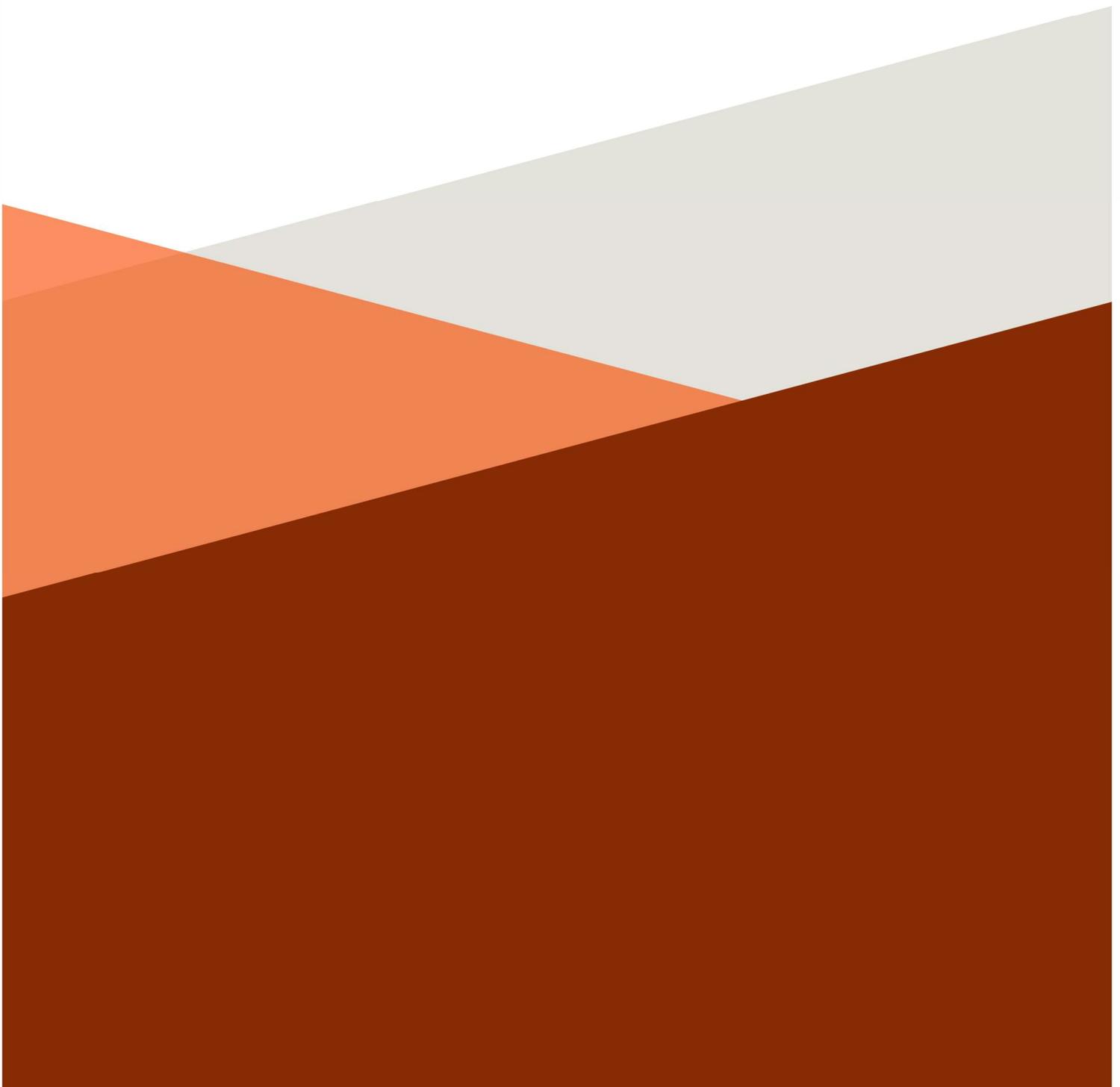




**NCCA**

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta  
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for  
Curriculum and Assessment

# Background Paper and Brief for the review of Senior Cycle Physical Education



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## Introduction

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The Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report (NCCA, 2022) was published in March 2022 following a four-year review about how Senior Cycle could evolve to meet the needs of all our young people. Significant common ground emerged from that review, including support for redeveloping senior cycle so that it could better contribute to students' growth and maturity, to their continuing intellectual, social and personal development and their overall health and wellbeing. In this context, Physical Education (PE) can be considered to be an essential component of learning and development throughout senior cycle.

This paper provides a background for the review of Senior Cycle Physical Education (SCPE), a non-examinable PE curriculum that is separate to the Leaving Certificate PE subject. It begins with an outline of how PE evolved in senior cycle and the current context, including consideration of relevant policy developments within both education and the wider world. Section 2 sets out how PE is currently provided for within the Irish curriculum. Section 3 offers insights from schools across Ireland. Section 4 presents an overview of curriculum provision in four different jurisdictions. Section 5 draws on the previous sections to categorise and briefly discuss some issues identified for consideration in the redevelopment of the SCPE curriculum (non-examinable), before finally setting out a proposed brief for the redevelopment in Section 6.

