



Submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) on its review of sexual health and relationship education across primary and post primary schools

11 September 2018

Background Information

BeLong To is Ireland's national organisation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Non-Binary (LGBTI+) young people. BeLong To's youth services in Dublin and around Ireland provide vital supports to LGBTI+ young people. BeLong To also works with government and other partners so that Ireland will be safe, equal and welcoming for LGBTI+ young people. BeLong To is pleased to make a submission to the CSO on the 2021 consultation.

BeLong To is pleased to make a submission to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on its review of sexual health and relationship education across primary and post primary schools.

LGBTI+ young people in Ireland

Ireland changed what it means to grow up LGBTI+ in Ireland in 2015 with a resounding Yes in the marriage equality referendum and with the Gender Recognition Act. However, recent Irish research confirms BeLong To's experience from our frontline work with young people that anti- LGBTI+ stigma results in significantly higher mental health challenges for young LGBTI+ people. We have seen a **doubling in the numbers of young people in crisis who have come to our services, especially those who are under-18**. Our dedicated youth workers and our resilience programmes are working all-out to meet the need.

In March 2016, former President of Ireland, Dr Mary McAleese, launched a large groundbreaking report on the mental health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people in Ireland. *The LGBTIreland Report*¹ was funded by the HSE's National Office for Suicide Prevention. It

¹ Higgins, Agnes, Doyle, L, Downes, C; Murphy, R; Sharek, D; DeVries, J; Begley, T; McCann, E; Sheerin, F & Smyth, S (2016). *The*

was conducted by Dr Agnes Higgins and colleagues in the School of Nursing, Trinity College, and had a special focus on LGBTI young people.

The LGBTIreland Report found that:

1. 56% of LGBTI who were aged 14 to 18 years had self-harmed, 70% had suicidal thoughts and one in three had attempted suicide.
2. In comparison, UCD/Headstrong's research found 21% of 17–25-year-olds overall engaged in self-harm.²
3. The **LGBTIreland** report showed a link between a young person having experienced LGBTI-based bullying, isolation, fear of rejection and serious mental health difficulties.
4. 67% (of those in school now or in past 5 years) **witnessed** anti-LGBTI bullying. And, 50% of LGBTI students **experienced** bullying.
5. Those who had experienced anti-LGBTI bullying had much higher levels of depression, anxiety, stress and alcohol use. They were also more likely to self-harm or have suicidal thoughts.

In summary, compared to the wider population of young people in Ireland, LGBTI young people had:

- **Two times** the level of self-harm.
- **Three times** the level of attempted suicide.
- **Four times** the level of severe or extremely severe stress, anxiety and depression.

We know from the young people we work with that shame, mixed messaging, and too often silence surrounds the areas of gender, sexuality and relationships in many classrooms across Ireland. Irish young people receive inadequate information relating to sexuality, safe sex, STI's, consent, and reproduction. In many schools young people receive incomplete or no information on being LGBTI+ despite 'Growing up LGBT' being part of the SPHE (Social Personal Health Education) and RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) curriculum in post primary schools. Growing Up LGBT: A Resource for SPHE and RSE³ was developed by the Department of Education and Skills and the Health Service Executive through the Social, Personal and Health Education Support Service, in conjunction with BeLong To Youth Services and GLEN (Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) in 2013.

The young LGBTI+ people we work with, in our Dublin groups and that our colleagues work with throughout our National Network of LGBTI+

LGBTIreland report: National study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender & intersex

people in Ireland. Dublin: www.glen.ie , www.belongto.org

² Dooley & Fitzgerald, 2012, *My World Survey. National Study of Youth Mental Health.*

³ <http://www.pdst.ie/sites/default/files/LGBT%20English%20Print.pdf>

youth groups, have been calling for improvements to sex education for many years now. The issue has been raised in BeLonG To's regular surveys of young people who attend our services and most recently in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs consultations in 2017 for the [LGBTI+ Youth Strategy, 2018](#). Gay Community News (GCN) published their [Budding Burning Issues survey](#) in August 2017. The Budding Burning Issues was a survey of 565 young LGBT+ people nationwide and the second biggest issue identified by young people was the need to overhaul the way our education system approaches sexuality and relationships education to ensure it is inclusive of LGBTI+ people and issues.

Gay Community News (GCN) Budding Burning Issues⁴

70% of the respondents disagreed with the statement: "Schools in Ireland today are safe places and are fully inclusive of LGBT+ students." 39% highlighted a serious lack of inclusive sex education, and 25% said bullying and homophobia continues to be a problem.

Direct Quotes from young people re Sexual Health

What do you think is the most important issue for young LGBT people in Ireland?

