



RCNI Submission
To the Committee on Education and Skills
Regarding the review of Sexual Health Education
and matters relating
April 2018

Introduction – Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)

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

Introduction

RCNI is very glad to be making a submission to the Committee on these issues. The increasing ubiquity of messages about sex and sexual relationships in our cultural spaces, many of them harmful and violent, means that it is imperative that we agree our core standards on lawfulness, respect and dignity and fully engage our institutions and structures to ensure our children and young people understand the basic shared values of their own community.

The impact of harmful sexual behaviour are many fold on young people, their mental health, their relationships, and their futures and on society as a whole. In many ways it can be understood that our historically ambiguous attitude towards sexual liberation has resulted in silence, paralysis and gaps. Our absence from this space has allowed those who seek to monetise sex to subvert and pornography all matters sex to the detriment of almost everyone bar those who profit. The facts of our cultural context means that silence cannot be neutral. Silence simply permits the pornographers to set the moral standard for our children.

RCNI would, in the short space of time and resources in drafting this submission, like to make a key point to you and that is that the ambiguity with which we have treated sex education has been baked into our governing and bureaucratic structures and those need to be addressed if we are to serve our children adequately in this matter.

Structure:

1. RCNI knowledge base
2. The policy landscape
3. How we use the word 'prevention'
4. Three aspects of education and prevention

1. RCNI knowledge base and background to this Submission

RCNI has been engaging with the question of education and prevention since our inception. Some key highlights:

- Developed the national standard on awareness raising to move sexual violence prevention education from a victim focus approach to a prevention bystander focus, it was adopted as national policy guiding all government spending on awareness raising in this area.
- Worked with USI in 2013 to incorporate consent into their sexual health 3rd level education and awareness initiatives.

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- Developed a partnership with Foróige nationally to integrate sexual violence prevention into their youth development training Real U Programme which has been rolling out for the past 5 years with the support of Crisis Pregnancy in the HSE.
- Worked with the HSE, Crisis Pregnancy Programme within Healthy Ireland to develop 7 modules for inclusion in the B4Udecide RSE programme for 12 – 15 year olds which is under review currently. These modules centre on personal self-awareness, empathy, communications and consent.
- Developed a Transition Year programme alongside the rest of the RCC sector and were the principal beneficiary partner in a successful European Union bid to draw down the funds to equip the roll out of this programme from four rape crisis centres across the country.
- Commissioned 3rd level based research to understand consent behaviour out of which was developed the Smart Consent programmes and further research in this area. In the research young people themselves identified how unprepared they felt for the complexity of negotiating sexual activity and they strongly recommended consent workshops be delivered at school age.
- Development of RCC bystander programme which has been rolled out in some 3rd level institutions.
- Advised Kent University team in devising their sexual harassment prevention programme content.
- A member of the RESPECT network which is an interagency 3rd level coalition to look at how 3rd level institutions respond to and prevent sexual violence.

2. The Policy Landscape

Some pertinent strategies and structures:

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

Each of these strategies have a role in ensuring children and young people have access to the education and supports they need to prepare them to make healthy decisions about their sex lives. Each of them have responsibility to ensure that children and young people have the opportunity to enjoy safety from violence and safe places to learn, grow and develop. Each has gaps. Each join up, or do not join up, in a range of ways.

For example the Sexual Health Strategy is consciously not inclusive of sexual violence. The Action Plan on Bullying is less consciously exclusive of sexual bullying. The Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence National Strategy has actions on developing relevant programmes for 2nd, 3rd level and youth reach but defers to the Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs on all matters to do with the child.

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It is doubtful to us that there is any one location that has the full picture or oversight in this area. All the policies and strategies are focused elsewhere but include aspects of sex and consent education. It would seem inevitable that matters would fall through the cracks.

For example in the DCYA's National Youth Strategy a diagram appears listing the youth policy context,

<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/20151008NatYouthStrat2015to2020.pdf>

FIGURE 3: NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT INFORMING THE NATIONAL YOUTH STRATEGY



Complicated as this landscape is, it is not comprehensive as might be noted from the screen shot included (apologies for the poor resolution), it is missing the National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender based Violence 2010 – 2014.

3. How we use the word 'prevention'

To make oversight of whole of government actions in the area of sexual health education consent and harm and violence prevention even more complicated, different strategies, policies, Departments and Agencies use the word 'prevention' to mean different things.

Both the WHO and UN have laid out separate categorisations of prevention. RCNI find it helpful to use the categorisation of Primary and Secondary prevention (WHO in health settings also uses tertiary but we find little application for that distinction in this subject area).

Primary prevention is the whole of population approach that seeks, through generalised intervention, to stop the issue from arising in the first place.

Secondary prevention seeks to respond to risk and harm eg find ways to identify those at risk of harm and intervene or ensure access for those who are harmed and provide supports.

It is our experience that these distinctions are not widely understood or standardised and so often policies promote their 'prevention' work when what they mean is particular forms of secondary prevention and almost no primary prevention.

One of the most egregious impacts of this in our view is that the schools action plan on bullying abandoned sexual harassment on the proviso that sexual harms were crimes and thus fall into the camp of Dept. of Justice activity and Tusla, Children First. Children First is almost entirely secondary prevention, so a gap opens up whereby schools have no national primary preventative strategy or action plan outside of curriculum content regarding sexual harassment (notwithstanding some excellent generalised whole of school ethos and values programmes), instead we find ourselves waiting for children (largely teenagers) to be harmed before we intervene.

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

4. Three aspects of education and prevention

Three areas of activity that are shared across this policy landscape. None are sufficient on their own we need a whole of system approach.

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- **Content:** Curricula and programme content, in and out of school settings, to deliver evidence based proven effective prevention programmes and sexual health fact based information.
- **Context:** schools and other locations having responsibility, policy and guidance to proactively ensure safe to learn environments. Eg we have no whole of school policy on sexual harassment, there is no guidance for schools on how to deal with an environment of sexual harassment. We know that in the absence of guidance authorities can often default to minimisation and silence.
- **Care:** How do we respond once an inappropriate action has happened, a child has been targeted or harmed, or a child has a sexual health crisis? Is it a whole of school bullying response, as well as an individual child protection response, is it a health response? Is there a division of labour that centres, supports and protects children?

Conclusion

We would be concerned that the division of labour across government has not always worked to deliver a coherent and holistic approach to sexual health, consent and the prevention of sexual violence programmes and whole of system approaches to young people.

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

RCNI would very much welcome further engagement with the Committee on these matters and would be happy to attend in person to develop our submission further, or to supply more information on any point raised in it.

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