

Still Shouting

The needs and experiences
of young people in Northern
Ireland who identify as
lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or
transgender (LGBT)

2017



YouthAction
NORTHERN IRELAND

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Contents

| | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. Introduction and Background | 4 |
| 2. Research Design and Methodology | 6 |
| 3. Literature Review and Policy Context | 7 |
| 4. Profile, Background and Experiences of Respondents | 12 |
| 5. 'Coming Out': Recognising and Telling | 16 |
| 6. Experiences of School | 20 |
| 7. Experiences of Youth Organisations, Supports and Services | 24 |
| 8. Conclusion and Recommendations | 28 |
| Glossary of Terms | 31 |
| Bibliography | 33 |



1. Introduction and Background

The Shout research was initially conducted by YouthNet, in 2003, as a means of exploring and documenting the needs of young people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) in Northern Ireland. As well as producing a research report, the Shout working group (YouthNet, Cara-Friend [GLYNI], YouthAction, The Rainbow Project and Opportunity Youth) also produced OUTstanding Youth Work, a toolkit for working inclusively with LGBT young people.

Since this research was carried out in 2003 there have been significant changes in both legislation and public attitude in Northern Ireland with regards to sexual orientation and gender identity (Carr et. al., 2015). In 2016, YouthNet, Cara-Friend and YouthAction thought it timely, therefore, to revisit the ShOUT research to see if and how things were changing for young LGBT people growing up in Northern Ireland. The findings from this research have also been used by Cara-Friend and YouthAction to update the OUTstanding Youth Work toolkit.

The authors would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of Amanda Stephens (YouthNet) in the survey design and data collection aspects of the research.



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2. Research Design and Methodology

Concerned with hearing the experiences of young LGBT people from across Northern Ireland a survey was designed based upon the 2003 study template. While there were some additional questions to the original survey, especially in the areas of gender identity and gender expression, it otherwise mirrored the original survey in order that comparisons could be drawn between the experiences of young people in 2003 and the experiences of young people in 2016.

In order to encourage the involvement of young people not attending LGBT youth groups, living in rural areas and/or not 'out' regarding their gender identity or sexual orientation, it was felt that an online survey would be the most accessible method of data collection. An online Google Form questionnaire was designed and promoted by the steering group via a range of social media platforms and through organisational youth sector mailing lists. There were 300 returned surveys with 270 of these valid¹. This compared with 362 responses to the 2003 report. Not all young people answered all questions so figures are presented as a percentage of responses to the question.

¹ Non-valid responses included those completed by those outside of the age bracket and/or partially completed surveys.

Where more than one answer could be selected from a list of options, this is noted.

Ethics

Ethical considerations for this research project were informed by the British Sociological Association's ethical statement (BSA, 2002), and the research governance policies and procedures of YouthAction Northern Ireland. Within this study a number of measures were taken to ensure that informed consent was obtained from individuals. A Participant Information Sheet was attached to the survey outlining the research aims and objectives, how the research would be used and who would have access to it. The British Sociological Association (BSA) suggests that 'the anonymity of those who participate in the research process should be respected' (BSA, 2002: 5). Taken literally, this involved 'the subject remain[ing] nameless' (Berg, 2007:79). Measures were taken in the handling and presentation of data to ensure this 'namelessness'.

The study was also mindful to 'minimise or alleviate any distress caused to those participating in the research' (BSA, 2002: 4). This involved adopting approaches that respected 'the confidences disclosed and the emotions which may have been aroused' (Lee, 1988:553). This entailed making participants aware of the nature and extent of their involvement, outlining their voluntary and anonymous participation in the study and highlighting contact details for a range of LGBT specific and more general support services and programmes.

3. Literature Review and Policy Context

This literature review seeks to outline research already undertaken into the experiences of LGBT people in Northern Ireland and to place some of that in a wider UK and Ireland context. The data collected in various research projects over the past decade and a half is presented under four thematic headings: coming out; experiences in school; experiences within youth services; and sources of information and support, as these were pertinent themes within our study.

Coming Out

People's experiences of coming out, i.e. identifying one's self as LGBT to a friend or family member, differ from individual to individual. Some reports have sought to investigate the average experience of coming out.

The ShOUT Report (Carolan & Redmond, 2003) found that the average age for realising one's sexual orientation was 12 for males, and 13 for females, but the age at which they came out to others was 17 for males, and 18 for females. On average there was a common experience of a five-year gap between knowing one's sexuality and actively telling someone, or coming out. This report was based on a survey aimed exclusively at those aged between 14 and 25 years of age.

Ten years later, *Through Our Minds* (O'Hara, 2013) found that the average age of realising one's minority sexuality and/or gender identity was 14.1 years: 13.8 years for males, 15.5 for females, and 12.5 years for transgender people. The average age of coming out, however, was 21.3 years: 20.8 years for males, 22.6 years for females, and 24 years for

transgender people. This notably higher average age of coming out may be explained by the different age range of respondents which was 16+, with no upper age limit. The generational differences in the age of coming out are highlighted by these simple statistics.

Most recently, *OUTstanding in Your Field* (O'Doherty, 2016) found that while 92% of people surveyed reported being out to close friends, just over half were out more 'completely', i.e. to all groups in their life including family, colleagues and friends. This illustrates the difficulties and/or reservations that individuals have in sharing their sexual and/or gender identity with those outside of their close friendship groups. The same report found that rural LGBT people were least likely to be 'completely' out, highlighting a difference in the experiences of those living in rural and urban areas. Again, *OUTstanding in Your Field* found that most LGBT people realise their minority sexuality and/or gender identity during adolescence, and that there is a period of a number of years between knowing this and feeling confident enough to disclose this information to someone.

