

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM OIDEACHAS AGUS SCILEANNA

JOINT COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Dé Máirt, 15 Bealtaine 2018

Tuesday, 15 May 2018

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair/Members present:

Teachtaí Dála/Deputies	Seanadóirí/Senators
Thomas Byrne,	Maria Byrne,
Catherine Martin,	Robbie Gallagher,
Hildegarde Naughton,	Paul Gavan.
Jan O'Sullivan.	

I láthair/In attendance: Deputy Paul Murphy and Senator Fintan Warfield.

Teachta/Deputy Fiona O'Loughlin sa Chathaoir/in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: We have a quorum and I call the meeting to order. I remind members to switch off their mobile phones. No apologies have been received. We will go into private session to discuss some housekeeping matters.

The joint committee went into private session at 3.38 p.m. and resumed in public session at 4.16 p.m.

Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education: Discussion

Chairman: We are now in public session. I remind members and witnesses to either turn off their mobile phones or place them in flight mode as they interfere with the sound system. Apart from those who are watching at home on television, the parliamentary reporters are following the meeting and their work would be adversely affected.

Item No. 4 on the agenda is our engagement with stakeholders on the committee's review of relationships and sexuality education. This is the second of three meetings we are holding on the topic. At the first session of the review, we undertook an investigation into the effectiveness of the current model of sexual health and relationships education. We heard from users, parents, teachers and student representative bodies as well as the Department of Education and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA. In this second session, we will be looking at the elements which need to be considered in a future model of sexual health and relationship education.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome Ms Elaine Byrnes, doctoral researcher from the school of psychology at National University of Ireland Galway, NUIG, Ms Sarah Lennon, communications and information manager at Inclusion Ireland, Ms Moninne Griffith, executive director at BeLonGTo, Ms Anna Keogh, an academic working in the area, Ms Rachael Treanor, health promotion officer at the National Youth Council of Ireland, and Ms Alex Cooney, CEO of CyberSafe Ireland. I will invite each of the witnesses to make an opening statement. I thank them for their written submissions. Speakers will have a maximum of three minutes for each opening statement and that will be followed by an engagement with members of the committee. We will call on members in order and Deputy Paul Murphy and Senator Warfield, who are not members, will then be given an opportunity to ask questions and comment.

I draw the attention of witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the committee. However, if they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any person, persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the House or an official either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

Any opening statements to the committee will be published on its website after the meet-

ing. I note that Ms Cooney must leave at 5 p.m. for another engagement. I ask members to put questions to Ms Cooney first in order to accommodate her.

Ms Alex Cooney: I thank the Chairman.

Chairman: Ms Cooney is very welcome. We try to be as flexible as possible. I call on Ms Byrnes to make her opening statement.

Ms Elaine Byrnes: I thank the members of the joint committee for this opportunity to discuss topics raised in my written submission with Mr. Richie Sadlier. My perspective is informed by two components of my work. I deliver the pilot sexual health module at second level with Mr. Sadlier and I work on my own PhD research with third-level students, focusing on sexual behaviour and the communication of consent. Data from third-level students I have interviewed indicates that, for most, school-based relationships and sexuality education, RSE, was at best haphazard and at worst non-existent. There was consistency with words and phrases used to describe the experience including “limited”, “mechanics”, “skirting around the issue” and “it wasn’t dealt with”. One student’s recollection resonated with me and summed up sex education in Ireland:

I think that education at that point has failed us, because we haven’t had enough information[...] if I had this information, I could have made different choices. And I know people who have had sex, and years later have realised that they regretted it.

Such experiences and memories are not something I want for this cohort of students. As a parent, it is not what I want for my own children and their generation.

There is a very real opportunity now to create a framework for sex education that is not just comprehensive, but which empowers young people to develop autonomy and sexual competence in their relationships. Collectively, as adult members of society, we owe it to young people to address past failings and support their developing sexual health. As outlined by the World Health Organisation, the sexual rights of all people must be respected, protected and fulfilled. I acknowledge that it is a daunting task for the committee to review the existing RSE programme, but we do not need to reinvent the wheel. There are a number of offerings from independent bodies which facilitate sex education and support schools in that work, the gold standard in respect of which is the Relationships Explored and Life Uncovered, REAL U, programme delivered by Foróige. While that programme needs updating, it is a very good starting point for the committee. There is also work being done by Anna Keogh, who will make her own submission here today, and a team at Trinity which is developing very innovative work.

In the assessment of the challenges in implementing the existing RSE curriculum contained in their report of 2007, Mayock *et al* highlighted and identified the practice of involving outside facilitators to deliver RSE. That is something which really needs to be considered. In our work together, Mr. Sadlier and I have noticed that our relationship with students is very different from the teacher-student relationship. There is a skill set an outside facilitator brings to bear which it would be very difficult for a teacher to replicate regardless of how enthusiastic he or she might be about delivering an RSE programme. I am at a loss to understand how we expect teachers to deliver an RSE programme which must be open, interactive and participatory and thereafter resume an authoritative role in the primary subjects they deliver. It is an unfair burden to place on teachers.

Regarding student-parent-school collaboration, I understand readily that there is a respon-

sibility on us as parents to support our children's developing knowledge of sex and sexuality. I am equally understanding of the fact that it will probably take another generation before we are comfortable in this country with any discussions around sex and sexuality. Factual information is difficult for parents to deliver due to the specific knowledge and skills required. As evidenced in Nordic countries, however, where there is a progressive approach to sex education, children learn through both school and home that sex and sexuality are healthy and normative parts of the human experience.

Chairman: I thank Ms Byrnes. We are inviting Foróige to attend at one of our upcoming meetings. I call Ms Lennon.

Ms Sarah Lennon: I thank the committee and Deputy O'Loughlin for the invitation. I think the fact that Inclusion Ireland is here today represents a culture shift. We represent people with intellectual disability, so for us to be part of a conversation around mainstream sexual education is a significant moment in itself. Sexuality and intellectual disability is an area that is constantly surrounded by taboo, and the tendency is to focus on how to protect people. We see people with intellectual disabilities as eternal children, devoid of sexuality. This is a very damaging preconception, and it can have a very serious impact on the quality of the sexual education that people receive. Inadequate sexual education can have very serious consequences. Until last year, the criminal law in this area reinforced prejudices. That law has been repealed and replaced, but the new law still contains many prejudicial aspects. In the 25 years it was on the Statute Book, that law created a chilling effect where teachers and other people who may have wanted to discuss sexual relationships were afraid to because of the fear of potential criminality in the area. In that context, we know that sex education for people with intellectual disability has suffered. The law has improved, but there is still a legacy of that law's prevalence for the past 25 years, and a number of people who are now in their 30s and 40s have not received sexual education.

Added to that is the fact that many people with intellectual disability attend special schools which teach at a primary level until they are 18 years of age. Like all other parts of the curriculum, relationships and sexuality education, RSE, and social, personal and health education, SPHE are pitched at that primary level, so young adults of 17, 18 or 19 may not receive relationships and sexual education. If they receive it at all, it is not beyond a primary level. We know that this focus tends to be around personal care skills and relationships rather than sexuality. HSE research shows that many staff working with people with intellectual disability are reluctant to provide sexual education after school for fear of reprisal from parents or organisations and concerns around the capacity of the individual to engage in relationships.