- *Practically speaking sex education for lesbian and gay people is completely nonexistent in most schools, Poor sex education, lack of education around gender and sexuality in school.*
- *Little support from schools, teachers are misinformed and have absolutely no idea how to deal with and talk about LGBT+ issues and how to address people within the LGBT+ community.*
- *In all my school years there was no same-sex sex talk, no information on coping with realising you're LGBT+, no representation in school literature whatsoever. That struck me as a major issue because in a school of over 700 students there's absolutely no way all of them are straight!*
- *LGBTQI inclusive Sex Ed should be taught in schools And there should be less heteronormativity in school books in both primary and secondary schools.*
- *In school there is NO sex education for gay students or about STIs and using protection where it concerns gay people all u get is a two-minute notice in religion class and even then they don't really care about LGBT students*

BeLonG To Recommendations

BeLonG To welcomes the NCCA's review of sexual health and relationship education across primary and post primary schools. BeLonG To is

⁴ <https://gcn.ie/70-percent-of-lgbt-young-people-say-that-schools-in-ireland-are-not-safe-places/>

committed to an education system that supports young people to make healthy and respectful choices about their bodies and relationships. RSE and SPHE can help equip our young people with knowledge around sexual orientation, gender identity, safe sex and remove the stigma shrouding LGBTI+ topics in a classroom setting, but schools and teachers need to be supported to ensure it is taught.

BeLonG To submits that updating RSE resources is only one part of what needs to happen so that comprehensive information on sexual orientation, gender identity, and coming out can be provided to young people. In the absence of a staff member or management leadership committed to LGBTI+ issues in a school, it is our experience that the Growing Up LGBT curriculum is not taught to young people. We would submit that engagement with sexuality education must not be optional or determined by the ethos of a school board. We propose that teachers and other staff in schools need training on how to teach this part of curriculum as part of initial teacher education and as CPD, and that class time for RSE covering LGBTI+ issues must be timetabled for both junior and senior cycles in every school.

Moreover, as confirmed in the LGBTIreland report, 12 is the most common age for a young person to realise that they may be LGBT (however many begin to discover this much younger) we propose that 5th & 6th classes in Primary schools should also be introduced to diversity, inclusion and equality around gender and sexual orientation.

Alltogether Now⁵ is a project that was developed by St Patrick's college DCU with the support of BeLonG To and the Department of Education, which can be implemented as part of the SPHE. The resources, lesson plans and full report for All Together Now were developed by Dr Bernie Collins, Dr Seline Keating and Prof Morgan from St Patrick's College (DCU) and are [now available to download](#) for primary school teachers.

For secondary schools BeLonG To has also produced resources such as [Safe and Supportive Schools](#) with the HSE⁶ This is a Whole School Community Model approach -a model that involved working with teachers, parents, students and the broader community to build a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for LGBT young people. We also run [Stand Up Anti Bullying](#)⁷ campaign annually. In 2017 42% of secondary schools participated. All of this work aims to ensure young people feel safe in school, to protect their well-being, make sure they feel they belong in school.

⁵ <https://gcn.ie/new-primary-school-resource-all-together-now-tackles-homophobia/>

⁶ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/media/pressrel/lgbtsafesupportiveschoolsproject.html>

⁷ <http://belongto.org/professionals/stand-up-awareness-week/>

According to 2016 UNESCO research,⁸ comprehensive sexuality education has positive effects including increasing knowledge about different aspects of sexuality, behaviours and risks of pregnancy or HIV and other STIs. Sex education results in reduced risk-taking behaviour and increased use of condoms and contraception.

BeLonG To strongly advocates that we need to transform how schools view and engage with sex education and LGBTI+ issues. We would recommend the inclusion of Growing up LGBTI+ issues in the core RSE curriculum, TRUST. Moreover, we believe that young people's sexual and mental health and well-being could be significantly improved through the integration of LGBTI+ issues and identities across all relevant subjects. In order to address stigma, social exclusion and bullying (major causes of mental health problems) as well as educate **all** our young people about their health and well-being, LGBTI+ identities should not be confined to one book and one subject. The research already outlined shows that 70% of LGBTI+ young people feel unsafe at school. The LGBTIreland report found that feelings of isolation and not belonging can have serious impacts on the mental health of LGBTI young people. Protecting young people's mental health and well-being should not be optional. It is too important.

Back in 2015, Ireland said yes to marriage equality. BeLonG To is now calling for our education system to say yes to the inclusion of LGBTI+ identities in a real and meaningful way. On behalf of all the young people, parents and teachers that we work with, we are advocating for a school system where every young person has access to scientifically factual, up-to-date information about sexuality, sexual orientation, gender identity, STI's, safe sex, and consent. Learning about these topics is an essential life skill, and vital to realise young people's right to health and well-being.

