



## Youth, Interrupted?

*...exploring the development of opportunities for young lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and people under 16.*

Étáin O'Kane

The ShOut Project 2006

## Table of Contents

Background.....	3
Methodology .....	6
Findings .....	8
Conclusion.....	19
Recomendations.....	20
Appendix A - Questions – Online Focus Group .....	21
Appendix B - Questions - Youth Workers .....	22
Appendix C - Community Development Question.....	24
References .....	25

## Background

The average age for men to realise they were LGBT was 12 years. However the average age they first told someone else was 17 years of age. For women, realisation was at around the 13 years of age, with coming out to another person at around 18 years. This indicates that for many young people there is a substantial period in their lives when they are struggling to come to terms with their sexual orientation or transgenderism. With 86% of respondents aware of sexuality in school and 69% involved with youth organisations, it is clear that messages young people get in these places are crucial to their personal and social development and ability to manage the critical transition from youth to adult. These findings emphasise the need to consider the development of specific support for young LGBT people under 16 years old.

ShOut Report (2003)<sup>i</sup>

This project aims to address this recommendation, published in the ShOut Report in 2003. In 2002 the Department of Education, as part of its statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act (1998), identified the requirement for research into the needs of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans (LGBT) in Northern Ireland. YouthNet was commissioned to act as the lead body in carrying out this research, which involved 362 young LGBT people, 76 youth organisations, and 48 public sector bodies.

Following publication, YouthNet made a proposal to the Department of Education to progress the recommendations in the report through a Consortium of membership organisations, including some of those involved in the research steering group. Funding was granted to appoint two development officers for an initial two year project, overseen by the Consortium: Challenge for Youth, Gay & Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland, The Rainbow Project, Young Citizens In Action, YouthAction NI and YouthNet.

The Consortium developed a strategy to address the needs of young LGBT people in NI by identifying and engaging with LGBT young people, building the capacity of LGBT youth organisations, promoting good practice in the youth service and other organisations working with young people, and influencing public policy. The implementation of the strategy has been carried out by two LGBT Development Officers since August 2004, and a recent announcement by the Department of Education has ensured that the project can extend this work up until 2008.

Community development work is based upon social justice, participation, sustainable communities, self-determination, reflective practice, and working and learning together.<sup>ii</sup>

A Summary of Good Practice Standards for Community Development Work states that the “*key purpose of community development work is collectively to*

*bring about social change and justice, by working with communities to identify their needs, opportunities, rights and responsibilities; plan, organise and take action; evaluate the effectiveness and impact of the action all in ways which challenge oppression and tackle inequalities.”*

Similarly, youth work values the power of playing one's part in a group through voluntary participation, where young people can build relationships and join together and to experience new things. At its core, youth work is about valuing young people, and sets out to empower them in order to express themselves, to learn how to make informed decisions, and to take an active involvement in the issues that affect their lives.<sup>iii</sup>.

Community/voluntary and statutory youth organisations work in partnership on many levels to actively encourage community relations and to promote citizenship in order to combat traditional and historical social injustice in NI.

For example, the “Joined in Equity Diversity and Interdependence” (JEDI) initiative was set up in 2000, as “*a creative partnership promoting a new vision of community through sectoral, organizational and personal transformation.*”<sup>iv</sup>

Through this framework, there has been a drive within youth work in NI to promote fairness, difference and relationships, and to help young people to challenge issues such as sectarianism and racism, as well as address the needs of young women and men, young people in rural areas, and areas of disadvantage, disabled young people, young people from the travelling community, and LGBT young people.

Under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>v</sup>, young people have the right to associate with others - particularly with others who also identify as being part of the same minority community; to have access to accurate and appropriate education and media; to have opportunities to express themselves and to participate within youth culture and to access youth services open to other young people; to be protected from bullying and other forms of harm and discrimination; and to have their privacy protected. But how does that apply to young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans?

According to the Eighty-Third Annual Report of the Registrar General, Northern Ireland's population continues to have the youngest age structure of the countries of the United Kingdom. Twenty-two per cent of the population is aged under 16 and 35 per cent aged under 25; compared to 19 per cent aged under 16 and 31 per cent aged under 25 in the United Kingdom as a whole.<sup>vi</sup>

These statistics estimate that there are 598,605 young people in NI under 25 and 376,266 under 16 years of age. The ShOut research established that up to 10% of the total population could be lesbian, gay, bisexual and or trans. Therefore up to 59,860 young people in NI identify as LGBT, and 37,627 of them are younger than 16 years of age.

