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# Exploratory Roundtable on the SPHE Curriculum: Summary Report

## Contents

Contents.....	1
Acknowledgments.....	2
List of Abbreviations.....	3
Introduction .....	4
Background .....	5
Discussion.....	7
i) A Whole School Approach .....	7
ii) Teacher Training and Supports.....	9
iii) Inclusivity and Cultural Awareness .....	10
Recommendations .....	11
Conclusion.....	12

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- Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland (ASTI)
- BelongTo
- Health Service Executive (HSE)
- Independent Living Movement Ireland (ILMI)
- Longford Roma & New Communities Partnership
- National Parents Council (NPC)
- NWC Youth Advisory Panel (YAP)
- Women's Aid

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## List of Abbreviations

**CSE:** Comprehensive Sexuality Education

**DCU:** Dublin City University

**GBV:** Gender Based Violence

**GREVIO:** Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence

**HSE:** Health Service Executive

**ITE:** Initial Teacher Education

**LGBTQI+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex + (*The '+' denotes the wider range of sexual orientation and gender categories*).

**NWC:** National Women's Council

**NCCA:** National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

**REA:** Rapid Evidence Assessment

**RSE:** Relationships and Sexuality Education

**SPHE:** Social, Personal, and Health Education

**WHO:** World Health Organisation

## Introduction

Following the 2018-19 review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) identified the need for an updated and integrated curriculum that combines Social, Personal, and Health Education (SPHE) and RSE from early childhood through post-primary education.<sup>1</sup>

The redevelopment process for each curriculum included research, collaboration with schools and educational partners, and broad public consultation to ensure a cohesive and comprehensive approach to SPHE and RSE across all educational levels. Many civil society organisations, including the National Women’s Council (NWC) have actively participated in these consultations. This resulted in the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum being implemented in September 2023, followed by the Senior Cycle curriculum one year later. The primary school consultation concluded June 2024 and is expected to be implemented in 2025/26.

NWC has a particular interest in providing a gendered perspective to the integration of RSE into the SPHE curricula, as it aligns with our commitment to support the implementation of the prevention pillar of the Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual, and Gender Based Violence. Furthermore, the aims of the SPHE curricula – to advance gender equality, promote public health, and prevent violence against women, are core strategic goals of NWC. To advance these objectives, NWC convened an exploratory roundtable on SPHE on 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023. The purpose of this event was to facilitate a discussion of relevant stakeholders and experts to explore the implementation of the updated Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum and the then ongoing redevelopment for Senior Cycle students. The discussion focused on the opportunities and challenges for the full and effective implementation of the curricula, and next steps to ensure the achievement of a whole school approach, including appropriate supports and resources for students, parents, educators, and schools, ensuring the inclusion and representation of marginalised groups in Irish society.

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<sup>1</sup> NCCA (2019) Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post primary school

The roundtable discussion was chaired by Ian Power, CEO of SpunOut. Notable speakers contributing to this insightful dialogue included Celeste O'Callaghan, Principal Officer from the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit at the Department of Education; Annette Honan, Education Officer from NCCA; and Dr Kay Maunsell, Associate Professor of Psychology, Human Development and Education from Dublin City University. Their diverse expertise and perspectives brought a wealth of insights into the implementation, challenges, and opportunities associated with the updated SPHE curricula. Other key stakeholders included the Health Service Executive (HSE) and representatives from various sectors encompassing LGBTQI+, the Roma community, disabled people, violence against women, and youth groups. Additionally, representatives from teacher and parents' unions were also involved.

This summary report provides context to the curricula redevelopment process, capturing the successes in their redesign to date, along with the persistent challenges and opportunities for reform identified during the roundtable discussion. Subsequent sections outline key recommendations emerging from the roundtable and a conclusion.

## Background

The evolution of SPHE within the Irish curriculum can be traced back to the pastoral care and tutorial system of the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-1990s, the integration of RSE became a key aspect of the curriculum, spurred by the establishment of an Expert Advisory Group on Relationships and Sexuality. This initiative resulted in the publication of the Interim Curriculum and Guidelines for RSE. SPHE including RSE was made mandatory in the Primary School Curriculum in 1999. Subsequently, the Junior Cycle SPHE Curriculum Framework was introduced in 2000.<sup>3</sup> While SPHE was implemented across the Senior Cycle in 2011, it was not mandatory.

