

Are we at risk of permitting Homophobia in Northern Ireland...?

Recent public debate has highlighted that **homosexuality remains a deeply divided and contentious issue here in Northern Ireland.**

During 2007 Ian Paisley Junior's comments on homosexuality and the subsequent opinion poll on Radio Ulster's Stephen Nolan programme highlighted that society in Northern Ireland still has some distance to travel if it is to fully embrace recent equality legislation in this area.

Passed in January 2007, this legislation affords Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) people equal protection under the law, when accessing goods and services.

Youth organisations who have worked to embed the EDI principles will have considered if their policies or practices erect barriers to the participation of young people within the nine Section 75 groups, including sexual orientation. In addition, as the Department of Education's A Model for Effective Practice highlights, **acceptance and understanding of others** is one of three core principles underpinning youth work in Northern Ireland.

However, given the wider social context in which youth work is operating it is not unrealistic to suggest that there is much still to be achieved if **All** young people are to actively participate and feel included in our society, regardless of their religious belief, gender, race, ethnic origin, ability or sexual orientation. Furthermore, understanding how we clearly articulate that it is **not acceptable** to discriminate against people from the LGBT community remains a challenge for us all.

As Dr Derick Wilson notes, meeting this challenge will require systems which support field staff to be open to wider professional values and the concept of a more open civil society where all are equal and different citizens, as well as on-going practice which develops trusting relationships between diverse young people and provides safe spaces in which young people can grow to be at ease with life in a diverse society.

In light of this debate, JEDI is keen to know, what further actions are required by or on behalf of youth service to assist young people from the GLBT community to feel accepted, valued and included within society? Can youth service contribute further to challenging homophobia?

"I think that society imagines that being gay has become easier for young people because it is for adults, but in many ways this is not true. I get far more calls about homophobic bullying now that I used to."
Child Line Councillor

Recent statistics for Northern Ireland reveal that:

- **A quarter** of young gay or bisexual men under twenty five have **attempted suicide** with nearly two thirds having considered taking their own life.
- **30% have self-harmed.**
- The North of Ireland has **the highest suicide rate** in Europe.
- According to 2007 research entitled - The Western Bigotry Index - Northern Ireland is **one of the most homophobic areas** of the Western World.

Guidance entitled '**Preventing and responding to homophobic bullying in schools**' was launched by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in September 2007. The shOUT research has highlighted a need for similar guidance for Northern Ireland.

'What's in Your Closet?' is a resource designed by members of Gay and Lesbian Youth NI and funded by The Youth Council for Northern Ireland. For further information on this and the shOUT research please visit:
www.glyni.org.uk

PSNI Pride without Prejudice?

The Police Service of Northern Ireland define a homophobic incident to be: **Any incident which is perceived to be homophobic by the victim or any other person.**