## 1. Background and context

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This section sets out some of the significant developments relating to Physical Education (PE) in Ireland. It also outlines the policy initiatives and developments over the last decade both within education and the wider policy context which are most relevant to the review of Senior Cycle Physical Education (SCPE).

Since the 1960s, PE programmes in schools have tended to focus on providing access to organised games and athletics. A number of policy documents have been introduced over the years with the aim of broadening the understanding and provision for PE beyond this focus on games and athletics. In 1973 the Department of Education's Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools (1973) set out for the first time a formalised approach to PE in post-primary schools. The document included broad, aspirational statements about the value of PE but little practical guidance on how to move PE classes beyond providing access to games and athletics and PE continued to be optional on the curriculum. In 1987, a PE syllabus was introduced, providing a unified structure for the development of students' physical education across both the junior and senior cycles. This document showed a significant shift in pedagogical thinking, moving away from a primary focus on moral, emotional, and social development (which was emphasised in the 1973 syllabus) toward a stronger emphasis on physical education, the appreciation of physical activity, and the development of a mature body image. Between 2003 and 2005, the revised Junior Cycle Physical Education syllabus was introduced on a phased basis, continuing the evolution and marking a substantial shift towards a holistic curriculum focused on physical literacy, student wellbeing, and lifelong participation through seven practical activity areas. The PE short course was later introduced as an option for schools in 2017. The introduction of the SCPE Framework in 2018 marked another significant development, aligning SCPE with junior cycle reforms; however, its impact on practice to date has been limited and the extent to which practice has changed since the 1960s is explored later in this paper.

The aim of the SCPE Framework is to encourage learners to experience confident, enjoyable, and informed participation in physical activity during senior cycle and into their future lives. Structured around six curriculum models, the Framework provides a detailed pedagogical map to support teachers in the design and enactment of meaningful senior cycle physical education programmes. The Framework recommends a minimum time allocation of a double period per week for senior cycle physical education (SCPE, p. 16), a position supported by Department of Education guidance (Circular 0090/2017). This requirement was subsequently strengthened through Circular 0054/2023, which stated that schools, including those operating one-hour class periods, provide either a double class period or a minimum of 80 minutes of physical education per week for all students. The inclusion of a recommended time allocation marked a notable shift from previous practice, where SCPE provision was largely determined by local discretion within the broad parameters of the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools. Despite this strengthened policy and curricular guidance, the impact of the SCPE Framework on practice and provision appears minimal. A review of reports published by the DEY Inspectorate since 2024 reveal that the required time allocation for senior cycle physical education is rarely achieved in schools and that senior cycle physical education in many schools continues to be characterised by traditional, games-focused programmes, with limited reference to the curriculum models, learning outcomes, or pedagogical guidance as outlined in the Framework.

Data from the Post-Primary Online Database (PPOD) on the 2025-26 school year indicates that the majority of schools timetable PE in Transition Year, however, this figure drops to 59.2% across the last two years of senior cycle. This data does not reveal the time allocation across the schools in which PE is timetabled.

These observations suggest that, while the SCPE Framework (2018) may have provided a comprehensive and progressive curriculum vision, its influence has been minimal on the long-established practices.

Since the introduction of the SCPE Framework there have been significant developments in the world of education, PE and beyond, including the development of policies across Ireland and the EU with specific focus on promoting health and physical activity. The policies summarised in Table 1 below highlight a number of areas which are most relevant to the review of SCPE.

**Table 1: Policies across Ireland and the EU with specific focus on promoting health and physical activity**

Policy / Framework	Purpose and Relevance
<a href="#">Healthy Ireland</a>	Healthy Ireland is a government-led initiative that seeks to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone living in Ireland. It aims to create an Irish society where everyone can enjoy good physical and mental health, and where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society.
<a href="#">National Physical Activity Framework (2024-2040)</a>	The National Physical Activity Framework sets a long-term vision for Ireland to have a highly physically active population by 2040. It focuses on removing barriers to participation, strengthening cross-sectoral collaboration, and promoting good practice in physical activity provision.
<a href="#">Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028</a>	This policy Framework establishes national goals for children and young people (birth to 24 years), including the objective for young people to be active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing.
<a href="#">National Sports Policy 2018-2027</a>	This policy aims to increase overall participation in sport and physical activity, with a particular focus on addressing the significant drop-off in youth sports engagement during the transition to post-primary education.
<a href="#">Active School Flag for post-primary schools</a>	Launched by the Department of Education and Youth in 2025, The Active School Flag Post Primary (ASFPP) process promotes physical activity, using a whole school approach, anchored by student voice and student leadership.
<a href="#">Physical Activity in Teaching and Learning Pilot Programme (2024)</a>	This new Pilot Programme is designed to encourage teachers and school leaders, in consultation with their students, to consider how a subject can be taught through physical activity.

