

**How does the “Coming out” experiences of young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) people impact on their mental health?**

## **Acknowledgments**

The researcher would like to convey thanks to all participants; for their openness in completing the questionnaire and for taking part in the focus groups, for demonstrating courage and resilience despite challenging “Coming out” experiences, and for being role models by sharing their feelings and describing events for the purpose of this study.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

In order to introduce the research subject and to indicate how this study corresponds with other reports on the area under discussion the researcher will critically consider existing available literature (Sharp 2009). Key themes will be identified amongst the existing text and any similarities or disparities noted (Walliman & Buckler 2008). In order to consider how the coming out experiences of young LGBTQ people may affect their mental health it is initially vital to understand the meaning of the term “Coming Out”. Stonewall (2013:p.1) describe this as “the process of telling others about your sexuality”. It is important to remember that not all young LGBTQ people experience a negative coming out process (Pace 2013) and for the purpose of this study, the researcher recalls:

“Coming out is often viewed as an important part of accepting your sexual orientation or gender identity for an LGBT person and is often a liberating and positive experience, which has the potential to improve general well-being”.

(Pace 2013:p.1)

The researcher is co-director and youth worker for an organisation supporting young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ). Previous small scale study by the researcher offered a valuable insight into the experiences of young LGBTQ people accessing support for issues arising as a result of their emerging or identified sexuality (Snowdon-Carr 2012). The data and statistics from the 2012 study have been submitted as supporting documents informing the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) for the area. The JSNA aims to describe the potential health, care and wellbeing needs of the population in the area and considers the appropriate service and commissioning objectives in order those needs are met (Somerset Intelligence 2013). The information collected during this previous study enabled the youth support group to extend its sphere of activity and attracted additional funding to provide further support for young LGBTQ people in the local authority area. The researcher has created networking opportunities, provides outreach work in all general further education

colleges and in addition to the regular group meeting for young people aged 14–18; further funding has enabled continued support for young people aged 18–24.

Recognising the limitations of the previous study (Snowdon-Carr 2012) where the participants were all members of the youth support group, it could be suggested that the statistics collected and experiences described would have the potential to be biased towards the needs of the sample audience. Addressing this potential bias has generated interest for this research to be repeated to a wider participative audience. It is the intention of the researcher to investigate how the “Coming out” experiences of young LGBTQ people impacts on their mental health. For this study the researcher will seek data and consider the experiences of young LGBTQ people who currently access the youth support group and also young LGBTQ people who do not or cannot access the youth support.

In order to examine the question above and gain as broad a variety of responses as possible (Bell, 1987), the researcher intends to use more than one method of data collection to examine the question (Walliman & Buckler 2008). This will be achieved by conducting a critical literature review, providing the opportunity to gain a perspective from the most up to date documentation available (Bell 1987); distribution of questionnaires in order to generate quantitative data which once collected data will be used as a measure to generate percentages (Walliman & Buckler 2008) and arranging a focus group in order to provide qualitative or verbal data to be critically reflected upon by the researcher to identify and recognise key themes (Walliman & Buckler 2008). Ethical issues relating to informed consent, respect, confidentiality and data protection will be considered according to the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA 2004) and appropriate permission sought.

Recognising the researcher's interest in the subject area and the potential for bias, data shared by young LGBTQ people in the County has evidently the potential to be influential in promoting further discussion and action amongst young people, providers of services, policy makers and commissioners. Therefore, it is the intention of the researcher to be realistic about the time available for this study (Bell 1987) and therefore to select the most appropriate research methods to illustrate and reflect upon the "Coming out" experiences of young LGBTQ people how this affects their mental health.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Ellis (2008:p.1) informs us that "Most Western countries have made considerable moves to afford legal rights on a basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity". In the UK, there have been a number of legislation changes in recent years which set out to expand on the rights of, and present new security for LGBTQ people (Equality Challenge Unit 2009). In particular the Equality Act (2010:p.18) details sexual orientation as one of nine "Protected Characteristics". This prohibits any direct or indirect discrimination in relation to the protected characteristic "Sexual Orientation" (Equality Act 2010:p.9). Despite this legislative progress there are many examples and available publications exploring the negative "Coming out" experiences of young LGBTQ people (e.g. Pilkington & D'Augelli 1995, Ellis 2008, Franks et al 2010, Heck et al 2011, McDermott & Roen 2011 and Russell et al 2011).

The political and legislative influences would be of particular interest to ecological theorist Bronfenbrenner (1979) who suggested a number of environmental systems have a major influence on child development. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined these environmental systems as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Pound:p.9) and suggested that each system interacts with each other (Shaffer 1993); The microsystem

consists of the individual and their immediate familial influences, the mesosystem applies to settings and links for example schools, places of worship, peer groups and community links, the exosystem relates to environments that the individual may not experience directly for example social networks, organisations and local government, finally the macrosystem considers the socio-cultural and broader cultural influences (Shaffer 1993, Pound 2009). Fisher et al (2012:p.3) tell us that depending on the young person's "Social, familial, racial and religious community" the process of coming out and identifying as LGBTQ "May be greeted as unwelcome and unacceptable". This often results in the young LGBTQ person remaining silent and without any sense of a support network (Fisher et al 2012).

The Stonewall (2012) "School Report" suggests that whilst levels of homophobic bullying have reduced since 2007, over fifty percent of LGB young people continue to experience homophobic bullying in schools and the negative impact remains evident. Stonewall (2012:p.23) make recommendations throughout this report and suggest:

"Schools that take steps to prevent and respond to homophobic bullying, and that positively address and teach about gay people and issues, reduce homophobic bullying and create a positive learning environment for lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils"

Fisher et al (2012:p.161) offers the view that "Unsafe school environments" where harassment and bullying goes uncontested, can result in a variety challenges for all students, not just students who are LGBTQ. This can have a negative impact on academic outcomes due to poor attendance and levels of aspiration and raise mental health concerns such as increased anxiety or reduced self-esteem (Fisher et al 2012).