The *LGBTIreland Report* (Higgins et al, 2016) surveyed over 2,000 LGBT people resident in the Republic of Ireland, aged from 14 years old and up. It found that the average age for realising one's sexuality and/or gender identity was 14.7 years old: 13.5 years old for males, 16.8 years old for females, 15.4 years old for bisexual people, 13.9 years for transgender people, and 12 years for intersex people. The average age for coming out is higher than reports have suggested it to be in Northern



Ireland, at 19.6 years: 19.2 years for males, 20.8 years for females, 18.6 years for bisexual people, 19.5 years for transgender people, and 21.3 years for intersex people. This is notably lower than the ages found in *Through Our Minds* 2013 report on the experiences of LGBT people in Northern Ireland.

63% of respondents (aged 14-25) in *The ShOUT Report* (Carolan & Redmond, 2003) stated that when they came out they felt they could not tell their parents, with 78% of respondents saying they came out first to their friends, rather than family. This underlines the anxiety and difficulty young people have when coming out more openly, or more widely. Young people continue to cite fear of rejection as the primary reason for not coming out to their parents (80%).

Experiences in School

The experiences of LGBT young people in schools are important to take note of, not least because of the high numbers reporting negative experiences and attitudes during their school years as a result of their perceived or actual sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

The ShOUT Report (Carolan & Redmond, 2003) outlined that 44% of LGBT people aged between 14 and 25 years were bullied in school because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, with 63% of respondents reporting negative experiences of some sort at school because of their minority sexuality and/or gender identity. Almost 1 in 10 (9%) said they were forced to change their school. Of those who left school

early 69% stated they were bullied because of their sexuality and/or gender identity. There was also a reported 25% rate of truancy among LGBT young people as a result of their negative experiences in school.

Through Our Minds (O'Hara, 2013) found that 61.2% of LGBT people had been called hurtful names related to sexuality and/or gender identity while at school. 88.6% had heard homophobic or transphobic language in schools, and 66.3% had heard LGBT people receive verbal threats in their schools. 88.7% of respondents reported that teachers never or rarely talked about LGBT issues sensitively.

The School Report (2012) surveyed 1,614 eleven to nineteen year old LGB young people from across Britain on their experiences of school. 19.99% heard homophobic language used daily, while 96% heard homophobic/transphobic slurs on a daily basis. 44% of LGB pupils skipped school because of homophobic bullying, while 32% changed their plans for future education because of it. Over half of LGB young people surveyed were never taught anything about LGB issues at school. 23% had tried to take their own life at some point (compared to 7% national average across the whole UK population), while over half (56%) had self-harmed.

The LGBTIreland Report (Higgins et al, 2016) outlined similar statistics in relation to LGBT people's experiences of school in the Republic of Ireland, where a sample of 805 young people enrolled in primary or secondary school (age range up to 18) along with those who had left school in the last five years, answered

specific questions around this. 48% of respondents had experienced minority sexuality and/or gender identity bullying at school, while 67.3% had witnessed bullying of other LGBT people in their school. 24.1% said that they missed or skipped school because of the negative treatment they received because they were LGBT, and 4.3% reported dropping out of school early due to bullying or negative treatment. LGBT people who were bullied because of their sexuality and/or gender identity were 19% more likely to have attempted suicide than those who were not bullied. They were also 12% more likely to have self-harmed and 18% more likely to have contemplated suicide.

Experiences in Youth Organisations

Youth work provides a non-formal avenue of education and support for young people that is sometimes complementary to formal school-based education, and sometimes acts as an alternative. Therefore, the experiences of those LGBT people who are members of youth clubs and other youth work organisations are noteworthy in establishing if sufficient support of minority sexual orientations and/or gender identities is provided through youth work.

The ShOUT Report (Carolan & Redmond, 2003) outlined that 53% of those who were members of youth groups had experienced negative attitudes around their sexuality and/or gender identity. The examples given by young people showed that negative attitudes existed in both peers and youth leaders. 57%

of LGBT young people in church-based organisations had experienced negative attitudes, compared with 50% in uniformed groups. Those who attended LGBT youth groups said it helped their self-esteem and self-respect and cited it as a positive and significant experience for them. 19% of respondents in *The ShOUT Report* were members of an LGBT youth group, while 54% of those surveyed said they were not but would like to be. Qualitative evidence from the same report illustrates the positive impact attending these LGBT youth groups had on individuals.

The LGBTIreland Report (Higgins *et al*, 2016) looked at the experiences of those LGBT people who attended LGBT specific youth groups in the Republic of Ireland. Similarly, those that attended LGBT youth organisations reported a positive impact on their mental health (68.9%), while 5% said it had a negative impact on their mental health, and 26.1% said it had no impact at all.

Youth workers were highlighted as positive role models and confidantes in *The School Report* (Guasp, 2012), where qualitative research findings illustrate that youth workers are one of the main sources of support outside of schools and homes.

There is very limited research into the experiences of LGBT young people within the Northern Irish youth work context, and so *Still Shouting* offers an updated glimpse into the lived experiences of LGBT young people in our various youth services.



Sources of Information & Support

An important indicator of how open institutions and services are to LGBT people is if LGBT people feel comfortable seeking information and support there. Where LGBT people seek support and information may be indicative of the general support infrastructure that exists for LGBT people across Northern Ireland.

