Draft specification

for Senior Cycle SPHE

NCCA consultation, 2023

NCCA consultation on draft specification for Senior Cycle SPHE

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

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

If you are contributing your views **an individual**, please provide details below

Name:	
Email address:	
Do you wish to be listed as a contributor to this consultation on the NCCA website?	Yes/No
Do you wish to have your written submission published on the NCCA website?	Yes/No

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

Name:	Sarah Benson
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Name of organisation/group:	Women's Aid
Does your organisation wish to be listed as a contributor to this consultation on the NCCA website?	Yes
Does your organisation wish to have this written submission published on the NCCA website?	Yes

Questions to consider

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:

Women's Aid agrees with the aim above, but we would suggest changing the wording from "empower students to become" to "empower students to be" as current wording infers that students are not already empowered, especially as they will have already undertaken SPHE at Junior Cycle and this will be building on that.

Question 2: The Learning

The draft course is structured around three strands and three crosscutting elements, illustrated below:
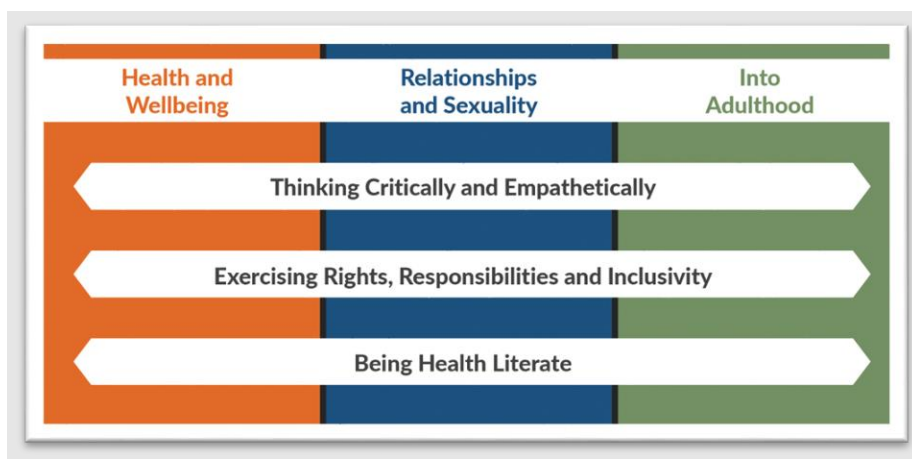
Below provides extracts from the draft specification. See draft specification pp 11–15 for a more detailed outline of the learning.

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.

	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:

Women's Aid would like to make the following suggestions in relation to Strand 1:

- 1.2 add 'relationships' so that it reads:
  *discuss the enablers and barriers to managing a healthy life balance - including study, work, **relationships**, play, sleep, people, 'me time', and ways to manage greater balance.*

- 1.4 include "partners" so that it reads:
  *explore the factors that influence mental health and well-being, including the influence of family, **partners**, peers, societal attitudes, media, technology, alcohol and drugs, and one's sense of self*

- 1.10 reword to ensure it is clear that there is no victim blaming if things go wrong during social events and that it is not always possible for people to manage theirs or others safety

- include content on eating disorders in all competencies referring to mental health or as a stand-alone point

- 1.9 Women's Aid recommends updating this point to take strengths-based approach, including both positive and negative coping mechanisms. This will educate young people to identify what they are already doing well and can build on, as well as where they may need some support. It is important to include in the curriculum that negative coping mechanisms can be taken up to deal with the abuse in abuse relationships, and so it is important that no victim blaming framing or language is employed. Therefore, we suggest updating this point to:

  *Equip young people with the tools to support their wellbeing, including positive coping mechanism, identifying negative coping mechanism, online critical awareness, etc., w*here to go and how to access *support and* help, if needed.

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.

	Students should be able to
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:

Women's Aid would like to make the following suggestions/observations in relation to Strand 2:

- 2.2 there needs to be explicit reference to how sexist double standards and victim blaming negatively influence students' dynamics of friendships, relationships and sexual behaviour.

- 2.3 Women's Aid welcomes the inclusion of consent as an essential component of sexual activity and suggest to also include 'equality' as a core principle, for example:
  *discuss sexual activity as an aspect of adult relationships characterised by **equality**, care, respect, consent, intimacy and mutual pleasure.*

Moreover, the negative impact of sexist double standards or victim blaming should be included here too.

- 2.4 Women's Aid warmly welcomes the discussion on harmful attitudes around gender, which should include addressing sexism and the importance of achieving gender equality. It is important to take a strengths-based approach to this topic– not only to highlight negative but also stress positive behaviours. It is also vital that this topic is discussed in all schools, including single sex school, particularly boys only schools. In single sex schools it is important to include a gender sensitive perspective to ensure that the discussions arising will be balanced and challenge beliefs which perpetuate inequalities.

