



**Belong To LGBTQ+**  
Youth Ireland

## Belong To Submission to the Citizens’ Assembly on Drug Use

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## Introduction

Belong To, LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland is a national organisation supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) young people. Since 2003, Belong To has worked with LGBTQ+ youth to create a world where they are equal, safe and thriving in the diversity of their identities and experiences.

The organisation advocates and campaigns on behalf of LGBTQ+ young people and offers a specialised LGBTQ+ youth service including crisis counselling with Pieta, information, and the provision of LGBTQ+ youth groups across Ireland. Belong To has the only dedicated drug and alcohol support service to support the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in Ireland. Belong To ensured that the voices of LGBTQ+ young people were heard in the development of the national drugs strategy, *Preventing Harm, Supporting Recovery*; the *National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy*; and the *LGBTI+ National Inclusion Strategy*. Belong To also supports educators and other professionals working with LGBTQ+ youth.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the meaningful work of the Citizen's Assembly on Drug Use, and to platform the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people living in Ireland. As detailed in this submission, members of the LGBTQ+ community may experience specific challenges relating to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity which can contribute to problem drug and alcohol use. Several factors relating to gender identity and sexual orientation can also prevent members of the LGBTQ+ community from accessing services relating to substance misuse and sexual health.

## Belong To's Involvement with Drug Support Work

Belong To has the only dedicated drug and alcohol support service to support the needs of LGBTQ+ youth in Ireland. This is a safe service for LGBTQ+ young people to bring any concerns around drug and alcohol use. The service is free of cost, confidential and non-judgmental. It is based on the harm-reduction model and focuses on reducing the risks and harms around alcohol and substance use. We provide education and information to LGBTQ+ youth to raise awareness of drug and alcohol use within the community and refer people to specialised agencies and services for further safe and positive support.

Our Youth Work Team engage in outreach, and contribute to a number of working groups related to drug use, including the HSE Chemsex Working Group, the North Inner City Drug and Alcohol Taskforce, the Gay Men's Health Network, the Midlands Regional Drug Taskforce, and the National Voluntary Drugs and Alcohol Sector volunteer cluster.

The LGBTQ+ young people who attend our groups and engage in our frontline services are actively involved in all of Belong To's policy, advocacy and research work. Through Belong To, LGBTQ+ young people contributed to the development of the national drugs strategy, *Preventing Harm, Supporting Recovery*, and the *National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy*, which was the first dedicated national strategy to LGBT young people in the world.

Belong To's stance on the decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use developed from a group of young LGBTQ+ people in the service coming together, discussing their lived experiences, and putting together a proposal to Belong To's youth work and management teams on adopting the position. Some of the LGBTQ+ young people shared their difficulties in getting a job because they had been charged with possession of a very small quantity of drug. When discussing these experiences together, the young people in our service found that those from working-class areas were far more likely to be stopped and searched by An Garda Síochána than young people living in middle-class areas, meaning that it was more likely for working-class LGBTQ+ young people to face a criminal conviction for drug possession.

As part of our Strategic Plan, Belong To is committed to ensuring that professionals and volunteers working across a number of mainstream services including drug and alcohol services have increased knowledge of the needs of LGBTQ+ young people and how to meet those needs. In 2021, we established an LGBTQ+ Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group with representatives from Merchants Quay, SAOL Project, Rialto Drug service and Ana Liffey Project to feed into a training needs analysis. A pilot training programme has been developed based on the results of the training needs analysis.

## Research Background: LGBTQ+ Youth and Drug Use

### Higher Rates of Drug Use Among LGBTQ+ Youth

Across Europe, LGBTQ+ youth report higher rates of drug use compared to the general youth population.<sup>1</sup> The *LGBT Ireland Report* examined health and wellbeing indicators for the LGBTQ+ population in Ireland, compared to a representative sample from the general Irish population.<sup>2</sup>

The research found that 56% of LGBTQ+ people living in Ireland had taken drugs at some point in their life, compared to 27% of the general Irish population. Among LGBTQ+ young people, 30% of those aged 14-18 and 63% of 19-25 year olds had used drugs at some point in their lives. This is significantly higher than 14-25 year olds in the general Irish youth population, 27% of whom had ever consumed drugs.