The ShOUT Report (Carolan & Redmond, 2003) asked respondents where they got support/information in relation to being LGBT. Over 50% of the young people said that they got their support from an internet source, with 36% saying they received support from books or magazines. 22% received support from an LGBT group, 7% named youth groups, while 4% named schools. 0.3% stated that a church group was where they received support from in relation to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. 18% of respondents named an LGBT helpline, and 17% named an LGBT venue.

In terms of specific LGBT service provision, *OUTstanding in Your Field* (O'Doherty 2016) found that those living in an urban area were four times more likely to have an LGBT support service in their area, when compared with those people living rurally. Unsurprisingly then, the report found that those living rurally were more likely to feel that they needed access to specific LGBT services. Overall, 46.2% of respondents had accessed support services in relation to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the past year, 41.3% of those had accessed these services from

a specific LGBT organisation (as opposed to other community or state providers).

Through Our Minds (O'Hara, 2013) examined support sought by LGBT people in relation to their emotional health and wellbeing. Just over half of respondents (51.3%) had accessed support in relation to emotional health and wellbeing: 23.7% of them through an LGBT group, 68.9% of them through HSC Trusts and GPs, and 13.6% through a private organisation.

Along with abortion, homosexuality continues to be one of the most avoided topics in Northern Ireland's schools, and this can isolate LGBT young people (Roslton et al., 2004; Maycock et al., 2009). This can make school environments feel hostile and unwelcoming, forcing a young person to mask their true identity, and to fear revealing it.

The 10-year Children and Young People's Strategy for Northern Ireland (2006-16), from the Department of Education, lacked any mention of LGBT young people. Their unique issues were not considered as part of that strategy, and therefore their needs not addressed under the strategy's recommendations and objectives. The recent update of the strategy, covering 2017-27 makes specific reference to the enhanced difficulties faced by LGBT young people, and recognises that LGBT young people have been largely ignored within communities, education and wider society.



4. Profile, Background and Experiences of Respondents

There were 270 valid survey responses. This section provides a profile of survey respondents and draws out some similarities and differences to the profile of those who responded to the 2003 survey.

There was a fairly equal response to the survey from different age groups – 35% were aged under 18 years, 31% between 18-21 years and 34% aged 22-25 years (see Table 1). This too was the case with regards to gender identification (see Table 2).

Table 1: Age of Respondents

| | |
|---------------|-----|
| 13 or under | 2% |
| 14 | 4% |
| 15 | 8% |
| 16 | 11% |
| 17 | 10% |
| 18 – 21 years | 31% |
| 22 – 25 years | 34% |

Tables 2 & 3: Identified Gender

| | |
|--------|-----|
| Female | 45% |
| Male | 45% |
| Other | 10% |

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Non-binary | 19% |
| Transgender | 17% |
| Intersex | 2% |
| Cisgender | 57% |
| Other | 8% |

There was a greater gender balance in respondents to the 2016 survey than there was to the 2003 survey. In 2003, 64% of respondents identified as male and 36% identified as female, this compares with 45% male and 45% female in 2016. The increase in female respondents is possibly due to the methods of data

collection employed. The 2003 survey was heavily promoted within predominately gay male venues and organisations whereas the 2016 survey was only available online and was promoted more widely in the LGBT and youth sectors. Other gender identities listed within the 'other' category in 2016 included: genderqueer, questioning, agender, bigender.

The 2003 questionnaire only asked young people if they identified as transgender (allowing for no other options), this was updated in 2016 to include intersex, non-binary, cisgender and other. In 2016, 19% of respondents identified as non-binary with 17% identifying as transgender. This contrasts significantly with the 2003 report whereby only 4% of respondents identified as transgender. Table 4 provides a breakdown of sexual identity responses.

Table 4: Sexual Identity

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Gay | 35% |
| Bisexual | 30% |
| Lesbian | 17% |
| Other | 12% |
| Heterosexual | 3% |
| Asexual | 3% |

The disparity between 'gay' and 'lesbian' categories may be accounted for by the rejection of the term 'lesbian' by many same-sex attracted young women, who instead self-define as gay (Neill, 2016; Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Guittar, 2014). There is a significant difference in the proportion of respondents identifying as bisexual in the two surveys – 14% (n=52) in 2003, and almost 30% (n=78) in 2016. The number of heterosexual young people who completed

the survey also increased. The 2003 survey had no young people identifying as heterosexual even though this category was included as an option. The 2016 survey, however, had 3% (n=9) identifying as heterosexual from the transgender and intersex categories.

The 2016 survey also allowed for 'asexual' and 'other' categories. The most significant increase was from the 'other' category with 12% (n=30) of young people identifying as such. Responses included: 'pansexual', 'homoflexible' and 'panromantic asexual'.

Table 5: Identified Disability

| | |
|--------------|-----|
| Disabled | 15% |
| Non-disabled | 84% |
| Other | 1% |

The 2003 survey asked respondents if they had a registered disability with 4% reporting that they did. The 2016 survey, however, did not specify that a disability had to be register. This may in part account for the higher proportion reporting a disability in 2016 (15%).

Consistent with the 2003 survey, 3% of those surveyed identified as being a member of a minority ethnic group. This included: Chinese, Jewish, Bengali, Indonesian and Black mixed backgrounds.

The religious identification of participants is more balanced than the previous survey were 53% identified as Catholic, 34% as Protestant and 13% as other. However, as shown in Table 6 respondents in the 2016 survey were provided with a 'no religion/faith' option. A similar option was not available in 2003.