Young people spend a large amount of their lives in schools or alternative education, their individual maturity and educational outcomes are formed by the behaviour and point of view of their peers; this is in addition to the learning that takes place in the classroom (Fisher et al 2012). The Institute of Medicine (IOM 2011, cited by Fisher et al, 2012)

suggests specific risk factors can be associated with young people who are LGBTQ including harassment, victimisation, substance use and homelessness and suicidal ideation. Stonewall (2012) reports 55% of young people who are LGBTQ have experienced homophobic bullying in school, ranging from 3% experiencing a sexual assault, 16% have endured physical abuse and 53% faced verbal abuse. In addition, 31% of young LGBTQ people surveyed reported feeling isolated and 23% have tried to take their own life at some point (Stonewall 2012). The results from this survey would correspond with Fisher et al (2012) who point out that young people who are LGBTQ are at risk for experiencing challenges with their mental health. Stonewall (2012:p.20) suggests “Homophobic bullying has wide-reaching negative consequences” for young LGBTQ people on the “Quality of their learning and engagement at school as well as on their mental well-being”. This is considered to be as a result of the additional anxiety or burden of coming out, particularly if any of the individual’s environmental systems, in particular microsystem and mesosystem suggest the possibility of a negative response to their coming out (Fisher et al 2012). Heck et al (2011:p.162) agreed that:

“Victimisation at school is a factor associated with negative mental health outcomes for LGBT individuals. Prior research indicates that LGBT youth report experiencing significantly more at-school victimization than their heterosexual peers”.

The key issues described throughout this paper are not purely characteristic for young LGBTQ people, in a recent health and social care report, Wilde (2012) provides correlating themes of heterosexism, a reluctance to disclose sexual orientation, increased mental health issues (for example anxiety and depression) and social isolation. Heterosexism is a term used to describe a bias displayed by society or community that can often be pervasive, where heterosexuality is assumed and other sexual orientations are ignored or dismissed (Stonewall 2004).

Savin-Williams (2005:p.182) reminds us that “Gay youth” does not and should not equate with “Troubled youth” and given the reported degree of harassment and bullying young LGBTQ people are subject to it is suggested that young LGBTQ people “Have exceptional, but unacknowledged, coping skills and resiliency” (Savin-Williams 2005:p.184). Ryan et al (2010) describe the role of family acceptance as being a protecting feature for young LGBTQ people, reporting predictors of greater self-esteem, social networks and universal well-being. Concluding that acceptance from family members is directly connected with positive mental health and well-being (Russell et al 2011). Saltzberg (2007) informs us that growing numbers of young LGBTQ people are coming out to parents at an earlier point than their predecessors. LGBT Consortium (2010) suggests many young people who are LGBTQ are aware of their sexual orientation from as early as age 11, however, they may not decide to come out until they are 15-16 yrs old. This period of time is considered to be the most vulnerable and could lead to increased mental health concerns LGBT Consortium (2010). Without negating the experiences and potential difficulties experienced by some parents and carers when young LGBTQ people choose to disclose their sexual orientation (Saltzberg 2007), the potential for conflict, rejection and further isolation further discourages young LGBT people to come out (Fisher et al 2010). Ellis (2008) reminds us that attendance at colleges and universities often creates the first opportunity for young LGBT people to explore their sexuality without the potential for negative influences of home or school.

This literature review provides a cross section of available data in order to illustrate the prevalence of barriers and issues which may affect the coming out experiences of young people who are LGBTQ. Key themes identified amongst the existing information include homophobic bullying, victimisation, rejection from families and peers and social isolation all which have the potential to negatively impact on their mental health and well-being.

### Chapter Three: Data Collection Methods

Sharp (2009:p.3) suggests that educational research:

“Involves the rigorous and ethically appropriate process of arriving at dependable answers to questions and solutions to problems of an educational nature through the systematic collection and critical analysis, interpretation and presentation of relevant data and other forms of information”.

This can be interpreted as a thorough, robust and logical approach to answering the research question (Chambers 2005). In order to describe, justify and analyse the selected philosophical approach or paradigm used by the researcher for this study, it first important to define the two extremes of the research continuum (Sharp 2009) and to identify the researcher’s own perspective regarding the kind of data required and how it will be acquired and analysed (Walliman & Buckler 2008). Research paradigms can be considered using two main groups, described by Walliman & Buckler (2008:p.159) as “The positivists and the relativists” or quantitative and qualitative research (Denscombe 2007). Qualitative research is likely to be connected to the use of language and description to analyse and make sense of the data (Denscombe 2007) and carried out from an interpretive view (Sharp 2009). In contrast, according to Denscombe (2007), quantitative research has a propensity towards numbers and measurable data and the researcher tends to be detached from the observable fact (Walliman & Buckler 2008). For this study the researcher would affirm a qualitative or relativist approach to research.

A range of data collection methods have been used for this research paper (Bell 1987). Walliman & Buckler (2008) go on to suggest a comparison of information from more than one resource will assist in recognizing any preconceptions. The researcher has given attention to the type of data required, the available methods in which to collect this information and the number of potential participants (Cottrell 2008). When considering the type of data necessary in order to answer the researcher’s question, a balanced argument for a combination of qualitative and quantitative data ensues (Walliman & Buckler 2008). Qualitative data is that which cannot be exactly calculated and is usually articulated in

language whereas quantitative data would be more readily calculated and expressed as a number (Walliman & Buckler 2008). The researcher opted for a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data; this was collected by way of an online questionnaire tool, a focus group and a review of current documentary evidence to be the most appropriate data collection techniques for this investigation (Walliman & Buckler 2008). Whilst percentages and statistics are ideal in representing a sample within a population, the notion that the scrutiny of human beings and their narrative demands the additional analysis and interpretation of more descriptive data (Walliman & Buckler 2008).