However, although there is evidence of goodwill and of instances of good practice across the youth service, the mainstream statutory institutions tasked with ensuring the health, education and well being of young people still avoid talking about sexual orientation and gender identity in any comprehensive and strategic way.

There are six LGBT youth projects operating in NI, supported by community/voluntary sector. Many of these groups have struggled with issues around sustaining funding and staff support, acquiring appropriate meeting spaces, and providing the time and human resources necessary to respond to the young people's needs and aspirations. None of these groups are open to young people under 16, in spite of the evidence showing us that young people are aware of their sexuality and gender identity and therefore require support at a much earlier age.

This report seeks to begin to understand the opportunities and barriers faced by LGBT youth groups, while considering possibilities for opening the door to individuals under the age of 16 to meet each other in safe and LGBT affirmative environments, and to have access to appropriate information and services. It also seeks to hear the voice of young people in relation to their experiences of youth provision and involvement in LGBT youth groups.

The recommendations will be presented to the LGBT Consortium to act as starting point by which it can consider the development of specific support for young LGBT people under 16 years old.

## Methodology

Thirteen questions were developed for a semi structured online focus group session with young LGBT people (Appendix A). An initial request letter was sent via email to 40 individual email addresses. The request was also posted on three yahoo groups, distributing it to 158 addresses. These email shots were followed up with further emails and/or phone calls to specific individuals known to the ShOut Project, who work directly with LGBT young people, to get information out to groups.

Young people interested in being part of the focus group contacted the author via text messages and email communication. Being exam time, it was difficult to engage young people; however it was possible to select a small sample, with an attempt at reflecting a variety of regions, youth groups, and genders.

Each participant received an explanation of the aims of the study, confidentiality, how the data would be used, and then permission was sought. Those who agreed to take part were asked their age, name, address/postcode, and their email, and telephone details. They were assured this would be for the author's eyes only, and would be shredded after the study was complete.

Participants were encouraged to choose their own nickname online, to ensure that no one would know their identity other than the researcher, unless they chose to make it known. The author stressed that they were free to disclose as much or as little information as they felt comfortable with during the chat. The chat took place over an hour and a half at a time previously agreed by the group.

21 questions eliciting qualitative and quantitative data were prepared for interviews with LGBT youth workers (Appendix B). These questions integrated community development principles with good youth work practice.

All interviewees were previously known to the author through the ShOut Project, and their participation was solicited through emails and follow up by telephone. Five interviews were conducted by telephone with individuals from LGBT projects in Dublin, Portadown, Derry, Cambridgeshire, and Glasgow, and four face-to-face interviews took place with individuals in Belfast and Newry.

## Findings

### Online Focus Group

Four young people from Derry, Belfast, County Wicklow and Dundee came online at a chosen time and were invited into the chat room. Two identified as gay men, two identified as lesbian and their average age was 19. All participants were involved in several LGBT youth groups, as follows:

- LGBT Youth Scotland
- Fife Flags
- LADZ Out group
- Gay Lesbian Youth NI
- Girls Empowering Girls
- Out & About
- Belong To Youth Project
- and The LadyBirds Women's Youth Project

Although this is too small a sample to be representative, their experiences are consistent with many ShOut Report (2003) findings. On average, members of the group came out at the age of 13, but were aware of their sexuality earlier than that. All four agreed that they began accepting their sexuality once they had their first romantic/sexual experience with another person. Younger than the average found by the ShOut research, they reported coming out<sup>1</sup> or being outed<sup>2</sup>, while still under 16 years of age.

None of the group were members of LGBT youth groups during that period of their lives. They reported getting information from books, the internet, teachers, and gay or lesbian characters and celebrities on television. They discussed chat rooms at length. Because you have to be over 18 to use them, they lied on their profiles. They discussed the fact that often they were approached by individuals online who were much older than them (20's, 30's and above). They agreed they would have liked opportunities to meet young LGBT people their own age, but felt there weren't any they knew of at the time.

Another large portion of discussion was dedicated to drinking, sex and drug taking while going to gay bars while under age. They talked about first going to bars and feeling that people in the bar were all gay and very nice to them, only to realize that it wasn't a particularly safe environment.

When asked how they could have changed their situations then, two explained that they were confused and depressed at that age. The group suggested that they would have made people more accepting, that *"gay people could walk down the street hand in hand without getting abuse"*, and *"schools would teach about all different kinds of families etc so kids knew from*

---

<sup>1</sup> Coming out: the process of recognising and understanding your sexual orientation and/or gender identity, and making that identity known to others.

<sup>2</sup> Being outed: having your sexual orientation and/or gender identity known to others without your consent.

