

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ AGUS GNÓTHAÍ ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

Dé Céadaoin, 15 Bealtaine 2019

Wednesday, 15 May 2019

The Joint Committee met at 9 a.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Lisa Chambers,	Fintan Warfield.
Denise Mitchell,	
Tom Neville,	

I láthair / In attendance: Senator Pádraig Ó Céidigh.

Business of Joint Committee

Vice Chairman: Apologies have been received from the Chairman, Deputy Farrell; Deputy Rabbitte and Senator Noone. I propose that we go into private session to deal with some house-keeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee went into private session at 9.10 a.m. and resumed in public session at 9.15 a.m.

LGBTI+ Youth Strategy: Discussion

Vice Chairman: I welcome members and viewers who may be watching our proceedings on Oireachtas TV to the public session of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs. The purpose of today's meeting is to update the committee on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, LGBTI, and national youth strategy. On behalf of the committee, I welcome the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Deputy Zappone, who is accompanied by Ms Olive McGovern, principal officer at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and Ms Linda O'Sullivan, assistant principal officer at the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

Before we commence, in accordance with procedure, I am required to draw the attention of members and witnesses to the fact that by virtue of section 17(2)(I) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to this committee. If they are directed by the committee to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter and they continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to a qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. Witnesses are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and they are asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against any persons or entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice to the effect that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or any official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I remind members and witnesses to turn off their mobile phones or switch them on to flight mode as they may interfere with the sound system and make it difficult for the parliamentary reporters to report the meeting. They also adversely affect television coverage and web streaming.

I advise the Minister that any submission or opening statement she makes to the committee will be published on the committee's website after this meeting. After her presentation there will be questions from the members of the committee. I call the Minister to make her opening statement.

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Katherine Zappone): 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. I had just fallen in love at that time. I was a young teenager and her name was Katherine too. This hearing is fitting and timely and will reassure young people across Ireland that Deputies and Senators remain determined to protect and respect their hard-fought rights in a different era from when I was growing up. Our gathering here is also a sign of solidarity to those who feel isolated, alone or bullied because of their sexual identity.

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. The 4,000 represent a decent sample number. The process was overseen by an oversight committee, with an independent chair, Ms Úna Mullally, and representatives from a broad cross-sectional group of relevant organisations, State agencies and Departments. The committee, as I said, had an oversight role, but all members were determined to ensure it would be the young people who would be in the driving seat. The result is a three-year, strongly oriented strategy which will inform policy decisions until the end of next year.

The results of the consultation process were deeply informative and I encourage all public representatives to take time to look at the views expressed. We should know what young people said when we asked what they thought. It is a cliché to say Ireland is a changed country, but it is important to acknowledge that recent changes did lead to positive comments from young people. Marriage equality, the Gender Recognition Act and even the fact that we are leading the world again with the youth strategy have all led to strong feelings of inclusivity among the young people of Ireland. If, however, our goal is to be 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 continued. They made suggestions on how to deal with these difficult issues, including by providing better training for professionals engaging with LGBTI+ young people, enforcing anti-bullying policies and addressing the health and well-being of LGBTI+ young people. As a result, three goals were identified, the first of which was the creation of a safe, supportive and inclusive environment, which would be good for anybody. The second was to improve physical, mental and sexual health, while the third was to develop research and data to better understand the 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.

What progress has been made since the launch of the strategy last June? To coincide with it, 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, the 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 a trans parents information day. Trans parents are important and I have spoken to many along the way. We might come back to that point during questions. Additionally, I provided funding to carry out mapping of LGBTI+ youth service provision at education and training board level. Following this mapping exercise, additional hours will be allocated in 2019 to youth services. I was also delighted to allocate grants for capacity building measures for 39 groups and organisations in 2018. They included youth services, family resource centres, sexual health centres, addiction services, equality organisations, arts therapy organisations and Traveller organisations. I have brought a couple of booklets with me to show and tell mem-

bers about some of the results of that work and the capacity building that is ongoing within the different organisations. I have one from Outcomers Dundalk and, of course, another from the national organisation, Youth Work Ireland, and its “Young and trans in rural Ireland” resource. They are only a couple of many examples of the work that has been done. Next month I will announce a new capacity building grants scheme for LGBTI+ specific organisations for the development of further capacity building initiatives for professional service providers.

The strategy is also about to become much more visible. A national competition has seen young people design a new welcome sticker for all young people’s services across the public, private and voluntary sectors. I look forward to seeing it everywhere. I was thrilled to be a part of announcing who won the competition. We have a copy of the image that was designed for everybody in the audience. It will go through some work from a communications company to ensure its visibility and power in the welcome it provides for young people.

