

15th May 2019

**LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy
Oireachtas Committee Hearings
Opening Statement by Minister Katherine Zappone**

INTRODUCTION

Colleagues,

It is fitting that we gather at this time – as the world prepares to mark the 50th anniversary of the start of the modern LGBTI rights movement.

This hearing is fitting and timely and will re-assure young people across Ireland that TDs and Senators remain determined to protect and respect their hard fought for rights.

Our gathering here is also a sign of solidarity to those who feel isolated, alone or bullied because of their sexual orientation.

LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy

The LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy, a world first, is the focus of our discussions today and I am honoured to be in a position to give an update on our work in this area.

At the outset it is important to say that the strategy itself is the result of listening to the voices of young people.

More than 4,000 took part in consultations both online and in person at meetings across the country.

This process was overseen by an oversight committee with independent chair, Una Mullally and representatives from a broad cross-sectional group of relevant organisations, State agencies and Government Departments.

This Committee as I said had an oversight role – but all members were determined that it was the young people who were in the driving seat.

The result is a three year strongly oriented strategy which will inform policy decisions until the end of next year.

YOUNG VOICES

Colleagues the results of the consultation were deeply informative and I would encourage all public representatives to take time to look at the views expressed.

It is a cliché to say that Ireland is a changed country – but it is important to acknowledge that recent changes did lead to positive comments from our young people.

Marriage Equality, the Gender Recognition Act and even the fact that we are leading the world again with the youth strategy itself have all lead to strong feelings of inclusivity.

However if our goal is a fully inclusive, equal and fair society – we are not there yet.

During the consultations, young LGBTI+ people acknowledged that discrimination and stigma, cases of bullying and harassment and a sense of isolation and exclusion continue.

The young people made suggestions to deal with these difficult issues including better training for professionals engaging with LGBTI+ young people, enforcing anti-bullying policies and addressing the health and wellbeing of LGBTI+ young people.

As a result three goals were identified.

- The creation of a safe, supportive and inclusive environment
- Improve physical, mental and sexual health
- Develop research and data to better understand lives of young members of the LGBTI+ community

While my Department has a lead role it is clear that what is required is a cross Government approach to respond to the shortfalls identified.

PROGRESS SINCE LAUNCH

To coincide with the launch of the Strategy last June, I announced immediate actions in the areas of youth service provision, capacity building, awareness raising and research.

Additional youth services included extra LGBTI+ specific youth worker hours, establishment of transgender groups, sexual health programmes, one-to-one and group support, art and drama projects, rural LGBTI+ networking events, a Parent peer support network and trans parents information day.

Additionally I provided funding to carry out mapping of current LGBTI+ youth service provision at Education and Training Board level. Following this mapping exercise, additional hours in 2019 will be allocated to youth services.

I was also delighted to allocate grants for capacity building measures for 39 groups and organisations in 2018. These included youth services, family resource centres, sexual health centres, addiction services, equality organisations, arts therapy organisations and traveller organisations.

Next month I will announce a new capacity building grant scheme for LGBTI+ specific organisations for the development of further capacity building initiatives for professional service providers.

The strategy is also about to become a lot more visible. A national competition has seen young people design a new welcome sticker for all young people services across the public, private and voluntary sectors. I look forward to seeing it everywhere.

The Participation Unit in my Department is also working with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to complete a consultation with young people on the reform of Relationships and Sexuality Education in the curriculum.

Goal 2 as it relates to mental health supports is very much the focus of the work lead by BelongTo Youth Service and I am delighted to say that my Department has long been a primary funder of BelongTo. In recent years their expansion into specific mental health supports in collaboration with Peita House represents the kind of strategic partnerships that young people need.

Under Goal 3 the Strategy commits to develop the research and data environment to better understand the lives of LGBTI+ young people.

The tender for this research has been awarded to Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhann in the HBSC Ireland Team in the Health Promotion Research Centre, School of Health Sciences, National University of Ireland Galway and is due to commence over the coming weeks.

NEXT STEPS

Over the summer an Annual Report on Implementation will be prepared by my Department. In September I will host an Annual Implementation Forum on the strategy providing an opportunity to explore what's working well and future plans.

Already a number of further actions are planned by my Department for 2020.

Work will commence on developing a leadership programme for young LGBTI+ leaders and potential leaders.

A biennial national event to publicly celebrate LGBTI+ young people and young leaders will take place.

Research proposals will be developed to examine the factors that support positive mental health for LGBTI+ young people and ascertain how these positive factors can be replicated.

GOVERNANCE

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 and the *National Youth Strategy 2015-2020* are providing the framework within which the Strategy is being framed.

A Youth Advisory Group has been established to recruit a broader Youth Forum to ensure the voice of young people remains central to the Strategy implementation process.

The first Annual Implementation Report will provide a more comprehensive and detailed picture of full implementation, however I have little doubt that this Strategy has already made a significant contribution to improving the lives of LGBTI+ young people in Ireland.

CONCLUSION

It is 50-years since members of the LGBTI+ community asserted their rights on the streets of New York with the Stonewall riots.

Next month on those same streets Ireland's leadership will be acknowledged.

At World Pride we will be honoured as a nation with a luminary award.

Ambassadors from the youth strategy will join me to accept the award.

During my visit I will also lead 400 Irish-Americans as the Irish Consulate to New York joins the World Pride Parade.

We are now a leading voice, a recognised global leader, for LGBTI+ rights.

With this honour comes responsibilities. We are protectors of rights.

I am sure Deputies and Senators will agree with me that we must never shirk away from that – not least when it comes to supporting our young people.

ENDS