We know there is inadequacy, but we also know that people with intellectual disability have sex. We know that people with intellectual disability who have sexual relationships are at a high risk of sexually transmitted infections, STIs, and often have limited access to care if they contract an STI. We also know that children and adults with disabilities are much more likely to experience violence, including sexual violence, than their non-disabled peers. We know that women and girls with disabilities are more likely to be adversely affected by the constitutional ban on abortion care in Ireland. We know that 20% of children taken into care are taken as a result of the mental illness or the disability of the parent, usually the mother. As such, where people do parent, there is a very high chance that those children will be taken into care. Each of those issues is exacerbated by the lack of adequate and early sexual education.

What does Inclusion Ireland think can be done? We believe that the recently ratified United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should prompt a review of all laws and policies impacting people with disabilities, including the criminal law and many of the

policies surrounding the delivery of sexual education. We think the review of approaches to sex education has to include required learning techniques, including the need to use easy-to-read materials and methodologies which engage people. We need to develop a specific curriculum for people with intellectual disability that is accessible but age appropriate, and deals with sexuality and contraception. We need funding for specific education programmes for school leavers and older adults who over the past 25 or 30 years have missed out on sexual education or who may need reinforced education. We also believe that the current review of voluntary organisations needs to look at the fact that many disability service providers are former religious orders and the impact that can have on the delivery of sexual education within a service provision environment. Parenting skills education should be developed in response to the large number of children who are taken into care on the grounds of disability.

As I said at the outset, we are undergoing a significant culture change. The ratification of the UN Convention is a very important point. There is now a responsibility on legislators, policymakers, the media and advocacy organisations to set the pace of that culture change and to take proactive steps towards the citizenship of people with disabilities rather than seeing them as eternal children. As citizens, people with disabilities require the tools and the education to access these rights to privacy, intimacy and sexual relationships in the same way as their peers.

Ms Moninne Griffith: I am the executive director of BeLonG To, Ireland's national organisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and non-binary, LGBTI+, young people aged from 14 to 23. We have been supporting young LGBTI+ people since we opened our doors 15 years ago in Dublin. Today we provide specialist youth services in Dublin, including peer support groups, one-to-one support, in-house counselling with our partners in Pieta House and street outreach. We also support a national network of more than 30 LGBTI+ youth groups throughout Ireland and we run Stand Up, the largest anti-bullying campaign in second level schools nationally, with the support of the Department of Education and Skills and many other education partners. This is now in its eighth year, and last year 43% of schools participated.

BeLonG To also works with the Government and other partners so that Ireland will be safe, equal and welcoming for LGBTI+ young people. This includes our work with the Department of Education and Skills on the development of Growing Up LGBT, which is part of the SPHE-RSE curriculum. Most recently we have been working with the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Katherine Zappone, and her Department in the development of the world's first LGBTI+ youth strategy. We have also been working with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, Deputy Regina Doherty, and her Department on a review of the Gender Recognition Act 2015. In this review, the issue of feeling unsafe or not belonging in schools was highlighted time and again by the young people and stakeholders consulted.

Ireland changed what it means to grow up LGBTI+ in 2015 with a resounding "Yes" in the marriage equality referendum and with the Gender Recognition Act 2015. There is still much work to be done, however, to create an Ireland where LGBTI+ young people are free from discrimination and stigma. Recent Irish research confirms BeLonG To's experience from our front-line work with young people that anti-LGBTI+ stigma results in significantly higher mental health challenges for young LGBTI+ people. We have seen a doubling in the number of young people in crisis who have come to our services in recent years, especially those who are under 18. Our dedicated youth workers and our resilience programmes are working all-out to meet that need.

The LGBT Ireland report, published in 2016, found that 56% of LGBTI+ people between the ages of 14 and 18 had self-harmed, 70% had suicidal thoughts and one in three had attempt-

ed suicide. The report showed a link between a young person having experienced anti-LGBTI+ bullying, social exclusion and fear of rejection with serious mental health difficulties. Some 67% of those in school now or in past five years witnessed anti-LGBTI+ bullying and 50% had experienced it themselves.

We know from the young people we work with that shame, mixed messaging and, too often, silence surround the areas of gender, sexuality and relationships in many classrooms across Ireland. Irish young people receive inadequate information relating to sexuality, safe sex, STIs, consent and reproduction. In many schools young people receive incomplete or no information on being LGBTI+ at all, despite Growing up LGBT being part of the SPHE and RSE curriculum. In short, what they are telling us is that many of them feel unsafe to be themselves in school, afraid to come out, afraid of the consequences, unwelcome and that they do not belong in our schools. Just last week, I heard the story of a young transgender person in school who was thrown down the stairs. In the changing rooms after PE they were thrown into the showers and the water was turned on just because they are transgender.

Back in 2015, Ireland said “Yes” to marriage equality. BeLonG To is now calling for our education system to say “Yes” to the inclusion of LGBTI+ identities in a real and meaningful way. On behalf of all the young people, parents and teachers whom we work with, we are advocating for a school system where every young person has access to scientifically factual, up-to-date information about sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, STIs, safe sex, and consent. Learning about these topics is an essential life skill and vital to realising young people’s right to health and well-being.

We are calling for an update of the Growing up LGBT RSE resources, which I believe is under way; integration of this Growing Up LGBT material into the main SPHE-RSE curriculum; the provision to teachers of further training on how to teach Growing up LGBT to build their confidence and capacity to cover these issues; the inclusion of LGBTI+ identities across all subjects to create visibility and highlight role models for young LGBTI people; the timetabling of RSE lessons in every school which would include Growing up LGBT; the resourcing of the Safe and Supportive Schools programme developed by HSE and BeLonG To so that it can be rolled out in second level schools nationally; the increasing of resources to reach more schools as part of Stand Up anti-bullying campaign and the provision of substitute cover to enable all teachers to attend the training; the resourcing of Alltogether Now developed by St Patrick’s College in DCU and BeLonG To so that it can be rolled out in fifth and sixth classes in primary schools nationally; and the inclusion of Growing Up LGBT and anti-bullying programmes in whole-school inspections.

Ms Anna Keogh: First, I thank the committee for the invitation. As I have spent the past four years researching the RSE programme, I am delighted to see it getting some much-needed attention. As we are here today to discuss the future of the programme, I will make some suggestions on content and will make suggestions on how new lessons could be facilitated and how teachers could be supported.

As for content, some matters need to be expanded upon in our current curriculum. First, the topic of consent needs to be interwoven into all lessons to showcase that although it is particularly relevant in relationships and sexual situations, it can be learned from day-to-day exchanges and does not need to be a big scary awkward conversation.

The topic of pleasure needs to be included and cited as a perfectly healthy reason to engage in sexual activity. In fact, if we actually talk about pleasure, it can be used as a measure of

consent. Put simply, if it does not feel good, be that in one's head, in one's body or in one's gut instinct, then it is just not right.

In respect of equality, all the resources should be inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations. It is great that we have a separate resource but it does not need to be a separate issue. Our society has developed to include marriage equality and a gender recognition Act and these should be reflected in our resources also.

In respect of sexual activity, young people have reported in previous studies that they are engaging in sexual activity that is not intercourse. These types of activities need to become part of the conversation that we are having in schools.

Having regard to media literacy and pornography, young people are bombarded by media influences every day, many of which are sexualised. Media literacy lessons could help them to critically analyse the messages they receive and discussions on pornography could help them to acknowledge that it does not always portray reality.

I could go on and on about all of the information we could include in the RSE programme but as was mentioned in the last meeting here, a fully comprehensive programme is useless if the people who are teaching it do not feel well supported, are not well trained and if they are not comfortable.