<a href="#">Sports Action Plan 2024 – 2027</a>	An ambitious vision for Irish sport is set out under the National Sports Policy, centred on getting more people participating in sport as active and social participants.
<a href="#">Sport Ireland Statement of Strategy 2023 – 2027</a>	This strategy sets out a five-year vision of how Sport Ireland will lead the sport sector to further develop sport and physical activity in Ireland.

## Redevelopment of senior cycle

Substantial progress has been made in the redevelopment of senior cycle since March 2022, when the Minister for Education tasked the NCCA with a comprehensive programme of curriculum development. The completion of the review of the non-examinable SCPE curriculum will follow the introduction of:

- a redeveloped Transition Year Programme Statement
- the redeveloped Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) subjects in Tranches 1-4
- a new Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum
- Senior Cycle Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes.

Therefore, with the exception of the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Programme, every Leaving Certificate subject and all senior cycle programmes will have been redeveloped within the same decade. This presents a unique opportunity to achieve curriculum coherence across senior cycle.

Progress has also been made in response to the Minister's plans for more flexible and integrated pathways. Access to the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) has been expanded to all students following the LCE Programme and the link modules have been redeveloped as LC Life, Community and Work modules for introduction in schools in September 2026. Adjustments to the LCA programme now enable students to study Leaving Certificate Modern Foreign Languages and Maths.

Finally, NCCA has commenced work with a network of schools to develop proposals to improve the curricular pathways available to all students in senior cycle. The network of schools is currently considering the suite of modules that would best suit the interests, strengths, needs and ambitions of students in senior cycle.

## Senior Cycle SPHE

In 2011, the NCCA published a Senior Cycle SPHE Framework to support schools in timetabling and providing for SPHE for senior cycle (apart from the approx. 5% of students undertaking the LCA programme). Due to the non-mandatory nature of the 2011 Senior Cycle SPHE Framework, there was evidence that provision of SPHE varied within and between schools. According to Department of Education data, most schools reported that they were not timetabling SPHE in senior cycle (school year 2021-22).

After careful consideration, it was agreed that the Senior Cycle SPHE curriculum would be introduced as a mandatory specification for all students, with a total of 60 hours dedicated to classroom learning across 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year of senior cycle. Therefore, students engaging in the established Leaving Certificate, Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme will all have access to the same curriculum, and potentially within the same classroom.

During Transition Year (TY), schools have access to SPHE micro-modules developed by the NCCA, which they can tailor for their TY Programme. The Transition Year Programme Statement recommends that SPHE be scheduled once per week, with each class lasting no longer than one hour.

## Section Summary

- The SCPE Framework (2018) attempted to offer continuity and progression from junior cycle following the phased introduction of the Junior Cycle Physical education syllabus between 2003 and 2005.
- By mandating that schools provide either a double class period or a minimum of 80 minutes of physical education per week for all students, the introduction of the SCPE Framework (2018) marked a notable shift from previous practice, where SCPE provision was largely determined by local discretion within the broad parameters of the Rules and Programmes for Secondary Schools (1973).
- Despite the strengthened policy and curricular guidance provided by the SCPE Framework (2018), reports from the Department of Education and Youth's Inspectorate indicate that the impact of the SCPE Framework (2018) on practice has been limited.
- A number of Government policies with specific focus on promoting health and physical activity are significant to consider in the context of this redevelopment.
- Significant progress has been made in redeveloping the senior cycle curriculum, including planned updates to all Leaving Certificate subjects and programmes, with expanded access and flexibility for students through initiatives like the new LC Life, Community and Work modules and adjustments to the LCA programme.
- The Senior Cycle Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum has become mandatory for all senior cycle students, ensuring consistent provision of SPHE across programmes with 60 hours of classroom learning over two years.

## 2. Physical Education in the curriculum

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This section provides an overview of physical education in the curriculum currently available to students within both the primary and junior cycle curriculum. It also highlights where physical education is provided for within the recently introduced Transition Year Programme Statement and the new Senior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes.

### Primary Physical Education

A new primary school curriculum is being introduced on a phased basis from 2025, with physical education located within the broader curriculum area of Wellbeing. The Wellbeing specification, which incorporates PE and SPHE, aims to empower children to thrive now and in the future by developing the knowledge, skills, concepts, dispositions, attitudes and values needed to lead active, healthy, and fulfilling lives (Wellbeing Specification, 2025, p. 10). The Primary Curriculum Framework introduces a suggested minimum weekly time allocation for the Wellbeing specification. Proportionally, as teachers prepare for PE and SPHE learning experiences, it is recommended that a ratio of 2:1 should be used for PE and SPHE learning, with the greater amount of time being given to PE (Wellbeing Specification, 2025, p. 51). Learning in Wellbeing is organised through seven activity areas that support the achievement of learning outcomes: Active Living, Aquatics, Athletics, Dance, Games, Gymnastics, and Outdoor and Adventure Education.

