

Submission to the Committee on Education and Skills
on the review of Sexual Health and Relationship
Education

National Youth Council of Ireland

National Youth Health Programme

April 2018

1. Introduction

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for 51 voluntary youth organisations in Ireland, 380,000 young people, 40,000 volunteers and 1,400 paid staff (NYCI Indecon Report) ¹. NYCI functions to represent the interests of young people and youth organisations. NYCI's role is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act) and as a social partner. The NYCI aims through its member organisations and its representative role to empower young people to participate in society as fulfilled confident individuals. The work of the Youth Council is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. In achieving these aims the NYCI seeks the emergence of a society in which young people are valued citizens who can make a meaningful contribution to their community.

1.1 The National Youth Health Programme (NYHP) is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland, the HSE and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The NYHP's work has, and continues to be informed by key strategic and policy developments within the Health Sector. The HSE Health Promotion Strategic Framework (HSE, 2011) promotes a 'settings based approach' for health promotion in Ireland. The youth setting is identified in the Strategic Framework as a key setting for health promotion. The NYHP works to develop and build the capacity and sustainability of youth health promotion across the youth sector in line with evidence based and evidence informed practice. This is achieved through;

- Building a culture of health and wellbeing across the youth sector
- Working in partnership with NYCI member organisations and the wider youth sector
- Supporting the practical application of learning and continuous professional development that enhances the knowledge, skills and approaches of youth workers, volunteers and their services
- Putting youth service and youth worker needs at the centre of our thinking

Key Strategic Themes NYHP

01 Support the development of effective, sustainable, evidence informed youth settings which are focussed on enhancing the health and wellbeing of young people across Ireland

02 Facilitate the wide scale application of effective and sustainable health promoting and service improvement practices

03 Gather youth sector experience and translate knowledge on youth health and wellbeing in order to achieve better outcomes and strengthen links with national policy

The NYHP endorses a settings based approach, focusing on the broader determinants of health rather than simply addressing individual and behavioural risk factors. The approach is underpinned by values such as empowerment, public participation, equity and partnership.

1.2 Sexual health is a specialist area of work for the NYHP, working in partnership with the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme. Working in collaboration with the Sexual Health Crisis Pregnancy Programme, three training programmes have been developed and are currently rolled out across the youth work sector:

- B4u Decide (Exploring Relationships and Sexual Education)
- Understanding Young People and Pornography
- Good Practice in Sexual Health Promotion (Developing Organisational Sexual Health Policy).

In addition, since September 2017, the NYHP co-facilitate on the HSE 10 day Foundation Sexual Health Programme.

The NYHP and NYCI also contribute at a national level to a number of key strategic groups and committees which include:

- LGBTI+ Strategy Working Groups

- SENYPIC (Sexual Health Education Needs of Young People in Care)
- Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Advisory Group
- Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Sexual Health Promotion Training Strategy

2. Background

In 2015, the NYHP conducted a rapid mental health needs assessment among youth work organisations to investigate the Mental Health needs of young people. The main issues identified as affecting the mental health and wellbeing included Body Image (90%), Relationships (77%) and Sexuality (66%)². In 2018, the NYHP conducted a rapid needs assessment on Young Men's Health, the key issues affecting the health and wellbeing of young men include Relationships (73%), Confidence (76%), Sexuality (60%) and Body Image (53%)³.

At a national level, research shows that these needs are similar throughout Ireland. Research conducted by Tusla and the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme on 'The sexual health and sexuality education needs of young people in care (2016)⁴' found that for young people in care:

- Feeling emotionally secure and stable and having good social skills are a key basis for good sexual health.
- Friends played an important role in their lives.
- Nearly all those interviewed were sexually active before the age of 17 years.
- Very few said they used contraception consistently during early sexual encounters- attributed to alcohol.
- Some young women said they relied on men to carry and use condoms
- Strong theme particularly among young women of regret and coercion.

Similarly according to research by Growing up in Ireland (GUI, 2016)⁵,

- 42% of 17/18-year-olds reported being sexually active and this was more likely among males than females.

- Males were also more likely to have multiple partners, as were those from more socially disadvantaged backgrounds, who were also less likely to use condoms or contraception frequently, compared to the most advantaged youth.
- Around one-fifth of 17/18-year-olds felt peer pressure to have sex (particularly males), whilst a small proportion reported that they were afraid of losing a partner through not having sex with them (particularly females).

These findings are compounded further by the online world young people utilise to access information on sexual health and behaviours. A recent report by the NSPCC (2016)⁶ on ‘the impact of online pornography on the values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of children and young people’ found that:

- By age 15, children were more likely to have seen online pornography (65% of 15-16years olds)
- More boys view online pornography through choice than girls
- On first viewing pornography, young people report a mixture of emotions including curiosity, shock and confusion however, these emotions subside on repeated viewing whether pornography is deliberately sought out or, accidentally viewed
- Substantial minorities of older children wanted to try things out they had seen in pornography with a greater proportion of boys stating this than girls

In relation to ‘Sexting’ Irish teens were found to be the 4th highest in Europe for sending sexually explicit images, videos or text messages (Sheri Bauman, 2017)⁷. In addition to this, a study carried out by Zeeko in UCD (2017)⁸ found that 13% of secondary school students sent nude/semi-nude photos or videos and the rate of sexting rises as teens get older with boys were twice as likely as girls to ‘sext’ (17% vs 9%).

