



RCNI Oral Presentation

**To the Committee on Education and Skills
Regarding the review of Sexual Health Education
and matters relating**

12th June 2018

RCNI Oral Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

We thank you for the invitation to speak to you today on this matter. And welcome the Oireachtas committee's focus on the question of sexual health education. RCNI have long standing engagement on this matter and believe there are urgent matters that require government level consideration and intervention.

Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI) is a specialist information and resource centre on rape and all forms of sexual violence. The RCNI role includes the development and coordination of national projects such as using our expertise to influence national policy and social change, and supporting and facilitating multi-agency partnerships. We are owned and governed by our member Rape Crisis Centres who provide free advice, counselling and other support services to survivors of sexual violence in Ireland.

The focus on sexual health education is often drawn to this issue based on public debate arising out of sexual violence crimes and our sense that we could be doing more to prevent these. We rightly ask questions about what messages about sex and sexual relationships our children are exposed to in our culture and what messages children receive from the sources we would hope set standards of behaviour that are safe, supportive and empowering such as from parents, schools and trusted authorities.

How do we support everyday respectful, safe and healthy sexual behaviour? Have we fully engaged our institutions and structures to ensure our children and young people share in and contribute to evolving positive values on sexual behaviour and expectations?

Curriculum content is one aspect to address but it is vital we understand that excellence here will be ineffective in the absence of a holistic response which ensures the institutional context and care responses also support positive sexually healthy behaviours.

Historically the Irish state has been resistant and ambiguous towards sexual autonomy and liberation. This has resulted in silences, paralysis and gaps, not least in sexual education in the schools system.

We would suggest that the ambiguity with which we have treated sex education has been baked into our institutions and bureaucratic structures and it is our view that those need to be addressed if we are to serve our children adequately in this matter.

Rather than one location that holds the strategic lead on this matter there are currently four Departments and at least six strategies and policies that have a role in shaping sexual health education:

- **Sexual Health Strategy 2015 - 2020** - Dept. of Health
- **Domestic, Sexual and Gender based Violence National Strategy 2016 - 2021**– Dept. of Justice and Equality
- **Bullying Action Plan 2013** – Dept. of Education and Skills
- **Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014 - 2020**– Dept. of Children and youth Affairs

RCNI Oral Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

- **National Counsel for Curriculum and Assessment** - Dept. of Education and Skills
- **The National Youth Strategy 2015 – 2020** – Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs

Each of these strategies has a role in ensuring children and young people have access to the education and supports they need to prepare them to make healthy decisions about their sex lives.

It is doubtful to us that there is any one statutory location that has the full picture or oversight in the area of sexual health education, which risks leaving the Dept. of Education and Skills with a lack of insight into the capacities and resources it has to hand and clarity of objective in curriculum and policy development and implementation.

For example you may find it surprising to hear that schools already have RSE curriculum content that contains seven RCNI consent-based modules. The reason this might be a surprise is because they were not developed within the Dept. of Education's NCCA rather they were developed under the Sexual Health Strategy overseen by the Dept. of Health and implemented largely from within the HSE and integrated into Healthy Ireland's B4Udecide resource.

We would bring to your attention another difficulty in the multitude of overseeing bodies. When looking across the national strategies which the Dept. of Education and Skills is subject to in various manners is that actions in the area of sexual health education consent, harm and violence prevention use the word 'prevention' to mean different things.

It is becoming standardised internationally to differentiate between primary and secondary prevention, not least because the two require very different capacities and activities. Primary prevention is a whole of population approach that seeks, through generalised intervention, to stop the issue from arising in the first place.

Secondary prevention seeks to respond to risk and harm through early identification of individuals at risk and the earliest possible intervention with those individuals to ensure the harm stops and supports are provided.

This distinction is not consistently embedded across government strategies in this area. It is our experience that these failures to distinguish uniformly across government creates gaps and inefficiencies at best and actions that nullify the effectiveness of each other at worst.

An example is where the Dept. of Education's Action Plan on Bullying which establishes whole of school guidance on bullying prevention, eg primary prevention, seems to have abandoned addressing sexual harassment and bullying (apart from cyber sexual bullying) on the basis that sexual crime is dealt with by Children First. But Children First is almost entirely made up of secondary prevention activities.

This leaves schools have no national primary preventative strategy or action plan regarding sexual harassment (notwithstanding some excellent generalised whole of school ethos and

RCNI Oral Presentation to Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Skills

values programmes), instead we find ourselves waiting for children to be at risk or harmed before we intervene under Children First.

Clarity and agreement at all policy levels as to what level of prevention they are engaging in is essential as we are not to abandon some of our most vulnerable children to gaps between support structures.

In our written submission RCNI recommended a comprehensive review of the policy landscape from the point of view of sexual health and the prevention of sexual violence for children and young people with the view to consideration being given to a whole of government approach being adopted.

On the 21st of May 2018 the UN Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children in her end of mission to Ireland statement recommended, 'A National Strategy to Protect Children from Sexual Violence'. We would urge the Committee to lead in supporting this coordinated approach.

**Dr. Clóna Saidléar - Executive Director
Rape Crisis Network Ireland clg (RCNI)**