

# YOUTH WORK WITH LGBTQI+ YOUNG PEOPLE: PURPOSE, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

## National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for national voluntary youth work organisations in Ireland. It represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations and uses its collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

[youth.ie](https://youth.ie)

## North-South Practice Development Hub

The North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub is a joint initiative between the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and the Education Authority Youth Service, Northern Ireland.

[North-South Hub](#)

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# Executive Summary

In May 2023 a conference was hosted by the North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub, with the aim of demonstrating the value and contribution of a youth work methodology to meeting the developmental and well-being needs of LGBTQI+ young people across the island of Ireland. This is a synopsis encompassing the main ideas and concerns that arose from the inputs, workshops, and discussions held during the conference.

## 1. Coming Out

Coming out remains the primary issue for LGBTQI+ young people, and the conference heard a first-hand account of the stress placed on one young person when deciding to come out, and the profoundly positive impact of youth services in supporting him during this time and his journey to self-acceptance.

## 2. Safety

Another pressing issue for LGBTQI+ young people is personal safety whether in schools, online, in public or at home. Poignantly, the conference took place the day after a vicious [homophobic attack](#) on a teenager in Navan, county Meath. Conference-goers were also reminded that 2022 was the most [violent year](#) for LGBTI people across Europe in the past decade.

## 3. Youth Work Fundamentals

Several of the workshops explored how the fundamental principles and values of youth work, coupled with the inherent skills and qualities of youth workers, are wholly conducive to meeting the developmental needs of LGBTQI+ young people. Whilst dedicated specialist provision remains very important, these workshops demonstrated how mainstream youth work can provide safe, welcoming and inclusive spaces for LGBTQI+ young people.

## 4. Trans Youth Healthcare

The challenges faced by transgender young people are acute and conference was informed of a [recent study](#) showing that Ireland ranks lowest among EU countries on trans specific healthcare provision. This is at the same time as trans healthcare for young people in the [UK](#) is in a state of flux.

## 5. Practical Challenges

Some of the practical challenges raised by conference participants included resistance from some faith-based organisations, confusion about LGBTQI+ terminology, logistical issues around residencies, the complexity in understanding the co-occurrence of Autism and Gender Dysphoria and queries about whether LGBTQI+ youth workers should disclose their sexual orientation/gender identity. The workshops provided the space to raise these, and many other queries and challenges, and to begin to explore solutions.

## 6. Evaluation and Feedback

Evaluation of the conference showed an overwhelming appreciation of having the space to share practice, to hear directly from a young person, to learn about theory, and to network on a North-South basis. Going forward, there was a clear appetite for further opportunities, which would build on collaboration and provide a blend of practical and theoretical learning alongside hearing the voices of young people and working towards solutions.





***“There is need for more opportunities like this to simply gather and coalesce, draw wisdom from the crowd and go away both affirmed in and challenged about our practice with LGBTQ+ young people.”***





## The North–South Practice Development Hub

The North–South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub is a joint initiative between the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and the Education Authority Youth Service, Northern Ireland. The Hub was established to strengthen and develop sustainable North–South youth work sector relationships among and between organisations, staff and volunteers, and to enhance the quality of the learning experience of young people participating in youth services across the island.

One area of the Hub’s work has been to facilitate a North–South LGBTQI+ Provider’s Forum, and in May 2023 the group hosted a one-day conference at the Crowne Plaza

Hotel, Dundalk. This was a collaborative event, delivered by representatives of NYCI, Education Authority Youth Service, Belong To, Cara-Friend, Youth Work Ireland, YouthAction NI, Donegal Youth Service, Ulster University Community Youth Work Team, SWAN YS, Waterford & South Tipperary Community Youth Service and Youth Work Ireland Galway.

The aim of the Conference was to demonstrate and increase understanding of the value and contribution of a youth work methodology to meeting the developmental and well-being needs of LGBTQI+ young people across the island of Ireland.

# Youth Work with LGBTQI+ Young People: purpose, principles, practice

Dundalk  
18 May 2023

A conference to demonstrate the value and contribution of a youth work methodology to meeting the developmental and well-being needs of LGBTQI+ young people across the island of Ireland.

## Conference participants

The Conference was attended by a total of 74 youth workers, managers and stakeholders, from across the island, either currently working with LGBTQI+ young people, or those wishing to broaden/enhance their practice to engage and include LGBTQI+ young people. Of the 74 participants, 32 were based in Northern Ireland, 40 in the Republic of Ireland, and 2 were visitors from a LGBTQI+ organisation in Manchester.