### Junior Cycle Physical Education

Physical Education was introduced as a 100-hour Junior Cycle short course in 2017 (Junior Cycle Framework, 2015). However, autonomy was offered to schools to choose between multiple options when timetabling PE at junior cycle, including the NCCA short course specification, school-designed or externally designed PE short courses, PE modules developed under the Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines, or the Junior Certificate PE syllabus (2003) (Department of Education, 2023). These options were replaced in 2023 by a mandatory 135-hour Junior Cycle Physical Education (JCPE) specification for all students, reported as part of the Junior Cycle Profile of Achievement (JCPA). Physical education is a core pillar of learning within the Junior Cycle Wellbeing curriculum.

The JCPE specification aims to develop students as competent and confident participants in physical activity, equipping them with the knowledge and skills to make informed decisions about lifelong involvement in physical activity and sport (JCPE, p. 5). It is structured around three contextual strands—Competence, Participation, and Appreciation. These are supported by three underpinning elements—Movement Competency, Safe and Ethical Participation, and Lifelong Engagement—which are embedded across all learning and teaching.

Physically active participation is central to JCPE, with students required to experience a broad and balanced programme that includes at least one activity from a minimum of five physical activity areas: Gymnastics, Athletics, Aquatics, Games, Dance, Adventure, and Health-Related Activities (JCPE, p. 13).

The Junior Cycle Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes (L1LPs & L2LPs) ensure that all students have an educational experience that addresses their individual needs and enables them

to live, participate in, learn, work and contribute with the greatest degree of autonomy to the communities in which they belong.

Physical Education is one of the six Priority Learning Units (PLUs) for Junior Cycle L1. Junior Cycle L2LPs are designed for students with general learning disabilities. At Level 2, Physical Education is not a standalone PLU; it is incorporated across PLUs such as Personal Care and Skills for Life.

## Transition Year

The parameters to support schools in developing their TY programme are described in the TY Programme Statement (2024) through Student Dimensions and Curriculum Dimensions. Personal Growth is identified as one of the four Student Dimensions. It describes how students mature socially and emotionally over the course of the year, developing in areas that include health and wellbeing, autonomy, identity, empathy and leadership.

The TY Programme Statement also provides guidance on design parameters for a school's TY programme. This guidance states that Physical Education is one of the components required to develop the Curriculum Dimension: Personal Growth, noting that the time allocation for PE should be aligned to the SCPE Framework.

## Leaving Certificate Physical Education

### Leaving Certificate Established

Physical Education was introduced as an examinable Leaving Certificate subject in 2018 on a phased basis and, by 2024, 448 schools were offering Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE) as an optional subject. Following an early enactment review in 2023 and the wider Senior Cycle review, LCPE was redeveloped and the revised specification will be introduced in September 2026.

The new LCPE specification is designed for a minimum of 180 hours of class contact time and aims to develop informed, skilled, self-directed, and reflective physical activity participants (LCPE Specification, p. 5). It is structured around three strands—Skill learning, participation and performance; Physical and psychological demands of performance; and Factors influencing participation in physical activity—experienced through a range of physical activity areas. Physical activity is central to learning and provides the context for exploring key concepts, including skill and technique, tactical components, physiological and psychological demands, and nutrition. Assessment for certification comprises two equally weighted components: a written examination at Higher and Ordinary level (50%) and an Additional Assessment Component (AAC) Physical Education Project (50%), both set and examined by the State Examinations Commission.

### Leaving Certificate Applied

Physical Education is part of the Leisure and Recreation course and consists of three modules. Each module is typically 30 hours of learning and students choose two of the three modules. The modules are Physical activity for performance, Physical activity for health and fitness, and Physical activity for recreation. This typically results in a time allocation of 60 hours. Assessment is school based through key assignments and course work. There is no final written examination.

## Level 1 and Level 2 Programmes

The Senior Cycle Level 1 and 2 Learning Programmes are follow on programmes for students who are progressing from a Level 1 or 2 Learning Programme at junior cycle. Physical Education is one of the elective modules available as part of both Senior Cycle L1 and L2 Learning Programmes. The modules are structured around two areas related to Movement and Health, and Wellbeing with a recommended time allocation of 60 hours each. They are described as enabling students to experience the benefits of physical activity for health and wellbeing, as well as identify and engage in activities they enjoy, and develop their own personal talents and abilities.

