

Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution

Wednesday 29 November 2017

Opening Statement

Chairman,

Good afternoon. Thank you for the opportunity to make this opening statement. My name is Eamonn Moran, I am Principal Officer in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills. I am joined today by Emer Egan, Deputy Chief Inspector, Amanda Geary, post-primary senior inspector and Clare Griffin, Primary Divisional Inspector.

The Department of Education and Skills welcomes the opportunity to address the ancillary recommendation of the Citizens Assembly relating to sexual health and relationship education. The ancillary recommendation of the Citizens Assembly states that:

Improvements should be made to sexual health and relationship education, including the areas of contraception and consent, in primary and post-primary schools, colleges, youth clubs and other organisations involved in education and interactions with young people.

The Department has already provided a written submission to the committee which sets out the current provision in relation to sexual health and relationship education in the primary, post primary and higher education sectors. I propose, therefore, to make only a short opening statement but, of course, I, along with my colleagues, will be very happy to engage with the committee during the subsequent discussion. This statement is organised in two parts – firstly, I will set out what is required of schools in relation to sexual health and relationship

education and how we support schools to meet that requirement. Secondly, I will describe briefly our monitoring of compliance, the outcomes of that monitoring and recent initiatives which can help and improve the quality of provision.

Part 1

What we require schools to do

Access to sexual and health education is an important right for students. Schools have a responsibility to provide for this, in consultation with parents, having regard to the ethos of the school. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) is a mandatory curriculum subject in all primary schools and in post-primary junior cycle. Relationships and Sexuality Education (or RSE) is required at all levels, from primary through to senior cycle. The Department has set out the content for each of these programmes in SPHE syllabuses and guidelines.

The primary level SPHE curriculum currently used in schools was published in 1999. Its purpose is to foster the personal development, health and well-being of the individual child, to help him/her to create and maintain supportive relationships and to enable children make safe and healthy decisions now and in the future.

At post-primary level, the SPHE curriculum framework for junior cycle was published in 2000. It provides students with the opportunity to develop the skills and competence to take care of themselves and others and to make informed decisions about their health, personal lives and social development.

RSE is not taught as a distinct programme or subject in primary schools and in junior cycle. It forms an integral part of the SPHE curriculum at both levels. At senior cycle, the school's

RSE programme may be taught as a distinct programme or may be delivered in the context of an SPHE programme or another subject.

Primary schools are also required to fully implement the Stay Safe programme, which addresses physical, emotional and sexual abuse. It aims to increase resilience by giving children knowledge, skills and strategies in an age-appropriate manner, which is an important precursor to understanding the concept of consent in an adult sexual relationship.

All schools are required to have an RSE policy that is developed in consultation with the school community, including school management, parents, teachers and students as appropriate. The school's programme for Relationship and Sexuality Education is developed and taught in the context of the school's RSE policy. It is important to note that the ethos of the school should never preclude learners from acquiring the knowledge about the issues, but ethos may influence how that content is treated.

Contraception or issues related to consent are not explicitly mentioned in the primary SPHE curriculum or in the RSE programme. The focus is on developing assertive skills, personal self-efficacy and understanding how one's body works. This then lays the foundation for later discussion of specific issues in a manner appropriate to the developmental stage of the pupils.

At post-primary level, schools are required to teach all aspects of the RSE programme, including family planning, sexually transmitted infections and sexual orientation. Elements of the programme cannot be omitted on the grounds of school ethos; however all aspects of the programme can and should be taught within the ethos and value system of the school as expressed in its RSE policy.

In relation to higher education, it should be noted that under legislation, the higher education institutions are autonomous bodies and the Department does not prescribe a programme in

relationships and sexuality education at this level. The majority of higher education institutions provide information on sexual health and provide additional links to students for further information and support on relationships, sexual education and mental health issues. Information is provided by both the Institutions' Student's Union and the Student Services Medical Centre. A number of higher education institutions provide classes in sexual consent, providing students with the opportunity to talk about positive forms of sexual communication.

