

Working with external facilitators

There are a range of individuals and organisations with expertise in areas of SPHE and RSE who can potentially complement, support and enhance learning and teaching in this subject. Careful consideration and preparation are needed before inviting a guest facilitator into your classroom. This guidance document sets out some of the key questions and considerations to keep in mind when deciding to engage external support.

Best practice guidance for post primary schools in working with external facilitators (both once-off speakers and those delivering programmes over a period of time) can be found in the Department of Education's Circular 0043/2018 at [this link](#).

Key questions

Is the external facilitator needed?

In general, the qualified classroom teacher is the best placed professional to work sensitively and consistently with students and ideally SPHE/RSE should be delivered by teaching staff who are trained for this purpose having completed relevant CPD. That said, there may be occasions when external facilitators can provide additional expertise to support learning and teaching in SPHE, and in such instances working with external facilitators is quite appropriate.

Who do I need to communicate with about what's happening?

External facilitators should be approved by the principal and board of management in consultation with the relevant teaching staff. All materials proposed for use by the external facilitator must be shared in advance with the principal and the board. Relevant school staff should also be informed of the details of the programme being provided by external facilitators,

so that they can be alert and sensitive to any students who might need follow-up support. It is also important to make parents/carers aware in advance of the content of the programmes provided by external facilitators as this can provide a helpful opportunity for parents to discuss the topic with their child.

Is the external facilitator complementing and supporting a planned comprehensive approach to SPHE?

Research shows that once-off inputs, which are not planned as part of an overall programme, are unlikely to have a long-term positive impact. To be effective, the external input needs to be part of an integrated programme of learning which provides a context. Such inputs should be co-designed by the teacher and facilitator/guest speaker and include both lead-in and follow-up lessons. This ensures that the students can be fully prepared for the visitor and have an opportunity to process and reflect on the learning experience after s/he leaves the school.

Am I confident that the approach planned is positively framed and supportive of student wellbeing?

The approach taken should enhance protective factors which predispose students to positive life skills, helping students believe in their capacity to cope, developing a sense of self-efficacy over life circumstances and instilling hope. The programme should not use shock or scare tactics or attempt to deal with sensitive topics such as mental health, suicide, self-harm or eating disorders, without appropriate care and expertise.

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Am I confident that the approach planned is up-to-date, evidence-informed and relevant to the life-experiences of our students?

It should provide factual, up-to-date, evidence informed content that is balanced with opportunities for students to actively engage in discussion, reflection and participate in their learning so that they can apply the learning to their own lives. The content and methodologies should be appropriate to the developmental stage of the students - keeping in mind that many students report that their learning in SPHE/RSE is often 'too little and too late'.

Is the use of an external facilitator helping to build my capacity as an SPHE teacher?

As well as supporting student learning in SPHE, the aim when engaging with external facilitators should always be to build teacher capacity too. Being involved in planning the session and being in the classroom during the session (perhaps co-facilitating all or parts of the session) signals to the students that this topic is integral to their learning and allows you, the teacher to build your understanding and skills alongside your students. In this way, it may be possible over time to take on full facilitation of this topic without external support.

Where can I find suitable external facilitators?

You might find the expertise you are looking for within your local community, for example through contacting your local health centre or sexual health centre. Some agencies and NGOs also provide expert facilitators who work within school and youth settings on specialist topics. Teachers who require guidance on accessing support can contact the relevant Department of Education support services or their local Health Service Executive's (HSE) Health Promotion personnel.

How should we review and evaluate the use of external facilitators?

External facilitators and programmes should be evaluated by students and teachers with regard to the subject matter, methodology and learning gained.

Questions for the teachers to consider

- What worked well? What didn't work so well?
- Was the content relevant and engaging for the students?
- Did the methodologies work? Did they enable students to be actively engaged in their learning?
- Did the session achieve the learning outcomes that we had hoped for? How do we know?
- What changes would we make if offering this to another group of students?

Questions for the students to consider

- What did you find most useful or interesting about the session?
- What did you find least useful or interesting?
- Would you recommend this session for another year group?
- If we were doing this again, what feedback would you give the facilitators for making it better?

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An example of effective practice

Effective practice when working with external facilitators has been found to occur where teachers have planned and taught a unit of learning and then invite in a class visitor towards the end of the unit of learning. With good pre-planning, the visitor can help address any outstanding questions that have surfaced, offer additional expertise or experience on the topic and point students towards local supports and services which they or a friend might need at some stage in their lives. Examples of people who can support SPHE in this way include mental health services, sexual health services, a nurse or GP, a member of the Gardai or your local Drugs and Alcohol taskforce and some Non-Government Organisations.

Further useful resources:

Communicating with parents

Collaborative planning for SPHE

Whole school support and leadership in SPHE

Other important considerations

- All external facilitators must be garda vetted and compliant with the school's child protection policy and other relevant school policies and procedures.
- Programmes should be delivered by facilitators who are qualified to work within the specific area of content and with the students for whom the programmes are designed.
- Facilitators should demonstrate appropriate understanding of the SPHE curriculum and be able to link their work to relevant learning outcomes within the SPHE curriculum.