I would like to encourage the Department of Education and Skills, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and all of the other stakeholders involved in RSE to utilise the services of professionals in this area. There are many individuals and organisations, some of which are here today, who do not have any other agenda than to provide fully comprehensive factual information on a wide range of topics. Qualified outside facilitators can provide innovative lesson plans, teacher training and support, additional, focused or more complex modules where needed, as well as parent workshops.

The model that I would propose is for each school to be assigned an RSE professional who would cover a number of schools in a catchment area. Such a professional would work with the whole school to support the RSE programme, keep up to date with matters arising in the media or any local matters that may need to be addressed, provide additional workshops when needed and partake in continual research and professional development, which would then be passed on to the teachers he or she was supporting in his or her schools. This would allow RSE to be recognised as an integral part of how we help young people in their development and growth and would assist teachers and parents in the already mammoth task of providing guidance to young people in the rapidly advancing world of today.

Ms Rachael Treanor: On behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI, and the national youth health programme, NYHP, I thank members 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 well-being.

As outlined in our submission, sexual health is a specialist area of work for the health programme, working in partnership with the HSE's sexual health and crisis pregnancy programme. Working in collaboration, we have developed three training programmes: the B4u Decide programme, which explores relationships and sexual education; the understanding young people and pornography programme; and the good practice in sexual health promotion programme, which enables the development of an organisational sexual health policy. The health programme and NYCI also contribute at a national level to a number of key strategic groups and committees one of which includes the crisis pregnancy and sexual health promotion training strategy

I do not want to quote pages of statistics, as in our submission we have outlined important findings. I want to highlight, however, some findings that 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 well-being included body image, relationships and sexuality. In the beginning of 2018, we conducted a rapid needs assessment to investigate young men's health and the key issues identified affecting the health of young men included relationships, confidence, sexuality and body image. The online world young people now utilise further affects their sexual health development. A recent report by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, NSPCC, 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. These emotions subside, however, on repeated viewing whether pornography is deliberately sought out or accidentally viewed and that substantial minorities of older children wanted to try things out they had seen in pornography.

Within the youth work sector, the aforementioned needs and issues are addressed through the delivery and implementation of the programmes that the health programme currently delivers. Within our submission we have outlined the aims and objectives of those programmes. Although this work is aligned to national policy and strategies, awareness and support, however, is needed.

The National Youth Council of Ireland welcomes a holistic and comprehensive approach to sexual health and well-being. 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 the practical skills in respect of using contraception and accessing information from safe and reliable sources. The National Youth Council of Ireland and the health programme recommend the implementation of the B4u Decide programme throughout the youth work and school settings, ensuring young people are supported to delay the onset of early sex until they are ready. As work on consent is already happening across the youth work sector, it is important that this work is highlighted and recognised and that work on the area of consent is not delivered as a stand-alone piece but as part of a suite of training on sexual health and well-being to ensure consistency of messaging for young people with regard to consent. It is essential that the 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 well-being. Young people need to be supported to develop their own competencies, especially with regard to self-esteem, body image and confidence. Evidence on the impact of pornography on young people should be collated and key learnings identified and formally shared to relevant sectors, as 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 the Children First legislation and the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017.

Chairman: I thank Ms Treanor. Last but not least I call Ms Cooney.

Ms Alex Cooney: I am the CEO of CyberSafeIreland and I would like to thank the Chair, Deputy O'Loughlin, and the committee members for the invitation to speak today. To give the committee some background on our work, CyberSafeIreland is the Irish children's charity for online safety. Our focus is on equipping children aged between eight and 13 with the skills to manage their online experiences in a safe, positive and successful manner. We do this primarily through the delivery of educational programmes in primary schools, but also through raising awareness among parents and teachers as well as the wider public. We have spoken to almost 12,000 children aged between eight and 13 since 2016. I am therefore speaking today from the perspective of online safety for children. We believe that an updated curriculum must endeavour to equip young people with the skills that they will need to safely navigate through their lives, both online and offline. According to Article 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, education should prepare children for responsible life in a free society and in the modern world this must reflect what children are exposed to in the online world as well as how this exposure affects their development.

Children are accessing the online world at an ever younger age without appropriate guidance, monitoring and support, making them vulnerable to a range of online risks, which I will outline further. Based on our own survey of 4,000 children aged between eight and 13 to whom we have spoken to since September last year, 67% of them own a smartphone and 72% are using social media and messaging services, such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram. This data serves as a reminder that the majority of children in Ireland are embracing technology and that they are doing so from a young age. While the online world undoubtedly offers opportunities to children to access information, this increased exposure brings with it increased risk, including loss of privacy and personal data, exposure to inappropriate material, cyberbullying, online grooming, extortion and negative impacts on their health and well-being.

I would like to consider for a moment exposure to inappropriate content. Some 32% of the children we have surveyed and 52% of the boys overall are playing adult rated games. These games, such as Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty, are designated for 18 years and older as a result of, for instance, sexual and-or violent content of a more extreme nature. In our earlier submission, we highlighted findings from the same survey my colleague referenced, namely, the NSPCC 2016 survey that examined children's exposure to porn. It found that 53% of 11 to 16 year olds have seen explicit material online, the vast majority of whom have seen it by the age of 14. Most of the boys who had viewed pornography online thought it was realistic. While we do not yet know how such exposure is going to impact children over the longer term, I think it is fundamental that we start to address these issues in an appropriate way and ensure that they are not learning about important topics such as consent or respect in relationships from online pornography.

Our focus is primarily on children aged between eight and 13. As such, we do not come across regular incidents of children sharing explicit images or videos, that is, sexting, although it is often a topic that concerns parents to whom we speak. We are aware, however, that it is a much greater issue among older teens in Ireland. Children should be educated on the risks

related to inappropriate sharing of explicit images or videos and specifically on consent issues relating to online sharing of another's images or videos.

While there is no doubt that parents play a crucial role in both protecting and empowering children in regard to online safety, schools also have a fundamental role to play. In our experience, parents need a lot of support as many are struggling to manage their children's online use and to set parameters around it. Parents and schools need balanced and sensible guidance on how to minimise risk while encouraging positive uses of digital media. It is critical that every child gets the opportunity to get consistent information and to have well informed and balanced discussions on important issues like consent, sexuality and what healthy relationships look like and the school curriculum offers that opportunity. This is particularly important given that parents often have very different approaches to discussing these issues at home and some parents will avoid having awkward or difficult conversations.

Children are learning how to use technology in schools in a much more consistent way since the roll-out of the digital strategy for schools in 2015 and this is welcome since technology will play such an important part in their futures. However, this education will need to extend beyond the teaching of practical skills of computer literacy to include a much broader focus on digital literacy, where children get the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills in an online environment so that they can make smart choices. This education should start when children are young, in an age and stage appropriate manner. If children are getting their first device and exploring the online world in primary school, and we know that they are, then these discussions need to start both at home and in school at least at the same time, if not before. It would be good to start talking about things like self regulation and achieving a healthy balance from an early age as many of the online platforms are designed to be addictive. According to Dr. Jenny Radesky, a US-based developmental behavioural paediatrician from the American Academy of Paediatrics, we can begin to teach children to self regulate from as young as six or seven years of age.

In 2017, a survey by Barnardos in the UK found that 70% of 11 to 15 year old children in England wanted the government to ensure that all children have school lessons on sex and relationships. Some 96% of the children surveyed felt that it was important for them to understand the dangers of being online so that they can stay safe. I do not believe we have carried out a similar survey in Ireland but I suspect the figures would be broadly similar and it would be well worth ascertaining young Irish people's views as part of this review.