- 2.5 Women's Aid strongly supports the inclusion of this competency, identifying signs of abusive relationships. We would like to ensure reference to learning about different 'forms/types' of abuse (i.e. naming emotional, physical, sexual, economic abuse and coercive control) are included and that students are supported to identify 'signs' more easily and as soon as possible. Therefore, we suggest rewording this point as follows:

  Identify and consider common forms of abuse including coercive control, and recognize early warning signs of abusive relationships.

  Note: It is also very important that resources for this topic are comprehensive and up to date. We note that the current Personal Safety resource pack is out of date and at times incorrect (for example it implies one needs to experience physical abuse to get a barring order, references the Domestic Violence Act 1996 which has been superseded by the 2018 Act, the case studies are all of older married people and not relevant to young relationships) Correct legislation should be noted in particular the Domestic Violence Act 2018 and the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020

  Up to date and relevant resources on relationship abuse, specific to young people, need to be provided to teachers to be able to teach this competency.

  Women's Aid would be happy to review and support the updating of resources. We also suggest including in the resource pack for teachers references and links to our Too Into You resources (www.toointoyou.ie) and to Teenline (www.teenline.ie)

- In 2.6 Women's Aid believes that this piece should be connected to the wider context and look at gender-based violence in a global context as is done in the Introduction of Zero Tolerance, the Third National Strategy on DSGBV (Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence). This piece should also make explicit the links between gender inequality and Gender-Based Violence. As well as exploring the roots of gender-based violence, it would also be important to include information on the structures which uphold inequality, and specifically, gender inequality which allows domestic, sexual and gender-based violence to persist.

- In 2.7 Women's Aid warmly welcomes a focus on pornography and its negative impacts on young people and their development of healthy intimacy and sexual relationships. We note that the research is unequivocal that pornography brings no benefits to young people and does demonstrable harm, including to the individuals in the pornography trade itself. It is also very

worryingly leading to an increase in sexual abuse and violence by minors (mostly boys) against minors (mostly girls). While it is important to facilitate young people to open up a useful conversation on pornography to allow students them to find out how severe its impacts can be through this process rather than just being 'told' that porn is harmful, we suggest replacing the current word 'investigate' with **'explore'** and call on the NCCA to ensure that all course materials are informed by a robust and 'porn-critical' lens. Drawing on excellent materials such as those provided as open source by www.Culturereframed.org and resources from campaigns like www.fightthenewdrug.com are recommended.

- In 2.8 Different **types** of sexual abuse, including image-based abuse, should be discussed here, including early warning signs /grooming. As in 2.5 there should be information included on what to do if students or someone, they know has experienced sexual violence. It is important to include information on specific supports, including hotline.ie (https://www.hotline.ie) in relation to getting support removing content posted because of image-based sexual abuse/intimate image abuse.

- In 2.9 This point should include a piece around sexual coercion, access to contraception and abortion and access to information on same. Information and links to IFPA/Positive Options should be included here.

- General Note on strand 2: it is vital that supporting information and resources related to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are linked up and up to date. Resources including information about relevant services should be made available. Relevant specialist services should be consulted in compiling accurate resources.

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 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:

Women's Aid would like to make the following suggestions/observations in relation to Strand 3:

- Re-word the overall aim of Strand 3 to ensure there is recognition that choices can be restricted and that it is not all on the students to look after themselves, but that they will be supported to do so, including by provision of resources. For example:
  *This includes being able to manage choices **(recognising that there may be barriers and choices may be restricted)**, 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 **by providing relevant resources, information and links to support as needed,** understand their rights and responsibilities before the law, and build the skills needed to be a good ally to those experiencing discrimination or inequality.*

- Adding in an outcome that explicitly names that young people will **'Gain knowledge of resources and information available to access support for challenging situations and experiences'** should be considered.

- In 3.3 include the term 'harm', to read:
  *explore a range of life events where they might experience change, loss, heartache **or harm***

- In 3.6 The concept of 'allyship' should be defined as it can be interpreted many ways. Women's Aid recommends that when defining allyship that there is an explicit effort to use the concept to promote equality in an unequal society. It should be based on principles of solidarity, inter-dependence and mutual reinforcement. It will be important to highlight some individuals or groups may need allyship because of living in an unequal society and recognise that this need can fluctuate over time depending on contextual circumstance, environment, and resources available to them. It will be important to clarify that allyship should not be taken as a license to speak over an individual or group and should not be hierarchical but encourage peers to actively listen to one another and offer support depending on the views of a negatively impacted individual and/or group as they see fit.