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<sup>2</sup> NCCA (2022) Background paper and brief for the redevelopment of Junior Cycle SPHE [https://ncca.ie/media/5169/sphe-background-paper-for-consultation\\_en.pdf](https://ncca.ie/media/5169/sphe-background-paper-for-consultation_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Given substantial societal changes since 1995, in April 2018, NCCA was mandated with a comprehensive review of RSE in Irish schools.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this review was to ensure the curriculum's suitability in contemporary Ireland. The review assessed school experience, the curriculum's relevance, RSE curriculum content, support materials, and delivery methods.

The RSE review prioritised integrating SPHE and RSE, evaluating existing resources, and identifying additional ones required by teachers and school leaders. Efforts were made to foster collaboration between formal and non-formal education sectors for sharing expertise and resources.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, the TEACH RSE research initiated by DCU in 2019 examined the professional development of teachers in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) for the purpose of teaching RSE. This research recommended a model of core plus elective/subject specialism at ITE and further, specialist teacher professional learning and development programmes post-ITE.<sup>6</sup>

The update of the SPHE curriculum has been positively viewed in the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) [baseline evaluation report for Ireland from 2023](#), particularly welcoming the inclusion of topics relating to sexual consent, domestic violence, and LGBTQI+ identities.<sup>7</sup> However, the GREVIO report emphasises the need for comprehensive coverage of all forms of violence against women and expresses concerns about the possibility of parents and educators opting out of young people being taught these critical subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> NCCA (2019) Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post primary school

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> DCU (2021) TEACH RSE teacher professional development and relationship and sexuality education (RSE) [https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/staff/2022-03/TEACH-RSE%20Research%20Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/staff/2022-03/TEACH-RSE%20Research%20Report_Final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> GREVIO is an independent body tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, a Council of Europe treaty aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention): <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-s-baseline-evaluation-report-on-legislative-and-other-measures-/1680ad3feb>

## Discussion

The discussion commenced by recognising the contributions of the speakers, whose presentations offered valuable insights into the ongoing efforts to redevelop the SPHE curricula. Additionally, the discussions delved into the comprehensive integration of RSE into Initial Teacher Education & Professional Development. There was a particular focus throughout the discussion on the need for a gender-dimension in the design and implementation of an SPHE curricula, for it to be successful in advancing gender equality. Various themes surfaced during the conversation, such as i) adopting a whole-school approach, ii) importance of teacher training and support, and iii) promoting inclusivity and cultural awareness.

### i) A Whole School Approach

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a whole school approach as a coordinated action between the curriculum, teaching, and learning; school ethos and environment; family and community partnerships.<sup>8</sup> The discussion during the roundtable emphasised the importance of adopting a whole school approach in the implementation of the redeveloped SPHE curricula. Various speakers highlighted the comprehensive nature of SPHE, with its learning outcomes on health, wellbeing, and relationships having the potential to have lifelong positive effects.

Speakers also pointed out the integration of SPHE with the Wellbeing Framework, emphasising its role in critiquing social and cultural norms. [Ireland's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice](#) suggests that the role of the school and teachers is to develop the 'whole child', who should leave school with a balanced set of cognitive, social, and emotional skills to face the challenges of the 21st century.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, NWC's submissions on the [Junior Cycle Background Brief](#) and [Senior Cycle Background Brief](#) stated that an SPHE curriculum which is designed and delivered considering the distinct needs of young people

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<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). (1998). Health Promoting evaluation: recommendations for Policy-Makers, report of the WHO European Working Group on Health Promotion Evaluation. Copenhagen: WHO

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.



cannot be implemented in isolation. A good curriculum should be participatory, backed by a whole school approach and parental/carer support.

The participants' call for a whole school approach resonated throughout the discussion, emphasising the need to engage collaboratively with teachers, parents, children, young people, and civil society to create a supportive, inclusive, and informed educational environment. This approach seeks to empower educators and students, ensuring a holistic understanding of SPHE and RSE that extends beyond the classroom and into the broader community.