## Section Summary

- From 2025, physical education forms part of the Primary Wellbeing Curriculum, The Curriculum Framework suggested a minimum weekly time allocation for the Wellbeing specification. Proportionally, as teachers prepare for PE and SPHE learning experiences, it is recommended that a ratio of 2:1 should be used for PE and SPHE learning, with the greater amount of time being given to PE
- Since 2023, Junior Cycle Physical Education has been a mandatory 135-hour specification within the Wellbeing curriculum, focused on developing students' competence, participation, and appreciation of physical activity. Inclusive pathways are provided through Level 1 and Level 2 Learning Programmes, with PE identified as a Priority Learning Unit at Level 1.
- The TY Programme Statement (2024) states that Physical Education is one of the components required to develop the Curriculum Dimension: Personal Growth, noting that the time allocation for PE should be aligned to the SCPE Framework.
- Leaving Certificate Physical Education (LCPE) was introduced as an examinable subject in 2018 and was offered in 448 schools by 2024. A revised LCPE specification will be introduced in September 2026, designed for a minimum of 180 hours and structured around three strands that place physical activity at the centre of learning.
- PE is part of the Leisure and Recreation course at Leaving Certificate Applied, in which students do two out of three modules. Learning time is typically 60 hours, 30 per module. Assessment is completed through key assignments and course work with no written examination.
- L1 and L2 learning programmes for PE at Senior Cycle provide follow on programmes for students who are progressing from a Level 1 or 2 at junior cycle.

### 3. Insights from school visits

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Feedback was gathered from six schools, through focus groups with students, teachers and school leaders. The areas explored in the consultation were:

- The impact of the SCPE Framework on timetabling
- The impact of the SCPE Framework on classroom practice
- The purpose and value of SCPE education
- Access to facilities
- Flexibility and structure offered in the SCPE Framework

Below is a summary of the themes that emerged in the feedback.

#### The impact of the SCPE Framework on timetabling

The main challenge for schools is timetabling the Framework's recommended 80 minutes of PE per week at senior cycle. Schools reported that they can allocate more time for PE in Transition Year, which allows for the exploration of a wider variety of activities and experiences. However, in the last two years of senior cycle, PE is often banded with SPHE, Guidance, or LCVP, resulting in some students not having access to PE. The time allocation varied across the schools visited, ranging from a maximum of 60 minutes per week in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year to PE not being timetabled in 6<sup>th</sup> year.

#### The impact of the SCPE Framework on classroom practice

Some teachers reported an awareness of the Framework and use it largely to set out overarching aims and objectives for SCPE provision, while others were unaware of its existence. Teachers familiar with the Framework report that they welcome some of the curricular models outlined therein, specifically, 'Sport Education' and 'Teaching Games for Understanding'. They also noted that they find some learning outcomes useful, however, they rarely referenced the Framework as a useful tool that informs planning.

Consistent with the DEY findings (DEY, inspectorate reports, 2024/26) there was little evidence that the SCPE Framework has an impact on planning for the provision of PE in the schools visited. It was evident from discussions that planning for classroom teaching and learning is informed by historical practice. Provision was structured around providing students with options to participate in the physical activities that were most likely to enhance motivation and maximise participation, and less on the development of skills and the technical aspects of activities.

#### Assessment and reporting

The participatory nature of SCPE is reflected in the assessment and reporting of SCPE. In the schools visited, reporting of SCPE is based on the students' attendance and participation. It was noted that parents rarely engage with PE teachers at parent-teacher meetings, although some participants reflected that this culture is beginning to change as there appears to be increasing parental awareness of the value of their children participating in PE and sport, particularly in relation to positive wellbeing.

There general consensus emerging from the school visits was that assessment in SCPE should be practical and should not take from the time spent being active in class. There was no evidence to suggest that the portfolio component suggested by the SCPE Framework is valued by teachers or students. It is perceived as reducing the time for students to be active and putting undue pressure on students to complete something that is perceived to have little value. Both teachers and students would welcome some form of official recognition for SCPE but stress it should reward participation and engagement and not involve a written component.

### **The purpose and value of SCPE**

Students report that they enjoy SCPE classes and value the opportunity for stress-free, active time spent having fun with friends. They note that their experience of SCPE has helped them make clear links between leading an active lifestyle, good health and positive wellbeing, and influences how they live their lives beyond school. When asked how PE could be improved, students expressed a desire for increased time allocation and a wider range of activity choices.

Teachers also recognise the importance of SCPE for young people at this stage of their lives. However, within the high-stakes Leaving Certificate environment, they note that SCPE can be a lower priority for some students who prefer to use the time to study. School leaders similarly acknowledge the benefits of SCPE for students' health and wellbeing, identifying being active and having opportunities to engage with peers as the most important aspects of SCPE provision in their schools.

Overall, school leaders, teachers and students strongly recognised the importance of SCPE and viewed its purpose as multifaceted. PE is perceived as a means of promoting physical activity, providing stress-free time, facilitating social interaction with peers, and developing skills for lifelong participation in physical activity. Participants also emphasise the role of SCPE in developing health and wellbeing knowledge to support life beyond school, with many highlighting the need for physical activity to take place more frequently than once a week.

### **Access to facilities**

Access to facilities has been a significant challenge for SCPE, especially since the introduction of LCPE and the 135-hour JCPE specification. While there was considerable variation in the facilities available in the schools visited, all the schools have found innovative ways to offer access to PE. For instance, schools are timetabling a whole year group together or using community facilities. This enables teachers to provide multiple options that are available on a rotating basis. While the use of community facilities, including local gyms and other sports grounds such as tennis courts, greenways or parks, incurs added expense, building community links is seen as beneficial and supports sustained physical activity throughout life.