The participation unit in my Department is working with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment to complete a consultation process with young people on the reform of the relationships and sexuality education programme in the curriculum.

Goal two as it relates to mental health supports is very much the focus of the work led by the BeLonG To youth service. I am delighted to say my Department has long been a primary funder of BeLonG To. In recent years its expansion into providing specific mental health supports, in collaboration with Pieta House, an extraordinary organisation founded by Senator Freeman, represents the strategic partnership young people need.

Under goal three, the strategy commits to developing the research and data environment needed to better understand the lives of LGBTI+ young people. The tender to carry out this research has been awarded to Professor Saoirse Nic Gabhann in the HBSC Ireland team in the health promotion research centre at the School of Health Sciences in the National University of Ireland, Galway, and is due to commence in the coming weeks.

What will be our 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. It will provide an opportunity to explore what is working well and future plans. Parents will be welcome at that event. Already a number of further actions are planned by my Department for 2020. Work will commence to develop 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.

The national policy framework, Better outcomes, brighter futures, and the national youth strategy provide the framework within which the strategy is being implemented. A youth advisory group has been established to recruit a broader youth forum to ensure the voice of young people will remain 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 the strategy has already made a significant contribution to improving the lives of LGBTI+ young people in Ireland.

It is 50 years since members of the LGBTI+ community asserted their rights on the streets of New York in 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 global luminary

award. Ambassadors for 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. 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 this, not least when it comes to supporting our beautiful young people.

Deputy Tom Neville: I have a quick question. The Minister mentioned the arts. Will she give me a brief outline of how she proposes to use the arts in this instance because when I cast my mind back to when I was very young-----

Deputy Katherine Zappone: That is not that long ago.

Deputy Tom Neville: It is not and I thank the Minister for saying so. It was through the arts that I met people of different sexualities. For a young guy, growing up in rural Ireland at the time, sexuality was closed and not spoken about. Thankfully, it is much more open and liberal today, which is fantastic and accepted. I found that the arts were a great medium of communication and a great way to meet people from different backgrounds and of different sexualities and whatever else and to integrate through a different medium. I wonder what arts programmes are available and what their objectives are because the arts can be powerful and a subtle medium of communication.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I thank the Deputy for the great question. From our perspective, the arts organisations are expected to be among the first to engage with the recognition, the welcome and the welcome sticker. The Deputy will be aware that a number of the national and local LGBTI+ organisations are in touch with their national and local community art programmes and I anticipate that they would be working with them to ensure there is an ongoing sense of inclusion and acceptance in the context of the arts. It is equally important that we can draw on the arts to help us to find ways provide the visibility of the community, be that to demonstrate the challenges that remain or the ways in which people can be embraced and acknowledged.

Ms Olive McGovern: In the consultation process arts organisations were identified by young people as a positive place, currently. The gaps identified were much more around the sporting space. For this reason, the sport organisations were brought on to the oversight committee as a special representative body. The arts is very much a positive space. Through the creative youth programme and other spaces, the expansion of the arts programmes is very positive in terms of the LGBTI young people's lives. There was no obvious gap around the arts organisations. In our discussions on the recognition marker, the arts were an obvious first port of call as an area that would embrace it.

Deputy Tom Neville: My point is around the expansion of that initiative into other sectors. That is what I found myself when I was younger. It is a case of using what is there and finding the little nuggets in that sector that can transfer across to the other sectors.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The Deputy's point is worthy of mention to the implementation group.

Ms Olive McGovern: Additional youth services hours have in many instances applied arts-based methodologies. The integration of the youth sector and the arts sector is important. In terms of what is being with the additional hours, it is often the addition of an arts-based methodology into an existing youth service. There has been significant expansion of youth arts

programmes through the creative youth programme as well. There is overall an expansion of the arts space through the creative youth programme.

Deputy Tom Neville: Have any specific challenges been identified in the sports space?

Ms Olive McGovern: Overall, the world of sport is a space, particularly for transgender young people but overall for the LGBTI community, in which there is still a need for significant development. We have not yet received an update from Sport Ireland but I expect that it will be open to making some progress in this area. The full implementation report will provide us with the detail of what it has done and what it is planning to do. Sport Ireland was a very willing participant on the oversight committee and it contributed significantly. In regard to the capacity building measures, a number of small-scale sports organisations were applicants. It was very enlightening to learn that at community level, sports organisations such as boxing clubs, football clubs, are doing small-scale reflective pieces within their organisations that at a community base could make their environments more inclusive of LGBTI young people.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: It is to be celebrated and acknowledged that Ireland is to host the Union Cup rugby tournament for LGBTI groups in June. It will be an important time in that Ireland will be welcoming a number of groups and members from throughout the world to that competition, which I think is to take place on the DCU campus. I had the honour of launching it recently with one of great lesbian sporting heroes, Ms Lindsay Peat, who will be joining me later this afternoon. It is an example of the way in which Ireland is taking its lead in this area and making sure it fits into other domains, particularly sports.