## The Conference objectives were to:

- Provide space to come together, share practice, exchange knowledge and develop new perspectives in relation to the inclusion of LGBTQI+ young people in youth work.
- Support those engaged in the delivery and oversight of youth services for LGBTQI+ young people.
- Strengthen and enhance relationships in the youth work sector North and South.

## Conference format

The conference was designed as a highly interactive event which would enable sharing of practice, challenges and solutions. The programme comprised keynote speakers and workshops exploring key themes around inclusive youth work practice with LGBTQI+ young people, followed by a Q and A panel discussion, and closing comments by Mary Cunningham, CEO of the NYCI.





## Conference Welcome

### Denis O'Brien, President, National Youth Council of Ireland

In opening the conference and welcoming participants, Denis noted his delight to be hosting the first major Practice Development Hub event on the theme of youth work and LGBTQI+. The conference was designed to facilitate engagement and connections, to affirm and to challenge, and to demonstrate the value and contribution of a youth work methodology in meeting the developmental and well-being needs of LGBTQI+ young people across the island of Ireland.

Denis thanked all participants for giving their time to attend the event, noting that this is a sign of commitment to their own practice and to LGBTQI+ young people. He reflected that a conference like this could not have happened in the Ireland of the past, in the days when homosexuality was criminalised and when young people's needs in understanding their sexual orientation were either ignored or met only through religious terms. For too long, the needs of LGBTQI+ young people were neither acknowledged nor addressed.

*We've come a long way, yet every young person's journey is new and unique to them, they all need supportive adults, supportive peers, safe spaces, and people who will listen and be non-judgemental. Youth work provides all of this.*

### Arlene Kee, Assistant Director Children and Young People's Services, Education Authority

Arlene reiterated the point made by Denis, that the selection of LGBTQI+ as the focus of the first major conference by the Hub was a clear and welcome reflection of the importance placed on this area of youth work. She spoke about the challenging context of youth work in current times, with complexities and pressures felt both at workplace and management levels. Particularly in the north, the challenges of government policy, budgets, and competing agendas have created the conditions for what she described as a 'perfect storm'. Those working within the youth service may feel they are being pulled in so many different ways, dealing with the complexity of young people's lives amid a difficult economic backdrop.

Acknowledging these pressures, Arlene stressed the importance of taking brave and positive steps forward in the midst of the perfect storm, and the imperative for conference-goers to engage in conversations, explore opportunities, to challenge, and to seek to influence. Noting that the conference would ideally create spaces for 'disruptive thinking' Arlene concluded,

*Let's do things differently, which requires thinking differently and having the courage to challenge.... youth work is powerful, our thoughts and our words and our actions are powerful and we don't get enough space in these busy times to take the time out to talk.*

### Dr Breda Friel, Ulster University

Breda facilitated a series of guided and sensory exercises for conference attendees, aiming to encourage reflexivity and prepare them for the day ahead.



# Keynote Speakers

## Moninne Griffith, CEO, Belong To

After welcoming conference attendees, Moninne alluded to the deep upset and anger felt within the LGBTQI+ community in the wake of a homophobic attack on a teenager in Navan the previous day. She deplored that attacks of this nature are becoming more commonplace due to the rise of extremist views, which normalise attitudes of hate towards LGBTQI+ people, and particularly towards trans people.

***Yesterdays' attack is an example of the real impact of what happens when we don't stand up as individuals and citizens and say 'enough'....this is about righteous anger, not the type that is corrosive, but the kind that motivates us into action***

Moninne then reflected on the origins and impacts of Belong To, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. The organisation provides direct youth services in Dublin, as well as supporting a Network of LGBTQ+ youth clubs across Ireland, campaigning work, and capacity building within schools and youth services, homeless and drug and alcohol services, sports groups and workplaces. Belong To's recently launched [Rainbow Award](#) was also highlighted as an example of the support provided to help create fully inclusive LGBTQ+ youth services for young people in Ireland.