In order to compare and contrast data from previous research (Snowdon-Carr 2012) it was considered advantageous to use the same questionnaire (Appendix 1). Data was gathered using an online questionnaire tool, considered by the researcher to be an accessible method for young people completing the survey and for distributing as widely as possible by electronic means. The online questionnaire was distributed widely throughout the County, via college networks, secondary schools, LGB&T forums, and other equality and diversity associations. Non- random or theoretical sampling was described by Walliman & Buckler (2008:p.154) as “A useful method of getting information from a sample of the population that you think knows best about the subject”. Sharp (2012:p.61) proposes:

Questionnaires are valuable research tools. In the right hands, they provide a method for collecting all sorts of data from all sorts of different people, about all sorts of different things”.

Questionnaires are considered advantageous as a research data collecting method as background information can be easily gathered (Sharp 2012), large amounts of data can be accumulated relatively quickly (Koshy 2010) and as the responses are anonymous, given the personal nature of the questions in this research questionnaire the participants are more likely to give an accurate answer (Walliman & Buckler 2008). In contrast, questionnaires require proficiency in their design (Koshy 2010, Bell 1987), with due consideration given to the style of questions used (Cottrell 2008, Bell 1987). Cottrell (2008)

recommends a questions ideal for use in quantitative research should be “Closed”, that is requiring a Yes/No answer. Quantitative questions should also be short, unambiguous and not likely to be misunderstood (Cottrell 2008). In addition, qualitative questions within the design of the questionnaire will encourage participants to answer in more detail (Cottrell 2008). Qualitative questions will be require more than a Yes/No answer, these are considered “Open” questions (Koshy 2010) and can potentially generate a large amount of data for analysis (Cottrell 2008). Anonymity, confidentiality and data protection was considered by the researcher in accordance with the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA 2004), particular thought was given to the compliance of legal requirements for working with vulnerable young people (Bera 2004). The researcher acknowledged voluntary informed consent given by young LGBTQ people completing the questionnaire and participants were informed that they could withdraw their contribution at any time (Bera 2004).

Young LGBTQ people accessing the support group were invited to participate in a focus group; appropriate permission was sought from the participants and group leaders (Bera 2004). A focus group is a useful time saving method of collecting research data (Walliman & Buckler 2008). A semi-structured approach was considered to be the most appropriate framework to adopt; questions were prepared in advance, (Cottrell 2008, Walliman & Buckler 2008) and practised (Cottrell 2008). Ground rules were agreed (Bell 1987) and with the permission of the participants (Bera 2004) the researcher used a recording device to capture the data; however this did generate a large amount of information. A semi-structured approach to questioning was considered to be the most appropriate in this case and would ensure participants were “Given freedom to talk about the topic and give their views in their own time” (Bell 1987:p.72). The researcher recognises the potential for bias and acknowledges their dual role as researcher and youth worker throughout the research (Bell 1987). In addition, participants may also present bias during the focus group; this

might be identified by shared opinions and that “People may respond in a different way than if interviewed individually” (Walliman & Buckler 2008;p.173). The researcher did not actively discourage participants who were interviewed in previous research (Snowdon-Carr 2012); however participants of the focus group had not been involved in the interviews during the 2012 study.

In order to bring together sufficient data to realize thorough, robust and logical results (Cottrell 2008), documentation published by Stonewall (2012) entitled “The School Report” is presented as an additional source of data. A document search identified an additional national source of research evidence which will supplement the data collected by other means (Bell 1987). The document review is relatively inexpensive, provides a valuable source of background information and is unobtrusive (Department of Health and Human Services DHHS 2009) however consideration must also be given to the potential for bias, inaccuracy and credibility of the documents Bell 1987).

#### **Chapter Four: Action, Results and Analysis**

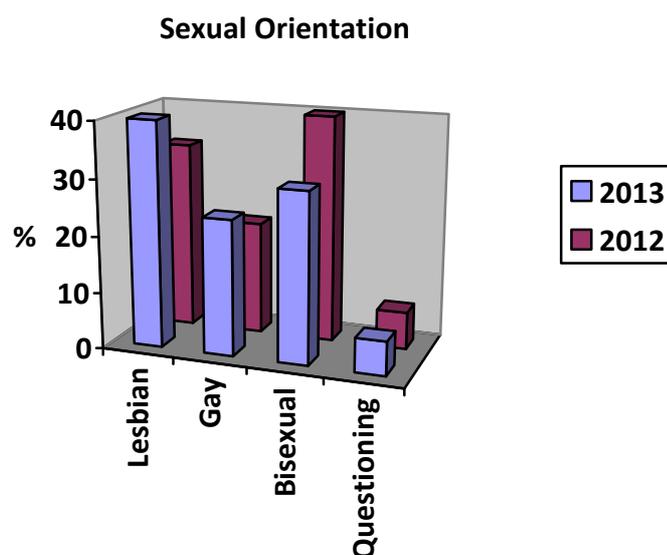
Utilising as many contacts and network links as achievable, the researcher electronically distributed the online questionnaire entitled “The 2013 Coming Out Survey” (Appendix1). The research questionnaire was sent to all young people and not solely young people who identified as LGBTQ. Recognising the limitations in previous research (Snowdon-Carr 2012), it was the intention to improve the opportunity for additional young LGBTQ people to provide details of their coming out experiences. The online questionnaire tool enabled the data to be collected via more than one means or web link (Survey Monkey 2013). The researcher opted to make use of two codes which made it possible to distinguish the data collected specifically from secondary schools and pupil referral units (PRU’s), (Web Link 1) and that of colleges and youth groups (Web Link 2). Themes became apparent from the data collected through the questionnaires and formed the foundation for questions which

were used in the focus group (Appendix 2). Young people attending the focus group were drawn from the LGBTQ population and were already known to the researcher. Documented data from previous studies, Stonewall (2012) and Snowdon-Carr (2012) was also scrutinised in order to compare local data with national surveys in the same subject area.