### Reasons for Higher Rates of Drug Use Among LGBTQ+ Youth

Research points to a range of life experiences that result in higher rates of drug use among LGBTQ+ young people. Self-esteem issues arising from social rejection of LGBTQ+ identities can result in drug use to manage mental health challenges, and as a coping mechanism in social situations.<sup>3</sup> Many studies highlight bullying, victimisation and a lack of social support in childhood as leading to higher rates of drug use among LGBTQ+ young people.<sup>4</sup> These issues remain a reality for many LGBTQ+ young people in Ireland today. The *School Climate Survey*, published in 2022 by Belong To and the Teachers College, Columbia University, found that 76% of LGBTQ+ second-level students felt unsafe at school, 1 in 3 reported that other students were not accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, and 58% had heard a school staff member make a homophobic remark.<sup>5</sup>

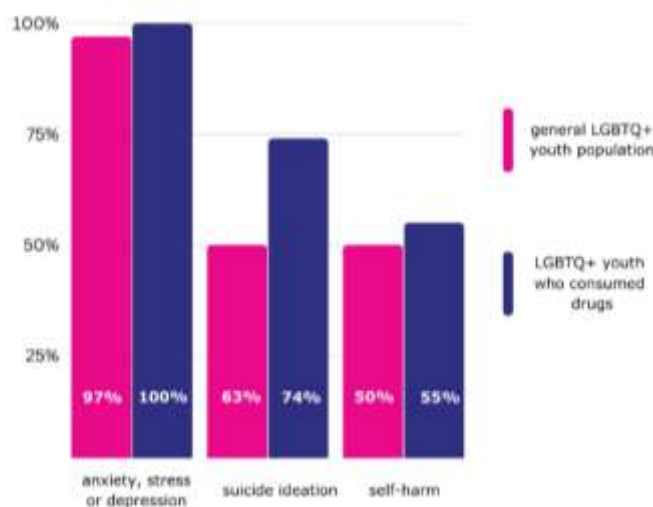
In particular, research shows that negative reactions to “coming out” as LGBTQ+,<sup>6</sup> and family rejection because of a young person’s LGBTQ+ identity,<sup>7</sup> strongly influence an LGBTQ+ young person’s drug use. This is reflected in the *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later* report published by Belong To in 2021.<sup>8</sup> 56% of LGBTQ+ young people who took the survey reported that they were not fully accepted in their home environment because of their LGBTQ+ identity. Among LGBTQ+ youth who had used drugs, 74% reported that their LGBTQ+ identity was not accepted at home. Additionally, LGBTQ+ young people who had experienced homelessness in the past year were twice as likely to have used drugs than those in stable accommodation. Another research study, commissioned by Focus Ireland and Belong To, found that many of the LGBTQ+ young people who reported using drugs had begun to do so, or increased their use, after becoming homeless.<sup>9</sup>

### Barriers to LGBTQ+ Youth Accessing Support for Drug Use

The *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later* report also explored barriers faced by LGBTQ+ young people who wanted to access support related to their drug use. Negative past experience with healthcare workers and service providers, often related to their LGBTQ+ identity, made LGBTQ+ youth nervous and reluctant to seek support. Location was named as a barrier among LGBTQ+ young people living in remote and rural locations, due to the lack of both specialised drug services and LGBTQ+ support services. Stigma associated with addiction and drug use was also named as a personal barrier in accessing supports.

### Drug Use and LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health

Generally, LGBTQ+ young people report higher levels of mental health challenges than the general youth population. The *LGBTI+ Life in Lockdown: One Year Later* report explored the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth in Ireland, and asked participants aged 18-23 about their drug use. LGBTQ+ young people who had consumed drugs were more likely to report that they had experienced anxiety, stress, depression, self-harm and suicide ideation than the general LGBTQ+ youth population:



## Preventing Problem Drug Use by Creating Safe and Supportive Spaces for LGBTQ+ Youth

As outlined earlier, stigma, shame, difficulties coming out, family rejection, bullying, and social isolation related to a young person's LGBTQ+ identity are all factors that can lead to increased use of drugs and alcohol. Alongside our frontline LGBTQ+ drug and alcohol service, Belong To works in schools, youth services and communities across Ireland to create safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth. This is a vital step in preventing some of the issues that arise for LGBTQ+ young people during their childhood and adolescence, which can lead to high levels of drug use.

Youth work enhances and changes the lives of young people. Through our Dublin Youth Service, we offer a number of groups designed to support the lives of LGBTQ+ youth and enhance their personal and social development. At Belong To, our youth groups provide a safe, welcoming space where LGBTQ+ youth can meet other LGBTQ+ young people, engage in informal educational programmes based on issues affecting their lives, and have fun. Our team of professional youth workers, with dedicated LGBTQ+ expertise, facilitate our youth groups assisted by a team of volunteers. Our practice is youth-centred, and promotes the wellbeing, self-worth and self-belief of LGBTQ+ young people. Through our 'Equal Partnership' model and 'Youth Participation' practice of non-formal education, LGBTQ+ young people are co-coordinators of the peer support groups. They democratically decide what workshops take place within their peer groups, and our peer educators facilitate the workshops supported by our youth workers. We facilitate workshops on coming out, harm reduction and sexual health with each youth group.