However, implementing a whole school approach for SPHE curricula can pose numerous challenges. Dublin City University prepared two Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) Reports for NWC on the concept of a whole school approach.<sup>10</sup> The REAs offer a comprehensive overview on learnings from other jurisdictions who have implemented a whole school approach, addressing challenges, and emphasising methods to promote gender equality and prevent Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Key findings included the identification of 'success indicators' from an analysis of a whole school approach to RSE integration in 4 countries. These success indicators included community partnership, Government support and funding, the development of appropriate materials for educators, passion among school leaders, and parental engagement. Additionally, a feedback process and post-evaluation report are crucial for continuous improvement.<sup>11</sup>

These REAs found that inclusive community-driven involvement – which actively engages the wider local community, parents, charities, and stakeholders – is vital for achieving and sustaining long-term progress and impact on gender equality. However, they also note that disadvantaged schools face hurdles due to underfunding, low parental engagement, and

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<sup>10</sup> While these Rapid Evidence Assessments provide valuable insights, NWC cannot fully endorse the content as they reflect DCU's independent research findings, and we did not have editorial control over the final versions.

<sup>11</sup> DCU (2023). RSE and Adopting a Whole of School Approach: International best practices that Irish schools can implement.

socioeconomic status. Resistance to educational content may arise with strong religious and conservative values, affecting outcomes regardless of the approach taken.<sup>12</sup>

## ii) Teacher Training and Supports

The participants emphasised the need for effective teacher training and the availability of appropriate supports for the successful implementation of the SPHE and RSE curricula. This includes the need for comprehensive professional development programmes to enhance teacher competence and confidence, particularly addressing gaps in ITE and providing ongoing support for existing teachers. The 2023 GREVIO report also highlighted gaps in both mandatory initial training and non-mandatory in-service training on RSE, contributing to a lack of teacher confidence in teaching the subject. The report noted that this would not equip teachers to handle complex or difficult discussions that might arise with respect to gender equality and gender stereotypes. The availability of adequate resources – like age-appropriate classroom activities, and supporting reference documents on topics like consent, sexual health, and LGBTIQ+ identities – were also stressed for the effective implementation of the redeveloped SPHE curricula. Additionally, the importance of cultural responsiveness to the changing demographics within Irish society, and to ensure the inclusion and visibility of marginalised groups, was highlighted.

The discussions indicated the need for a designated teacher or team within schools to be responsible for championing the implementation of the SPHE curriculum. This designated individual or team should have clarity regarding school policies and be aware of whole-school strategies to effectively integrate SPHE across different subject areas. This is crucial, as discussions during the roundtable highlighted concerns about non-specialist teachers being assigned SPHE teaching roles due to shortages of dedicated SPHE educators in schools. The speakers highlighted the integral role of teachers and the need for Continuous Professional Development (CPD), shedding light on the [TEACH RSE](#) study's findings and the ongoing efforts to address gaps in teacher education. This also aligns with the WHO's work, which recognise that educators' professional learning and development are pivotal factors for the success of

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<sup>12</sup> DCU (2023) RSE and Adopting a Whole of School Approach: International best practices that Irish schools can implement.

quality sexuality education programmes globally.<sup>13</sup> This dedicated teacher or team could also facilitate any necessary evaluations to understand the enablers and barriers to the adoption of the redeveloped SPHE curricula within a school.

The TEACH RSE research outlines key recommendations for improving teacher training in RSE during ITE and the necessity for a specialist programme to address the unique challenges of teaching SPHE at the post primary level. It advocates for a continuum of professional development for teachers, focusing on holistic, inclusive, and rights-based approaches to RSE provision. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of enhancing student teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes in RSE, ensuring a clear pathway for future graduate teachers in SPHE/RSE education. In 2022, the Department of Education and Skills announced the first postgraduate programme to upskill registered post-primary teachers teaching SPHE and Relationships and RSE. This unique part-time Level 9 postgraduate programme at DCU enhances registered post-primary teachers' competencies in SPHE/RSE, emphasising personal development, skills, and subject knowledge for effective teaching at Junior and Senior Cycle levels.<sup>14</sup>

The discussion also touched upon the complexity of classroom dynamics, requiring teachers to be well-equipped not only with content knowledge but also with skills to create a safe and open space for conversations. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the adaptation of teacher training programmes to address evolving challenges – particularly surrounding social media and technology – to ensure that young people receive accurate and reliable information.

### iii) Inclusivity and Cultural Awareness

The participants also noted that inclusivity and cultural awareness needed to be emphasised throughout the implementation of the new curricula to ensure it caters to the diverse needs

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<sup>13</sup> World Health Organisation (WHO) (2017). Training matters: A framework of core competencies for sexuality educators. [https://www.bzga-whocc.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/BZgA\\_TrainingMattersFramework\\_EN.pdf](https://www.bzga-whocc.de/fileadmin/user_upload/BZgA_TrainingMattersFramework_EN.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> DCU (2022) Graduate Diploma in Social, Personal and Health Education/Relationships and Sexuality Education. <https://www.dcu.ie/courses/postgraduate/school-human-development/graduate-diploma-social-personal-and-health#:~:text=The%20Graduate%20Diploma%20in%20Social,and%20to%20build%20capacity%20and>

and backgrounds of students. The recognition of cultural diversity was seen as crucial in crafting an inclusive curriculum, to incorporate various perspectives, including Travellers and Roma, migrants, LGBTQI+ individuals, and disabled people.