***At the heart of it the most important thing we do is create a safe space for young people just to come and be themselves and meet other young people who have similar life experiences as them, so they build community, build friendships, confidence, resilience, their agency and then their impact on the world around them.***

As a result of this critical social education approach, young people grow in ability and can, in turn, create change within the LGBTQI+ community and wider society. Moninne described several instances of LGBTQI+ young people actively influencing government policy. For example, in preparation for the referendum on marriage equality, Belong To had organised a registration drive in partnership with a number of other organisations. 40,000 new voters registered in Ireland, and young people were the strongest age demographic to support marriage equality. Young people from Belong To were also active in representing LGBTQI+

views during the development of the LGBT Youth Strategy, the Gender Recognition Act, the review of Relationships and Sexuality Education, and the Action Plan on Bullying in education.

***All of this shows the impact of LGBT young people who were given the platform, who are provided with the opportunity to develop, to thrive, to find their voices, become agents for positive change.***

In closing, Moninne noted that the key issue of concern for LGBTQI+ young people remains coming out. This is a continual process and brings with it a fear of rejection – for some young people coming out can be a terrifying experience with mental health repercussions. The second most pressing issue is being trans, Moninne contended that trans healthcare in Ireland has worsened over recent years she cited a recent [ILGA report](#) where Ireland ranked last among EU countries on trans specific healthcare provision. The third issue for LGBTQI+ young people is that of safety, whether it be in schools, online, in public or at home.

She concluded that there is an ongoing need for further research, as well as a need to support youth workers and to improve both job and funding security. There is a constant need to develop expertise, and she warmly welcomed the conference as a space to share with each other.





### **Lee Cullen, Operations Director, Cara-Friend**

In welcoming conference attendees, Lee noted his pleasure at seeing representatives from the North and South join together, and also voiced his appreciation of the priority which has been given by the Hub to LGBTQI+ issues across the island of Ireland. Youth work, he reflected, is a powerful process which can have fundamental outcomes for young people.

***As youth workers we're unwavering in our support for LGBTQIA+ young people as they embark on their journeys of self-discovery. Youth work is a transformative force that provides the tools for young people to explore their identities, fulfil their potential and actively contribute to society.... When provided with the necessary support that is cognisant of their community and cultural context, young people who identify themselves as LGBTQIA+ become resilient and courageous leaders who can shape the future of equality and inclusivity.***

Whilst there is a tendency to dwell on the difficulties and challenges of working with LGBTQI+ young people, Lee contended it is also essential to reflect on, and talk about, the development of organisational collaboration. He outlined the approach which Cara-Friend has taken to collaborative working within the youth sector in Northern Ireland over the past decades. This has ranged from the early 'inclusion groups' which involved the former Education and Library Boards, to the current partnerships which fully incorporate the

expertise of LGBTQI+ organisations within the broad youth work sector provision in Northern Ireland.

***It's all about sharing the commitment to creating the environments where young people, regardless of their sexual orientation or their gender identity feel safe, respected and supported. A safe space for young people.***

Lee proceeded to outline the aspiration to develop collaboration across Ireland, to bring together grassroots organisations and other agencies, and allow for the development of shared knowledge, resources and best practice. Such a comprehensive model of all-Ireland collaboration would be responsive to the ever-evolving needs of LGBTQI+ young people. Reflecting on the Cara-Friend experience, he attested how collaboration had led to the development of synergy with the youth work sector, and how this approach can amplify collective impact, can develop confidence within youth work staff themselves delivering on these issues, and create a more effective and tailored support system for LGBTQI+ youth generally. In his closing comments Lee reiterated his appreciation that the Conference is taking place and encouraged participants to actively share their expertise.

***I'm excited to be here and hope the conference inspires future work, that together we can forge a future that celebrates diversity, embraces inclusivity and ensures that no one is left behind.***

## **Ayrton Kelly, Former youth service user and LGBTQI+ rights activist**

Between the ages of 16 and 23 Ayrton was a youth service user and volunteer with Donegal youth service. After coming out as gay in 2015 he became involved in activism and advocacy, including involvement in the development of the LGBT National Youth Strategy.

Ayrton began by recording his personal appreciation for youth services and youth work practitioners, including a number of individuals attending the conference.

***I can very strongly attest to the impact that youth work has had on my life when I needed it most, and I continue to reap the benefits today in my career and personal life – from being exposed to a safe, supporting environment I began to figure out who I was, my authentic self as it were.***

Ayrton proceeded to recount pivotal events from his early childhood, school and family life, and reflected that in hindsight it is difficult to put a timepoint on when he first realised he was gay. He described various experiences which had worsened his own sense of inner conflict and heightened the fear and discomfort of coming out.