### **Flexibility and structure**

School leaders and teachers expressed a desire to retain flexibility in any revised Framework to suit individual school contexts. They requested flexible curriculum content and provision options, realistic time allocations, and clearer guidance on SCPE programme content and planning for health, fitness, and wellbeing within practical activities.

## Section Summary

- The SCPE Framework has minimal influence on planning for the provision of SCPE in schools.
- Time allocation for SCPE varies in schools.
- Banding PE with other subjects means some students do not experience SCPE.
- SCPE lessons generally focus on participation and offer choice in relation to the activities experienced.
- Transition Year offers greater opportunity for a variety of activities and breadth of learning.
- Learning in SCPE is focused on participation rather than instruction.
- There is welcome for some form of official recognition for SCPE that rewards participation and engagement and does not involve a written component.
- It was common to use community facilities, especially in Transition Year. This offered benefits associated with community links, but challenges were noted relating to time and cost.
- PE is considered important and where feasible should be supported in the curriculum.
- Schools would welcome a revised Framework that provides clear guidance on how to embed learning about health, fitness and wellbeing within practical activity.

## 4. International trends

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This section considers the provision of physical education in other jurisdictions following a review of upper secondary PE: Scotland, Sweden, Western Australia and Ontario. These jurisdictions were selected for review due to similarities to Ireland in terms of provision where PE is a core area of learning and can also be selected as an optional subject for certification.

The overviews below illustrate the main areas of study within the selected curricula and offer some insights to help to stimulate discussions around the development of a specification for SCPE.

### Scotland

PE is part of the Health and Wellbeing curriculum area of the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland. Similarly to Ireland, the curriculum offers the option of PE for formal qualification as well as PE for holistic development. Students are facilitated to participate in PE for holistic development even if they are studying PE for certification. Learning in Health and Wellbeing is described as focusing on developing knowledge, skills and attributes for physical, emotional and social wellbeing.

Schools design their PE programme at a local level aligning to the Curriculum for Excellence outcomes and experiences outlined as part of the Health and Wellbeing Curriculum. It is expected that schools plan for experiences that combine practical activity, health, wellbeing and personal development. The outcomes that relate directly to PE are as follows:

- Movement skills, competencies and concepts
- Cooperation and competition
- Evaluating and appreciating.

As well as these areas, the curriculum also includes learning related to both Physical Activity and Sport, and Physical Activity and Health. These areas relate more to the young person's experience outside of the PE classroom such as the wider school environment and community. The curriculum specifies the need for regular opportunities for physical activity and sport across the school, promoting active travel such as cycling and walking, the use of outdoor spaces and the opportunities in the wider community. It advocates for the promotion of purposeful and enjoyable participation at break times and outside of the classroom to help establish patterns of daily physical activity to support lifelong participation. These experiences are explained as providing the principles for young people to understand physical health, including factors that influence physical activity, to support young people to participate at their highest level, with opportunities to pursue lifelong involvement or careers in sport, health and leisure.

In relation to time allocation for PE at this stage of education, no statutory allocation is provided, however in the curriculum guidance it states that the Scottish Government expects schools to continue to work towards the provision of at least two hours of good quality physical education for every child, every week (Curriculum for Excellence, Health and Wellbeing, p. 5). Schools must

ensure young people continue their development across Health and Wellbeing, including PE-related learning and becomes part of the school-level entitlement planning.

Assessment and reporting in this area is undertaken at a school level with school reporting structures aligned with the school's Curriculum for Excellent Senior Phase curriculum. The curriculum suggests tracking progression through class observations, participation, skill development, personal reflection, effort and engagement. Schools have the option to incorporate portfolios. Professional judgements are based on the outcomes and benchmarks provided in the Health and Wellbeing curriculum specific to PE. Below is an example of benchmarks relating to the area of Physical Competencies:

- Takes calculated risks showing an awareness of self, others and safe working, for example, completing a somersault.
- Adapts, transfers and improvises movement effectively.
- Is internally aware when creating and adapting movement sequences in new and challenging situations.

## Sweden

All students are required to study PE at upper secondary school in Sweden as part of the Skolveret <sup>1</sup>curriculum. Upper secondary school is structured around a set of foundation subjects, which includes 'physical education and health'. Similar to the example above in Scotland, students also have the option of selecting a specialised PE subject as part of their formal qualification, but this is separate to the core PE that must be studied by all students.

The curriculum suggests an integrated approach that highlights the interconnections between the aims, core content and knowledge dimensions of the PE curriculum. Also included in the curriculum is 'levels of understanding' expected over time. The four knowledge dimensions in the curriculum are:

- Facts (Fakta): foundational theoretical knowledge such as understanding training principles or health-related theories
- Understanding (Förståelse): interpreting and explaining how activities or wellbeing concepts work and why they matter (e.g. grasping why certain exercises enhance coordination)

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<sup>1</sup> Information sourced from English documentation available and translated documentation available on the Swedish National Agency for Education.