*an early age that people were different and being gay would have been more normal.”*

The group felt that being involved in LGBT groups gave them a sense of belonging, *“feeling good about being gay”, “that other people had had the same or worse experiences and that you were not alone”, “learning that being gay doesn’t have to define your every element of existence”, and “knowing that people were going through was I was going through...even if we only met for 2 hours on a Monday...I looked forward to it all week. Now we see each other almost every day...and have ‘gay days out’ every week”.*

To improve LGBT youth groups they felt there should be more of them, they should be more accessible and have them in schools and available to young people in rural areas.

When asked what recommendations they would make to meet young LGBT people’s needs, they offered:

- *educate other young people in schools, educate teachers, educate youth leaders in mainstream youth projects so that it is inclusive of LGBT people*
- *access schools and provide support to students, educate teachers*
- *increased visibility in schools*
- *have a set curriculum in schools so that LGBT people are given role models and are mentioned*
- *give teachers training in diversity and teach them not to be homophobic gets who used phrased like “it’s probably just a phase”*
- *set up groups for younger people...say for a few hours before the other groups starts...from 13-16 maybe...so they aren’t all in together... because there’s definitely a need for groups for younger people*
- *maybe set up a secure on-line groups and advertise them in schools*
- *more openly gay people*
- *maybe start a mentoring system for younger gay people, like a befriending thing...just someone they can talk to, who’s been through everything and let them know it’ll work out ok*

## LGBT Youth Group Interviews

### LGBT Youth Group Profiles

Six LGBT youth groups currently exist in Northern Ireland: two for young women, one for young men, and four mixed groups. The mixed groups report more men than women involved.

A project based in Belfast, and a project covering the Craigavon/Banbridge area, have both operated for less than two years. The projects in Derry and Newry have run for two, and two and a half years. The remaining two projects, in Belfast, have run for five and six and a half years respectively.

Respondents collectively estimated that up to 436 young people were involved in their projects over their time of operation; however a total number

of 59 young people were involved in their projects at present. The Craigavon group (n=0) and the Newry group (n=3) reported the fewest number, while one group in Belfast (n=20) and the Derry group ((n=17.5) reported the largest number of young people involved.

Cross referenced with the statistics on the LGBT youth population in Northern Ireland, these figures correlate to 0.9% of all LGBT young people under the age of 25 presently gaining access to services specifically geared to meeting their needs across the entire youth sector today.

Meanwhile, the Glasgow Outreach Initiative were able to estimate that they have had contact with 1500 young people over seven months of operation, and that they intended to make contact with 10,000 over a three-year period.

The BeLonG To Youth project in Dublin estimates that they made contact with 280 young people in 2004 and 460 young people in 2005 (making a total of 740). They report considerably fewer numbers previous to 2004, and do not have statistics available for 2006 yet, but they were confident the number would see an increase on previous year. The 2byouth project and the Young Pink and Talented project in Cambridgeshire have involved up to 94 young people over two years.

Glasgow, Cambridgeshire and Dublin also found that more young men get involved in their projects, and one group had set up a women's group to redress this.

#### Terms of Reference and Strategic Work Plans

The Glasgow, Cambridgeshire and Dublin based projects have clear terms of reference, mission statements and service plans and/or strategic work plans. In contrast, only two groups in NI have formal written statements and/or strategic work plans. Two NI groups had no written terms of reference or strategic work plans, explaining that their projects were directed by what the young people requested on an ongoing and informal basis.

#### Core elements of project/work

The main element of work in Northern Ireland is reported as follows.

##### *Health*

- addressing mental health issues
- personal development and confidence building
- enabling young people to accept themselves
- sexual health
- drug and alcohol use

This work took place through time-bound and structured personal development programmes, as well as by creating an environment where young people could come and feel comfortable to talk about their feelings, identity, and where members of the group could become more confident. All participants talked about the need for 'safe space'.

For example, one participant discussed the need to develop a model of working with young women which allows them to identify with others, be and feel a part of something, and to create a safe environment.

#### *Social opportunities*

- arts and crafts
- trips out
- having fun
- providing a social outlet for young LGBT people
- peer support and leadership
- learning new skills

In two groups, young people took part in structured activities that they are involved in planning, particularly through the arts, with a view to building confidence and developing creative and practical skills. Several groups provided young people with opportunities to train in peer leadership and mentoring, including shadowing and/or training to be sessional workers for their project. One group was keen to provide accreditation and public celebration of their achievements in order to generate pride in what they were achieving and to acknowledge the efforts put in by group members. This group felt that participation and ownership by the young people was a very high priority as *“they are the experts in their own lives.”*

Outside Northern Ireland, groups reported similar core work: providing a space to meet, providing resources on issues and internet access. One mixed group leader also discussed the need to work with young women in order to redress the gender imbalance they were experiencing. All groups trained young people involved in their projects to take on leadership and peer education roles. And all three respondents talked about the need to promote their service to young people, while being able to signpost to other organisations where appropriate.

