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The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Unsure (LGBTU) Youth Research Project: Views and experiences of young people living in West Sussex

There is a growing body of evidence both internationally and in the UK that LGBTU¹ young people frequently experience homophobic/transphobic bullying, discrimination, and marginalisation because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (e.g. DCSF, 2007; Makadon et al., 2008; Robinson et al., 2002). While experiences of discrimination are common, they are also diverse reflecting the life experiences of different groups including personal, family, work, patterns of health, and treatment by providers of public services (Breitenbach, 2004). Moreover, there is strong research evidence which suggests that discrimination (overt or otherwise) can have a significant and negative impact on the health and emotional well-being of vulnerable young people. For instance, studies show that LGBTU young people often face social isolation and exclusion (CSNU, 2007); homelessness (Cull et al., 2006); violence and abuse from peers and family (Hunter, 1990); bullying at school (Hunt and Jensen, 2007); violence in the streets (GALOP, 1998); and mental health difficulties including high rates of suicide, anxiety, depression, and self-harm (e.g. DCSF, 2007; Johnson et al., 2007).

Discrimination resulting from homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism has led to the LGBTU population in the UK (and elsewhere) being isolated and hidden. This means that it is particularly difficult for LGBTU people to 'come out' and access

support from their family, friends, local communities, and services. For LGBTU young people, these issues are often magnified as they face additional difficulties in negotiating and establishing their emerging identities (social, sexual, and gender) within limiting social and cultural boundaries (e.g. relating to status and power, religion, limited freedom of movement, and so on).

LGBTU in West Sussex

In rural West Sussex, local practitioners have for some time been aware that there is inadequate LGBTU service provision for young people. This is in the wider context of LGBTU young people failing to access mainstream services due to discrimination they have suffered in the past (CSNU, 2007). Although attempts have been made in the past to set up a service for young people in West Sussex, these have been unsuccessful largely due to a lack of a dedicated worker and sustained funding. In April 2006, a steering group, comprised of representatives from the local Primary Care Trust, the Youth Service, and Terrence Higgins Trust (THT), convened in order to tackle this pressing issue. In 2007, the International Health Development Research Centre (IHDRC) at the University of Brighton was commissioned by this steering group to undertake qualitative research looking at the provision of existing services for (LGBTU) young people and to explore

1. We use the term "LGBT" as it is currently the most commonly used and accepted term by a number of agencies, equality organisations, and some official government documents (e.g. Fish, 2007). However, we also acknowledge the potential divisive nature of the term in that it can be construed as being all-inclusive such that LGBT people are sometimes seen to form a single 'community', and other concerns such as what 'trans' does and does not include. We also add the term 'Unsure' (U) to the acronym to acknowledge and (potentially) include those young people into the study who maybe unsure about their sexuality and/or gender identity.

the support needs of LGBTU young people across West Sussex (see Pope and Sherriff, 2008). In this article, we summarise the main findings of this recently completed study. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 19 LGBTU young people and 17 practitioners/service providers. The aims of the research were twofold:

1) To explore the current service provision (voluntary and statutory) available to LGBTU young people in the West Sussex area;

2) To explore LGBTU young people's experiences of local and accessible service provision and/or other support, and in doing so, identify their support needs.

Methodology

The research consisted of two distinct elements: a scoping study to identify current service provision for LGBTU young people across West Sussex; followed by a series of focus-groups and in-depth individual interviews with LGBTU young people from across West Sussex. Among other things, the scoping exercise included a number of interviews with regional and local practitioners and/or service providers. The aim of these interviews was to assist with the identification of LGBTU youth projects and services and to stimulate snowballing of further relevant contacts. Following this exercise, qualitative research with LGBTU young people (13-19 years) was carried out. Young people were selected purposively (i.e. non-randomly) to take part in focus group discussions and, where relevant or requested, individual in-depth interviews. Although the sample was not intended to be representative of the wider population, socio-demographic data show-ed that all young people interviewed were White British, most were female (n=13) and, the sample included only young people who identified themselves as being lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB). No young people identified themselves as being trans (T) or unsure (U). It is therefore important for further research to recruit purposively to include young people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities, as well as those who are trans or unsure.

Findings: Lack of services

The results of the scoping exercise revealed that despite a good range of mainstream services for young people across the county, no formalised service currently exists in West Sussex that provides specific information, advice, or support for LGBTU young people. Although LGBTU services for young people do exist outside of the county, for those residing in West Sussex, access to these services is severely restricted due to (amongst other things) transport difficulties and the associated financial costs (e.g. money for bus and train fares). Unsurprisingly, interviews with practitioners and young people overwhelmingly highlighted the urgent need for a sustained LGBTU youth service to be provided for young people in West Sussex, alongside relevant training for working with, and raising awareness of, LGBTU young people's issues.

Findings: 'Coming-out' in West Sussex

In general, young people reported very few positive experiences of being a LGBTU young person in West Sussex. Perhaps predictably, a recurring theme that arose included worries and concerns about how other people (mainly parents and friends) would react about the young person disclosing that they were LGBTU.