***The journey of self-acceptance for a young LGBT person is not a linear one, it's more like a game of snakes and ladders, where progress is incremental, and you can fall back.***

Ayrton shared his story of self-awareness, the stages of coming out, including coming out to himself, and the gradual process of coming out to different individuals. Ayrton described the strain placed on his mental and physical health, and the unwitting tensions created by some people who were acting with good intentions. He spoke in moving detail about trying to find the courage and confidence

to approach local youth service, and the subsequent importance that youth services had for his personal development and life journey. Ayrton paid tribute to several individuals within Donegal youth services and emphasised the huge value of the youth service in providing a safe space.

***Youth work has a profound impact, the power to change the situation, and help those LGBT young people who, right now, are alone, isolated and in need to support.... Youth work is the ladder in the LGBT edition of snakes and ladders....to do this we must be conscious of our words, our actions, and our inactions, because they can put a young person back to square one.***



**My takeaway  
on leaving the  
conference is...**

***"Best part for me was hearing a young person's journey - it always comes back to the individual and where they are coming from."***



## Workshops

**Participants chose to attend two out of a total of five workshops. These comprised brief presentations by lead facilitators, followed by interactive exercises and/or conversations which allowed participants to share their own practice and to learn from others. During the workshops several participants disclosed personal or sensitive information about their circumstances or practice, and it is not appropriate to include details in this report. The following pages instead provide a summary of workshop presentations and a flavour of the very wide range of issues raised during discussions.**



## An asset-based approach

### Facilitators

Olivia Davidson – YouthAction NI

Debbie O'Rourke – Waterford and South Tipperary Community Youth Service

### Theme

This practical workshop starts with recognising the strengths, skills and qualities youth workers bring to their everyday engagement with young people and applying these in your work with young people who identify as LGBTQI+. It will seek to demystify the practice and foster the sharing of practical solutions to the challenges raised.

## Proud Spaces

### Facilitators

Gina Halpin & Matthew Seebach – Youth Work Ireland

### Theme

This interactive workshop will explore youth work practices, values, methodologies, and principles that guide youth workers in the creation of inclusive and safe spaces for young LGBTQI+ young people in youth services. The workshop will share recent findings from a European wide survey and research project – Proud Spaces.

## Enhancing Inclusive Practice in Youth Work

### Facilitators

Maria Ghianni-Wilkinson – Cara-Friend

Barry McSkeane – Belong To

### Theme

This workshop will give you the chance to hear more from the island's two organisations dedicated to improving the quality of LGBTQI+ provision in all youth services. Join us to share your experience and learn about how you can connect with experts today.

## Beyond the Lanyard – developing an inclusive workplace

### Facilitator

Francis Loughlin – Education Authority Youth Service

### Theme

This workshop will explore the practicalities of creating an inclusive workplace which welcomes and supports workers identifying as LGBTQI+.

## Autism – Identity, Well-being and Inclusion

### Facilitator

Dr Breda Friel – Ulster University

### Theme

This workshop offers a conversation about the growing link emerging in literature and in practice between autism and gender dysphoria. It will offer thoughts from one person's lived experience, as well as best practice recommendations with a particular focus on mental health and well-being.

## An Asset-based Approach

*Facilitated by: Olivia Davidson, YouthAction NI and Debbie O'Rourke, Waterford and South Tipperary Community Youth Service.*

This interactive workshop aimed to demystify youth work practice with LGBTQI+ young people and foster the sharing of practical solutions to the challenges raised.

The facilitators began with a brief presentation to highlight the strengths, skills and qualities which youth workers bring to their everyday engagement with young people. The key point made was that the fundamental principles of youth work, such as the pursuit of freedom, human rights and anti-discrimination, mean that everyday good youth work practice is highly inclusive, and, as such, all youth workers have the skills needed to work with LGBTQI+ young people. The presentation was followed by a practical exercise for participants to reflect on two letters written by young people, reproduced within the Youth Action NI LGBTQ+ Youth Manifesto. This exercise prompted discussion on a range of themes, including:

- Confusion about the LGBTQI+ terminology, language and use of pronouns. Facilitators noted this is one of the most common concerns for youth workers and there is no fixed rule book. Expectations will vary and workers should be led by the young people they are engaged with. The skill of the youth worker lies in the process and in having conversations. There may be a fear of 'getting it wrong' in front of young people, but they can sense when a genuine mistake has been made - if you are transparent, young people can guide you.