Overall statistics for 2017 in relation to Sexually Transmitted Infections have not been published however a summary report from Health Protection Surveillance Centre (2017) illustrate that the rate of STI’s are on the increase and during 2016, 86% of all STI’s notified were among those aged less than 30 years (HIV Ireland, 2017)⁹.

2.2 Within the youth work sector, the needs and issues which have been identified above are addressed through the delivery and implementation of the programmes the NYHP currently deliver.

B4u Decide aims, to support young people to delay the onset of early sex until they feel ready.

The trainings objectives are:

- To explore the role of friendship in the development of healthy relationships
- To understand the role played by the media and peer pressure on young people and early sex
- To enable young people to develop skills in how to say 'No' and resist pressure
- To enable young people to explore the concept of consent
- To educate the young people on the importance of contraception
- To facilitate young people to discuss the impact of pornography on relationships

Understanding Young People and Pornography aims to develop the skills and confidence of those working with young people in addressing the issues of pornography. The objectives include:

- To define pornography
- To explore the topic of pornography
- To understand why young people engage with pornography
- To understand the impact of pornography on young people

Good Practice in Sexual Health Policy aims to strengthen the organisational environment for the delivery of sexual health programmes and will consider the development of policy and good practice. The objectives include:

- To examine the context for addressing the sexual health needs of young people
- To discuss the role of organisation in relation to this work

- To examine the support needs of workers and organisations in the area of sexual health
- To identify rationale and process for policy development
- To explore good practice with regard to sexual health education programmes

Since April 2016, the figures below indicate the various sexual health trainings delivered by NYHP and numbers of participants trained throughout the Ireland.

Training	No. of Trainings Delivered	No. of Participants Trained
B4u Decide	5	64
Understanding Young People and Pornography	11	171
Good Practice in Sexual Health Promotion	8	96
10 Day Foundation in Sexual Health Promotion (led by HSE)	2	30
Total	26	361

3. Policy Context

The work that NYHP carries out in relation to sexual health fits under various national policies and strategies which include:

- **Healthy Ireland (HI):** The framework for improving health and wellbeing of the Irish population. The vision of HI is where everyone can enjoy physical and mental wellbeing to their full potential, where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone’s responsibility.

Action 3.1, Action 3.4, Action 4.8, Action 4.9

- **National Sexual Health Strategy 2015- 2020:** Everyone in Ireland will experience positive sexual health and wellbeing.

Goal 1: Sexual Health promotion, education and prevention: Aims to provide everyone living in Ireland with comprehensive and age appropriate sexual health education and/or information and will have access to appropriate prevention and promotion services.

- **Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020:** To make Ireland the best small country in the world in which to grow up, raise a family and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled.

Outcome 1: Active and Healthy: All children and young people are physically healthy and able to make positive health choices, have good mental health, have a positive and respectful approach to relationship and sexual health.

- **National Youth Strategy 2015-2020:** To enable all young people to realise their maximum potential, by respecting their rights and hearing their voices, while protecting and supporting them as they transition from childhood to adulthood.

Outcome 1, Objective 1: Active and Healthy: Young people enjoy a healthy lifestyle, in particular with regard to their physical, mental and sexual health and wellbeing.

- **Value for Money and Policy Review: 7 potent mechanisms**

Communication skills: essential for a successful transition to work or training, for independence, and to access a range of life opportunities, to attainment, in forming positive relations and in reductions in re-offending

Relationships: A beneficial change in young people's relationships with older adults through their participation in positive activities can be transferred to academic learning and may lead to better outcomes

Emotion Intelligence: Ability to manage feelings by knowing one's own emotions, as well as recognising and understanding other people's emotions. This is vital in managing relationships.

4. Recommendations

A holistic and comprehensive approach to sexual health and wellbeing needs to be implemented. Sexual health needs to be recognised across a spectrum where young people are supported to develop their knowledge and competency regarding relationships and gender identity through to the practical skills around using contraception and accessing information from safe and reliable sources. This can be achieved through the following steps outlined below.

- Implement B4u decide throughout the youth work and school settings, ensuring young people are supported to delay the onset of early sex until they are ready. Rollout across both settings ensures consistency of messaging in relation to young people's sexual health. To achieve this, additional capacity is needed with NYHP to provide this training in a timely fashion in response to the needs that have been identified by the youth work sector in this area.
- Work in relation to consent is already happening across the youth work sector. It is important that this work is highlighted, recognised and continued and that work around the area of consent is not delivered as a standalone piece. Consent needs to be part of a suite of training on sexual health and wellbeing. To ensure consistency of messaging for young people in relation to consent it is essential relevant sectors are equipped with accurate consistent and tangible information.
- Consideration needs to be given to the role of gender, gender identity and the role of gendered messaging and how this informs sexual health and wellbeing. Young people need to be supported to develop their own competencies, especially in relation to self-esteem, body image and confidence and self-efficacy.

- Evidence on the impact of pornography on young people should be collated and key learnings identified and formally shared to relevant sectors. It is important to identify and understand why young people are using pornography. In the absence of safe and relevant online resources young people need to be supported to access the information they need from reliable and trustworthy sources.
- The establishment of a working group is essential to ensure an agreed approach and response to underage sex, social media and sexting, particularly since the implementation of Children’s First Legislation (2018) and the Criminal Sexual Offences Act (2017).
- The establishment of a working group (representation from a range of sectors) to ensure appropriate standards are achieved in relation to the development of resources, programmes and online information for young people’s sexual health and wellbeing.
- Young people’s voice should be central to the work of the commission, informing and supporting the development of programmes and resources targeted at developing their knowledge and expertise.

References

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