#### *Education*

All three projects in Dublin, Cambridgeshire and Glasgow promoted services in schools and with youth workers. A core element of one group’s work was building partnerships with education services, the local council, schools, and venue owners etc to target hard to reach young people.

#### *Visibility*

In England, public recognition and showcasing helped to promote the service, and young people could work towards Youth Achievement and Millennium Volunteers awards.

The Irish group discussed their focus on capacity building, and working within a *“critical social education model”* which encourages young people to understand their rights and civil liberties, how to affect social change themselves, and to engage in activism. Young people are also encouraged to attain visibility through, for example, campaigning against homophobia and homophobic bullying with schools by developing posters, an information booklet and training.

### Main needs/issues identified by young people

When asked about the needs and issues being identified by the young people involved in projects, participants identified the following themes.

#### Relationships

- coming out
- dealing with families' reactions
- coping with loneliness and isolation experiences within communities and families.

Relationships and coming out issues featured highly – such as young people asking, “*what’s a gay relationship?*” or “*what does it mean to be gay?*” or about appropriate behaviour as an LGBT young person with peers and in romantic relationships. Concerns about family, and the need for positive role models were highlighted.

#### Safety

- when out and about
- within relationships
- physical and mental abuse
  - i.e. bullying at school, dealing with the stigma of identifying as LGBT before coming out.
- access to appropriate information

One participant mentioned that young people wanted to share their experience of bullying and harassment, needed to talk about it and develop ways of dealing with it, and to find out their rights, i.e. that they deserve NOT to be treated that way. Another worker talked about homophobic bullying and truancy. Learning how to protect themselves in terms getting info on sexual health, as well as alcohol and drug misuse were also discussed.

#### Personal development

- mental health issues
- the affects of homophobia
- building self awareness and confidence
- challenging the young people’s own attitudes and preconceptions
- art and creativity

Workers in NI discussed the lack of confidence young people had due to fear of homophobia. They expressed a feeling that LGBT young people needed a place to feel comfortable and have a laugh, a place to meet that was safe and where they could be themselves and to meet other LGBT young people.

The Scottish, Irish and English groups talked about their groups needing “*stuff they probably would have missed out on in school*” and “*to have a sense of belonging, peer support and something that is theirs*” and “*acceptance and affirmation, which is lacking in the rest of their lives*”. All

three project workers stressed the need to be in an environment where being who they are is a normal thing.

These groups expressed a belief that young people wanted positive opportunities with their peers rather than focussing on sexuality. One participant explained that this was because they had already come through a process of normalising their experience and becoming empowered. Two participants explained how the young people wished to engage with the wider community and the world, upon which they wanted *“to make an impact.”* Two projects responded to this need through creative expression.

Self-confidence to join a group was raised. One group got a lot of email contact, but the younger people didn't often feel comfortable coming in to the project. They therefore felt it important to attempt to raise confidence enough to get involved. Another group talked about the need to nourish the young people's self-esteem.

The specific needs of young trans people, young people in care and rural young people were highlighted by the English, Scottish and Irish participants.

#### *Health*

Sexual health was mentioned by one participant. Two participants discussed issues around drugs awareness and alcohol addiction, and one drew attention to lack of education due to leaving school early or experiencing homelessness as a problem.

Several participants discussed young people's need to understanding their rights to health, education, and other services they can access outside the group. Although one participant explained that their project had less of focus on mental health and was more about general peer support because over the course of the project, the young people's needs moved from a focus on themselves, to focus on society.

#### Evaluation of impact/success

Five projects in NI had no system of evaluation beyond recording the number of young people attending their service, but reported using anecdotal evidence such as direct observation and face-to-face feedback. One of these groups was able to record hits on their online website and gain an insight into the needs of young people through the topics being addressed in their online discussion forum. One group mentioned the fact that it *“would've been good to get an evaluation done externally but we had no money.”*

The remaining Northern Irish organisation records how many young people enrol, and then complete their programme. They evaluate sessions and do a larger end of year evaluation. The project coordinator is developing a practice paper to disseminate within their agency, and as a model of good practice throughout the youth sector.

The Scottish project involves outreach work with young people online. They record notes on all interventions, including post codes and age. They hold

regular team building and supervision meetings, and staff review their work at monthly objectives meetings. Eight young people per year receive peer education training and young people are involved in employing sessional workers. Young people are also engaged through focus groups & evaluations after workshops, and the project gets feedback from clinical services on uptake rates. They suggested that infection rate statistics is another form of long-term evidence they can use to assess their impact and success.