- Discussion on the tensions and competing values of working in conjunction with some faith-based organisations. Youth workers need to be brave to take a stand for LGBTQI+ young people. Whilst there have been developments in some parts of the faith-based sector this can be very variable.
- The need to be inclusive in everyday practice rather than signposting and relying on specialist provision. Youth work needs to confront a lack of action or hesitation to include LGBTQI+ young people in provision.
- Discussion on whether workers should disclose their gender identity and/or sexual orientation to young people - whilst there is value in having LGBTQI+ workers as visible role models, workers should only disclose what they are comfortable with.
- Discussion on accommodation for residentials and how generic safeguarding policies should be sufficient to resolve any concerns or issues.



**My takeaway  
on leaving the  
conference is...**

***"We already know what to do, so keep doing it, go back to the youth work principles and continue to respect every individual and their story."***



## Proud Spaces

*Facilitated by: Gina Halpin and Matthew Seebach, Youth Work Ireland*

This interactive workshop was designed to explore youth work practices, values, methodologies and principles that guide youth workers in the creation of inclusive and safe spaces for LGBTQI+ young people in youth services. The workshop invited a discussion of the findings of the first stage of a European wide survey and research project – Proud Spaces. The research project aims to establish an evidence-based LGBTQI+ model of best practice for youth workers and others working with LGBTQI+ young people in Ireland and Europe.

The Proud Spaces research found the following kinds of activities took place in LGBTQI+ youth services:

- Safe spaces are provided
- Peer support is facilitated
- Coming out support
- Art therapy and creative activities
- Holistic support, signposting and referral via integrated youth services
- Personal development
- Developmental group work, empowerment and social action
- One to one work
- Trans boxes

The key outcomes of LGBTQI+ youth work were found to be:

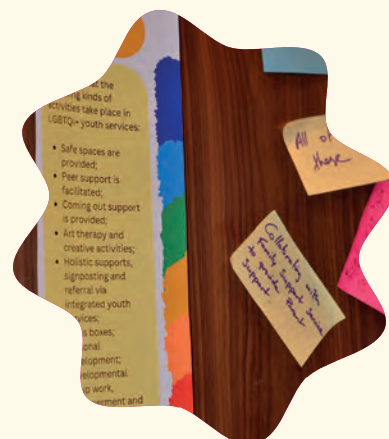
**Knowledge** – awareness of supports, awareness of LGBTQI+ identities, awareness of own agency, awareness of possibility of change, awareness of the history of the LGBTQI+ community.

**Attitudes** – feeling that they not alone, that their life has meaning, having a voice and being heard, feeling they can be accepted and understood by peers, feeling they can be accepted in a wider community, that they can be safe, that change is possible, and feeling that they have agency and the ability to make change if they want.

**Skills** – positive coping mechanisms, the seven skills of all youth work, community building/networking, campaigning, advocacy, peer leadership.

The research findings were discussed during the workshop, and participants were encouraged to share their own experiences and practice. Feedback on the workshop was gathered during a closing circle, at which participants affirmed the value of being able to reflect on their own work, develop new contacts, hear about what others are doing, feeling more supported and less isolated in their work, and the value of learning about new initiatives such as Trans boxes.

A copy of the Proud Space report can be accessed [here](https://www.youthworkireland.ie/proud-spaces/) and more information on the project is available on the Youth Work Ireland website at <https://www.youthworkireland.ie/proud-spaces/>



**My takeaway  
on leaving the  
conference is...**

***“There are a lot of amazing  
resources available for  
working with LGBTQI+ youth.”***

## Enhancing Inclusive Practice in Youth Work

*Facilitated by: Maria Ghianni-Wilkinson, Cara-Friend and Barry McSkeane, Belong To*

This workshop provided participants with the chance to hear from two LGBTQI+ specific organisations dedicated to improving the quality of provision in all youth services, followed by a wide-ranging discussion on participants' own experiences.



Maria gave a brief presentation on [Cara-Friend](#), which was established in 1974 to support LGBTQI+ people across Northern Ireland. Providing a range of services such as support to youth work, an inclusive Schools Charter, switchboard and helpline, Inclusive Business Charter and visibility in community events, Cara-Friend is now in the process of developing an Inclusive Youth Network to support groups. This would include free LGBT training, policy development and governance support, expert advice, sharing of opportunities, and also an annual conference. The aspiration is to hold the first such conference in autumn 2023.