Table 6: Religious Identification

| | |
|-------------------|-----|
| No religion/faith | 38% |
| Catholic | 28% |
| Protestant | 26% |
| Other | 8% |

Table 7 shows the occupational status of respondents. Multiple responses were selected. The majority of young people were still in education when they completed the survey, with 36% in school, 12% in further education and 21% in university. Results here differ significantly from the 2003 statistics that showed 16% of respondents at school and just over a third (37%) stating that they were in full time employment. These findings are unsurprising given the expansion of education and the decline in labour market opportunities for young people.

Table 7: Occupational Status

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| School | 36% |
| Further Education | 12% |
| University | 21% |
| Employed full-time | 21% |
| Employed part-time | 12% |
| Not working | 8% |
| Other | 3% |

Finally, young people were asked if they had experienced a range of issues and/or circumstances as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. They were asked a similar question and provided with similar options (drawn from previous research) in 2003. Table 8 illustrates the percentages of each sample population that reported encountering a range of negative experiences as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity in 2003 and 2016.



Table 8: Personal Experiences as a Result of Sexual Orientation/ Gender Identity

| | 2016 | 2003 |
|--------------------------|-------------|------|
| Physical abuse | 22% | 35% |
| Verbal abuse | 73% | 65% |
| Sexual abuse | 11% | 17% |
| Homelessness | 3% | 16% |
| Suicidal thoughts | 61% | n/a |
| Attempted suicide | 25% | 29% |
| Self harm | 52% | 26% |
| Medicated for depression | 30% | 24% |
| Eating disorder | 21% | 21% |
| Alcohol misuse | 27% | 34% |
| Drug misuse | 14% | 23% |
| Practiced unsafe sex | 22% | 27% |

As highlighted in Table 8 a smaller proportion of the 2016 sample reported having experienced physical abuse and/or sexual abuse as a result of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. That said a higher proportion of young people in the 2016 survey reported instances of verbal abuse than previously. The greatest difference between the surveys was in the percentage of young people indicating self harm – rising from 26% of respondents in 2003 to over half of respondents (52%) in 2016. While not previously asked, 61% of the 215 young people who answered this question in 2016 also reporting experiencing suicidal thoughts.

In a series of questions concerning life at home 50% of young people noted that they had experienced homophobic or transphobic attitudes from family members (n=132). The 2003 survey found 70% (n=253) of respondents indicating such experiences. While this suggests a significant decrease, that half of the sample still experience homophobic or

transphobic attitudes at home remains concerning. Further, as a result of these attitudes, 26% (n=67) of young people said they felt compelled to move away from the family home and to find accommodation elsewhere. Again, this is a noteworthy decrease from the 2003 survey where 45% (n=163) of the sample reported feeling compelled to leave the family home as a result of homophobic or transphobic attitudes. It was, however, an experience of just over one-quarter of the young people in this most recent survey.

While not always directly comparable, the findings above do suggest both progress and stagnation. Young people in 2016 were less likely to report some forms of abuse, alcohol and drug misuse and homelessness than those in 2003, but more likely to report experiences of self-harm, verbal abuse and taking medication for depression. That 61% of the sample also reported suicidal thoughts, and one-quarter reported having attempted suicide adds to concerns highlighted in other research about the mental health/ well-being of LGBT young people.

The following three sections of the report also demonstrate that despite significant social, legislative and attitudinal change in Northern Ireland, many young LGBT people are still marked by feelings of difference, exclusion and isolation. These sections focus specifically on their personal experiences of growing up LGBT, 'coming out' and 'being out', including their experiences in schools, youth organisations and with support services.





5. 'Coming Out': Recognising and Telling

Recognising

Despite greater visibility of LGBT individuals within the media and public life 'coming out', the disclosing of one's sexuality or gender identity (for the first time and/or as an on-going process), remains significant.

While some young people noted being aware of a non-heterosexual identity 'since they were born' or 'for as long as I can remember', generally they reported becoming aware of this between the ages of 11 – 16 years. Among those who provided a specific age at which they became aware of their sexual orientation, the average was 13 years old. Disclosing this information or 'coming out' most frequently happened between the ages of 13 – 18 years, with an average age of 15 years. This suggests on average a two-year gap between young people being aware of a non-heterosexual identity and them telling others. The 2003 survey noted a five year gap between young people becoming aware of their sexual orientation and them sharing this information with an other. While a reduction in this period, from five to two years, is to be welcomed, a period of two years remains a substantial period wherein a young person feels they cannot share specific aspects of their identity with anyone.

The survey also asked young people about their gender identity. It found that more young people identified as transgender or gender variant than previously (2003). This may be reflective of a more nuanced, less binary, discourse around gender, increased positive media representation of trans people and an increase in support and medical services in Northern Ireland. Of those who answered the question on gender identity, 43% (n=94) identified as other than cisgender. This included non-binary (19%), transgender (17%), intersex (2%), other (8%) or a combination of these.

The average age at which young people reported becoming aware of a trans or non-binary identity was 15 years old. It is important to note however that the most frequently cited age of being aware of this identity was 10 years or younger (17%, n=12). First disclosing this information or 'coming out' to someone else appeared to happen most frequently between the ages of 14 – 18 years, with the average age being 16 years.

Telling

The majority of young people reported that the first people they 'came out' to were friends (81%). In identifying who they felt they could not tell when they first came out, parents were identified as the most difficult to tell (63%), followed by siblings (38%) teachers (33%) and clergy (20%). In comparison with the 2003 survey, 'friends' is still the most significant response from young people. In 2003, 78% (n=284) of young people felt able to tell their friends with 81% (n=215) indicating the same in 2016.