The English project evaluates sessions through session books, and they can assess success by looking at the number of referrals they get from project partners. As much of their work is art based, success is evidenced by the end product. They also rely on the fact that young people chose to come back to engage in new projects, and staff observations.

The Dublin group uses an evaluation system imposed by their funders, which collects the number of young people involved, age profiles, et cetera. Each session is evaluated and at the end of each programme young people are asked to provide activity based and/or written evaluations, depending on nature of programme. They receive feedback from other organisations (albeit more soft and vague), and from people in the commercial gay scene. The project also conducts yearly plan reviews which include performance indicators.

Community development principles

Participants were asked to consider to what extent they felt their projects adhered to community development principles by giving them six phrases with a brief explanation of what each meant, if required, and asking them to assess on a scale from one (strongly disagree) to five (strongly agree).

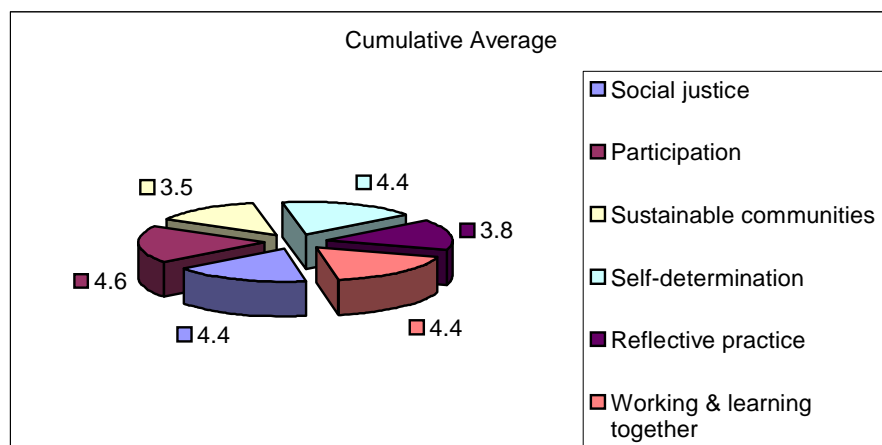


Fig 1. Adherence to community development principles

The results (Appendix C) show that cumulatively, participation was scored highest at 4.6, while social justice, self-determination and working and learning together all got scores of 4.4. Reflective practice hovers between a “neutral” and “agree” response, and sustainable communities got the lowest score of 3.5.

### Age ranges in LGBT youth groups

Five LGBT youth groups in NI are open to young people between 16 and 25 years of age, and one targets 18 to 30 year olds.

One group believes the average age of young people in their project was 16, but the other projects reports averages between 18 and 23. The cumulative average age is over 19.7 years of age, but if you factor out the first group's estimate, this raises to 20.4 years of age.

In contrast, the initiative in Glasgow targets 13 to 25 year olds, with an estimated average age of 16. The Cambridgeshire group has several projects running – one targeting young people at secondary school, a drop in service for 12 to 17 year olds, and a creative, arts based project which is open to anyone on a drop in basis, with an estimated core group between the ages of 15 and 20. This worker reports the approximate average age in the drop in is 15, and the arts project's average age is 18.

The group in Dublin targets 14 to 23 year olds and runs three separate projects – one for the younger age range of 14 to 17, one open to anyone on a drop in basis, and a young women's group also open to all ages. They suggest that the average age in their project is 17 or younger. Therefore, the cumulative average age of young people involved in these three groups is 16.5.

### Background/rationale for age range of target group

In Northern Ireland the age range for the youth service is 4 – 25 years as recognised by the Department of Education in the Youth Service Policy Review (1999).

Three groups stated that that their organisations have a remit to work with 16 to 25 years of age, and therefore their LGBT group is the same. When asked why they could not work with younger ages, they suggested that this was funding-led. Two groups had organisational policies restricting their work to 16-25 year olds, mainly because of how funding streams worked. One stated that the Education and Library Board who gave them funding gave them a remit of work with 16-25 year olds. Another group's project funding was from the Department for Education and Learning which also required the age to be set at that range.

However, all participants discussed concerns about child protection, and dilemmas around parental consent when discussing the rationale for the age range targeted by their projects.

For example, one participant explained that before they came into their project, it had already been decided that they would work with young people over 18 in order to avoid parental consent issues or concerns around child protection. They considered whether this decision may have also been due to a feeling that the youth service didn't traditionally support this kind of work.