Barry gave a brief presentation on [Belong To](#), which provides a range of services within the Republic of Ireland including youth services and advocacy. Since 2007 Belong To has facilitated a national Network which currently provides 74 member groups with a range of support and training services. The Network also fosters a sense of solidarity between groups, which is particularly important in

times of crisis or controversy. Barry then outlined the [Rainbow Award](#), which has been piloted with six youth organisations.

The Award is structured into four Tiers, to include Tier 1) Universal Training Tier 2) Champions Training Tier 3) Organisational change and Tier 4) Awards process. The 6 Modules (6 P's) are the areas of focus for evidencing best practice and organisational change under Tier 3.

These Modules are: 1) Policy & Governance, 2) People, 3) Practice, 4) Programmes, 5) Participation & Empowerment, and 6) Partnerships. Participation in the Rainbow Awards process is free.

Participants were then divided into smaller groups to discuss their current issues and solutions when working with LGBTQI+ young people, and the supports that they need. The conversations were extremely wide-ranging, and the following list touches on only a few of the many issues which were raised:

- Dealing with a perception that LGBTQI+ work is disproportionately well funded.
- Practical issues with residentials, including the challenge of individual bedrooms and communications with parents/carers.
- Lack of counsellors and variable/limited relevant skillsets within statutory mental health services.
- Creating awareness of LGBTQI+ issues among heterosexual workers.
- Extension of youth work to not go beyond our remit in advising on some legally impacting issues.
- Recognition that there may be divisions within the LGBTQI+ community, and in particular there can be transphobic attitudes among some LGB people.
- Dealing with homophobia within the youth group, at times it may be necessary to keep evenings separate.
- Weighing the right of external groups to express their religious or cultural beliefs against the rights of LGBTQI+ young people to personal safety.



***“There is a huge community of dedicated professionals across Ireland committed to making young LGBT+ lives the best they can possibly be.”***

## Beyond the Lanyard – Developing an Inclusive Workspace

*Facilitated by: Francis Loughlin, Education Authority NI Youth Service*

This workshop was designed to explore the practicalities of creating an inclusive workspace which welcomes and supports workers identifying as LGBTQI+. The Crosscare example of wearing lanyards which indicate that the space is safe was given, although, as discussed, this approach may carry the risk of seeming tokenistic.

A series of questions were raised to explore how workspaces can become more visibly inclusive. These included:

- How does your workplace look?
- What personal items do staff display?
- How are your workers identified (gender identifies)?
- What corporate images are on show?
- What do your promotional materials look like?

In terms of creating a culture, the following were discussed:

- How could your workplace change?
- What practical changes could/should be made?
- Who would be responsible for this?
- What permission may you need to seek?
- Who would you have to approach to enable these changes?
- How do we use our influence on the culture? (may need to be disruptive)

There was an acknowledgement of the tensions involved in developing inclusive workspaces, including the risk of creating a sterile and tolerant space, rather than one which is open and diverse. The aspiration is to work towards a space of 'universal accessibility' which is inclusive of everybody.

Feedback on the workshop was gathered during a closing circle, at which participants acknowledged the complexities of ensuring inclusion in workplaces. Some had difficulties with LGBTQI+ terminology, confusion about how to define inclusivity, and there was also concern that equality in Ireland seems to be regressing rather than advancing, due to the spread of the far right. Workshop participants said they were grateful to have opportunities to listen to other youth workers, expressed interest in the concept of universal accessibility, felt that faith-based organisations are changing in their practice, and there was also a call for more training to support inclusion in the workspace.



**My takeaway  
on leaving the  
conference is...**

***“That we need more time to explore inclusive workplaces where LGBTQIA+ workers can feel included.”***



## Autism – Identity, Well-being and Inclusion

*Facilitated by: Dr Breda Friel, Ulster University*

This workshop offered a conversation about the growing link emerging in literature and in practice between autism and gender dysphoria. The workshop presentation offered thoughts from one person's lived experience, as well as best practice recommendations with a particular focus on mental health and well-being.

The workshop began with a detailed presentation on Autism and the emerging body of research which finds a significant co-occurrence between Autism and Gender Dysphoria. Some of the key points from the presentation included:

The prevalence of Autism has increased, although this could be due to better assessment: 1 in 44 children in 2018, up from 1 in 54 in 2016.

