. [Available here](#).

<sup>46</sup> Pizmony-Levy, O. (2022) *The 2022 Irish School Climate Survey*. Research Report. Global Observatory of LGBTQ+ Education and Advocacy. Dublin and New York: Belong To and Teachers College, Columbia University. [Available here](#).

discussed their feedback on Learning Outcomes, and agreed Belong To's recommendations. At the end of discussions on each Strand, young people had the opportunity to highlight anything they felt was missing from the Strand, and the group agreed additional recommendations to the NCCA.

The feedback from young people is arranged by strand below, and thematically arranged in accordance with their key recommendations for each strand.

## **General Feedback**

### Standardisation

- Young people felt that, although the curriculum is very strong, what is actually taught in class can vary greatly between schools on account of individual teachers' preferences, time management, bias, and/or level of knowledge.
- Many young people in the group who are currently in Senior Cycle, or who have recently graduated from second-level, noted that they had been given few or no SPHE classes during Fifth and Sixth Year.
- Young people highlighted the need for all teachers scheduled to take SPHE classes to be trained in the curriculum, so as to ensure that the curriculum is taught correctly and in full. The group felt that, without this training, there was a risk of SPHE not being prioritised within the school, and/or teachers relying on their own knowledge to teach the class, which may be incomplete or not evidence-based.
- Finally, the group felt it would be helpful for all school staff to be provided with training opportunities relating to LGBTQ+ identities, wellbeing, and diversity and inclusion.

### Oversight and Student Feedback

- Young people felt it would be helpful to have a feedback mechanism for students on a local (school) and more formal (NCCA/Department of Education/academic research) level as to their experience of being taught the new Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum.
- Young people felt it was important for the NCCA or the Department of Education to have some kind of oversight mechanism to ensure that Senior Cycle SPHE is being taught to students, and not replaced by additional classes for exam-based Leaving Cert subjects.
- Upon discussion within the group, it was agreed that integrating student consultation and/or including a focus on SPHE teaching during school inspections.

### Misinformation and Digital Literacy

- Young people felt that many teachers have the perception that much of the information taught in SPHE, and RSE in particular, was already 'out there' on the internet, and that a majority of students have likely already availed of this information.
- As such, young people were concerned that teachers feel this education is not as "necessary" as it might have been in the pre-internet age.
- However, young people expressed serious concerns about the level of unsafe and misleading information that can be found online relating to sexual activity, drug and alcohol use, dieting, wellness, and other wellbeing-related topics.
- More broadly, young people also expressed serious concerns at the lack of education to Irish society as a whole on digital literacy and media literacy, and named a number of events in Ireland which resulted in violence against minority groups that had gathered support through online misinformation campaigns.

### Consent and Boundaries

- Young people in the focus group welcomed the inclusion of consent under Strand 2, but felt it important for consent to be threaded through all Strands and Learning Outcomes as a core aspect of the SPHE curriculum.
- To ensure that students' understanding of consent goes beyond a 'surface level', and to normalise integrating consent-based thinking to everyday life, the group felt it was important to teach consent in different ways.
- One example given was consent to sharing photographs online. Under Learning Outcome 1.4, young people suggested that, when discussing media and technology, there should be acknowledgement of the fact that a person can withdraw their consent from a certain photograph being posted on social media (outside the context of image based sexual abuse). If the poster refuses to remove this photo, this should be framed as a breach of the person's consent. The group felt that framing consent in this way may act as a good introduction to conversations around consent in the context of sexual or intimate relationships.
- Consent and boundaries were considered to be closely linked by young people. The group stressed the need for students to be taught what healthy boundaries look like, how to draw appropriate boundaries with friends and family, and how to respond if those boundaries are overstepped.
- Finally, the group felt it would be beneficial for the SPHE curriculum to include teaching on knowing your personal limits – not only in the context of sexual activity, smoking, and drug and alcohol consumption – but also in terms of socialising and friendships.