Another participant talked about the fact that 16 and 17 year olds were calling local help lines before the group was set up, so the need was established, otherwise he suspected that the group may have been limited to 18-25 year olds, and explained that the reason for this was concern about child protection issues.

A third participant spoke about the fear of homophobia as being a barrier to groups providing services to young LGBT people under 18, *“that’s a real factor with LGBT youth groups, particularly for workers.”* When asked to elaborate, they explained that *“our young people are sexualised by society”* and the group literally had fears of accusations of sexual abuse, *“because people never see past sex.”* However, they felt that this was changing because of a greater body of work and research being done in the area to establish that young people are coming out younger than ever before. They confirmed that they were getting approached by young people under 18 years of age, *“whose needs aren’t being met at all.”* In their experience, 25 was too high an age, and young people in the group over 21 acted more as leaders than members of the youth group.

The group open to people over 25 decided to do so because they found that some of the younger ones in the project had friends over 25 who still had needs because, *“they were in the closet, weren’t able to face up to it, and were isolated. They only had online access to the community.”*

In Dublin, a youth led group for ages 17 upward had previously existed. This was based on the legal age one can consent to sex in Ireland. They found that it kept collapsing due to lack of support – and so a group of organisations endeavoured to set up a professionally supported group. The organisations involved were in contact with young people under 17 but like the NI groups, were concerned about their legal position regarding child protection and parental consent.

They presented a case for working with a younger age range to the Dublin Youth Board, who gave them clarification on their legal position and allowed them to work with young people from 14 years of age, provided that they had child protection policies in place and professional youth workers present. Having an open door policy meant that they didn’t require parental consent, but the group also developed a mechanism for parental support in partnership with Parents Support. The interviewee felt that parental consent was often overlaid as an issue when working with LGBT young people.

The Cambridgeshire projects also operate as a drop in service so anyone can join. The age range was determined by the needs identified by young people in school.

In Scotland, the project adhered to its organisation’s standard, and the participant offered that 25 is a given standard upper age limit in youth work practice. To work with young people under 16, they have implemented the Frazier Guidelines, which safeguards professionals when providing sexual health guidance to young people without parental consent by ensuring that an

assessment of risk and understanding of advice/treatment is determined prior to any intervention occurring.

#### Opportunities to work with a younger age group

In Northern Ireland, one participant felt there were no opportunities at the moment, while another suggested that they would be able to work with younger people if a child protection policy was enforced. Several workers suggested building partnerships with youth groups who work younger age ranges. Other ideas were to provide information in schools and youth centres, to hold sessions in youth clubs with youth leaders, general one-off sessions with generic youth groups, and to develop a programme of LGBT issues for young people and training for youth workers.

Another suggestion was to offer email and telephone support. One group reported that they were able to refer younger people to use their website, but admitted that young people would still be keen to be in a peer setting. It was thought one option would be to allow them to take part in voluntary social activities in town. They would like to set up a drop-in to establish younger people's needs and develop service accordingly, but raised the issue of insurance and child protection. The issue of fears for parents was also a concern, and several participants suggested developing support for parents who needed it.

The Glasgow, Cambridgeshire and Dublin groups presented similar suggestions – offering web-based forums for as a means of first contact. One group did work in rural areas to look at an online drop in (chat room facility hosted by different agencies throughout the week, and moderated by trained peer leaders) and also looked at taking drop in to different youth venues across rural areas. The need to develop specific work with young women who are referred by outside agencies/schools and who seem less comfortable coming into a mixed group and therefore may need extra support was raised.

They also suggested including LGBT awareness-raising with teachers providing personal social health education (PSHE) curriculum, encouraging youth workers who work with the younger age group to think and talk about the issues through their National Youth Council. They felt they could develop work in group settings in primary schools and mainstream youth projects looking at discrimination.

All groups felt it important that young people should be given opportunities to access social space away from school, "*where they can do normal teenager stuff, denied to them in their day to day lives.*" However, one group offered that their under 17's drop in wasn't very successful so a strategy for this work still needed to be developed. Another suggestion was under 18s discos.

#### Barriers to working with the younger age group

Parental consent, limited resources and funding, and child protection were the main points of discussion. One participant was concerned that local Education and Library Boards, and the youth service in general, would be reticent to support it, but admitted that they seemed to be becoming more

open. Another participant also questioned whether funders would be cautious about financing projects that involved lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people.

There were discussions about fear of the unknown, and of youth workers' own ability and understanding of the needs of younger people, as well as questions as to how young people could be found and/or made aware of the service. Two participants mentioned negative cultural attitudes, religious and social stigmatisation of LGBT people, and the problem of young LGBT people and the people working with them being sexualised.