The notion of a linear Autism Spectrum is unhelpful and reflects a scale of economic viability. Similarly, terms such as 'high functioning' and 'low functioning' are harmful and outdated. The deficit or medical model of disability locates the "problem" within the individual and so the focus must be to treat, fix or cure, whereas the social model of disability states the "problem" lies within an inaccessible and excluding society and so the focus should be to challenge, fix and change.

A Strength-based approach has a fundamental belief that every individual has the ability to grow, develop and flourish, given the right environment. We don't minimize or ignore the areas for improvement, but focus on the strengths first. Everyone has a different purpose in a team, let's build teams where each individual's strengths are acknowledged and appreciated.



Epidemiology of Gender Dysphoria: Just like the prevalence of Autism, an increase of the prevalence of Gender Dysphoria has been reported over time, and gender identity clinics consequently report an increase in referrals. It is unclear whether this reflects a true increase, or whether it reflects the fact that it has become much easier to seek transgender care due to more visibility and acceptance. It should not be assumed that an increase in incidence is linked to any one cause, as a single cause of Gender Dysphoria being unlikely but an interaction of biological, social and psychological factors. The presentation outlined current research into each of these factors, highlighting the complexity in understanding the co-occurrence of Autism and Gender Dysphoria.

Following the presentation, topics which were discussed in more detail included:

- Strengths-based perspective
- Gender identity affirmation
- Supporting young people
- Person first vs. identity first language

**My takeaway  
on leaving the  
conference is...**

***"Normalise not  
problematised."***

## Q and A Panel Discussion

**The panel comprising of Moninne Griffith, Lee Cullen, Ayrton Kelly, and Dr Breda Friel responded to questions which had been developed during the conference workshops.**

### **Could consideration be given to expanding the national network on an all-Ireland basis?**

Lee Cullen: Conversations have been going on between Cara-Friend and Belong To. Belong To operate the network in the Republic, while Cara-Friend have been developing a network in Northern Ireland, and both our organisations are uniquely positioned between our respective LGBTQI+ sector of community organisations and the wider youth work sector. Both organisations have been developing a lot of work in parallel and there is shared value in trying to bring that experience of being part of that national network together. To answer the question, there is strength in togetherness on an all-Ireland basis.

### **How do we support LGBTQI+ youth workers in the work they're doing, or their identity? How much of their personal life has to become part of their work life? This can cause mental health issues for LGBTQI+ workers, is there any advice the panel can give to those workers?**

Moninne Griffith: Belong To recently held a session with a psychotherapist on the subject of vicarious trauma and the fact that workers who are LGBTQI+ may carry past trauma with them and can be affected when working with a young person experiencing trauma. She noted that there are standard but essential practices to support staff well-being – annual leave, TOIL, making sure not to habitually work overtime, taking breaks, going out at lunchtime, making sure that colleagues are talking about well-being as an integral part of the work rather than an add-on. Boundaries



should be put in place to support staff well-being, and managers also need to model their behaviour to staff. Moninne noted that Belong To employ a psychotherapist once a month to provide a therapeutic space for youth workers, and an online therapeutic space is also provided to the national Network to those workers who need it.

Moninne highlighted the importance of being able to recognise vicarious trauma. For example, the recent anti-trans movement has caused trauma to some LGBTQI+ professionals, underscoring the need to have personal boundaries in place, which can include complete holidays from work and filtering social media etc.

Dr Breda Friel added that Ulster University have run a number of professional and personal self-care workshops. Important components of these workshops include awareness of the vicarious retraumatising that happens in youth work, that good boundaries make for good practice, and also the need to distinguish supervision from case management. In terms of the latter, supervision is crucial in self-care.

**A benefit of the National Network is that it allows different types of organisations to collaborate. However, we are operating in a space of competitive funding. In this context, how can we make sure we collaborate and that we don't promote some voices above others?**

Dr Breda Friel: Youth work is a social educational and psychological science, and at its foundation and ethos it draws on positive psychology. Youth work is person-centred and entirely relational, and as such it crosses many professional disciplines. Breda described the interface when disciplines are brought together as the 'third space', but noted that funding does not often align with this third space. Collaboration is so important and yet the reality is that funding cycles create competition. Breda described collaboration and competition as 'uncomfortable cousins' but they are an inevitability, particularly when resources are limited. There is likely to be competition at a range of levels, be it rural/urban competition, thematic, national/local/regional, geographic, voluntary/statutory etc. Within this reality, the important thing is to get partnerships established at very early stages, and to stay true to the central purpose of the work. Key questions to ask when collaborating are: how do we maintain our independence of purpose and voice; how do we maintain our boundaries of practice, and how do we maintain communication at all levels?