Supporting schools to meet this requirement

A range of actions has been taken by the Department to support the implementation of SPHE and RSE. The Department has published Policy Guidelines for Relationships and Sexuality Education to support schools in developing RSE policy. These provide clear guidance on engaging with the school community and on sharing the school's policy on RSE, recognising that a partnership approach to RSE helps to ensure that children are provided with a consistent experience and are able to make connections between life at home, in the school and in the community. Sample templates for RSE policies are provided for schools to consider when drafting their own policies.

An RSE Support Service and a separate SPHE Support Service is available to schools. An extensive programme of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities has been provided to support teachers in the implementation of RSE and SPHE programmes in post-primary schools.

The Department and the support services have also developed a wide range of teaching materials, particularly in the area of RSE. This work has been done in partnership with other

Departments and agencies, including the HSE, the Gay and Lesbian Education Network (GLEN) and the Crisis Pregnancy Agency, for example.

It should be noted that schools have discretion regarding the resources that they use to teach SPHE/RSE and that these are used in accordance with the school's policy.

Part 2

How we monitor compliance

It is the responsibility of the school Board of Management to ensure that RSE is taught in the school. The Inspectorate conducts robust quality assurance of provision in SPHE and RSE through its programme of inspection in schools. Inspectors ensure that the school timetable includes time for SPHE and RSE, that the RSE policy has been developed and that broad and balanced coverage of the SPHE and RSE curriculum is evident in school planning and, in focussed evaluations of SPHE and RSE lessons, that students are achieving the intended outcomes of the curriculum. During all whole-school evaluations school management are required to confirm that the full Stay Safe programme, SPHE curriculum and RSE are being provided.

Where there is evidence that provision is unsatisfactory, recommendations for improvement are made and, in those cases where there is no or inadequate implementation of the SPHE and RSE curriculum, the Inspectorate conducts a range of follow-through actions until such time as the school is compliant.

What we have found in terms of provision and quality

Schools are positively disposed to providing good quality SPHE and RSE and we have noted the prevalence of a positive classroom and whole-school atmosphere. Systematic engagement

by school managers and teachers with SPHE and RSE continuous development activities has a positive impact on the quality of programme delivery. However, there are some challenges to achieving high quality in that provision which are common across primary and post-primary.

In some schools the development of an RSE policy hasn't been achieved and there is insufficient engagement with parents on the policy and programme in the school. Secondly, we know that there are issues relating to the competence and confidence of teachers regarding the delivery of RSE.

Recent initiatives which will support high quality provision

The Department is developing a policy on wellbeing which will be published in early 2018. The policy, which will cover both primary and post-primary schools, will set out a number of actions which will enhance the physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing of students and enable them to build life skills. It will include actions to support schools and teachers to deliver high quality learning experiences so that students acquire an appropriate knowledge and understanding of human relationships and sexuality.

Another important development is the introduction of a new area of learning called Wellbeing as part of the new Framework for Junior Cycle. SPHE and RSE are integral parts of the Wellbeing curriculum in junior cycle. They provide opportunities for teaching and learning directly related to wellbeing, not least the capacity to develop and maintain healthy relationships. Guidelines developed by the NCCA have been published and training has already commenced for school leaders to assist them in implementing a wellbeing programme.

It is envisaged that the SPHE curriculum (including RSE) at primary level will undergo a review by the NCCA in the coming years, as part of the ongoing review of all the curriculum areas. A review of the curriculum at senior cycle is also underway and the SPHE and RSE programme at that level will be considered.

These reviews will include the views of all the education partners, recent research outcomes, societal and cultural changes and all the relevant policies and teaching materials that have been disseminated to schools since the SPHE and RSE curriculum was first introduced. It is not possible to determine exactly what the review will conclude in terms of curriculum content, but the process will be very comprehensive and all views and suggestions will be considered.

My colleagues and I look forward to our discussions.

Thank you.