We provided a set of recommendations in our earlier submission and I will not repeat them. I would like to emphasise, however, the importance of ensuring that digital literacy is a compulsory part of the curriculum at both primary and secondary level, along with age and stage appropriate discussions around issues related to what children are exposed to in an online environment. Such additions to the curriculum will help to mitigate against risks that children face in the online world and enable them to embrace the opportunities that exist there for them.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to speak today and I look forward to members' questions.

Chairman: I thank Ms Cooney and all the witnesses for their submissions and opening statements. They have addressed the whole area of content and collaboration between schools, parents, family and community extremely well and also the need to support teachers in the vital work they do in this area. I am conscious that Ms Cooney has to leave soon. Is she in a position to stay for a few questions specifically directed to her?

Ms Alex Cooney: I can stay until 5.10 p.m.

Chairman: If not, she could write to us. If anybody has any particular questions for Ms Cooney, I am happy to take them now. I call Deputy Thomas Byrne.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: My question is not just for Ms Cooney.

Chairman: I call Senator Ruane.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I have a question for Ms Cooney. The Data Protection Bill will be dealt with this afternoon and I wonder about the digital age of consent being raised to 16 years of age. I know about the inaccurate picture pornography, etc., give to children but there is also a lot of positive content online that somebody might not get from a parent, peers or school. Will raising the age of digital consent to 16 years of age cause problems under the current system in regard to children being able to engage positively on particular platforms, especially if they come from groups such as LGBT or with intellectual disabilities, where people are already isolated and they use the likes of Facebook to share experiences? If the legislation is passed and the digital age of consent is increased to 16 years of age, will that have a negative impact on people being able to engage online positively in terms of sexual experiences or relationships?

Chairman: We will group the questions.

Deputy Jan O'Sullivan: I found part of Ms Cooney's presentation chilling, particularly on boys up to the age of 14 seeing pornography as normal sex and getting their messages in that way. I forget the percentage she said but it was a relatively high percentage. I want to ask a specific question following on from that. Would Ms Cooney suggest, as well as the other issues we will tease out with the others around sex education in general, that online materials and a strategy are needed to address this online because it seems that is where many young people spend a lot of time?

Chairman: In her presentation, Ms Cooney highlighted the gap between the messaging that children receive at home and in school on online safety. I am interested in her elaborating further on that and seeing how we can bridge that gap. Can she give us any insight on that? The statistics she gave us were shocking and harrowing. Will she expand on the implications for society in that regard?

Ms Alex Cooney: I hope I cover all the bases. We believe the digital age of consent should be 13. If it is raised to 16, it will make children in fact more vulnerable, even if at face value it seems it will protect their data. I mentioned that 72% of the children to whom we speak, the vast majority of whom - 94% or 96%, I think - are under 13, are already accessing these services, and many of them are doing so with parental consent. Therefore, we really need to consider parental consent and what informed parental consent looks like. If we raise the digital age of consent to 16, we will simply have more children lying about their ages to get online and not being afforded the basic safeguards that are available for children who are 13 and older, 13 being, in theory, the age at which they are allowed to access these services. There are measures in the general regulation that will address children's data, and that is positive. It is the first time this has been done. However, the digital age of consent, which has captured everyone's interest in recent weeks, is not really the solution. It will not stop children accessing the services, it will not protect their data, it will mean more children lying about their ages and it will not provide the safeguards needed. It would be great to see the data of all children under the age of 18 protected regardless. That should just be the rule: if they are under 18, one is not allowed

to collect data from them or advertise to them. The solution should not be so connected to the digital age of consent. Our view is that the digital age of consent should be 13. We feel that will keep children safer. What we want is proper parental engagement and parents making informed decisions as to when their children are ready to access these services, own devices and so on.

Regarding online safety in the curriculum, we absolutely need to address these issues at school and in the curriculum in an age and stage-appropriate way. This needs to happen at primary school as well as secondary school. The problem is that there is a big gap between what children are exposed to online from a young age and what they are learning about through those sources and the reality. Parents at home and in schools offer the opportunity to explore these issues in a safe way.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: My question was whether there should be actual teaching materials that operate online as opposed to just-----

Ms Alex Cooney: Yes, there are some fantastic educational resources online.

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: They should be the primary method.

Ms Alex Cooney: Yes. Webwise has some really good materials for children. There are lots of good materials out there. We just need to highlight them more and push parents and children in those directions. There is a lot of really good information they can access but, unfortunately, they do not always access the best sources of information. It is also about helping children to make informed choices online, to understand what is real and what is fake and what is advertising and what that means, and to learn how to navigate through that and challenge what they see in order that they do not just accept everything at face value. This is where digital literacy comes in, and this is something we will have to teach children to do. I hope that answers the question.

Regarding the messaging in terms of what we need to do, it is really important that we also equip parents with the skills and knowledge. We often compare this to road safety, for example. We have had much campaigning on road safety in recent years. I ask the committee to think how socially unacceptable drink-driving is today and how we all wear seat belts. Obviously, there is legislation that supports these measures, but there have been acts of campaigning on these issues for a number of years. We need social norms around safe online use and we need to equip parents with simple empowering messaging. If we freak parents out, they are inclined to take away the technology, which is absolutely not what children want at all and will stop children coming to them and telling them of problems. If they think the technology will be taken away, they are less likely to share negative experiences.

It is a matter of equipping parents with the skills and knowledge they need to support their children in this regard. There is lots of evidence to suggest that practices such as co-use, that is, parents and children using technology together, are really positive. It is a matter of helping children to learn about things like self-regulation so we can address some of the addiction issues we are seeing in primary school as well as secondary school. We really need to support parents actively in this regard. We are calling for a national parents’ awareness campaign, which we hope to kick-start ourselves. We are here to discuss relationships and sexuality education in school. School is an opportunity to offer this consistency. We know that not all children get consistent information at home - if indeed they are having conversations about some of these issues at all - so school offers that opportunity to have these issues consistently addressed.

Chairman: I thank Ms Cooney. She is excused. I know she needs to go. I will go back to the members. I call Deputy Martin.

Deputy Catherine Martin: I thank the witnesses for their detailed presentations. I have questions for each and every one of them. What do they consider to be, or how do we define, age-appropriate materials? How do we ensure that they are not delivered too late or too early? What exactly is their advice on this and how it should be done?

Ms Byrnes spoke of the use of facilitators in delivering sexual health education. How does she envision this happening at a national level? Would she advocate for facilitators to be employed by the Department or contracted? How do we ensure a level playing field and that all schools get the same type of programmes? Would it be a weekly programme or module? I presume, given what Ms Lennon said, that if outside facilitators are employed, they would then have to have training on how to engage young people with disabilities and on easy-to-read materials and methodologies. Ms Byrnes also mentioned the feedback survey on her module, which is fantastic. It is the way to do it. Are we getting a sense of what is children's sense of this? Are we tapping in enough, or does she think we should conduct some kind of national survey of our youth on their attitudes towards or understanding of sex, consent and relationships and then design programmes? Does she think enough studies have been done?

Regarding the Growing Up LGBT and anti-bullying programme to be included in the whole-school inspections, does Ms Griffith feel this is not being taught across the board in all schools? How does she envisage this working? It is subject-orientated when the inspectors come in, so would that be a module instead of SPHE or sex education? How exactly would that work in the whole-school evaluations? Should it be included not just in whole-school inspections? Is it ever included in the incidental inspections? We used to call them drive-bys. Perhaps that is a good way of checking up as well. I was not quite clear on the anti-bullying programme being included in the whole-school inspections. Is that the Stand Up awareness week or is it the anti-bullying policy? Do the witnesses believe that the ethos of the school interferes with the provision of fact-based and informative sex education?