Moninne Griffith added that funding cycles can set unrealistic timeframes, asking how can organisations prepare collaborative applications with just three weeks notice? To pre-empt this, she suggested there needs to be a more strategic approach between organisations, with conversations amongst ourselves first before contacting funders. Lee Cullen agreed for the need for reframing of funding. He noted that LGBTQI+ work is not just with individuals but also with the LGBTQI+ community, and that an all-island approach would also be useful.

**Could Ayrton comment on what it is really essential for youth workers and youth services to do to ensure young people can have a positive experience?**

As a former youth service user Ayrton highlighted that the needs of each individual young person will vary, but he felt that honesty with the young person and setting realistic expectations is critically important to every young person. He noted that young people can sense authenticity, and so youth workers need to be honest with them to build trust, even if this means having hard discussions. He noted that youth workers may have a fear of using the wrong language with young people who identify as LGBTQI+ but that young people will know when a genuine mistake has been made. In essence, Ayrton suggested that 'in trying to not get it wrong, youth workers may be shooting themselves in the foot'.



***"Excitement for potential partnerships across the island."***

***"Just do it, young people aren't going to criticise you for that."***



## Closing comments

### Mary Cunningham, CEO, National Youth Council of Ireland



Mary reflected that while the conference had been positive, exciting and empowering, it had also revealed an underlying sense of anxiety to 'do the right thing' when working with LGBTQI+ young people, leading to the question 'what is the right thing to do?'. In this respect the conference had emphasised the fact that the fundamentals of everyday youth work – the pursuit of freedom, human rights and anti-discrimination – are central to working with LGBTQI+ young people. At its heart, youth work respects young people and creates safe spaces for them to flourish, and Mary contended we should not allow anxieties about LGBTQI+ terminology get in the way of providing good youth work practice. She paid tribute to the professional talent within the room and emphasised the importance of reflecting on and valuing our own skills.

The conference had also shone a light on the importance and challenges of collaboration, and Mary reflected on the need to forge partnerships well in advance of making joint funding applications. She urged conference attenders to continue to network and to build on the contacts they had made today.

Another clear message from conference participants was the value placed on having opportunities to share practice and learn from each other. Mary stressed that we need to have greater confidence and self-belief in our practice and in the fundamentals of youth work, and more opportunities, such as today, to share our practice with others.

In closing the conference Mary recorded her sincere thanks to the keynote speakers – and especially Ayrton for sharing his personal story – and her gratitude to the workshop facilitators, the conference planning group, to the hotel, to Denis O'Brien and Joe Hawkins. She paid tribute to the funding and support of the Education Authority and thanked the National Network, hoping that future partnerships will be built from this event. Finally, Mary gave thanks to all those attending the conference for their active participation and generosity in sharing their practice and insights.

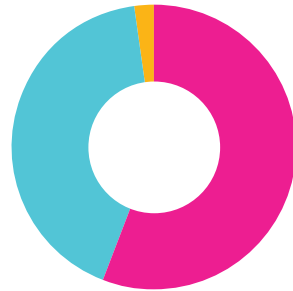


***"Some great pieces of work going on, brilliant to have this opportunity to share and network."***

## Evaluation

In closing, participants were invited to provide feedback and evaluation by responding online to the following three statements and questions.

The conference demonstrated the value of a youth work approach to meeting the developmental needs and well-being of LGBTQI+ young people.



Strongly agree	56%
Agree	42%
Disagree	2%
Strongly disagree	0

Conference provided me the space to share practice, exchange knowledge and develop new perspectives in relation to the inclusion of LGBTQI+ young people.



Strongly agree	57%
Agree	43%
Disagree	0
Strongly disagree	0

The conference helped strengthen and/or enhance my connections/relationships in the youth work sector, north and south.



Strongly agree	47%
Agree	45%
Disagree	8%
Strongly disagree	0

Asked to share a word to describe how they are feeling as the conference ends, the responses were:



# YOUTH WORK WITH LGBTQI+ YOUNG PEOPLE: PURPOSE, PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

A North-South Youth Work  
Sector Practice Development  
Hub co-ordinated event.