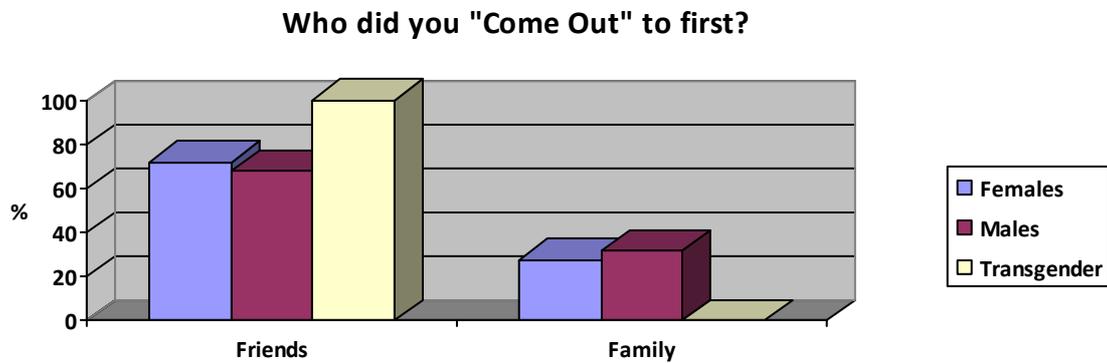
A total of 50 participants took part in the research. Zero surveys were completed via web link 1 despite additional efforts by the school nurse co-ordinator to share the survey in schools and thirty four surveys were completed via web link 2. Sixteen young LGBTQ participants shared their coming out experiences during the focus group for the purpose of this investigation.

### Results and analysis

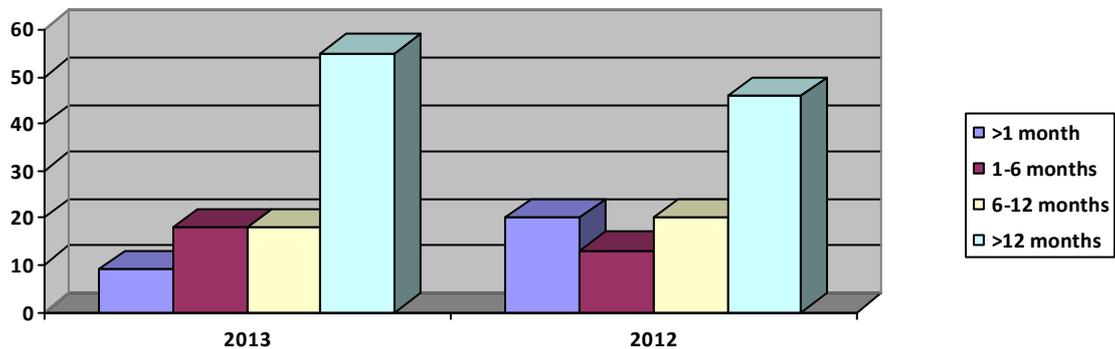
Of the participants 56% identified as female, 39% male, 5% transgender and their ages ranged from 13-15 (36%), 16-17 (44%), 18-20 (12%) and 21-25 (9%). When asked “Which category best describes your sexual orientation?”, 40% of young people responding to the questionnaire identified as lesbian, 24% gay, 30% bisexual and 6% questioning.



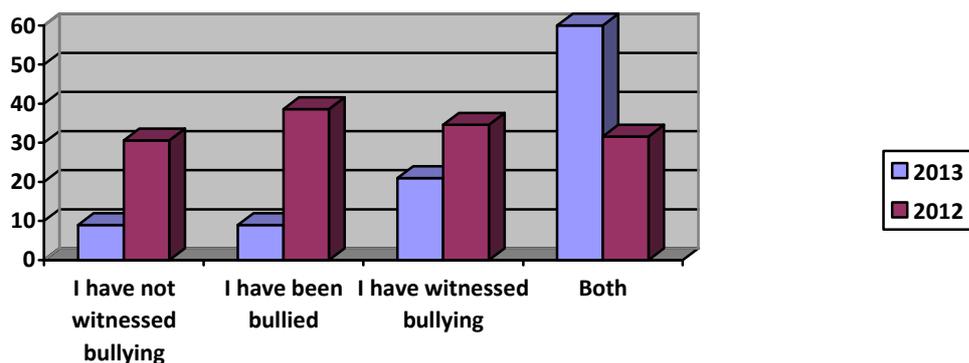
The “2013 Coming Out Survey” revealed 80% of young LGBT people came out to friends first (72% females and 68% males) and 20% told a close member of their family. Notably 100% young people who identified as transgender reported coming out to their friends first.



Data revealed 55% young people who identified as LGBTQ chose not to disclose their sexual orientation to another person for more than a year, this compared to 47% in previous studies (Snowdon-Carr 2012).



Of the young LGB people who reported to have experienced or witnessed homophobic bullying; 30% claimed to have reported it, 33% didn't report the bullying and 36% made no comment.