Young people feeling able to tell their parents has slightly decreased from the previous survey, with 91 (25%) of young people feeling unable to tell their parents in 2003 and 51 (19%) feeling unable to tell their parents in 2016. Likewise, young people feeling able to tell siblings has also slightly decreased, with 101 (28%) feeling able to tell siblings in 2003 compared with 40 (15%) in 2016.

Continuing to Tell

While the majority of respondents reported being 'out' to varying degrees, only 39% reported being 'out' to everyone. More revealing is that less than half of the young people who answered this question (48%) were 'out' to friends, and less than one-third (30%) were out to their family. Almost half of the sample (48%, n=129) reported that there was still someone they felt they could not tell about their sexual orientation or gender identity (see below). Overall, young people's responses illustrate the on-going nature of 'coming out'. While 'coming out' is often understood as being the first time one discloses their sexual orientation or gender identity to others, it also represents an on-going process of 'outing' oneself in environments (and a society) within which heterosexuality and gender binary are assumed. While the initial act of 'coming out' was often difficult and fearful for young people, the on-going nature of the process was also difficult and exhausting for some individuals. As one young person noted: "I don't see why I have to keep coming out, straight people don't have to constantly remind people that they are straight."

Not Telling

Around a quarter of the sample reported not being 'out' and as noted above, many others (n=129) reported that there were people they still could not tell about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For those who had not yet come out at all, those they most commonly noted feeling they could not tell were grandparents and wider family (n=47) and parents (n=39). Others listed included teachers, employers, "people in church", classmates and "those closest to you".

When asked why they felt they could not come out, young people noted negative attitudes; stigma and shame; uncertainty and fear as some of the factors that made 'coming out' difficult.

Negative Attitudes

From the qualitative responses, it is evident that some young people decide not to come out because of the negative attitudes of others. Such attitudes, it appears, are based on a lack of understanding of LGB people leading to stereotypes and in some cases, intolerance. The following comments are illustrative:

"I haven't told my parents cause I don't think they'll understand what bisexuality really is."

"My friends and people in school are secretly homophobic. They think that they are not but they still act horrified about people being gay. I don't want my friends to think that I fancy them."



"My parents and most people from school talk about people dating the same sex as if it's a bad thing and make jokes about it a lot."

Stigma and Shame

Demonstrating their knowledge of "being different" and the "burden" of this difference (Neill, 2016) in a heteronormative and gender binary society, a number of young people noted feelings of shame and fear of letting others down as reasons for not coming out. Examples included:

"The thought that I would be letting people down stops me from coming out."

"I want to come out but when it actually comes to saying it outright the words seem to just die in my mouth. I suppose it comes down to fear of being judged or seen differently."

"It would illicit feelings of disappointment from my family."

Uncertainty

Some young people also noted that they had not yet come out because they were either not yet sure themselves of their sexual orientation or they felt that others would assume they were simply confused because of their age. Young people noted:

"It's super duper awkward, plus if I'm not actually gay, and I'm bi or straight or whatever, I don't want to come out twice."

"People saying that I'm only attention seeking or confused."

"I feel that they'll treat it as a phase or experimenting and I would be embarrassed."

Fear

Finally, some young people simply stated that they were afraid to come out:

"I am afraid."

"I'm scared that people will think differently of me after I tell them. I'm scared of how my parents will react if I told them."

'Coming Out' as Trans

Similar themes, particularly those relating to fear, shame and difference were evident in the responses of those who identified as trans. When asked about their reasons for not coming out, young people repeatedly mentioned their family. Further they noted that they did not want others, especially family members treating them differently as a result of their gender identity. Illustrative of this respondents commented:

"My family barely accept my bisexuality, I doubt they'll accept my gender identity."

"Family shame, fear and ridicule stops me coming out to family members."

"The fear that they might disown me."

"I am still at school and although I am not ashamed, I do not want people to change the way they act around me or judge me."

Making it Easier to Tell

When asked what would have made it easier to 'come out' about one's sexual orientation or gender identity, young people noted that more inclusive responses to sexual orientation and gender identity in school (n=44), less focus on religion within political and civic life (n=32), a fuller, less binary understanding of sexuality and gender (n=30) and greater family support and understanding (n=19) would aid this process. The following comments from young people further illustrate these themes and demonstrate their belief that greater education/understanding will lead to greater inclusion:

"Having been given appropriate sex education in school would have helped. Making learning about same-sex relationships in 'Learning for Life and Work' class compulsory; instead everything is based around heterosexual relationships."

"Having teachers that understand that being LGBT is not a 'hormonal imbalance' and teach that people in same sex relationships are equal would help."

"Having a government that doesn't criticise innocent people in the LGBT community and offering more support and awareness about being LGBT+."

"I firmly believe if there was a more comprehensive and inclusive school level education, it would be far more normalised for LGBT people. There was a lot of negative stigma about being LGBT in my old school."

"If people in Northern Ireland were better informed and better educated. Even now I feel a large part of our society still view LGBT people as being 'different' or not 'normal.'"

"If my parents were less religious and more accepting."



6. School

It is important to consider young people's experiences of school as this forms a large part of their lives growing up – they learn, socialise and are socialised here. How young people fair in school can also have lasting impacts in terms of opportunities and choices regarding next destinations, and their position in the labour market. Added to this, 86% of the sample were aware of their sexual orientation while at school, and 55% of those who identified as non-cisgender were aware of their gender identity while at school. It is, therefore, a site where identity is being understood and negotiated. When asked who they could not tell when they first came out, teachers were listed third, only after parents and siblings.

