



**Opening Statement for Presentation to the Joint  
Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills on  
the review of Relationships and Sexuality  
Education (RSE)**

**Rachael Treanor  
Health Promotion Officer  
National Youth Health Programme  
National Youth Council of Ireland**

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## **Introduction**

- Chairman, Deputies, Senators, on behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland and the National Youth Health Programme, thank you for the invitation to speak today on the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education.
- The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for 51 national voluntary youth work organisations working with young people in every community in the country. We represent and support the interests of our member organisations and use our collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.
- The National Youth Health Programme is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland, the Health Service Executive and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs with a vision for Ireland to be a country where all young people can experience positive health and wellbeing
- As outlined in our submission, sexual health is a specialist area of work for the NYHP, working in partnership with the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme. Working in collaboration, three training programmes have been developed and are currently rolled out across the youth work sector:
  - B4u Decide (Exploring Relationships and Sexual Education)
  - Understanding Young People and Pornography
  - Good Practice in Sexual Health Promotion (Developing Organisational Sexual Health Policy).
- The NYHP and NYCI also contribute at a national level to a number of key strategic groups and committees one of which includes Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Sexual Health Promotion Training Strategy

## Overview

I don't want to quote pages of statistics, as in our submission we have outlined important findings however, I want to highlight some, which illustrate what is affecting young people's sexual health.

In 2015, the NYHP conducted a rapid mental health needs assessment among youth work organisations to investigate the Mental Health needs of young people. The main issues identified as affecting the mental health and wellbeing included Body Image (90%), Relationships (77%) and Sexuality (66%). This year, 2018, the NYHP conducted a rapid needs assessment on Young Men's Health, the key issues identified affecting the health and wellbeing of young men include Relationships (73%), Confidence (76%), Sexuality (60%) and Body Image (53%) .

At a national level, research shows that these needs are similar throughout Ireland. Research conducted by Tusla and the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme on 'The sexual health and sexuality education needs of young people in care (2016)' found that for young people in care:

- Feeling emotionally secure and stable and having good social skills are a key basis for good sexual health.

The online world young people now utilise, further affects their sexual health development.

A recent report by the NSPCC (2016) on 'the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people' found that:

- On first viewing pornography, young people report a mixture of emotions including curiosity, shock and confusion however, these emotions subside on repeated viewing whether pornography is deliberately sought out or, accidentally viewed
- Substantial minorities of older children wanted to try things out they had seen in pornography with a greater proportion of boys stating this than girls

In relation to 'Sexting' Irish teens were found to be the 4<sup>th</sup> highest in Europe for sending sexually explicit images, videos or text messages.

Within the youth work sector, the needs and issues which have been identified above are addressed through the delivery and implementation of the programmes the NYHP currently deliver. Within our submission, our sexual health training suite is explained.

This work is aligned to national policy and strategies however, continuous awareness and support is needed.

### **Specific commentary**

The National Youth Council of Ireland welcomes a holistic and comprehensive approach to sexual health and wellbeing. Sexual health needs to be recognised across a spectrum where young people are supported to develop their knowledge and competency regarding relationships and gender identity through to the practical skills around using contraception and accessing information from safe and reliable sources. The National Youth Council of Ireland recommends the following:

- Implement B4u decide throughout the youth work and school settings, ensuring young people are supported to delay the onset of early sex until they are ready.
- Work in relation to consent is already happening across the youth work sector. It is important that this work is highlighted, recognised and that work around the area of consent is not delivered as a standalone piece. Consent needs to be part of a suite of training on sexual health and wellbeing. To ensure consistency of messaging for young people in relation to consent, it is essential relevant sectors are equipped with accurate consistent and tangible information.
- Consideration needs to be given to the role of gender, gender identity and the role of gendered messaging and how this informs sexual health and wellbeing. Young people need to be supported to develop their own competencies, especially in relation to self-esteem, body image and confidence and self-efficacy.
- Evidence on the impact of pornography on young people should be collated and key learnings identified and formally shared to relevant sectors. It is important to identify and understand why young people are using pornography. In the absence

of safe and relevant online resources young people need to be supported to access the information they need from reliable and trustworthy sources.

- The establishment of a working group is essential to ensure an agreed approach and response to underage sex, social media and sexting, particularly since the implementation of Children's First Legislation (2018) and the Criminal Sexual Offences Act (2017).
- Thank you and I am pleased to answer any questions you may have