One worker talked about their discomfort as a practitioner when faced with a dilemma between maintaining the confidentiality of the young person and deciding how much information about a project parents required in order to give consent. This was especially difficult when working with young people who weren't yet out to their families. However, regarding this issue, another participant offered, *“but if there was support for parents as well then would this be a barrier?”*

Participants also discussed the fact that younger people may have difficulties coming forward to admit or to understand their feelings, and about *“what message we send out there to make young people comfortable and interested in getting involved.”* There were questions about how younger people could access information, as well as whether they had the independence to attend and freedom to participate. Misinformation in schools and other projects that confuses young people was seen as a barrier, as well as transport issues.

Finally, one participant suggested that there was a history of gay groups setting up youth services but some of these groups didn't necessarily do a good job, and that this was increasingly seen as inappropriate because they were not youth work focussed and regulations for youth work nationally were increasingly focussing on standardization and professionalism.

#### Organisational and personal commitment to working with younger people

The Scottish, Irish and English groups felt that their organisation was committed to working with a younger age range in the future. One offered: *“we went out of our way to commit to working with younger people from the beginning.”* When asked whether they had a personal commitment to working with younger people, participants in Glasgow, Cambridgeshire and Dublin said yes. One offered that, *“it's clear from research that young people are coming out at a younger age. What about 12 13 year olds? Do we turn them away? We have to respond to their needs because that's their reality.”*

In Northern Ireland, three workers felt their organisations would support working with young LGBT under 16. One worker said they doubted they would support it, while the remaining two reiterated that their organisation worked with 16-25 year olds –however, one offered that they embedded inclusion of LGBT issues within their overall work and ethos, and therefore didn't specifically have a desire to develop specific programmes.

Three other groups felt their organisation would support it, one group emphatically supporting the idea, stating “it’s a matter of preventing the damage when they are younger or dealing with the damage with it’s already done.” On a personal level, two workers in NI said they were committed to this work, two said yes but it would depend on resources and funding, one said that they would within mainstream work, and a final one felt that the stigma of homophobia needed to be addressed first, however, they wished to be able to signpost younger people to appropriate services.

#### Further Suggested Reading

Participants reported relying on internal information and reports, and on young people in group. However, they also suggested the following academic literature and/or resources as being useful in their practice:

- It’s Elementary (US Video)
- ShOut Report (2003)
- Community Planning (LGBT Youth Scotland)
- Research by Ian Rivers (no reference provided)
- Glasgow Health Promotion
- Stonewall
- An Acceptable Prejudice? (Institute for Conflict Research, 2003)
- Family Planning Association
- Gay Community News
- Attitude Magazine
- A Mighty Silence (Lesbian Advocacy Services Initiative, 2002)
- Allsorts London
- Suicide prevention – Grossman et al (no reference provided)
- Out on Your Own (Rainbow Project, 2006)
- Australian Drugs Taskforce (no reference provided)
- Sears, J.T., ed: Youth, Education, and Sexualities: An International Encyclopedia. Greenwood Press (US)

## Conclusion

This study has revealed that community development principles are being implemented within the community/voluntary youth sector. However, improvements could be made in terms of reflective practice and sustainability. Like the Scottish, Irish and English projects, Northern Irish groups would benefit from strategic development, including clear aims, project planning, and appropriate measures for evaluation. As funding and resources were recurrent in discussions, strategic planning should also consider sustainability as a goal of project design. It seems that many projects in NI are set up responding to the needs of young people which works in the short term until money runs out, or human resources become strained. Project design must incorporate methods for ensuring that young people receive a consistent service over the long term.

Education was the target of much discourse both by young people and youth workers. Schools, teachers, and curriculum were seen as being in need of improvement. Participants are aware of issues regarding transportation, the needs of young people in rural areas and of young women. However, the needs of trans young people were not mentioned by workers in Northern Ireland, whereas projects elsewhere seemed to be addressing this issue more explicitly.

Considerations as to how projects attract young people, market their service and provide support were discussed. Suggestions were made for the development telephone support, as well as setting up mentoring for older LGBT people to support younger people and web-based projects.

However, there also was an acknowledgement that the internet posed safety issues, and that there was also a need for social contact among young LGBT people in order to address the negative impact of exclusion, discrimination and abuse. Social contact was also seen as the means by which young people gained skills, improved confidence and formed support networks.

Workers clearly believe that the needs of young LGBT people under 16 must be addressed, and that such young people would benefit from safe and affirming single-identity spaces. They also express a willingness to work with young people under 16. Yet fears over child protection and gaining parental consent for young people to participate in LGBT projects ran through interviews. From a community development standpoint, this would suggest that the need of parents and families of LGBT young people need to be addressed.

