



**Opening Statement to the  
Committee on Education and Skills on its review of sexual health and  
relationship education (RSE)**

**15<sup>th</sup> May 2018**

Good afternoon

My name is Moninne Griffith, I am Executive Director of BeLonG To, Ireland's national organisation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Non-Binary (LGBT+) young people aged 14- 23.

BeLonG To has been supporting young LGBTI+ people since we opened our doors 15 years ago in Dublin. Today we provide specialist youth services in Dublin including peer support groups, one to one support, in-house counselling with our partners in Pieta House and street outreach. We also support a National Network of over 30 LGBTI+ youth groups throughout Ireland and we run the largest anti bullying campaign in second level schools nationally, Stand Up, with the support of the Department of Education and Skills and many other education partners. This is now in its 8<sup>th</sup> year and last year 43% of schools participated.

BeLonG To also works with government and other partners so that Ireland will be safe, equal and welcoming for LGBT+ young people including our work with the Department of Education and Skills on the development of Growing Up LGBT, which is part of the SPHE/RSE curriculum. Our work is cited internationally by UNESCO as 'good practice', commended by Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner and cited by the UN Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights in their first global report on LGBT rights.

Most recently we have been working with Minister Katherine Zappone and her department in the development of the world's first LGBTI+ Youth Strategy and with Minister Regina Doherty and her department on a review of the Gender Recognition Act where the issue of feeling unsafe or not belonging in schools was highlighted time and time again by young people and stakeholders.

## **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.

The LGBTIreland Report published in 2016 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. The report showed a link between a young person having experienced LGBTI-based bullying, social exclusion and fear or rejection with serious mental health difficulties.
3. 67% (of those in school now or in past 5 years) **witnessed** anti-LGBTI bullying. And, 50% of LGBTI students **experienced** bullying.

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 short, what they are telling us is that many of them feel

unsafe to be themselves in school, afraid to come out, afraid of the consequences – unwelcome and that they don't belong.

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 further training on how to teach Growing up LGBT to build on their confidence and capacity to cover these issues
4. Include LGBTI+ identities across subjects to create visibility and 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 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 it can be rolled out in 5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> classes in primary schools nationally
9. Include Growing Up LGBT and anti-bullying programme in the whole school inspections

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