**Results summary from questionnaires**

<b>Have you personally experienced?</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2012</b>
Physical Abuse	47% (16)	50% (7)
Verbal Abuse	94.1% (32)	92.9% (14)
47% of young people reported their experiences of homophobic bullying to a teacher or in school. Of these, 33% said "nothing was done about it".		
Sexual Abuse	17.6% (6)	35.7% (5)
Homelessness	8.8% (3)	0% (0)
Attempted Suicide	35.2% (12)	42.9% (6)
35% of the young people taking part in the questionnaire had attempted suicide (25% of females, 15% of males and 100% of transgender young people)		
Being in Care	2.9% (1)	0% (0)
Self Harm	67.6% (23)	78.6% (10)
67% of young people who identified as LGBT had self harmed (58% of Females, 15% Males and 50% of (2) transgender young people).		
Medicated for depression	20.5% (7)	35.7% (5)
Eating Disorder	26.4% (9)	50% (7)
Alcohol Misuse	29.4% (10)	42.9% (6)
Drug Misuse	23.5% (8)	28.6% (4)
Practice Unsafe Sex	32.3% (11)	21.4% (3)
Being paid for Sex	2.9% (1)	7.1% (1)
Sex in Public Places	17.6% (6)	35.7% (5)

When asked, 57% of young people thought that sexuality could affect a person's mental health however 75% stated their sexuality has affected their mental health in some way.

Given the nature of the personal details that young people were likely to share during the focus group, it was important to ensure the venue was appropriate and that the discussion remained in focus and time limited (Cottrell 2008). The researcher reminded all participants that their input was purely voluntary and that they could withdraw themselves and their data from the study at any time (Bera 2004). Questions were shared in advance of the focus group in order that young people were aware of the direction of the conversation (Cottrell 2008). Permission was sought and gained from each participant in order for the researcher to use a recording device to capture the discussion (Cottrell 2008).

### **Focus group**

Young people were asked to talk about their “Coming out” experiences and most young people were able to discuss their narrative freely in the group (see Appendix 2 for transcriptions of focus groups). The participants are known to the researcher and therefore an element of bias can be expected, both in the familiarity of participants to each other and to the researcher. Several participants were keen to provide their “Coming out” experience and were able to recall how old they were when they first considered their sexuality and how old they were when they actually came out;

“I was 15 when I realized, I came out to a friend at 16 and told my parents once I had left home at 18”,

“I came out when I was 14 and I confided in a friend, by the end of the school day, everyone in the school knew”,

“I was 12, I’ve been gay forever”,

“I didn’t realize until I was 16, I came out within six months but it felt like forever”.

This data corresponds with

Accounts of how friends or family responded to their news included;

“My mum was cool; my brother is gay so it was easier for me to come out”,

“Friends were great, it was pretty nerve wracking really, I bottled it face to face and did it on MSN [Online instant messaging service] in the end”,

“I had to tell someone before my head exploded; I wrote my dad a letter. He is still getting over it”,

“I kept it quiet for a year and a half maybe 2 years. I didn’t come out to my parents until I was 16 so I had to suppress quite a lot of me. It’s hard to hide that for so long without it affecting you in some way. I wrote them a letter in the end”.

When asked to consider how their “Coming out” experience might have impacted upon their mental health, participants were more hesitant in their responses. Respondents suggested that their mental health had not been affected however were able to discuss at length their reasons for not coming out earlier and how it feels to conceal a part of your identity. Respondents shared numerous accounts of their coming out experiences in school and described the impact this had on their attitude to school, confidence and general well-being

“Everyone knew and negative comments were normal from students and teachers; “Taking the Mickey” wears you down”,

“I had one of the teachers who started one of the names I was called in school”,

“In my school the teachers didn’t stop any of the name calling”

“If you look after my emotions and how I feel about myself in school, my grades would be much better wouldn’t they? It’s not just the exam stuff that you learn in school”

Focus group participants were asked to comment on any advice or guidance they would suggest to other young people who are considering coming out. In both focus groups, young people were unanimous in their approach and responded by stating;

“If you don’t come out then you are denying yourself who you are”,

“You will make more friends from being proud of your sexuality than if you hide it”,

“The time should be right for you, no-one else. So wait until you are ready it’s your choice to come out”,

“It’s definitely worth coming out, even if you get picked on for it. It’s better to be picked on for being gay than picking on yourself and destroying yourself from the inside”.

Finally young people were asked to consider the types of additional support that would have been useful when they chose to come out. Young LGBT people taking part in the focus group responded with:

“There isn’t a LGBT phone helpline in (County) the nearest is in London”,

“Without this (Youth support group) I would have just fallen into a place I couldn’t get out of”,

“More structured support throughout school, there is only so far you can go on your own”,

“There isn’t any support for parents either, I prepared myself to come out, but no-one prepared my parents”,

“Maybe a counselling centre with specially trained LGBT counsellors, anonymous, maybe a drop –in, that way you could be sure of someone to talk to without the fear of being judged”,

“It’s only a little thing but if in schools from day 1 they (Teachers) said things like, some of you might be gay and that’s ok”.

For some young people who are forming their sense of self and beginning to question or label their sexual orientation, this process has the potential to be hampered by a tough social environment (Fisher et al 2012). Qualitative data collected during the course of this study would be in agreement with the idea that young people who are or think they might be LGBTQ are telling us that they need emotional support during the coming out process (Youth Chances 2013).

## **Chapter Five: Reflection**

One of the greatest impacts throughout this research has been the young LGBTQ people openly discussing their personal “Coming out” experiences. According to the “2013 coming out survey”, 94% young LGBTQ people regularly received or heard homophobic remarks and 47% participants had experienced physical abuse. These reported figures are higher than recently recorded in the Stonewall (2012:p.4) “Schools report”, declaring 53% young

LGBTQ people experience verbal homophobic abuse and 16% reported physical abuse. This might however suggest that young LGBTQ people are often the subject of abuse as a result of their sexual orientation. Stonewall (2012:p.20) states:

“Homophobic bullying has wide reaching negative consequences for lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils on the quality of their learning and engagement at school as well as on their mental well-being”.