Deputy Hildegard Naughton: I thank the witnesses for coming before us. They have given very informative presentations. My questions are along the lines of Deputy Martin's regarding the consistency across the country in our education system in respect of sex and relationship education and how best to do that. Ms Byrnes referred to outside facilitators, as did Ms Anna Keogh. Do they have any evidence as to how best to do this between primary and secondary school? For example, in primary school, the teacher is there teaching all subjects all day long. How would they interact with the teacher training colleges? There is one school of thought that an outside facilitator would come in and perhaps assist the teacher in class. Perhaps the outside facilitator would come in and do the RSE lesson, or SPHE in the case of primary schools. Has the best approach been thought out between primary, secondary and third level? What would the qualification of these outside facilitators be, and how would that best work with teachers? Coming from that background, I know that certain teachers and people are just not comfortable giving those lessons. They would rather not do it. It would not work and they know they would not be comfortable doing it. There may be teachers who would be very willing, perhaps in second level schools, and this may be their subject. This might work out more effectively. Consistency is needed right across the board.

With regard to the LGBTQ+ community, will the witnesses give the committee a brief outline, without an in-depth explanation, on what is being taught at the moment, where it is done well and what is being done?

Deputy Jan O’Sullivan: I thank the witnesses for their very interesting presentations, which are very useful to the work of this committee. I particularly appreciate having Inclusion Ireland and BeLonGTo here. It will ensure that we will have more comprehensive proposals than we might otherwise have had. I was particularly interested to learn in the presentation by Inclusion Ireland that many special schools are described as primary schools, a fact I had not thought about. I was struck by Ms Lennon’s comment that these students are not “eternal children”. This aspect is often left out and we absolutely need to include it.

My question relates to those of the two previous questioners. It is about bringing in people from outside. Ms Treanor spoke about particular expertise. I agree with her on this and I am aware that the Foróige programme and others that come in from outside are factual and good, as referred to by Ms Keogh. I have concerns, however. I was a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution. When we discussed the issue of sex education with the Department of Education and Skills, the concern was that people from outside could be brought in by a particular ethos that might not present factual information or might present it from a certain perspective. If people are to be brought in from outside, no matter how good they are, does this allow us to have other people from outside coming into other schools? If we are to have an absolutely comprehensive programme that is factual, inclusive and appropriate to deal with all kinds of issues, such as those raised by Ms Keogh, including consent, pleasure and equality, how would we ensure this happens when one brings in people from outside? Is it better to have a programme, such as the one proposed by Ms Keogh, where people come in and are clustered with a number of schools to train the teachers? Perhaps the witnesses would tease this out a little more.

Senator Lynn Ruane: I started working on the issue of consent a number of years ago and I was quite shocked at the reaction I got when speaking about consent, understanding consent or understanding sex-positive parenting outside the education system. I gave a talk on negotiated sexual relationships and sex-positive parenting and I literally cleared the room; they left with their children. This is where we are at. We look at the education system but where does the interplay come in around parents who come from a particular ethos or way of thinking? I read the submissions and there are many different specialised areas within the topic. Do we break up the specialised areas into modules or do we train special facilitators to carry out all the functions around sexual education; LGBTQ+, minority groups, consent and cyber issues? Do we acknowledge that there is different expertise in different areas and that the topic is a running course through the whole of second level school, and whatever is introduced in primary school?

Deputy O’Sullivan asked about who is invited into schools. Obviously those involved would have to be regulated and come under the remit of the Department of Education and Skills as recognised bodies to carry out this type of work within schools.

I have a question for Ms Byrnes, which may refer to what she included in her submission. Will she explain what is actually meant by sexual competence?

I read the submission by Inclusion Ireland. The issue around consent for people with intellectual disabilities was not an area I had ever thought about. Deputy O’Sullivan spoke of it being all primary level. If we are to look at the issue from the perspective of intellectual disability, can Ms Lennon explain if it is to be a totally different programme or would it adopt existing or proposed programmes? Where does changing the culture come in? Some people with intellectual disabilities are still dependent on their parents. Will the parents have a say in this issue? Is the struggle with the parents in terms of a cultural shift and the acceptance that their child engages in sexual relationships? Obviously, and rightly, we need to shift that culture but how

do we begin? Will Ms Lennon explain whether the programme would need to be completely specialised? We refer to age appropriate sex education but then refer to part of the school system as primary education. Is the age appropriate sex education in a mainstream school the same as age appropriate sex education in special schools? I ask this from a place of ignorance, not because I think it should be one way or the other.

Senator Paul Gavan: I thank all of the witnesses for their presentations. As the father of two teenagers, and one child about to become a teenager, there is a huge amount of crucial information here. Every parent in the State needs to hear what has been said here today.

Like my colleagues, Deputies O’ Sullivan and Naughton, I was a member of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, and I have a particular interest in the ancillary recommendations that have brought about this topic today.

I have one question for all of the witnesses, which I believe goes to the heart of the issue. Unfortunately, I was in Europe during the last meeting when Rita Sexton from the Department of Education and Skills said: “...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.” How do the recommendations that the witnesses make today sit with a statement like that? Is it possible to deliver the recommendations that the witnesses are looking for in the context of such a statement? Ms Sexton’s statement reflects the current policy of the Department of Education and Skills.

Chairman: Does Senator Gallagher wish to come in?

Senator Robbie Gallagher: No.

Deputy Paul Murphy: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. From their different experiences, will the witnesses comment on the mediating factor of ethos between what exists on paper on the curriculum and what is actually delivered in schools? What impact does this have on the sex education that ends up being delivered?

Ms Lennon’s comments were interesting with regard to the infantilisation of people with disabilities. It is clear that this would also tally with the idea that sex education is completely inadequate or effectively non-existent. Where do the witnesses think this comes from? Is it linked to a paternalistic attitude that desexualises people and infantilises them and how do we tackle this? As Senator Ruane asked, what does tackling this issue look like in reality and what would be appropriate?

I was interested to hear the story about the trans young person, which was horrific. It is, unfortunately, not that surprising because we know that trans people are particularly subjected to bullying, and in some instances horrific bullying. Sex education as currently taught is supposed to discuss LGBTQ+ issues but we are aware that the delivery of this aspect of sex education is inadequate. How do the witnesses see the interaction between sex education as delivered and an environment where bullying and homophobia persists in schools? Any amount of this bullying is too much. Is there a hidden curriculum that makes LGBTQ+ people feel excluded? If their sexual experiences are not referred to or discussed, this can mean that their experiences are “othered”, even if their teachers do not set out to do this. That creates an environment in which they can be the subject of bullying.

I agree with what Ms Keogh said about pleasure as a measure of consent and what she said about equality, sexual activity and the different ways in which sex exists. Sex is not just a means

of reproduction. Does she believe the fact that things are not taught in that way is linked to the issue of ethos? My experience has been that because of a particular view of sex, heterosexual sexual intercourse, as opposed to all the other forms of sex that exist, is the only type of sex that is really discussed during sex education. Is that related to the question of ethos? Finally, I ask Ms Keogh to go into a bit more detail about what she meant when she spoke about innovative lesson plans. What does that look like? Is there research in this area that can inform us?