- Skills (Färdighet): practical abilities to perform physical activities, demonstrating precision, timing, control and safety
- Familiarity (Förtrogenhet): internalised competence and automaticity being so practiced that actions become second nature.

There is a statutory requirement for all students at upper secondary to complete core PE, which at a minimum is 100 credits and maximum 200 credits. Upper secondary school is based on a credit system; there are 2,500 credits over the 3 years based on the compulsory foundation subjects. While the time allocation is not specified per week, 100 credits is generally considered to be a full academic year programme of approximately 100 hours. The curriculum and aligned expectations are compulsory but schools have autonomy in how they meet this requirement. In some cases, schools may plan for weekly lessons and have longer activity days to supplement the time. Some may have two 60-minute sessions per week throughout, and other options include block scheduling the programme so more intense experience with more hours over a shorter period of time.

Assessment of the four dimensions is linked to the levels of understanding provided; they are based on a 3-tiered approach from limited to full familiarity which supports progression in the subject through this stage of education. The curriculum advocates students being evaluated on their ability to integrate all four dimensions across different activities and contexts.

## **New South Wales – Australia**

While the curriculum requires schools to provide PE-related learning (Personal Development, Health and Physical Education) from years 7–10, it is not a requirement for years 11–12. However, most schools still offer PE or physical activity subjects as part of their senior cycle curriculum outside of the elective options.

During this stage of education, the area of Personal Development, Health and Physical Education includes many elective options available to students based on individual interest and their pathways and these options contribute towards formal qualifications. Many schools still opt to create a 'non-exam PE' experience for upper secondary; this includes structured sport, fitness modules, wellbeing activities and recreation programmes. Schools make this decision at a local level.

Many schools elect to offer PE through flexible structures such as modules, typically 20–40 hours long. As the curriculum at upper secondary has this overall flexibility within its structure, schools can plan their provision based on student interest and teacher expertise.

The New South Wales Department of Education's policy on sport and physical activity states it encourages opportunities for physical activity on a least 3 days per week and advocates for whole-school approach to physical activity. More specific recommendations are outlined for up to 150 minutes of moderate–vigorous physical activity through teacher-led structured programmes. Some of these programmes happen through sport, recreational periods or form part of wider school programmes such as activity days or wellbeing blocks.

## Ontario

Students in Ontario undertake physical education through the Health and Physical Education courses set out in The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9–12. Courses are credit-based and selected by students according to interests and post-secondary intentions. The courses are a statutory requirement contributing to the Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD) and are established by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The Health and Physical Education curriculum supports students in developing the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to lead healthy, active lives. In particular, it emphasises lifelong physical activity, informed decision-making and personal and social responsibility.

Healthy Active Living Education courses at upper secondary provide physical education at senior secondary level. These courses focus on integrating physical activity participation with health knowledge and on the development of living skills.

The curriculum consists of three strands:

- Active Living which focuses on participation in physical activity, personal fitness development, movement competence and strategies for maintaining an active lifestyle
- Healthy Living which focuses on understanding health concepts and issues including mental health, nutrition, substance use, personal safety and sexual health
- Living Skills which focuses on personal, interpersonal and critical and creative thinking skills such as goal setting, communication, collaboration and decision-making.

There is flexibility in how the allocation of 110 hours of instruction is provided for in schools. Depending on school schedules, the allocation of hours can be spread over one full year or one semester depending on school context. Students earn their credit from 110 hours of instructional time and schools plan for how this is organised. Typical programmes usually consist of physical activities, fitness, or other skill or health-based learning.

Student achievement is assessed through ongoing school-based evaluation and a final evaluation that is conducted at the end of the course. Final grades are based on coursework completed throughout the course and a final assessment task. There are no external examinations for Health and Physical Education courses in Ontario.

## Section Summary

In the jurisdictions reviewed:

- PE is commonly positioned within an area relating to health and wellbeing.
- PE is offered as both an examinable subject and as PE for all students or 'core PE'.
- Non-examinable PE curriculums place strong emphasis on lifelong participation, health literacy, and personal and social development.
- Flexibility is afforded to schools in relation to how schools schedule and organise the hours for PE.
- Assessment is school-based and focuses on practical participation.

## 5. Issues for consideration

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This section sets out a number of issues for consideration in the redevelopment of Senior Cycle Physical Education. These arise from considerations relating to the nature of the provision and draw on themes that emerge from previous sections of this background paper. Careful consideration of the following issues will be required from an early stage of the deliberations of the redevelopment of this part of the curriculum.

### The target group/s for an updated curriculum

Currently, there is a difference in the content and status of the PE curriculum provided for students across senior cycle depending on the programme they study. Students following the LCA programme engage in PE through Leisure and Recreation modules which are mandatory; whereas the SCPE Framework supports the planning for PE for students following the LCE programme. In the context of removing barriers between LCE, LCA and LCVP, as announced by the Minister for Education, Norma Foley, TD in March 2022 as part of her plans for the redevelopment of senior cycle, it is now timely to consider whether a single SCPE curriculum should be designed to address the needs of students engaging in all of these senior cycle programmes. This will necessitate immediate consideration about the technical form and status of the curriculum component(s) to be developed.