Reports confirm that young LGBT people who are bullied are at a greater risk of suicide, self harm and depression (Snowdon-Carr 2012, Stonewall 2012 & Youth Chances 2013).

In this 2013 study, 35% young LGBTQ people told us they had attempted suicide, compared to 23% reported by Stonewall (2012), 67% reported to have self harmed compared to 56% recorded by Stonewall (2012). 20% of young people taking part in this survey had been medicated for depression, compared to 13% recorded by Stonewall (2012). In addition, Stonewall’s (2012) finding of lesbian and bisexual girls being at greater risk was also supported by this research. When comparing the Snowdon-Carr (2012) data with current findings it is important to hold in mind the previously declared limitations of the 2012 study whereby the population of young LGBTQ people surveyed were all accessing a youth support group and were known to the researcher.

	Snowdon-Carr, 2012	Current research	Stonewall, 2013
Attempted suicide	43%	35%	23%
Medicated for depression	35%	20%	13%
Self harm	78%	67%	56%

These 2013 findings continue to indicate the need to further develop services and policies for LGBTQ people in the County. (Wilde 2012 & Youth Chances 2013). Qualitative data provided by young LGBTQ people taking part in the focus group offers illustration of the potential for negative impact from family members, community, peer group and current legislation and could be linked with the concept of ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979).

Themes emerged from the focus groups which highlighted a number of issues young people described acting as barriers or deterrents to coming out which included; previous homophobic bullying, the possibility of family rejection and being aware of difference. These examples might go some way to explain the reasons why once young people identified as LGBTQ, 55% of young people surveyed indicated they did not tell another person about their sexuality for more than 12 months. 80% came out to friends first, feeling safer that the potential response would be less negative. This supports findings from research which has found that on average young people who identify as LGBTQ first consider their sexuality at the age of thirteen, but do not actually tell another person on average for a further two years (Youth Chances 2013).

Young people who are LGBTQ may face many challenges (Fisher et al 2012), but rather than focusing on young LGBTQ people as an “At risk population in need of special services” (Savin-Williams 2005) an asset-based approach is considered beneficial (Fisher et al 2012). Illustrated within current research by focus group participant (M):

“The fantastic thing about being LGBT is that in a way because of some of the discrimination that you face you build such a strong character because you don't have a chance to sit in a hole of self pity you have to get on with your life”

The young LGBTQ people who took part in the focus groups have clearly described a number of risk factors associated with coming out, however participants were also able to describe many more protective factors as indicated by Fisher et al (2012). Young people taking part in this study concur with the three salient points highlighted by Fisher, et al, (2012) and Stonewall (2012), providing a clear message for families, schools, colleges, support services and health providers:

1. ‘Homophobic bullying is not ok’
2. Avoid biased language and heterosexism

### 3. Curriculum in schools should also reflect the lives of LGBTQ people

In order to address limitations from the previous study (Snowdon-Carr 2012), the researcher endeavoured to distribute the online questionnaire extensively throughout the county. The researcher acknowledges throughout this report that the focus group was made up of young LGBT people known to them via the youth support group and may have more pronounced support needs than other young LGBTQ people in the county. Young people taking part in this focus group were however, different participants from the young people previously interviewed (Snowdon-Carr 2012). Whilst a relatively small amount of sample data is reported throughout the “2013 Coming Out Survey” the issues reflected throughout this study are comparable with UK data provided by Stonewall (2012) and Youth Chances (2013).

## **Chapter Six: Conclusion**

The qualitative and quantitative data collected for this study provides an insight into the “Coming out” experiences of a sample of young LGBTQ people and how this might affect their mental health. For the purpose of this study, the researcher has endeavoured to consider that every young person’s sexual identity development is a unique and individual experience (Fisher et al 2012). Recognising the potential limitations of this small scale study, the information collected and analysed leads to the conclusion that the coming out experiences of young people who are LGBTQ can in some cases have a negative effect on their mental health. As it is noted that the early coming out experiences can be a source of resilience; families, peers and professionals can be critical protective factors for young LGBTQ people (Fisher et al 2012) why then does it appear that this resilience is not utilised, celebrated nor factored into service development and curriculum planning? All young people should have access to the services and support that meets their needs and should be able to “Expect dignity and affirmation and receive support and services that

foster their well-being, development and successful transition to adulthood” (Fisher et al 2012).

Data from this research provides evidence that support services for young LGBTQ people should be continued, the accessibility improved and the remit extended. Development throughout adolescence is an “ongoing process” (Fisher et al 2012:p.145) and Savin-Williams (2005:p.166) report, “It may take a few years or even a lifetime” for young adults to feel positive about their sexuality. An environment where young LGBTQ people can feel safe and valued, develop skills and competencies in order to go about their daily lives will promote positive youth development (Savin-Williams 2005 & Fisher et al 2012). Accepting this proposition highlights that with the right environment the coming out process whilst remaining a complex part of identity development can be a positive experience rather than one which increases the risk of future mental health difficulties. It is therefore the responsibility of agencies working with young people to acknowledge how much impact the zero tolerance of homophobic bullying, avoiding biased language and heterosexism and an inclusive curriculum can have on a young person’s wellbeing.

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sexuality)

5. Have you witnessed or experienced homophobic bullying? (For this survey homophobic bullying means using negative language to describe a LGBT person, verbal and physical abuse as a result of sexuality)

- I have not witnessed or experienced any homophobic bullying
- I have been bullied
- I have witnessed bullying
- Both

To whom, if anyone, did you report this?