  In 3.6 The term 'equity' is not the same as 'equality'. Women's Aid recommends the use of the latter term here.

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:

We would like to include here a few overarching considerations on the Specifications for all three strands. The SPHE Curriculum should ensure that it has an explicit intersectional equity lens. **All** strands should:

- There is a need to ensure reference to **structural contexts** are made explicit for the topics covered in this curriculum. DSGBV happens within the broader context of 'gender inequality' and is based on 'historic unequal power relations between men and women'. Therefore, this structural social context needs to be named for students to understand that a gender unequal society is the baseline for engaging with the topic of DSGBV. We note that this is the language used in the introduction to the 3rd National DSGBV strategy so it also can be easily applied here also for congruence.

- Ensure a gendered analysis of (in) equality is also explicitly woven through the entire curriculum, given that all children are born and socialised into a gender unequal (i.e.sexist) society. This impacts on all strands and not just Strand 2 whereby sexist behaviours, attitudes and stereotypes pervade many of the issues dealt with in strands 1 & 3 also.

- There is a need to ensure **greater precision** of language in the curriculum materials regarding *sex/gender, gender identity, and sexuality* as distinct and different terms., For example, the Glossary should include sex/gender, gender identity and sexuality as distinct terms. These different terms should also be referenced throughout the curriculum materials in appropriate points (e.g. 2.4, or where there may be reference to LGBTQ+) to ensure that there is not confusion between sex/gender (as a binary concept) and gender identity and/or sexuality. This curriculum should mirror the language used in the new *Anti Bullying Action Plan* for schools which refers to 'sexist' 'gender identity' and 'homophobic' bullying as distinct and different (though sometimes overlapping depending on an individual young persons experience). Responses and understanding must be nuanced, recognise and cater to distinct and different lived experiences.

- Promote awareness and understanding of structural inequality, and consequently barriers and enablers will be different for everyone. The curriculum should promote the understanding that structural inequality is a societal problem, and not the fault of an individual or group, and those who are 'othered' in society face increased barriers, while privilege of any kind (male privilege, white privilege, socio-economic privilege etc.) often acts as 'enabler', regardless of merit. Therefore, it is important that class-based activities and discussions use an equality framework, as this will demonstrate that challenges faced by individuals or groups in society are not the fault of the individual / groups but of the systems and structures which do not meet their needs, while benefitting others.

- Promote resilience by systematically including in all strands reference to supporting material and especially signposting to relevant supports that young people can access themselves (ideally) or be referred to.

Implementation

- Women's Aid strongly supports indications that these Specifications may become mandatory in guidance for schools for Transition Year.
- We believe all students and society as a whole would benefit from this curriculum being taught in all schools and to all students, with no opt outs.
- Additional consideration should be given to how effectively teach the curriculum in single sex schools – and particularly in all male schools and how it can be approached and delivered using

creative pedagogies and in such a way as to avoid 'defensiveness' (especially to thread 2) and be genuinely supportive and empowering of male students, in terms of building healthy respectful, egalitarian relationships and friendships and really seeing/hearing/understanding how the experience of girls in the world can be very different to their own due to sexual and sexist stereotypes, reductive (and sometimes harmful) behaviors and attitudes.

- Consideration should be given to how this curriculum can be connected to Safeguarding of Students and Teachers, including ensuring supports will be provided for teachers/designated schools staff to recognize and respond to difficult issues that may be disclosed in school through supporting and empowering young people to share what is happening for them. An example may be ensuing a number of key staff receive training for disclosures of suicidal ideations (e.g. ASSIST training).

- The curriculum should connect with the values of the school, the teaching community and institutions, so that there is a cultural mindset shift at 'whole school level' not just in a single class/classroom. This should consciously be developed and nurtured in schools grow over time, with direction and support from the NCCA and Department of Education. Taking a 'whole school' approach would mean that the principles and objectives of SPHE does not fall to one individual or small group of individuals. Strategies to deliver success may include 'SPHE Champions' and representatives throughout the school including on the Board of Management, Parents Associations and Student Representative Groups.

- Consideration should be given, and clear commitments made to indicate how the SPHE curriculum will be evaluated and updated and how its consistent and universal delivery will be monitored.

- As already mentioned, Women's Aid strongly believes that up to date, accessible, age, gender and culturally appropriate resources are key to the success of this curriculum. A clear system to system for collating, maintaining, reviewing and evaluating these resources needs to be put in place. Women's Aid is available to support this process.

Thank you for taking the time to share your views with us. Please email this document to SPHEdevelopments@ncca.ie before October 18th, 2023.