Since 2007, Belong To has supported a network of youth workers to ensure that LGBTQ+ young people across Ireland have access to dedicated, high-quality youth services and supports close to home. The National Network is made up of brilliant youth workers from national youth organisations such as Youth Work Ireland, Foróige, Crosscare and local youth and community services that run LGBTQ+ youth groups. As the national LGBTQ+ youth organisation, we facilitate a space to offer subject matter expertise and support to the youth workers who provide these groups. We come together to deliver a standardised model of LGBTQ+ youth work and best practice across Ireland.

Stand Up Awareness Week, run by Belong To, is Ireland's largest LGBTQ+ anti-bullying campaign, now in its 14th year. Running Stand Up Awareness Week can be the first step to creating a safe space within a school for LGBTQ+ young people. It is a time to show solidarity with LGBTQ+ youth so they feel seen, heard and safe, and to ensure everyone knows that homophobic, biphobic and transphobic language and bullying will not be tolerated. The campaign aims to decrease bullying, isolation, self-harm, suicide ideation and mental health difficulties among LGBTQ+ youth. With the campaign, we also strive to increase peer support between LGBTQ+ youth and their classmates, and increase awareness of the experiences of LGBTQ+ students among the entire school community.

## Recommendations to the Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use

### Drug and Addiction Services: LGBTQ+ Training

Due to the specific factors that lead to drug use among LGBTQ+ youth, and barriers faced by LGBTQ+ young people when engaging with healthcare and addiction services, research recommends specific LGBTQ+ training for service providers across drug, alcohol and homelessness services.<sup>10</sup>

The national drug and alcohol strategy, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery*; the *National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy*; and the *National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy* contain actions to improve the capacity of drug, alcohol and healthcare services to work with the LGBTQ+ community through staff training. Additionally, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* recommends considering the need for specialist referral pathways for LGBTQ+ and other groups who may not attend traditional addiction services.

In 2021, Belong To established an LGBTQ+ Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group with representatives from Merchants Quay, SAOL Project, Rialto Drug service and Ana Liffey Project to feed into a training needs analysis for those working in drug services. A pilot training programme has been developed based on the results of the training needs analysis.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Roll out of LGBTQ+ inclusion training for drug services developed by Belong To in partnership with the LGBTQ+ Drug and Alcohol Advisory Group.
- Provide for LGBTQ+ inclusion training for drug services under the next national drug and alcohol strategy.

### Youth Services: Prevention and Targeted, Low-Threshold Early Intervention

Research conducted with LGBTQ+ youth in Ireland relating to drug use provided two recommendations relating to youth services.<sup>11</sup> Youth groups, projects and services were identified as key to providing support to LGBTQ+ young people, and information relating to drug use, as a means of prevention and early intervention. The study also named LGBTQ+ youth work as a way to engage members of the LGBTQ+ community who are struggling with drug use, but face barriers in approaching traditional drug and addiction services.

The Programme for Government commits to examining approaches to identifying young people at risk of problem drug use. Additionally, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* names youth services as a means of delivering substance use education to young people, and of providing supports to young people at risk of substance use. The *National LGBTI+ Youth Strategy* commits to investing in early intervention as a means of addressing LGBTQ+ youth mental health challenges, and to a coordinated approach to delivering and funding LGBTQ+ youth services.

### Recommendations:

- Take specific actions and provide for targeted initiatives around the provision of information, education and support on drug use in all youth services, taking a harm-reduction approach. For example, this could be an action in the new Youth Action Plan being developed by the Department of Children, Equality, Inclusion and Youth.
- Roll out the Belong To Rainbow Award, an accreditation programme for LGBTQ+ safe and supportive youth services.

### Schools: A Harm-Reduction Approach to Drug Education in SPHE

It is positive that the new Junior Cycle SPHE curriculum, to be rolled out from September 2023, contains specific actions relating to drug and substance use taking a health-led, harm-reduction approach. When surveyed about their drug use, 83% of LGBTQ+ youth felt that they would have found harm-reduction focused drug education at second-level useful.<sup>13</sup> *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* highlights that “education and awareness programmes that... support positive behaviours and choices are more likely to be effective in encouraging proactive and healthy behaviour than stand-alone measures” and that “initiatives that use scare tactics or testimonials from former drug users to discourage drug use can be counterproductive and may have little impact on changing behaviour”.