6. Have you personally experienced... (More than one may apply)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Physical Abuse    | <input type="checkbox"/> Medication for depression |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Verbal Abuse      | <input type="checkbox"/> Eating disorder           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sexual Abuse      | <input type="checkbox"/> Alcohol misuse            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Homelessness      | <input type="checkbox"/> Drug misuse               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attempted Suicide | <input type="checkbox"/> Practice unsafe sex       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Being in Care     | <input type="checkbox"/> Being paid for sex        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Self Harm         | <input type="checkbox"/> Sex in public places      |

7. Do you think sexuality can negatively affect a young person's mental health?

- yes
- no
- Don't know

8. To what extent has your sexuality negatively affected your mental health at any time?

- |                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all | <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly   | <input type="checkbox"/> Significantly |

9. When trying to find out about LGBT issues what sources of information and support have you used?

(More than one may apply)

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Internet         | <input type="checkbox"/> School  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Books/Magazines  | <input type="checkbox"/> Family  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> LGBT Youth group | <input type="checkbox"/> Friends |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helpline         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clubs/societies  |                                  |

Please add any other sources you have found

helpful



10. Where could a young LGBT person go for help if they were struggling with their mental health?

## Appendix 2

Proposed focus group questions.

1 Tell me about your “Coming out” experiences.

2 What would you advise other young people who are thinking about coming out?

3 Can you think of any other types of support that would be beneficial for young people when they chose to come out?

Can you tell us about your experience of “coming out”? What was that like when you first realized that you might be gay?

Silence

How long was it before you told another person that you might be gay?

(F) I probably waited for about a year and a half

A Year and a half?

(F) But I probably knew deep down that I was gay before that for a while

Yeah?

(F) Yeah.

And how old were you when you did come out?

(F) Fourteen?

So, a year and a half back from that

(F) Yeah

What about anyone else?

(B) I was seventeen when I realised and I came out when I was 17, but after a moment of realisation, I had actually known for a very long time, but it wasn't until I was 17 that I had all the pieces and I could tell people.

Ok

(B) I tried to artificially set up coming out to my friends in a coffee shop, but I realised the waitress was in my computer class and I just froze up. Friends were great, it was pretty nerve wracking really, I bottled it face to face and did it on MSM in the end.

(A) Yeah me too, facebook

(B) After that it was much easier, cos you just don't come out just once, but the first time is the hardest. I think I would have been substantially more miserable than I am usually if I

hadn't come out though. It's such an impossible web of lies if you don't come out and you've got to keep checking everything in your life to make sure you don't reveal this secret and it becomes an impossible mission to keep this secret.

(So) It was the same for me, all of a sudden it dawned on me that I was bi and I probably have been for a couple of years more. I figured it out I was about 15 and told mum and dad when I was 16.

So you told mum and dad first?

(So) No, I told my friends first.

(Be) I was 12, I've been gay forever (ha-ha), I came out when I was 12 too, I tried to blag it was my best friend who was gay and told my mum my best friends gay. And she said you're gay aren't you? And I said yep, my mum was cool my brother is gay so it was easier for me to come out.

(A) I didn't realise until I was 16, I came out within six months but it felt like forever.

(J) I probably held on to my news for about two months before I told someone

A couple of months?

(J) Erm, I was about thirteen? I had absolutely no idea until one trip, and it's all, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It's not really been too negative for me. I don't think, if I had to come out, I mean if I'd grown up straight I don't think it would have been too different because I haven't had any bullying or any immediate issues.

Which is really good to hear because that is not always the experience is it?

(J) I know a load of people who didn't have such a good experience as me.

So, you were thirteen, you came out at thirteen?

(J) It was the end of twelve months, my granddad died, my parents split up and I found out I was gay. It was an eventful twelve months.

You say you found out, what do you mean by that?

(J) I had absolutely no idea and I developed my first crush on a girl on a school trip and I didn't have a clue what to do with it.

Ok?

(J) Pretty much, I was just trying to figure it out, what it was. I had to tell someone before my head exploded (ha-ha, I wrote my dad a letter, he's still getting over it.

Ok..to (F) did your head explode in the year and a half?

(F) Well, a few months before I came out, I decided that I wanted to

Ok

(F) Because it was getting too much and I knew my parents would be ok with it really and it was just irrational, the feeling that I would be rejected or whatever, but then I just did it.

So, did you come out to your parents first?

(F) I came out to my friend first, as practice. Then I told my mum, my mum told my dad and then they told my grandparents.

Thanks (F)

Would anyone else like to tell me how old you were when you came out?

(M) Well, I came out when I was about 14, and I confided in a friend, by the end of the school day everyone in the school knew and I realised that they weren't my friend and so I stopped talking to them, but I kept it quite for about a year and a half, maybe two years

Pretty similar then?

(M) I kept it quiet for a year and a half, maybe two years. I didn't come out to my parents until I was sixteen so I had to suppress quite a lot of me. It's hard to like hide that for so long without it affecting you in some way. I wrote them a letter in the end.

Did your head explode?

(M) Yes! It did, it did. I couldn't face them so I left them a letter before I went off to college.

(J) I did the same for my dad

(M) If it's like an older generations views it's so much harder to try and approach them and its (Pause) I don't know, it depends on how strong your relationship is with your parents is already

(J) mmm

(M) and I didn't have a good one and it's not perfect now but I don't think any relationship with parents is going to be perfect, but what can you do? (Pause)

Would anyone else like to share?