Senator Fintan Warfield: I thank our guests for contributing to this somewhat emotional committee hearing. I know someone who has said their experiences would have been different if they had been given this information when they were younger. Two years after I left school, I was the victim of a sexual assault. It took me five years to realise what consent was. After I watched an RTÉ documentary called “Asking For It?” around that time, it became clearer than ever to me that my response to a life experience would have been much different if I had been equipped with the knowledge to realise that the experience in question was not consensual. I am not alone in this regard because we know that 500 new cases of HIV are being detected alongside consent.

The question I would like to put to Ms Griffith is like the one that was asked by Deputy Hildegarde Naughton. Almost ten years have passed since I left school. Has the education system improved for LGBT young people during that time?

I would like to speak about the impact of the absence of role models and frames of reference for LGBT people. There can be issues of trust with a teacher or a parent who is not a frame of reference for a gay young man, as I was. I suggest that we cannot truly empower or reach LGBT young people with inclusive sex education that is a two-way street between the teacher and the pupil until we redefine the social code entirely. Can that be done? Can we reach LGBT young people through education reform alone? Can we deal with this through a vision for safe schools? Does the social code, which is essentially repressive of us all, need to be redefined entirely? The upcoming referendum is a perfect example of that.

Chairman: I thank the Senator for sharing his personal situation and helping us to understand this matter from his perspective. I suggest he is a good role model for many young men and women in the circumstances he has outlined.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: I apologise for having to leave earlier. I will have to leave again shortly to go to the Dáil. I disagree with very little that has been said. I agree with practically all of it. I set out the only issue I have in a parliamentary question that I tabled in the Dáil last week. As two or three speakers have said, it has been recommended that outside bodies should come in to give these lessons. There are many outside bodies going into schools at the moment. Concerns have been raised about some of them. There are sports organisations going in. It all seems fantastic, but there is absolutely no regulation of this activity. I am concerned that no standard practice has been set down at a departmental level to oversee who is allowed in and out of our schools. I see the potential for this to become an issue in the most benign areas. It has been mentioned as an issue in sex education. There are groups going in that people say should not be going in because they are not happy about what those groups are doing. People on the other side of the argument might say they are not happy about some other crowd going in. Do the witnesses have any suggestions in that regard? Teachers are trained to teach. Nowadays, many of them have master's degrees. Why do they need to be taken out of the picture when these subjects are being introduced in our schools? Maybe there is an obvious answer to that.

One of the speakers referred to the suggestion that we could be throwing too much at the

education system. When problems arise, it is often suggested that the education system should sort them out. It is obvious that we have to educate people on the issue of consent, for example, but it is clearly a societal issue. Perhaps it is beyond the scope of this committee and the witnesses who are present to deal with it. I am not sure what the education system can do about the valueless attitude or mindset that clearly exists among certain people in society. Maybe it can try to deal with it, but I think we all have a responsibility in this regard.

Chairman: My three brief questions relate to issues that have been raised by other members. In the experience of the witnesses, are external providers going into ethos-based schools to provide training on matters that would be considered to be outside the ethos of such schools? The question of external people coming in also arises when we talk about the importance of taking a whole-school approach. The implementation of the RSE curriculum and the teaching of modules with regard to growing up as an LGBT person should be considered when a school is having a whole-school inspection, but my understanding is that such matters are not currently considered during such inspections. Do the witnesses think it would be a good idea to develop that? We regularly debate issues of cybersafety and cybersecurity, but we tend to forget about the ongoing presence of print media. Is the emphasis on the digital age causing us to ignore the many magazines that are readily available when young people go into our large newsagents?

When I attended a Comhairle na nÓg day in County Kildare in 2014, I was struck by the fact that the main issue raised by young people from different school backgrounds and different rural and urban areas across the country was their huge concern that their peers in the LGBT space were not getting the support they needed, were at risk of being bullied by their peers and were suffering from a lack of respect and understanding. It was striking to learn that 43% of schools were not delivering anything in relation to LGBT issues. It is still particularly concerning. What can we do to help young people who are struggling? The stark statistics we have heard regarding young people's struggles with all aspects of growing up have made it clear that those who are having to deal with sexual identity issues feel very alone. Thursday is the national day against homophobia. This is something we need to stress and support as much as we can. It strikes me that we have had many discussions in this session and previously about collaboration between students and parents. As Ms Byrnes has said, it will take another generation before we have matured on a societal and cultural basis to tackle this issue in a meaningful way. It is a generation away. We have a duty to try to bridge that gap within this generation. I will call the witnesses to respond in the order in which they put their hands up, after which there will be an opportunity for further questions.

Ms Rachael Treanor: The NYCI can only really comment on the youth work sector. We do not deal with the schools. To answer the first question from Deputy Catherine Martin on how to find age-appropriate materials, it is not just about dealing with lack of sex education in the youth work sector. It starts at the beginning and takes a holistic approach to sexual health promotion. It starts with body image and promotes self-confidence and self-esteem. It gets people to negotiate that area of consent. It is done on a day-to-day basis, not as a stand-alone module or programme. It is embedded in all the programmes in the youth work sector, especially in youth-promoting and health-promoting organisations. Health promotion is embedded in their day-to-day work. They take the best approach, which is a holistic one looking at all of those different forms of sexual education. It especially incorporates the body image piece and confidence to give people the ability to say "No". That will stand to them throughout their years. That answers that.

Again, we cannot comment on the schools but the consent piece is done within the youth

work sector on a day-to-day basis. It is not done as an individual programme. It is embedded within the work. The work Foróige does on the REAL U programme is similar to B4u Decide. It incorporates all of that and is done within the day-to-day work. It is really about promoting self-esteem and the confidence of young people. If a consent issues comes up, they then have the ability to say “No” and to negotiate the pleasure piece, what they like and what they do not like. It is just about incorporating and taking that holistic approach to the sexual education piece within the youth work sector. I cannot comment on schools.

Ms Anna Keogh: We were asked about how outside facilitators are regulated. There is postgraduate education. I did my masters in sexuality studies and focused on sex education in secondary schools. I attended training with the Irish Family Planning Association and Foróige. There are many training programmes which can help someone to become a relationship and sexuality educator. This year, DCU has commissioned a postgraduate programme on sexual health and sex education and it has a module which focuses on intellectual disabilities. It is coming along. There are education certificates we can get. As to regulation of outside facilitators *per se*, we need to trust the schools that they can regulate who they let in. There are outside speakers for other subjects also. One would not let someone come in and say something that is completely wrong about history. In the same way, one would not let them come in and say something non-factual about sexuality.

Deputy Thomas Byrne: It is being said that people are going into schools to say things which are wrong.

Ms Anna Keogh: Yes. There are some organisations which have been going in. However, that goes back to the question about ethos and whether it reflects the school’s ethos. If the ethos clause was taken out of the Education Acts, those organisations would not be allowed to go in because it would not be factual. Deputy Paul Murphy asked whether the ethos clause made it possible to teach factual information. There is some factual information being taught by teachers and outside facilitators and we are trusting them. However, it means the information can be skewed. Senator Gavan asked about this. The Department said the ethos cannot affect the content but it can affect the delivery. That means, for example, the school would have to teach a module on different sexualities, but in the delivery, it can say it thinks they are wrong if that is the ethos. That is what that means on a day-to-day basis. The ethos affects almost everything in the programme, including outside facilitators. Taking the ethos clause out of the Education Acts would be a way to regulate them.