Negative School Experiences

Similarly to the 2003 survey, young people in 2016 were asked if they felt they had experienced a range of negative school experiences and outcomes as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Table 9 displays the results.

Table 9: School Experiences as a Result of Sexual Orientation/ Gender Identity

| | |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| Being bullied | 112 (68%) |
| Achieving lower results | 60 (36%) |
| Truancy | 41 (25%) |
| Dropping out | 20 (12%) |
| Changing school | 18 (11%) |

Most notably, over two-thirds (68%) of the sample reported being bullied in school as a result of their sexual orientation and/ or gender identity. This is considerably higher than the proportion of the sample reporting similar experiences in 2003 (44%), and is perhaps most surprising given an increased focus on anti-homophobic bullying training and campaigns in local schools over the past 10 years. It should be acknowledged, however, that higher reporting could also be a consequence of greater understanding of the issue among young people today. That said, when we examine attitudes towards LGBT issues and identities in school (see below), this, and the other experiences reported in Table 9, might be reflective of the continued hetero- and gender-normative nature of schools more generally (i.e. adding classes and policies on anti-homophobic bullying alone is unlikely to lead to wider sustained cultural change and /or understanding of LGBT identities).

Numbers remained fairly consistent between surveys with regards to those who reported truancy and/ or dropping out of school as a result their gender identity and/ or sexual orientation. Hence suggesting a lack of progress in this area. Added to

this, over one-third of the sample felt that they had achieved lower grades in school as a result of their gender identity and/ or sexual orientation. The figures in Table 9, therefore, suggest that school is not always an inclusive space for young LGBT people and that their educational experiences and outcomes can be negatively impacted as a result. It is because of these very experiences that we might expect schools to provide additional, or at least good quality, support and advice to young people who might identify as LGBT.

Information and Support

84% (n=222) of the sample indicated that they had not received any support or information at school regarding sexual orientation or gender identity. Just 11% (n=28) reported that they had received 'some' information or support. This 11% mirrors the numbers who received information and support thirteen years previously in the 2003 survey. Therefore, despite recurring research that highlights negative outcomes for LGBT young people in schools, it would appear that overall there is little change in the availability and presentation of LGBT specific information and support in schools. In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is little change (and in some cases an increase in) the negative educational experiences and outcomes noted above.

Attitudes towards LGBT in Schools

Young people were asked if they experienced negative attitudes towards gender identity or sexual orientation while at school. The phrasing of the question means that this did not have to relate to personal experience of negative attitudes, but would give an indication of young people's understanding of school attitudes more generally. Almost three-quarters (72%) of those who answered this question reported negative school attitudes. When asked to provide examples to illustrate this these included, but were not limited to, trans/ homophobic language and attitudes from staff and pupils (n=69); bullying by pupils (n=41) and a lack of understanding and/accurate information from staff (n=44).

Homophobic and transphobic name-calling and ridicule was perpetuated both pupils and teachers. Examples included:

"Name calling, being called a gay butch bitch."

"One teacher was very determined to weed out anyone who 'spoke gay' and would humiliate them in front of the class. Another teacher told one boy to 'stop speaking in that gay voice' because his voice was slightly higher pitched."



Some noted that displays of trans/homophobia, and the derogatory use of the word "gay" were seen as "banter" or simply non-offensive, and thus sanctioned:

"General 'banter' in playgrounds and classrooms went unchallenged."

In addition to some visible signs of trans/homophobia was the invisibility of LGBT identities and information in teaching and the school environment, or the outright rejection and 'othering' of them:

"In personal development we skipped the section that had a gay couple, being LGBTQ was never talked about and sex education only referenced straight people... transgender was never a word I even heard at school."

"I was told that it wasn't natural, an abomination, creepy, perverted..."

"Being transgender guy in an all girls school, they refused to allow me to wear the right uniform stating that it was an all girls school and while I was there I was 'a girl' and should 'act like one.'"

Taken together, these examples demonstrate the continued hetero- and gender- normative nature of schools. The outward and visible rejection of LGBT identities and/or the invisibility of them in teaching and the school environment more generally, may explain some of the negative experiences and outcomes reported by LGBT young people within the survey.





7. Experiences of Youth Organisations, Supports and Services

The Department of Education states that “effective youth work helps identify the social and development needs” of young people (Department of Education, 2016). Within the survey young people were asked a series of questions regarding their involvement in youth work organisations. These aimed to explore the extent to which their needs were being met within informal educational settings, and to identify areas of learning with regards to inclusive approaches to work with young LGBT people. Young people listed involvement in a range of youth work settings, including voluntary, statutory, faith based and LGBT specific.

Membership and Experiences of Organisations

When asked if they had ever been a member of a youth organisation over half (52%, n=104) noted that they had not. Of those who had, 66% (n=69) reported a positive response to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, while 22% (n=23) noted a negative response. A further 12% (n=12) had received neither a negative nor positive response.

Alongside listing membership in a youth organisation, 152 young

people stated that they had been a member of a church organisation. Organisations within the church include uniformed groups, youth clubs, sporting groups and faith based programmes. That numbers responding to this question were higher than the previous question on youth organisation membership, might suggest that young people took this question to refer to church membership more generally. While a member of a church organisation over half (56%, n=85) reported experiencing negative attitudes towards their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Twenty-one young people (14%), however, noted that they had experienced a positive response. A further 46 (30%) noted that the response to their sexual orientation or gender identity was ‘other’ than positive or negative.