### The technical form and status of the SCPE curriculum: Framework versus specification

It is timely to consider the extent to which a Framework approach has contributed to a situation whereby the intended curriculum has limited impact on the enacted curriculum in schools. Also, in the context of a request from schools for clearer guidance on what content to include in a SCPE programme, is it more effective to present the learning in a curriculum specification rather than a curriculum Framework? And if so, what time should be allocated to this curriculum component and should the time allocation continue to be mandatory for all schools?

### Supporting continuity, progression and coherence from junior cycle

Section 1 highlights how the introduction of the Junior Cycle PE curriculum in 2003 impacted continuity, progression, and coherence from junior cycle to senior cycle. As noted in section 2, a mandatory 135-hour Junior Cycle Physical Education (JCPE) specification was introduced in schools in 2023, presenting a timely opportunity to consider how an updated senior cycle SCPE curriculum can build on the foundations laid in junior cycle.

### Alignment with government policies/strategies

SCPE curriculum developments must be cognisant of relevant government policies, strategies, and commitments, some of which are outlined in Section 1 of this paper. In doing so, consideration should be given to how the PE curriculum can support national priorities such as lifelong physical activity, health, and wellbeing. This includes recognising key policy principles—such as choice, inclusivity, and rights-based approaches—that underpin and strengthen these priorities.

## Supporting practice in schools

There is an opportunity to consider how schools can be given both the autonomy and the support needed to design bespoke SCPE experiences that benefit young people. A new curriculum can recognise, support, and consolidate existing good practice. It will be necessary to consider how a new curriculum can provide clear guidance to enable teachers to sustain and build on effective approaches that will provide access to stress-free, enjoyable opportunities for physical activity, alongside meaningful and relevant learning related to health and lifelong participation in physical activity.

## Section Summary

- There is currently inconsistency in the SCPE curriculum content and status across different programmes (LCE, LCA, LCVP), prompting consideration of a unified curriculum for all of the senior cycle programmes.
- It is timely to consider the most appropriate technical form of a new SCPE curriculum, to decide whether a curriculum specification would provide more clarity and impact than the current Framework approach.
- Determining the appropriate and potentially mandatory time allocation for SCPE is a key consideration in developing the new SCPE curriculum.
- The review should support continuity, progression and coherence from junior cycle.
- SCPE curriculum developments should align with relevant government policies and priorities, supporting lifelong physical activity, health, and wellbeing through principles such as choice, inclusivity, and rights-based approaches.
- The new curriculum should balance school autonomy with appropriate support, building on existing good practice.

## 6. Brief for the review of Senior Cycle Physical Education

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The NCCA Development Group established to redevelop LCPE, as part of the Tranch 2 developments, will undertake the task of developing an updated curriculum for SCPE. The work of the Development Group will, in general terms, be agreed by the NCCA Board for Senior Cycle and by the Council, in line with the brief set out below.

Senior Cycle Physical Education will be developed to support the realisation of the purpose and vision for a redeveloped senior cycle as outlined in the *Senior Cycle Review: Advisory Report* (NCCA, 2022).

In addition, the Development Group's work will draw on research and good practice in the field of physical education, as well as relevant reviews, consultations, and developments in curriculum and assessment.

Assessment in Senior Cycle Physical Education will be classroom-based and primarily formative in nature. Learning in SCPE will not be subject to external assessment by the State Examinations Commission.

The curriculum will be student-centred, outcomes-based, and designed to respond to the diverse needs, interests, and abilities of students. The time allocation for SCPE will be agreed following consultation on this paper.

More specifically, the development of the revised SCPE curriculum will address:

- How the curriculum aligns with the guiding principles of senior cycle and the overarching vision for senior cycle education
- How to support continuity and progression, including how it connects with and builds on learning in junior cycle Physical Education, Transition Year programmes, and other senior-cycle subjects and modules.
- How the curriculum can support the development of a broad range of key competencies relevant to future life, work, study, and wellbeing.
- How to ensure Senior Cycle Physical Education promotes engagement, ensuring the curriculum is relevant and of importance for students with diverse interests, backgrounds, and abilities.
- How, in its presentation and learning outcomes, the curriculum can provide clarity on the expectations for learning so that the important knowledge, skills, values and dispositions that students should gain during SCPE are evident and unambiguous.
- How it can promote an integrated approach to physical activity that supports students in developing the knowledge, skills, values and dispositions needed to engage in sustained physical activity for life and to make informed decisions that enhance their long-term health and wellbeing.

The work of the Development Group will be based, in the first instance, on this brief. In the course of the group's work and deliberations, elaborations of some of these points, along with additional considerations, may be added to the brief.

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