Ms Elaine Byrnes: To say something about facilitators, I do not see people going into schools half-cocked. I see it as being part of the Department of Education and Skills or of Department-approved facilitators. They are delivering. Deputy Hildegard Naughton raised an issue I also have with how sex education is currently delivered, namely, the lack of consistency. Teachers deliver RSE - where they are delivering it - to their own level of comfort. Whether that is due to ethos or the teacher himself or herself, it is not acceptable. That would not happen with any other subject. We would not have a maths teacher saying “I am not comfortable with the theory of Pythagoras so I am not going to deliver it”. It would not be acceptable to parents. Why is it acceptable that relationship and sexuality education can be delivered to the level of comfort of whoever in the school has drawn the short straw and must deliver RSE? That is what happens in effect; he or she draws the short straw. There is a collective sigh of relief in the school I am working in now when they see Richie Sadlier and me walk in the door on a Friday. As such, I do not see it as a question of disparate and unregulated bodies going into schools. The World Health Organization, WHO, Europe and the Federation of Health Education in Europe

produced a framework for sexuality educators in 2017 which outlines competencies and expectations for any sexuality educator delivering programmes at second level.

Regarding content, we talk about age appropriateness and stage appropriateness. It is something that needs to be delivered from first year to leaving certificate, building year-on-year starting with 12 and 13 year olds in first year. Senator Ruane asked what is meant by the term “sexual competence”. There are four underpinning principles of sexual competence in the module I deliver with Mr. Sadlier on preparing adolescents for the instance of first intercourse. First is absence of regret and second is willingness which means they are not under duress. That brings in consent. Third is autonomy of decision, whereby they are doing something because they want to and not on foot of peer pressure or intoxication. Fourth is reliable use of contraception. Once a young person can tick those four boxes, we regard him or her as sexually competent. However, they have a long way to go in their education before they can tick those four boxes and competently and confidently negotiate consent and sexual relationships. It is important to note that we come from a place of positive sexuality. Senator Ruane referred to that. Heretofore and not only in this country, sex education has been delivered from a risk perspective. What has been highlighted to young people are the risks associated with sex rather than pleasure or the discourse of desire. They do not come into it at all. It is about avoiding risk, unplanned pregnancy and, with the introduction of consent, sticky legal situations instead of mutual pleasure, competence and the development of mutually satisfying relationships.

I am used to working with students at third level but I have been particularly struck by the capacity of the young people I work with at second level to engage in critical evaluation when they have the opportunity to do so. They have the capacity to tease things out and evaluate through debate when they are peer supported. It is very important to Mr. Sadlier and me that the activities in our module are interactive and peer-led. While the boys are supported, they run the activities.

Ms Moninne Griffith: Deputy Catherine Martin asked a question about age appropriateness. We know from research that 12 is the most common age for people to realise they might be LGBT or different in some way. However, the age they may come out to another person is 16. That also means there are much younger children coming out earlier than 12 and there are many 12 year olds in primary schools. At the request of the Department of Education and Skills, we engaged with St. Patrick’s College and DCU to develop a pilot programme called All Together Now. It is age appropriate and does not talk about safe sex or STIs, sexually transmitted infections. It starts with exploring in fifth and sixth classes the concepts of human rights, equality, diversity, difference, empathy, bullying, the impacts of bullying and how to stand up for one’s friends. It introduces all these concepts in a nice, age-appropriate, soft way to ensure people who are already thinking they might be different will not feel excluded in primary school and it sets them up for secondary school.

The feedback we are getting is that the Growing Up LGBT programme is not being taught. It is only in a minority of schools that it is being covered. The suggestion around the whole-school inspections is one that came up during the course of the stakeholder consultations on the LGBTI+ youth strategy. There may be other ways and other tools which will ensure it is taught.

Deputy Catherine Martin: Incidental inspections could be considered in this context as the whole-school evaluation is every few years.

Ms Moninne Griffith: I have taken a note of that and will add it to my list.

Schools are required to address homophobic and transphobic bullying as part of the national action plan on bullying. The problem is that some schools claim it does not happen as they have no LGBT students in their schools. Having this as part of the incidental inspection or the whole-school evaluation would ensure schools address it. It would also provide a way to evaluate and monitor that something is being done. Schools are supposed to keep a log of homophobic and transphobic bullying. However, those figures are not sent up to the Department of Education and Skills, meaning we have no way of monitoring whether it is enforced in schools or not.

As to Deputy Hildegard Naughton's question on what is being taught in schools, the RSE, relationships and sexuality education, Growing Up LGBT programme is comprehensive and we are involved in updating it. There is a junior cycle and senior cycle. It talks about respectful communication, gender, coming out, friendship, prejudice, discrimination, relationships, trans identities, supports and celebrations. It would be great if this was being taught in schools as it addresses many of the issues.

Safe and Supportive Schools is a whole-school community programme developed by the HSE with the support of BeLonG To. It involves everybody in the school community, not just the teaching staff, including parents and the board of management, along with social workers, GPs and youth workers getting involved. They develop curriculum, policy, planning, training of staff members and boards of management, direct support to young people through linking in with LGBT youth groups and community partnership. It is independently evaluated and has been rolled out in some of the larger schools in Donegal and the north west with fantastic results. Many of the evaluated schools have reported a much better environment not just for LGBT students but for all students. It encourages issues such as LGBT identities to be discussed openly with everybody involved in the students' lives, working on policies which encourage empathy and encouraging young people to stand up for themselves and for their friends.

Stand Up awareness week happens every November in secondary schools. The results from that are positive. Young people who have reported back to us have said seeing a poster in the school or the teachers involved is positive. In one school, all teachers posed in a photograph wearing rainbow shirts. That sends a strong message to young people, making them feel welcome and included. The simplest things make a young person feel there is somebody in the school they can come out to and that they belong there. When they are ready, then they know they can get the support they need.

On the interaction between sex education and bullying, generally in the curriculum there must be greater inclusion, visibility and normalisation - if one will forgive that word - of LGBT identities. One young woman told me last year that in her school they were talking about Oscar Wilde in English class. When she said Oscar Wilde was gay, her teacher said that we do not talk about that in school. This is perhaps the most famous gay Irish man in history. That reinforces the idea that there is something wrong about being gay. She was rightly enraged about it. Another person, who might not be quite as empowered as this young woman, might internalise those messages and feel there is something wrong. With the high level of self-harm and suicidal ideation we are seeing among the young people we are supporting across the country, it is too important an issue not to address. This is a major health issue. It really is important that we ensure our LGBT young people belong in our school system.

I thank Senator Warfield for sharing his story. Unfortunately, it is not unique. I have heard many of those stories from young people who have come into us for support. Has it improved in the schools system? I wish I could tell the Senator it has. In some schools it has. There are

amazing teachers, principals, great leaders and boards of management who are making inroads to ensuring schools are safe and supportive for LGBT students. However, that is not across the board everywhere. There is an absence of role models. Many young people have told us how important it is to have teachers who are out on the staff team. In general, the acknowledgement that such and such an architect was gay or that poet was a lesbian or gender recognition is discussed in a politics class have a hugely powerful impact for young people.

Including it in the whole-school inspection came up in the LGBT youth strategy as a solution. We are open to other solutions around this. It was just a way of trying to encourage and support schools to ensure they are complying with their obligations under the national action plan on bullying and ensuring our schools are safe and supportive for LGBT young people.