Young people were asked to, without naming the organisation, provide examples to highlight their positive or negative experiences in youth work organisations. Seventy-four young people responded to this open question. Their responses demonstrate that: feeling accepted and supported; being in an open and inclusive environment; having LGBT specific spaces and LGBT issues discussed directly, were some of what made their experiences positive in these settings.

In commenting on what contributed to a negative youth work experience young people noted: homophobic attitudes displayed by young people and/or staff; “ignorance” not being challenged (e.g. homo/trans/bi phobic language); and the privileging of “normal” (i.e. heterosexual) relationships. Illustrative of this young people stated –

“Homophobic jokes by adult volunteers was difficult to hear.”

“General homophobic comments were not challenged.”

“In the church group people were asked to leave for being gay... sometimes it had to be a secret...the general vibe was that it was wrong and needed to be changed.”

“Just like school, people had little knowledge of the subject and misinformation was passed around.”

“Anytime they talked about relationships it was always between a man and woman.”

While a member of a youth organisation 45% (n=49) had received information and/or support. The support and information received by young LGBT people included LGBT specific sexual and mental health information; sign-posting and referrals onto other groups, programmes and services; counselling; supportive friendships and inclusive personal development programmes. More young people (55%, n=60) however noted not receiving information and/or support with regards to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

When asked if youth organisations and groups should deal with the needs of young people who identify as LGBT, 254 people responded, 96% stating that they should. When asked how youth clubs and organisations could support LGBT young people, the following themes were highlighted –

- Raise awareness of gender identity and sexual orientations amongst all young people;

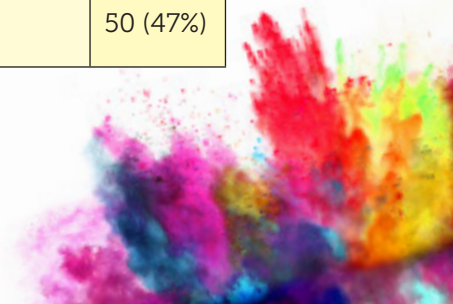
- Make LGBT resources available and ensure all resources used in programmes acknowledge LGBT individuals/identities;
- Greater acceptance of LGBT people by staff and young people, demonstrated through enforced anti-bullying policies that specifically address sexual orientation and gender identity.

Membership of LGBT Youth Groups

Over a third of young people (39%, n=106) responded to a question on experiences of LGBT specific youth groups. Table 10 provides a breakdown of responses to a list of opportunities these forums offered. Young people could indicate multiple responses. A safe environment and feelings of support and belonging all ranked highly.

Table 10: Opportunities Afforded by LGBT Youth Groups

| | |
|---|----------|
| A safe space in a non-judgmental environment | 83 (78%) |
| Allow you to explore sexual orientation and gender identity in a safe way | 63 (59%) |
| A sense of identity and belonging | 74 (70%) |
| A feeling of support | 82 (77%) |
| An opportunity to socialise in an alcohol free environment | 62 (59%) |
| Make LGBT news and information accessible | 64 (60%) |
| Create opportunities for collective action/lobbying | 50 (47%) |



Some of those accessing LGBT young groups (n=28) noted ways in which these services could be further developed, through –

“Being more accepting of less mainstream identities” (e.g. other than lesbian and gay).

Greater “outreach with those outside of the group” in order to address homo/trans/biphobia within communities.

Further “engagement with schools.”

“Talk about love and sex and feelings...we need a more healthy attitude to these things.”

Other feedback however noted that these groups were “doing a good job” and should “continue doing what they are doing.”

Additional Sources of Information and Support

Finally, when asked to identify where they had received information and support regarding their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, 264 young people responded. Table 11 provides a breakdown of responses from both the 2016 and 2003 surveys. Young people could indicate multiple answers to this question.

Table 11: Sources of Information and Support

| | 2016 | 2003 |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|
| Internet and Social Media | 191 (72%) | 182 (50%) |
| TV and films | 61 (23%) | NA |
| LGBT Youth Group | 58 (22%) | 80 (22%) |
| Nowhere | 39 (15%) | NA |
| Books and Magazines | 34 (13%) | 130 (36%) |
| Other | 29 (11%) | 55 (15%) |
| School | 19 (7%) | 14 (4%) |
| Youth Group | 13 (5%) | 25 (7%) |
| LGBT venue | 14 (5%) | 61 (17%) |
| College | 10 (4%) | 18 (5%) |
| Church Group | 1 (0.5%) | 1 (0.3%) |

This illustrates that the Internet, social media, TV and films are the most frequently cited places that young LGBT people access support and information. Reflective of the expansion of online/ electronic means of communication, it is unsurprising that more young people today access information through this medium than in 2003, and that it is by far the most frequently cited means of accessing information and support. While online resources are now more readily accessible they are still not available to all, nor is the information always accurate. Receiving information through places where young people spend a considerable amount of their time – school, college – remains low.



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8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite some positive policy developments and greater LGBT visibility within the media, growing up LGBT in Northern Ireland remains difficult for many young people. They note the many ways that LGBT identities are negatively portrayed. Both directly through homo/trans/biphobic language used by political and civic leaders and indirectly through the erasing of LGBT individuals through the privileging of heterosexuality and gender conformity within education and youth provision.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that 'coming out' within such environments remains difficult for many. While this research has indicated a drop from 5 years to 2 years in becoming aware of one's sexuality and sharing that information with others, two years remains a substantial period to conceal one's sexuality from others. Illustrative of this the numbers of young people feeling able to tell their parents about their sexuality orientation or gender identity dropped from 25% (2003) to 19% (2017). Added to this, the number of young people feeling able to tell their siblings about their sexual orientation or gender identity has also dropped from 28% (2003) to 15% (2017). Young people noting fear, stigma, shame and negative

stereotypes as factors inhibiting their ability to 'coming out' to others.