### Method of Teaching

- Some young people shared their own experiences of how RSE had been taught in their school, including some teachers outright refusing to teach the topic, and other struggling to answer basic questions from students.
- Young people firmly expressed that LGBTQ+ students should not be singled out during teaching of LGBTQ+ topics, used as an example, or expected to educate staff or other students on their identity and experiences.
- Similarly, a strong and recurring issue highlighted by LGBTQ+ young people was the use of 'debates' in class to discuss certain topics. Young people named the many harmful impacts that these debates have on students with lived experience of the debated topics. Additionally, young people felt that debating topics such as LGBTQ+ families and reproductive rights was not an effective way to ensure that all students receive objective, evidence-based information.
- Young people also stressed the distinction between inviting students to co-develop LGBTQ+ clubs, and input on teaching and curriculum, and being *expected* to share their personal experiences for the benefit of others.
- The group felt it would be helpful to set up a mechanism for teachers to deal with questions they may find difficult through the provision of additional resources made available to students through an online hub.

### Educating at Primary Level

- Young people felt that the curriculum should be revised regularly to ensure that it is fit for purpose, and factually correct. One young person noted that in 2017, their SPHE book had not been updated to reflect changes in the law following the Marriage Equality referendum.
- Young people were also concerned that, through social media, traditional media, friends, and other sources, students may learn certain behaviours or acquire misinformation before being

taught it in school. One young person gave the example of encountering online misinformation about drug use at age 13, but the topic of drug use not being covered in school until Senior Cycle.

- As a result, young people strongly recommended that the revised post-primary SPHE curriculum be accompanied by greatly enhanced SPHE-RSE at Primary level. The group stressed the need for age-appropriate conversations around sexuality, sexual activity, families, and relationships before reaching secondary school.
- Young people were very aware of the concerns parents may have about extending RSE to younger age groups at Primary level. However, the group discussed how concepts such as sexual orientation, families, relationships, and consent could be discussed in an “age-appropriate” way – for example, some families having two mums or two dads, or ‘good touch’/‘bad touch’ conversations in relation to abuse and personal safety – which can then be built upon as the child ages.
- The group acknowledged that parents/guardians have primary responsibility for teaching their children about topics covered in SPHE. However, young people felt that parents/guardians often did not want to discuss such subjects, or lacked the knowledge needed to answer their children’s questions.
- To address this, young people recommended that a broader programme should be introduced by the Government, for example through community and family resource centres, to support parents/guardians. The group felt this had the dual benefit of educating parents/guardians, and taking some pressure off schools to be the sole source of guidance for young people.

## **Strand 1: Health and Wellbeing**

- **Regarding wellbeing**, the group strongly expressed their frustration that what was discussed in SPHE in relation to wellbeing, mental health, and a healthy life balance, was not reflected in their schools’ culture.
- In particular, young people felt that what was taught in SPHE was actively contradicted by stresses resulting from homework, study, assignments and exams.
- Young people further expressed their frustration that teachers were reluctant to change their timelines if, for example, students had multiple essays due on the same day for different classes.
- **Regarding mental health**, LGBTQ+ youth highlighted the need for young people to be equipped with the skills to recognise when their friends are struggling with mental health challenges, and how to support them.
- **Regarding drug and alcohol use**, young people highlighted that abstinence, or ‘just say no’, teaching towards drugs and alcohol was not helpful and often resulted in students disengaging during these lessons.
- Young people felt that it was important for SPHE teachers to acknowledge that a considerable number of students at Senior Cycle will have consumed alcohol and/or drugs at some point, and that education should be focused on a health and harm-reduction approach.
- Additionally, the focus group voiced that it is important for dependency and addictive behaviours that do not fall within the stereotypical understanding of addiction to be addressed. Examples given by young people included dependence on weed to manage mental health challenges, and alcohol dependence where a person may not drink every day, but also may not be able to cope with social gatherings without alcohol.
- **Regarding safety**, a clear recommendation from LGBTQ+ young people was to ensure that topics related to sexual violence were not taught in a way that involves ‘victim blaming’, i.e.



advising students that a victim of sexual violence could have avoided the assault had the consumed less alcohol and/or drugs.