(S) I think I was 15 when I realized, I came out to a friend at sixteen and told my parents once I had left home at 18. The first person I told was a girl, she was like bi at the same time so we could like ease ourselves into it. Then actually I told my ex girlfriend at the time, we don't really speak much anymore (ha-ha). My parents were fine and the way that I outed myself was by, me and my friends used to take disposable cameras to all the clubs we used to go to and there was a picture of my friend kissing a girl and my mum happened to be flicking through the pictures and my mum noticed and said is (name) a lesbian and I was like yeah, and she was just like are you gay and I was just like yeah and she was like ok (ha-ha) and it's all been fine yeah

(J) Nice and simple

(S) Yeah

(M) If only it was that simple, I recently read my coming out letter and I was shocked because it doesn't sound anything like me and it was just the pressure got to me so much and the pressure got to me and I just wanted to say it in any way but I didn't want to face the consequence I just wanted them to know and if I had a chance to rewrite that letter, I dunno, maybe. I was so miserable because I had hidden it.

Thank you for sharing your experiences; pause. What would you say to other young people who are thinking about coming out, what would your advice be to them?

(J) It's nothing to be ashamed about, there is always somebody in their life they think might disown them or, just not be friends with them anymore and erm, if you think that then you think about why and you think about the bad things, but there's nothing bad about it. You will make more friends from being proud of your sexuality than if you hide it.

Thank you

(M) The fantastic thing about being LGBT is that in a way because of some of the discrimination that you face you build such a strong character because you don't have a chance to sit in a hole of self pity you have to get on with your life and so you are building this strength of character and so I would say the time should be right for you, no-one else. So wait until you are ready, but then once you are ready it's your choice to come out and when you are confident in yourself, just do it. If people don't like you well, it's not because you are gay it's because they don't like you as a person and that's their problem, not yours. Don't change yourself, you will find people that do accept you

(F) If you don't come out, then you are denying yourself who you are and a whole other life in way and you will miss out on so much if you stay in the closet. So you don't want to miss out.

(S) It's like a pressure cooker and that pressure can be released cause there are lots of positive things that can come out of that.

(So) You are not the only one, you're not the first person to do it and you won't be the last, you're not on your own, that was the thing for me, I felt very isolated, I couldn't talk to anyone. Younger people just don't know who to look to and don't know who to talk to.

(A) It's definitely worth coming out, even if you get picked on for it, it's better to be picked on for being gay than, (Pause) picking on yourself and destroying yourself from the inside.

(C) I would suggest doing it when you are ready

(A) Yes

(B) It's a process you go through, you can't keep it hidden forever. Friends aren't the people to be worried about; there are always more people in the world to be friends with. If it's family, yeah, that's when it gets more complicated.

(A) I think definitely it's important to make sure that you are safe when you come out because if it is a scenario where your parents might kick you out or get angry or violent or whatever, you need to make sure there is somewhere you can go and possibly stay.

(Be) You've got to have a plan B

(B) That's the complicated bit because they are the people you rely on.

But how amazing and what a journey, you have been saying that it has been tricky in some cases but here you are saying but no, do it anyway, its better if you do come out. Tell me, you guys have this support group, what else would have been helpful for you?

(A) This group did the trick for me, there isn't a LGBT phone line in (County) the nearest is London and you're meant to call one in your area but we don't have one which would be useful, just a contact number just to have an anonymous conversation.

(So) Maybe a counselling centre with specially trained LGBT counsellors, anonymous, maybe a drop in, that way you could be sure of someone to talk to without the fear of being judged.

Ah ha

(B) It's only a little thing but if in schools from day 1 they (Teachers) said things like, some of you might be gay, and that's ok. Not everyone is straight and no, I don't have a girlfriend.

(So) In sex ed its like that one lesson, it's all about the science but it's not about me

(A) At my school, they mentioned it but it was in a negative way, Aids and HIV, nothing else, just nothing else. I am a lesbian, it was all that was mentioned all about gay men, it would have been better not to mention it.

Ok, any other ideas?

(Be) Everyone knew and negative comments were normal from students and teachers, "Taking the Mickey" wears you down. No support was offered, it was all a bit comical.

(M) More structured support in school, there is only so far you can go on your own. And the only reason I have been able to be me and happy with myself is because of this group. Without this (Youth support group) I would have just fallen into a place I couldn't get out of, and you feel like you are the only one, that's part of my problem, but then I realised, we are everywhere

(J) We are everywhere (everyone laughed).

So what you are saying is that in your school experience, if you had felt there had been someone in school to talk to, that would have been helpful?

(M) Yes,

(J) To know who to go to if there is an issue as well

Yes?

(M) There isn't any support for parents either, I prepared myself to come out but no one prepared my parents, they don't have any idea and then you just drop that bombshell

Mmm

(F) In the USA don't they have (Organisation)

(M) I remember watching a YouTube video about support for parents and someone showed their parents and that helped too.

(M) Seeing couples in public, you see straight couples everywhere and you don't often see gay couples.

(J) it's amazing when you do.

(M) If I'd have seen others, role models that would have given me so much courage too

(B) Posters too, there are no posters or pictures, either for support or just showing gay people

(A) No nothing in my school either

(So) There are no gay kids in my school, that's how it feels

(A) I had one of the teachers started one of the names I was called in school, it wasn't a case of if someone picked on someone, they'd stop it. In some cases they encouraged it, it wasn't about the student's welfare, just the grades they got. No pastoral care just about a set of grades. If you look after my emotions and how I felt about myself in school, my grades would be much better wouldn't they? It's not just the exam stuff you learn in school, homophobic bullying is not ok.

(B) There needs to be more signals for young people that gay actually exists and that it's ok, in my school the teachers didn't stop any of the name calling.

Thank you, does anyone else have any other comments? Thank you for being so very open and sharing your coming out experiences with the group and with me. Thank you.