I have heard from many young people across the country. In the consultation of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs as part of the LGBT youth strategy, over 4,000 young people were surveyed. Not all of them identified as LGBTI+. They listed their concerns over safety and inclusion. Time and again, including in the consultation and recently in the Budding Burning Issues survey in *Gay Community News*, inclusive sex education arises in the top three issues of importance. On what we can do about this, I have outlined some of the solutions already. Safe and Supportive Schools is an excellent model because it involves everyone and because it is inclusive of diversity and difference across the board. Focusing on LGBT young people is wonderful but it actually has a knock-on effect for young people who may be different in any way. I hope I have answered the questions.

Chairman: I find it quite shocking that any school could just make a blanket statement to the Department that it has no LGBT students. Apart from the issue of the young people in the school who are probably experiencing angst associated with finding their sexual and gender identity, it is about support, awareness and tolerance. Even if there were no LGBT students, there would certainly be one with a brother, sister, neighbour or friend in that category. They need to be equipped with all the tools to help them understand this. I find the concept of a blanket statement quite shocking. I have no doubt it happens.

Ms Sarah Lennon: I will start with Deputy Paul Murphy's question on why we have infantilised people with intellectual disabilities. We have a legacy of institutionalisation and segregation in this country. That persists for people with intellectual disability today. A great number of residential services, educational services and post-educational services are segregated from the mainstream. That creates very significant othering for people with intellectual disability. The criminal law from 1993 was the law that decriminalised homosexuality. At the same time, it created an offence of sex with a mentally impaired person. The definition of "mentally impaired person" was such that pretty much everyone with an intellectual disability and a large number of people with mental illness fell within it. It was an offence for someone in this category to have sex unless married. This was 1993. Thankfully, that law was repealed in the past 12 months. We are living with the legacy, however, and we are playing catch-up. There are other ways in which people have been othered but the effect on those with an intellectual disability has been very significant.

With regard to the questions Deputy Jan O'Sullivan and Senator Ruane were asking on age appropriateness and special schools, approximately one in five people with an intellectual disability will go through a special school system, approximately four out of five will go through second level and a very small number will proceed to third level. There is no specific relationships and sex education programme for people with an intellectual disability but there are curriculum guides. This is a matter that the NCCA can address.

The curriculum guide for primary schools, which includes the special schools, has a very heavy focus on personal care skills and on relationships that do not continue on to sexuality itself. At post-primary level, the curriculum guide is divided into sections covering mild, moderate and severe to profound intellectual disability levels rather than considering the individual learning styles of pupils or proposing needs analysis. With regard to mild intellectual disability, the syllabus module, which covers friendship, relationships and sexuality, is called “You’ve Got a Friend”. We are already in circumstances in which we are still not acknowledging that those concerned, even those with a mild intellectual disability, should have a sexuality. It is not appropriate, respectful or realistic to think people with an intellectual disability would not have physical desires or experience arousal, regardless of intellectual functioning. We know from our advocacy work that if this is not recognised and if the correct tools are not used, it leads to what we call either challenging or inappropriate behaviours down the line. That is a very significant challenge.

Inclusion Ireland would always favour a universal approach whereby people should take their place in the mainstream with resources that are accessible to them. While we continue with a special education system and special schools, we cannot afford not to take cognisance of the fact that there are people in primary education who are, in effect, adults. We need to develop curriculum guidelines that take account of people’s different needs, stages and processes.

With regard to ethos, there is a very significant impact on service delivery across the board in both education and, although it is probably outside the remit of this committee, disability services. Inclusion Ireland was contacted by many disability services, including former or current religious orders, that have a genuine fear resulting in a form of paralysis among people who want to develop relationships and sexual education for people who have left the school system, who might never have received it or who received deeply inadequate and in some cases inappropriate sexual education.

Parental involvement, which has arisen a few times, is crucial. Research shows that many people working in schools or disability services are afraid of reprisals from parents. That fear might be genuine or imagined but, nonetheless, it is essential that parents be brought on the journey with young people with an intellectual disability. There is a significant fear in that anyone who is a parent does not want to consider his son or daughter growing up and his or her blossoming sexuality but when we deny people with an intellectual disability access to the information they require, we create vulnerability. People are not inherently vulnerable; we make them vulnerable by denying them the information they need to enjoy intimacy and to protect themselves. Protection is a significant issue, as I stated in my presentation. People with an intellectual disability are far more likely to be sexually abused than their non-disabled peers. That should not be seen as an excuse to deny people information and education. It is quite the opposite because we are only creating vulnerability when we deny people that information.

Chairman: The presentations have been excellent. Is the best practice for sexuality and relationships education to have outside facilitators coming in? In the primary school setting, there is one teacher for every class. Should teachers be given the proper qualifications in teacher training college? It might work differently in secondary schools. What is the best practice? Can the witnesses be specific about this right now? Is it best to have an outside facilitator coming in who has the appropriate qualification approved by the Department of Education and Skills?

Ms Moninne Griffith: To whom is the Chairman addressing the question?

Chairman: Whoever wants to answer it. First, I call Senator Robbie Gallagher.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: I will be very brief. Unfortunately, I missed a lot of the presentation because of other commitments this afternoon. The part I heard, I really enjoyed. It is a really challenging subject for us all. In this country, we sometimes clap ourselves on the back for travelling so far and for being such a mature-thinking country but when it comes to this subject, we are lagging behind and have a long way to go. There is a challenge for the schools. I am easy about whether the programme is delivered by an outside body or internally by teachers as long as the content is right and those who are delivering the content are competent. That is the most important aspect.

It should not all be left to schools. Educating the parents is also an element we cannot ignore. Ms Lennon referred to intellectual disability. We have so far to travel in this regard that it is quite shocking. Has Ms Byrnes ever been refused access to any school that she wished to-----

Ms Elaine Byrnes: We are only piloting this module in one school.

Senator Robbie Gallagher: Therefore, there has been no issue in that regard.

Ms Elaine Byrnes: Absolutely not. It is a school with a Catholic ethos. I have found that some schools with a Catholic ethos will allow in outside facilitators, while others will not. There is a lack of consistency.

Chairman: It is something we will address in our report. Does Ms Keogh wish to respond to Deputy Hildegard Naughton's question?

Ms Anna Keogh: It is a combination of both. A circular was issued in 2010 on the use of outside facilitators to deliver the relationships and sexuality education, RSE, programme. Teachers are encouraged to bring them in. If there is a certain area a teacher is uncomfortable covering and an outside facilitator is willing to come in and cover it, that is fine. In a way they are encouraged to do so. However, there are mixed research findings. From the research we have carried out, some students prefer their teacher to cover the programme as they have a relationship with him or her and can follow up questions they have about the programme. Other students have said they would not dream of asking their teacher a question. They may know him or her from down the road and have known him or her all their lives. It is a matter of combining the two and utilising the services we have available. It is a matter of empowering teachers and making them as comfortable as they can be, but if they are not comfortable teaching the programme, we cannot blame them for that. That is not the reason they may have chosen to enter the education system. If they need help to talk about contraception or lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, LGBT, issues, a person can be brought in to talk about them. Outside facilitators probably would not want to teach the whole programme, but teachers can use them as a support system.

Chairman: I thank the delegates, individually and collectively, for giving of their time, their motivation and passion in dealing with this sensitive issue. It has been incredibly useful for us as members to listen to their opening statements and contributions and have had the opportunity to read their written submissions. They will certainly help us in forming our ideas for inclusion in our report that we will probably finalise in a month or so and then present to the Minister and the Department of Education and Skills. We will be in touch with the delegates when we are planning to do so. I thank all of them again. Their input is very much appreciated.

The joint committee adjourned at 6.05 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 29 May 2018.