That said however, there has been a significant increase in the number of young people identifying as transgender and/or gender non-conforming. There has also been an increase from 14% in 2003 to 30% in 2017 in the number of young people identifying as bisexual. This may suggest greater awareness and personal understanding of less binary gender identities, expressions and sexual orientations than previously.

Recommendations

- Development of specific and targeted support services for young people who identify as LGBT.
 - Given that 72% of young people seek information and support relating to LGBT issues online, we recommend that more resources are deployed into improving the quality and accessibility of information online – on youth-specific websites. Where young people access information and support in places in person, such as school and youth clubs, there is a need for informed people who are equipped to help and support the young people there and then.
 - Resources made available for the continuation of LGBT specific youth programmes to allow young people to explore their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in a safe, non-judgemental environment.
 - Greater specific targeting and recruiting of LGBT young people within 'mainstream' youth

services to ensure increased participation.

- Development and delivery of appropriate training for those working with young people, e.g. teachers, social workers, youth workers, health professionals, community workers, etc.
 - Resources made available to roll out LGBT awareness training programmes targeting all those working with young people in formal and non-formal education, in both the statutory and voluntary sectors.
 - Ensuring that modules which encourage best practice for inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity issues are core elements of professional and vocational qualifications.
 - Embedding LGBT Awareness Training as part of continuous professional development initiatives within formal and non-formal educational professions.
- Ensure the curriculum taught, and policies implemented, in schools reflect the diversity of society and is inclusive of LGBT identities.
 - Inclusion of LGBT stories across the curriculum, in all subjects, to ensure visibility and positive messaging.
 - Inclusion of comprehensive modules on sexual orientation and gender identity in national curriculum for schools and youth work, which will address issues specific to LGBT young people and those who are questioning their identity. This

will also support all young people to live in a diverse society.

- Ensuring specific mentioning of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia in anti-bullying policies and procedures in all schools.
- Ensuring all schools implement best practice to effectively support transgender students in improving their educational experiences, formal and non-formal.
- The implementation of previous policy amendments (e.g. RSE Guidelines August 2015) have been subject to the discretion of individual schools, resulting in inconsistent delivery across Northern Ireland. We recommend a review of this individual opt-out policy.
- Further local research into gaps around the experiences of LGBT young people in Northern Ireland, which builds on existing literature.
 - Ensuring that policy formulation is inclusive of and informed by local research.
 - Making resources available to fund research into gaps in the literature around LGBT issues and experiences in Northern Ireland.



Glossary

Asexual: A person who lacks sexual feelings or desires. They may form romantic non-sexual connections.

Birth sex / Biological sex: The sex that a person is assigned at birth, based on your sexual organs alone.

Bisexual (Bi): A person who is physically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to both men and women.

Cisgender: A person or people whose sense of personal identity and gender corresponds with their birth sex.

Cisnormativity: The assumption that all people are cisgender, i.e. have a gender identity which matches their birth sex.

'Coming Out' (of the closet): A process that involves someone accepting their own minority sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) or transgender identity, and informing someone or some people about it. This is rarely a once off event in someone's life, and can take place multiple times in a lifetime. It is necessary because we live in a heterosexist society, where all people are assumed to be heterosexual.

Gay: Generally used to describe men who are physically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to other men. It can also be used as an umbrella term to describe same sex attracted people, i.e. gay men and gay women.

Gender Expression: The way in which a person expresses their gender identity, typically through their appearance, dress and behaviour. Preferred or chosen pronouns, as well as a preferred name, can be part of one's gender expression.

Gender Identity: A person's own sense of having a particular gender, which may or may not correspond with their birth sex.

Heterosexism: Discrimination or prejudice based on the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation. It can also be the societal assumption that everyone is heterosexual.

Heterosexual: A person who is physically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Homophobia: The dislike of or prejudice towards LGB people. Homophobic is the adjective form of this term used to describe the qualities of these characteristics, while homophobe is the noun form given as a title to individuals labelled with homophobic characteristics.

Internalised Homophobia: This is defined as the involuntary belief by LGB people that the homophobic lies, stereotypes and myths about them are true. This means the individual struggles to come to terms with their own same-sex attractions and suffers from distress as a result of their own negative attitudes towards their own sexual orientation.

Intersex: A term used to describe a person who may have the biological attributes of both sexes, or whose biological attributes do not fit with societal assumptions about what constitutes male or female.

Lesbian: A woman who is physically, sexually and/or emotionally attracted to other women.



Non-binary (Genderqueer):

This is a catch-all category for gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine – identities which are thus outside of cisnormativity.

Sexual Orientation: A person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted.

Transgender (Trans): Denoting or relating to a person whose sense of personal identity and gender does not correspond with their birth sex.

Transition / Transitioning: The journey a transgender person takes from the gender they were assigned at birth to the gender they feel is their true gender. This varies depending on the needs and desires of the individual undergoing the transition process. An individual may choose any combination of social, medical and legal steps that will help them achieve the greatest level of comfort with their body and social roles.

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The background of the entire page is a vibrant rainbow, divided into six vertical stripes of equal width. The colors, from left to right, are red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. Each stripe has a distinct crumpled paper texture, giving the background a tactile, three-dimensional appearance.

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