To combat the root causes of problem drug use among LGBTQ+ young people, schools should also be encouraged to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion and acceptance among the staff and student body. Findings from the 2022 *School Climate Survey* show that higher levels of staff support for LGBTQ+ identities, staff proactively intervening when overhearing homophobic remarks, and representing LGBTQ+ identities in the school curriculum results in LGBTQ+ second-level students feeling a higher sense of belonging and peer acceptance in school.

*Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* contains a number of actions relating to the role of schools in supporting a health-led response to drug use, including integrating drug education to the SPHE curriculum, collaboration between schools and youth services to support young people at risk of early substance use, and the provision of continuing professional development training for SPHE teachers, guidance counsellors and home school community liaison (HSCL) coordinators.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, the Programme for Government commits to support the introduction of drug and alcohol awareness programmes for secondary school students, and to continue to resource harm-reduction and education campaigns related to drug use.

### Recommendations:

- Include clear information on safer drug use, available supports for young people experiencing problem drug use in the updated Leaving Cert SPHE curriculum.
- Provide resources and training required to roll out the updated Junior Cycle and Leaving Cert SPHE courses to all school staff involved in the provision of wellbeing supports, including SPHE teachers, guidance counsellors, home school community liaison coordinators, and wellbeing coordinators.

- Require and resource all second-level schools and youth services to participate in Stand Up Awareness Week, an LGBTQ+ anti-bullying week endorsed and supported by the Department of Education under *Cineáltas: Action Plan on Bullying*.

### Society: Outreach, Accessibility and Family Support

The HSE ‘Start Low and Go Slow’ campaign, and drug testing facilities at festivals, are very positive developments for addressing the potential harms of casual drug use among young people. Additionally, it was welcome that the HSE ran a harm-reduction outreach campaign during the Electric Picnic festival in 2022, with volunteers from youth and drug services including Belong To providing information and advice on safer drug use, and ways to identify bad reactions to drug use, including potential overdose. Both the Programme for Government and *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* note the need for drug-quality testing services and outreach at festivals.

*Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* also contains actions relating to the expanded geographical spread of quality drug services; the range, availability and geographical spread of drug and alcohol services for those under the age of 18, including interagency work with child and family services; and strengthened family support services for those affected by substance use.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Provide supports to the parents of LGBTQ+ young people, so as to reduce the rate of family rejection and isolation among LGBTQ+ youth, a key factor leading to higher rates of drug use among LGBTQ+ young people.
- Provide LGBTQ+ inclusion and awareness training to family support workers, social workers and healthcare professionals.
- Provide for harm-reduction campaigns for casual and recreational drug use, through youth services, family resource centres, healthcare services and on social media.
- Increase the availability of drug support services nationally through the establishment of dedicated services, and integration of low-threshold supports to primary care centres.
- Provide targeted investment to youth services interested in establishing dedicated prevention and early intervention programmes for young people.

### Legislation: Decriminalisation of Possession for Personal Use

Belong To supports the decriminalisation of drug possession for personal use based on the harm-reduction model of supporting LGBTQ+ young people engaged in drug use, and because of the disproportionate impact that the criminalisation of drug possession has on working-class and marginalised communities.



*Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland* highlights within its title the three key elements required to effectively support those experiencing challenges with drug use: a health-led response; a harm-reduction approach; and a recovery-focused outlook. The strategy acknowledges that:

*“Many people who use drugs problematically, come into contact with the criminal justice system and acquire criminal convictions, either directly or indirectly related to their drug use. Criminal convictions can represent a serious impediment for people seeking to move on from drug misuse and involvement in crime, particularly in the areas of access to employment, housing and travel.”*

Globally, LGBTQ+ young people are overrepresented in youth homelessness. While similar statistics are not available for Ireland, in the UK, only 4% of young people identify as LGBTQ+, but 24% of young homeless people are LGBTQ+. Research by Belong To found that LGBTQ+ young people in Ireland who had experienced homelessness in the past year were twice as likely to have used drugs than LGBTQ+ youth in stable accommodation.<sup>14</sup>

In 2015, a Joint Parliamentary Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality recommended following the Portuguese health-led approach to drug use, whereby the possession of a small amount of illegal drugs for personal use could be dealt with by way of a civil or administrative response rather than via the criminal justice route. Arising from this, *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* contains a commitment to “consider the approaches taken in other jurisdictions to the possession of small quantities of drugs for personal use with a view to making recommendations on policy options”.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Decriminalise drug possession for personal use.
- Tackle the stigma of drug use and encourage those experiencing difficulties with drug use to seek support through information, education and awareness campaigns and initiatives.
- Take a health-led response for those in active addiction.
- Remove the barriers imposed by a criminal conviction to allow those recovering from addiction to move on from drug use.
- Provide routine drug testing and low-threshold supports.

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