On the specific question relating to the arts, following completion of the mapping exercise I mentioned earlier, gaps in youth services will be filled through the allocation of the additional hours. We are to make some decisions on allocating those additional hours relatively soon, as Dr. O'Sullivan will confirm.

Dr. Linda O'Sullivan: As for youth service provision across the country and identified gaps in provision, be that in arts or youth services, we will seek to allocate provision for extra hours in accordance with the gaps identified nationally, including provision in arts organisations.

Deputy Tom Neville: Are there specific regions of the country where the gaps are more prevalent?

Dr. Linda O'Sullivan: The results of the mapping exercise have not yet been analysed. We hope to have the results of in the coming months.

Deputy Denise Mitchell: One of the objectives of the strategy is review the relationship and sexuality education, RSE, curriculum. We all agree that is really important in context of consent, the understanding of the diversity of relationships and in respect of safe sex. Is the Minister hopeful that there will be real change in how RSE is delivered?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: Yes, I am. It is always important to maintain hope and to imagine the possible. The Department recently held a consultation on this issue with approximately 80 young people. We are preparing a report of that consultation, which will be presented to the NCCA and will be part of its discussions with the Minister for Education and Skills on what changes are being sought. I will forward a copy of the report to the committee. This is a key area where there are some outstanding places where things need to change for the community.

Vice Chairman: Would Ms McGovern like to comment?

Ms Olive McGovern: Our consultation report in of itself indicated to the NCCA a significant amount of concern in this area and it recommended changes. For 4,000 young people across the country, this was a common theme. However, the NCCA was anxious to go even deeper with young people and consequently, separate to our full population consultation it worked with BeLonG To and others on an additional specific LGBTI+ population consultation. We supported that through that our participation unit with a broad population. Even in the broad population, for whom this is not perhaps the first matter of concern, this is still a matter of concern. Young people are calling for an RSE curriculum that better represents the reality and the diversity of young people's lives. That is the most universal theme among any of the consultations. The LGBTI young people have much more specific content that they would like to see covered but the general population of young people were very supportive.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I welcome the Minister and her officials to the committee. This is a really ambitious project that should be commended. It will, I hope, enhance the lives of young LGBT people.

Homelessness figures have reached 10,000 people. Youth homelessness is an issue with which this committee will deal in the coming weeks. An LGBT shelter has been launched in London and we know that LGBT homelessness is a big issue across the Minister's birthplace, the United States. We do not have as much data on youth homelessness in Ireland and whether it is a problem. In the USA, studies indicate that about 40% of all young people accessing homeless services are LGBT. A recent study in the UK found that one quarter of young homeless people are LGBT. We need to realise if it is a problem here. It is touched on in some of the strategy's objectives, such as with homeless services having a safe and inclusive environment. Can the committee do anything in its work on youth homelessness which would support these actions?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I do not know if we have specific statistics but the Senator's question is excellent. Two things come to mind in responding. One is whether young LGBT homeless people are homeless as a result of their sexual identity. I do not know. Second, if they are part of the homeless population - no doubt they are - is the question of whether there are special supports for them to mitigate the harm which young people experience as a result of being homeless. My officials may know if we have this information.

Ms Olive McGovern: There is certainly a call for more research in this area and we are beginning to gather data on sexual orientation, or LGBTI status generally, as it is not only related to sexual orientation alone, within the homeless services.

Dr. Linda O'Sullivan: It has emerged that there is a dearth of gender-neutral facilities in homeless services. This is something that could be examined in respect of the trans community. Support for parents is also important to address the underlying causes in terms of some of the high incidence of homelessness in the LGBT community.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I refer to objective 8(b) in the strategy which relates to the prohibition of conversion therapy. Our Private Members' Bill prohibiting conversion therapy has passed Second Stage in the Seanad. It would be the most comprehensive ban in the world. Some would argue it is a reach into religious freedom but we are talking about vulnerable people. In many parts of the world, its use has been prohibited in the cases of young people and minors. My view is that anyone seeking access to conversion therapy is vulnerable and should be protected from those who seek to take advantage of their vulnerability.