## **Strand 2: Relationships and Sexuality**

- **Regarding LGBTQ+ topics**, young people stressed the need for the entire SPHE curriculum to be LGBTQ+ inclusive, as opposed to being addressed within stand-alone lessons.
- Young people noted that, throughout their lives, students will encounter LGBTQ+ people, identities and experiences in a range of settings, and so having stand-alone lessons on LGBTQ+ topics doesn't accurately represent how non-LGBTQ+ people will interact with LGBTQ+ people in their lifetime.
- In light of this, young people very much welcomed the note included at the beginning of Strand 2 instructing LGBTQ+ inclusion throughout the teaching of each Learning Outcome.
- **Regarding healthy relationships**, LGBTQ+ young people repeatedly expressed the need for SPHE to address topics including understanding, creating and respecting boundaries; how to communicate clearly and respectfully, what good communication looks like, and skills for communicating feelings, particularly when feeling frustrated or upset; and dealing with challenges and disagreements between friends, classmates, family members and colleagues.
- Young people also stressed the high number of LGBTQ+ youth whose parents and/or families are not accepting of their identity, or struggle initially when a young person comes out. The focus group felt that it was important that the SPHE curriculum address what difficult family dynamics might look like, and ways for a young person to protect their wellbeing in a difficult home environment,
- Additionally, LGBTQ+ young people noted that, both in schools and in society, there is a stereotypical view of domestic violence as being between a couple. However, the group felt that it was important for all young people to be aware that physical, psychological and emotional abuse perpetrated by parents against their children is also a form of domestic violence.
- LGBTQ+ young people in Belong To's focus group highlighted how abusive behaviours within friendships is rarely discussed in detail, beyond the context of bullying.
- Young people also stressed the need for SPHE to include teaching on abusive family relationships, as this can be hidden to those outside the family unit and may not be well understood by those experiencing the abuse.
- **Regarding sexual activity and sexual health**, LGBTQ+ young people very strongly voiced the need for both consent and mutual pleasure to be included in SPHE classes, and felt that this was an important and progressive inclusion in the draft Senior Cycle curriculum.
- Young people also felt that covering care, respect and pleasure together with consent was a good way of teaching consent and boundaries, as it moves away from a purely legal understanding of consent, and allows space to discuss how consent requires ongoing communication and can be retracted at any time.
- LGBTQ+ youth who joined Belong To's focus group on the draft SPHE curriculum voiced their frustration of the absence of sexual health education in their schools or, where it was provided, a focus on preventing pregnancy rather than a holistic approach to sexual health.
- **Regarding gender**, the group felt that it was extremely important to address gender stereotypes, gender norms and attitudes towards gender in SPHE.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people, how understanding men as 'rational' and women as

'emotional' negatively impacts men's mental health, and how gendered subject choices, such as Home Economics and Woodwork rarely being made available in single-sex boys and girls schools respectively, impact our understanding of gender roles in society.

- LGBTQ+ young people consulted by Belong To felt that it was extremely important to address gendered violence.
- Young people also felt that it was important to have discussions around how gender stereotypes negatively impact all members of society, including how traditional gendered expectations impact LGBTQ+ people and how gender stereotypes perpetuate gender inequality and gender-based violence.
- **Regarding pornography**, young people expressed that this was an important topic to address, as they felt that some young people relied on pornography to learn about sexual behaviour in the absence of pleasure, intimacy and boundaries being taught during SPHE.

### **Strand 3: Into Adulthood**

- The group highlighted the benefit of learning a range of life skills during Senior Cycle SPHE, including relating to finances, the workplace, and making the transition from second level school to further education.

Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us. Please email this document to [SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie](mailto:SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie) before Friday.

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**NCCA**

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