The English, Scottish and Irish respondents clearly did not focus on these issues as much as the Northern Irish groups. This may be due to lack of definitive guidance by the Department of Education and Education and Library Boards, but further exploration may be necessary to understand its pervasiveness in Northern Ireland.

## Recommendations

### **The LGBT Consortium should:**

1. carry out a needs analysis with young people under the age of 16, in order to determine the types of opportunities, projects and services they wish to have developed on their behalf.
2. develop a strategy in order to advocate on behalf of young LGBT people under the age of 16, integrating community development principles with good youth work practice.
3. work with the Department of Education to develop clear guidelines for schools and youth workers in order to clarify acceptable standards and requirements for working with LGBT young people under the age of 16. This should include clarification on confidentiality policy, child protection, and other legal responsibilities.
4. seek clarification with the Education and Library Boards, and other funders, on how funding streams for young people under 16 can be used to pursue opportunities for LGBT youth groups to support these young people.
5. promote and celebrate examples of good practice, and strengthen its relationships with those LGBT youth projects who are successfully engaging LGBT young people.
6. support LGBT youth groups and projects in the NI who wish to develop services for young people under 16.
7. consider developing partnerships with relevant agencies that provide support and advice to parents to ensure that the parents and families of LGBT young people are addressed.

## Appendix A

### Questions – Online Focus Group

1	How old are you?
2	How many LGBT youth groups do you belong to?
3	How do you define your sexual orientation and/or gender identity?
4	How old were you when you become aware of your identity?
5	What was it like for you at that time?
6	How old were you when you came out?
7	Who knew first, and who did you tell first (if they were different)?
8	Were you a member of a youth club or organisation at that time of coming to realise your sexuality, coming out etc?
9	Where did you get your information and support from at that time when you were first realising, having first experiences, coming out/being outed?
10	If I could hand you a magic wand and take you back to that time in your life when you were younger, what would that world look like?
11	What are the good things you've experienced from being part of LGBT youth groups?
12	What would you improve about LGBT youth groups if you could?
13	What would your suggestions be so that younger people under 18, under 16, have a chance to access youth groups that meet their needs?

## Appendix B

### Questions - Youth Workers

1	Project Title?					
2	Youth Worker's Name?					
3	Role and length of time involved?					
4	Area Covered?					
5	Length of Operation?					
6	Total number of young people who have made use of the project?					
7	Current number of members?					
8	What is the gender balance?					
9	Does the project have terms of reference/mission statement?					
10	Do you have a strategy and work-plan?					
11	What do you see as the core elements of project/your work?					
12	What are the main needs/issues that young people are identifying?					
13	How do you evaluate of impact/success					
14	Community development values – to what degree do you think this project adheres to these values and principles?					
		1 Strongly Disagree	2 Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Agree	5 Strongly Agree
	Social Justice					
	Participation					
	Sustainable communities					
	Self-determination					
	Reflective practice					
	Working & learning together					
	Additional discussion points					
15	Age range of target group?					
16	Current average age?					
17	Background/rationale for age range of target group?					

18	What opportunities do you believe there are to work with younger age group?
19	What barriers do you believe there are to work with younger age group?
20	Do you have a personal desire to work with younger people?
21	Do you perceive there to be an organisational commitment to working with younger people?
22	What academic literature and/or research do you find useful?

## Appendix C

### Community Development Question

	Social justice	Participation	Sustainable communities	Self-determination	Reflective practice	Working & learning together
Group A (LL)	4.5	5	3	5	2	3.5
Group B (GN)	4	4	4	4	4	4
Group C (SM)	4	5	3	4	5	5
Group D (RM)	4	5	4	5	5	4
Group E (M)	4	5	3	4	3	5
Group F (JD)	4	4	3	4	3	4
Group G (SK)	5	4	5	5	4	5
Group H (LJ)	5	5	5	4	4	5
Group I (MB)	5	5	2	5	4	4
Cumulative Average	4.4	4.6	3.5	4.4	3.8	4.4

## References

- 
- i Carolan, F, Redmond, S (2003) ShOut: Research into the needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT). YouthNet.
- ii A Summary of Good Practice Standards for Community Development Work. Belfast: CWETN.
- iii Smith, M. K. (1997) "Introducing informal education", *the encyclopedia of informal education*. <http://www.infed.org/i-intro.htm>
- iv A Framework for Reflection in Practice. Belfast: JEDI.
- v The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).
- vi Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. "STATISTICAL PRESS NOTICE (November 2005).
- vii A Youth Service for a New Millennium: Youth Service Policy Review (1999). Department of Education.