We have been met with goodwill from the Department of Health. Legislative progress has been slow due to Brexit. I understand the Department of Justice and Equality proposes to undertake research into the extent of the use of conversion therapy in the State, something that the Department of Health had floated during the debate on Second Stage. We do not need research to know that it is happening in Ireland as it is apparent that organisations exist that offer to repress, suppress or eliminate a person’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Should extensive research on this delay a Bill to the point where legislation may not be introduced in this term? What if the Department of Justice and Equality establishes that it is not that apparent and that two organisations is not sufficient to warrant a legislative ban, despite the ongoing practice in the State and that a legislative ban could also stop parents sending minors abroad to access summer camps which emphasise “praying away the gay”, as we hear it described sometimes? Has the Minister had engagements with the Department of Health? Does the Minister support a legislative ban even if there are only one or two organisations which offer the practice? The British Government undertook the largest survey of gay people I have come across in which this issue arose. It is primarily an issue in faith-based practices and organisations. I am not that hopeful and do not anticipate legislative change at the moment, given our experience to date. Has the Minister anything to say on this? Can she give the Bill any support?

Deputy Katherine Zappone: The issues which the Senator raises and his leadership on this are really important. It would be no big surprise that I absolutely support the idea that conversion therapy by health professionals in Ireland should not take place. On a legislative ban, the process under way is really important. I understand it is now with the justice committee. As the Senator indicated, there is research that needs to be done. It is not an unusual thing to ask for when developing law that brings forward such a change, in order to see how harmful action against citizens may be stopped or prohibited through legislation. It is important to undertake that kind of research.

The Minister of State, Deputy Catherine Byrne, is leading the more detailed examination of the Bill. I acknowledge the Deputy’s leadership. It is important that that process continue.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I see a shortcoming in the commitment in 8(b) of the strategy, which is confirmed by the findings of the British survey, which showed that only 5% of people who have undergone conversion therapy do so in a professional, regulated space. In other words, 95% of those who experience conversion therapy do so through faith-based organisations. The outright ban which we propose is the only way the issue can really be addressed. I am not contesting that research is needed but I am slightly concerned that the Department of Justice and Equality is conducting research and that the two strategies might conflict.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: I will bring the Senator’s comments to the Minister.

Ms Olive McGovern: For the record, the Department of Justice and Equality is not doing the research, it is just that these matters are being considered in the context of the LGBT inclusion strategy.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: It is in the wider strategy.

Ms Olive McGovern: Dr. O’Sullivan might confirm that there is not additional research.

Dr. Linda O’Sullivan: No, there is no additional research.

Ms Olive McGovern: The policy context is the inclusion strategy.

Dr. Linda O’Sullivan: The wording of the final action in the justice strategy is currently under negotiation. It remains to be seen how that will be formulated.

Senator Fintan Warfield: The Minister referred to the mapping out of provisions for youth services and youth support. When I speak to organisations such as Teach Solais in Galway, Gay Project and LINC in Cork, or phonedlines such as Gay Switchboard and the LGBT helpline all seem to apply to different funding streams. Sometimes that is welcome because when the austerity junkies are around and things are cut back, separate funding channels can protect services and so on. Should those services be streamlined? I have a concern that less money is going to services in County Cork. Will that issue be addressed in the mapping exercise?

Dr. Linda O’Sullivan: Uniquely the mapping exercise we are carrying out is related to youth service provision. However, in the current strategy development process being undertaken by the Department of Justice and Equality the issue of funding for LGBT-specific organisations has emerged. It is under review and being examined and considered as part of the strategy development process.

Senator Fintan Warfield: I commend the sticker being worn. I spoke to Ms Úna Mulally about the commitment in that regard and she was very excited by it.

Deputy Katherine Zappone: It is going to look great and will be amazing.

Senator Fintan Warfield: As I have stated previously, there was a one-way system around my school and every day I passed a BeLonG To poster which read “It’s OK to be gay”. Although I did not come out while I was in school, it was nice to know someone had put up the poster there. It is very important that such posters be put up in GAA clubs and other spaces. Taking part in sport can be frustrating for members of the LGBTI community, which is probably why I ended up playing for the Dublin Devils football club. We will be in Rome in July for the European games. I commend the initiative represented on the sticker.

Vice Chairman: On behalf of the committee, I thank the Minister for her presentation. I also thank Dr. O’Sullivan and Ms McGovern for their excellent input. It has been a very easy meeting; I wish all meetings were as easy.

The joint committee adjourned at 9.55 a.m. until 10 a.m. on Wednesday, 22 May 2019.