The curricula redevelopments aim to provide clarity and flexibility, allowing teachers to adapt content to address the unique needs of their students, covering topics such as addictive behaviours, gender-based violence, and the influence of pornography. Participants stressed the significance of cultural sensitivity, especially in tackling sensitive topics like gender-based violence. Additionally, concerns were raised about the need for translated and easy-to-read documents to ensure accessibility for all, including communities with specific linguistic or literacy needs. The discussion suggested that ongoing collaboration with civil society organisations representing the interests of marginalised groups – along with ongoing mechanisms for feedback capturing voices of young people – were essential in refining the curricula. The emphasis on intersectionality emerged as a key theme, urging a curriculum that not only acknowledges cultural diversity but also intersects with other aspects of identity, reinforcing the importance of creating an inclusive and culturally sensitive learning environment.

Participants at the roundtable discussed the need for SPHE to be mandatory for all students to ensure students' rights to information and autonomous decision-making; particularly for those aged +17 years of age. The GREVIO report also recommends SPHE as a mandatory school curriculum to be taught to all students at all levels of education, adapted to the evolving capacity of learners.

## Recommendations

1. Prioritise a whole school approach which encourages collaboration between young people, school stakeholders, parents, and the community. This would extend learning beyond the traditional classroom to bring about behavioural change, create a supportive environment for young people, and advance gender equality.

2. Increase the number of graduate programmes in SPHE and provide Continuous Professional Development (CPD) support for teachers with previous SPHE training experiences.
3. Establish a framework for an evidence-based continuous review and evaluation of the SPHE curricula, which incorporates a gender lens and includes the supporting materials for educators and the graduate programmes.
4. Provide teachers with high-quality resources and tools which support them in the teaching aims, ensuring these materials can combat misinformation, while being culturally responsive and inclusive to the diversity of students and experiences in Irish society. Resources and tools must include an age-appropriate core component on issues relating to gender stereotypes, gender equality, and the various forms of violence against women.
5. Incorporate a strong emphasis on intersectionality to address the diverse needs of students, including those from marginalised communities like Travellers, Roma, and migrants, as well as the perspectives of disabled and LGBTQI+ individuals.
6. Ongoing and active engagement with young people, teachers, parents, civil society, and local communities to ensure feedback on RSE (including on issues of gender equality) can be incorporated into the design and delivery of the SPHE curricula.

## Conclusion

This roundtable discussion on the redevelopment of SPHE curricula marked a significant milestone in the ongoing efforts to enhance RSE within Irish schools. The comprehensive dialogue and contributions from distinguished speakers and diverse stakeholders, emphasised the importance of integrating RSE into the educational framework from early childhood through post-primary education. Throughout the discussion, key themes emerged, highlighting the necessity for a holistic approach to SPHE implementation, robust teacher training and support mechanisms, and curricula that embrace inclusivity and cultural awareness. Participants emphasised the interconnectedness of SPHE with broader societal goals, including gender equality, public health promotion, and the prevention of violence against women, reaffirming the vital role of education in shaping informed and empowered young people. The need for a gender lens at all stages of the design and implementation of

the curricula was also emphasised, including with respect to the development of any supporting resources. This gender lens would ensure issues of gender stereotypes, gender equality, and the need to combat gender-based violence would be addressed.

The recommendations stemming from the roundtable discussions offer a roadmap for action, calling for efforts to foster collaboration among stakeholders, enhance teacher competence and confidence, and continuously evaluate and refine the curriculum to meet evolving needs. Embracing intersectionality and cultural sensitivity emerged as central principles, ensuring that the curriculum reflects the diverse experiences and identities of young people in Ireland. Moving forward it is imperative to translate these insights into tangible actions, prioritising the well-being and holistic development of young people in Ireland. By working together, drawing on the expertise and perspectives of educators, policymakers, civil society organisations, and communities, we can collectively create an educational environment that nurtures respect, resilience, and inclusivity.