In summary our recommendations are as follows:

1. Update Growing up LGBT RSE resources.
2. Integrate Growing Up LGBT into main SPHE/RSE curriculum.
3. Provide teachers with training as part of their initial teacher education and CPD, on how to teach Growing up LGBT to build their confidence and capacity to cover these issues.
4. Include LGBTI+ identities across subjects to create visibility, value, inclusion and to highlight role-models for young LGBTI people.
5. Timetable RSE lessons in every school inclusive of Growing Up LGBT.
6. Resource Safe and Supportive Schools programme developed by HSE and

BeLonG To so that it can be rolled out in second level schools nationally.

7. Increases resources to reach more schools as part of Stand Up Anti Bullying

⁸ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0026/002607/260770e.pdf>

campaign and provide sub cover to enable all teachers to attend the training.

8. Resource Alltogether Now developed by St Patrick's (DCU) and BeLong To so

that is can be rolled out in 5th & 6th classes in primary schools nationally.

9. Include Growing Up LGBT and anti-bullying programme in the whole school

Inspections.

BeLong To would be happy to provide an in-person briefing to the NCCA as part of its review of sexual health and relationship with a particular focus on LGBTI+ young people in Ireland.

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BeLong To's Sexual Health Work

BeLong To runs sexual health workshops with the young people who attend our youth groups. We also run 'In the Know' a 6-week personal development course aimed at young MSM (including trans people) aged 17-24, four times a year. Our young women's group, the Ladybirds are currently working on a sexual health campaign. We run a weekly 'Monday Chats' service, which provides information, support and integration into peer support groups and external referral services for young LGBT+ people between 14-23 years old.

We are currently collaborating with Pieta House to provide young LGBT+ people at risk of self-harm or suicide with access to a LGBT+ youth friendly and experienced counsellor two days' a week within BeLong To Youth Service Dublin. We also provide young LGBT+ people with access onsite to the only designated LGBT+ drugs outreach/education worker in Ireland. This worker delivers an outreach service to many 'hard to reach' young LGBT+ people on the streets in Dublin, providing information on drugs and alcohol harm reduction, sexual health as well as mental health and well-being.

BeLong To Youth Service has long established positive history of collaborating with Gay Men's Health Service (GMHS) to target MSM (men who have sex with men), 16yrs – 24yrs of age. This work included a dual-way referral system of young men and our joint project at Dublin Pride 2018, where we distributed over 3,000 Sexual Health and Wellbeing resource packs (condoms, lube, GMHS Services Information Cards, HIV Testing Information, LGBT Helpline information, Mental Health and Drug

and Alcohol harm reduction information and messaging) to target 'hard to reach' young people attending Pride. We are currently also developing our partnership with the GUIDE clinic in St James Hospital.

In August 2016, BeLonG To conducted an online survey of young people in relation to our youth services to help us make decisions about how best to meet young peoples' needs following a 100% increase in the number of young LGBT+ people using our services post the historic Marriage Equality referendum win in May 2015.

261 LGBT+ young people participated in the survey. The findings identified a clear gap within the area of sexual health. Sexual Health support was named as the number one **new** service, LGBT+ young people want BeLonG To provide.⁹ This clearly highlights the importance of the need for BeLonG To and stakeholders in the sexual health field to collaborate and provide LGBTI+ youth friendly clinics, as identified by this vulnerable cohort.

We know that STI infections amongst the general population of young people has increased steadily. We do not have access to data in relation to LGBTI+ young people in particular, however based on our 15 years of frontline experience and international research we believe that they may be at an increased risk.

International research has also found that young Lesbian and Bisexual women are at an increased risk of unplanned pregnancies.¹⁰

⁹ Suicide prevention support and mental health support were named as the top two existing services needed.

¹⁰ Julie Mooney-Somers Rachel M. Deacon Jude Comfort, Women in contact with the Perth gay and lesbian community: Report of the Women's Western Australian Sexual Health (WWASH) Survey 2010, WA Centre for Health Promotion Research at Curtin University, 2012

'Australian research suggests that unplanned pregnancy among younger same-sex attracted women is much higher than among their heterosexual peers, (20, 21) a disparity echoed by international research. (22, 23) The nature of LBQ women's sexual relationships with men is not well understood, and high rates of unprotected sex may suggest sex is unplanned and that LBQ women may not have the necessary negotiation skills to protect themselves against STIs in these situations. ← Those designing STI prevention programs need to be aware that a significant proportion of women who do not identify as heterosexual are having sex with men and consider the reach of their programs; LBQ women may not respond to health promotion campaigns directed at assumed heterosexual audiences. ← STI prevention programs need to address skill development among LBQ women to support successful negotiation of safe and satisfying sexual relationships with all sexual partners.' P.38.