"My parents...they don't know yet simply because I don't know how to bring up the point and I have no idea how they will react about it." (Male, 16, Worthing)

All the young people interviewed, who had 'come out' to their immediate peers and family, reported that they had experienced difficulties including being bullied at school and losing erstwhile friends.

"...I lost a couple of friends cos they didn't stick by me so that was probably a good thing as you find out who your real friends are." (Male, 19, Bognor Regis)

However, for some despite such early difficulties, 'coming out' was perceived as a positive experience in that they had become stronger, made new friends and found new forms of informal peer support that hadn't previously been accessible.

"At first it was like really hard to deal with because I got bullied...but after you show them that you don't care what they say...then they stopped cos they realised they were embarrassing themselves." (Female, 14, Bognor Regis)

Findings: Homophobic bullying

All interviewees said they had experienced homophobic bullying of some kind both in and out of the school environment because of their (perceived) LGBTU status. This included verbal and physical abuse and examples in the dataset were ubiquitous. Such incidents were reported as usually (but not always) occurring within the boundaries of the school environment.

"You get people bullying [you] all the time when you walk in corridors in schools and they will be like 'lesbian, lesbian'..." (Female, 18, Horsham)

"I got my head kicked in, there were about five blokes all jumped on me and I didn't go into school the next day." (Male, 16, Angmering)

Of particular concern were the responses of several young people who reported having self-harmed, having suicidal feelings, and attempted suicide on more than one occasion as a result of homophobic bullying.

"I have tried twice to kill myself because of bullying and people hating me for who I am." (Male, 18, Lancing)

"I'm a self-harmer and I was very suicidal."

(Male, 13, Bognor Regis)

Such accounts are deeply disturbing and add to the growing evidence that LGBTU youth are over-represented in suicide rates for young people as a whole (e.g. Carolan and Redmond, 2003; Johnson et al., 2007).

Findings: The 'ideal' LGBTU service

As this research was intended to inform the future development of a new LGBTU service for young people in West Sussex, young people were asked to reflect upon what they felt would be an 'ideal' LGBTU service to meet their needs. All young people said they felt that there was a need for a specific LGBTU youth service to be

developed across West Sussex and that this should include, for example, one-to-one support, drop-in sessions, group activities (social and educational), opportunities to meet other LGBTU young people, and the provision of a safe space for young people to 'hang out'.

"We need a social place that would provide a cup of tea and a hug and say that everything will be OK."

(Female, 18, Horsham)

"A confidential place where young people can feel safe and happy to go and just hang out."

(Female, 17, Selsey)

With regards staff, young people felt that it would be useful (but not essential) if staff were LGBTU themselves, and for them to have some experience of working with LGBTU young people. Characteristics such as being empathic, 'available', consistent, trustworthy, and open-minded were stated as being important in a LGBTU worker.

"Someone that understands what young people are going through, so they have experience and are trained to work with LGBTU young people."

(Female, 15, Bognor Regis)

"Being really open-minded and trustworthy."

(Female, 16, Midhurst)

Issues for consideration

The findings from this study raise a number of broader and more specific issues for consideration some of which are outlined briefly below:

- A clear outcome of this research is that a support service for LGBTU young people living in West Sussex needs to be developed. However, if it is to be successful, long-term and sustained funding must be available in the same way it is for mainstream services for young people.
- All professionals and practitioners working with young people should be required to undertake (diversity) training around LGBTU issues (e.g. school nurses, Connexions staff, teachers, youth workers, supported housing workers etc). Additional specialist training would be required for those working specifically with LGBTU young people (e.g. as part of a LGBTU service).
- Simultaneously with any work to develop a LGBTU service in West Sussex, further research needs to be conducted to develop new training

programmes and resource materials for staff working with young people.

Next Steps

Following the completion of this research, a launch event was held in Worthing in West Sussex (May, 2008) to provide a unique opportunity in gathering together young people, youth workers, policy-makers, and other interested professionals and stakeholders to explore issues arising from the research.

At this event, and informed directly by the findings of the research, West Sussex Youth Service made a firm commitment to initiate the process of developing county wide LGBTU services for young people residing in the county.

To this end, the Youth Service is currently working closely with the project steering group and other relevant stakeholders (including young people) toward this important objective.

Moreover, the IHDRC is currently working with various community partners to develop an evidence-based training pack for professionals working with (LGBTU) young people.

The pressing need for this project was identified through our recent study (Pope and Sherriff, 2008), and through collaboration with our community partners including Allsorts, the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA), THT, and the Dorman Youth Arts Centre. Together, it has become clear that accessible and appropriate training materials are required urgently to kick-start the process of assisting practitioners in working with all young people to be able to address LGBTU issues as part of their everyday work (e.g. as part of day-to-day youth work or for teachers addressing homophobic bullying in the classroom).

The Sussex LGBTU Training and Development Research Partnership therefore will provide the first attempt to explore the training needs of practitioners/professionals working with young people across East and West Sussex. Further details of this new project can be obtained from the first author.

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