



Inequalities in Health: A Strategy for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust

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1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Rainbow Project (TRP) is an organisation that promotes the health and well being of gay, bisexual and non-heterosexual men in Northern Ireland. We are the only health organization for gay and bisexual men in NI. We provide a range of services including information and support, education and training, counselling, personal development health promotion, advocacy and training.

2.0 Consultation

- 2.1 The Rainbow Project is grateful for the opportunity to make this submission to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (Trust) and to offer assistance and comment on its strategy, Inequalities in Health; A Strategy for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust.
- 2.2 We broadly welcome the strategy and measures therein particularly those which identify vulnerable groups such as children and young people, members of the travelling community and people with a disability. However **we have considerable concerns with the strategy and its noticeable lack of reference to sexual orientation and same sex attracted people throughout.**
- 2.3 The documents introduction makes reference to *'other forms of inequality... [that] can contribute to health inequalities'* but only makes specific reference to *'ethnicity, gender or geography.'* Considering the body of evidence that suggests same sex attracted people are disproportionately affected by health inequalities, The Rainbow Project believes the Trust's document should make explicit reference to this.

3.0 Health Inequalities

- 3.1 Specific recognition of LGBT people is particularly important given the disproportionate impact of mental health problems for young LGB people who are 5 times more likely to be medicated for depression, 2.5 times more likely to self-harm and 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts.¹ Further to this 28.6% of young same sex attracted men showed signs of a mental health problem compared to 10.2% of those who were attracted to the opposite sex.²
- 3.2 The Public Health Agency's HIV and STI surveillance in NI also flags up the considerable disproportionate risk of men who have sex with men (MSM) contracting STI's, in particular gonorrhoea, HIV and syphilis, and recommends targeting the MSM community with specific sexual health messages. Moreover, the risk of MSM contracting HIV is quite significant, with MSM accounting for 47% of

¹ SHOUT, The needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and or transgender; Youth Net, December 2003

² Young Life and Times Survey, 2005

those receiving treatment for HIV in 2008³. While this is lower than those who contracted HIV from heterosexual contact, this is the first time in a considerable number of years that HIV rates among MSM contact is lower than their heterosexual counterparts but remains hugely disproportionate in terms of population size. It still remains a significant concern for The Rainbow Project.

4.0 Commission on the Social Determinants of Health

- 4.1 We agree with the statement that *'Health care is one determinant of health, but the conditions in which people grow, live, work and age are far more important.'* There is nothing inherent about a person's sexual orientation that predicates an increased risk of experiencing health inequalities but rather same sex attracted people suffer health inequalities due to the 'stigma' around being attracted to someone of the same sex, homophobic bullying, issues coming to terms with their sexual orientation and coming out to friends, family and colleagues coupled with the conservative nature of NI and its political leaders.
- 4.2 The Rainbow Project welcomes the Trusts subscription to the recommendations of the Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (CSDH). We also welcome the emphasis CSDH puts on early childhood development and working with girls and women, putting a major emphasis on child development and education⁴. However we also believe it is important to work with men in this area, as fathers play a key and important role in the emotional well being of children. Moreover we feel that there should have been specific reference to same sex couples with children whether male or female.
- 4.3 Regarding education, we would stress the need to include an age appropriate and comprehensive programme of sexual orientation awareness and acceptance within our schools diversity programmes and relationship and sexuality education curriculum as homophobic bullying and inadequate redress of the issue is a major contributor to mental health problems with young LGBT people⁵.
- 4.4 Further, we welcome the emphasis CSDH place on the need to measure and understand the problem (health inequalities) and assess the impact of action. They make specific reference to 'investment in training of policy makers' and we would urge the Trust to channel significant efforts to this recommendation as a key measure the Trust will take to tackle health inequalities. While some good practice can be identified within the Trust in terms of training, there are still a number of gaps that need addressed, particularly regarding the training of policy makers. The Rainbow Project carried out four sessions of sexual orientation awareness training with the Trust in 2009/10 and while these were well attended, there was a dearth of policy makers at these sessions. Training is particularly important within the context of meeting the needs of the LGBT population.

³ Public Health Agency, HIV and STI Surveillance in Northern Ireland: 2009

⁴ Commission on Social Determinants of Health: Closing the gap in a generation. World Health Organisation (2008).

⁵ Out on your own; The Rainbow Project, McNamee: 2006

- 4.5 There are many barriers that exist that result in a low uptake of formal health and social care provision among many groups. However given the disproportionate impact of health inequalities faced by LGBT people, adequate training for all front line staff dealing with sexual orientation awareness, how to address specific issues related to sexual orientation and mental health and how to address these issues with LGB individuals sensitively and appropriately is an issue we would insist the Trust address and invest in. Assistance and training is available around sexual orientation awareness within the LGBT community sector, which many statutory and public agencies are already under taking, we would encourage the same from the Trust.

5.0 Framework for Health and Social Care

- 5.1 The section outlining a framework for health and social care in the document is welcomed. We believe it sets out a comprehensive framework that caters for a human rights based approach to delivery through measurement and assessment, as well as accounting for disadvantaged groups, namely those groups referenced in section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 5.2 **Formalising the use of interagency partnerships is particularly important when addressing the social determinants of health.** This should include a mixture of statutory and community/voluntary organisations. It is widely recognised that community and voluntary sector organisations working in a particular area gather experience and expertise in that area of work which can be utilised by the statutory sector. This is particularly the case regarding LGBT issues. The Rainbow Project has developed considerable expertise and experience in policy and practice around emotional and physical health needs of LGBT people, particularly men who have sex with men and we would encourage the Trust to work closer with The Project in that field.
- 5.3 **We welcome the Trusts commitment to staff development among ‘disadvantaged groups.’** This allows for a greater understanding of the individual and collective needs of these groups, however we believe that it is necessary to be prescriptive with these groups and outline who they are, in line with section 72 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 5.4 We also welcome many of the provisions in the document relating to how this framework will look in practice and would again **stress the need for specific inclusion of same sex attracted issues around health inequalities given the specific health problems faced by the LGBT community** around access to services, statutory agencies understanding of sexual orientation issues, expertise within and sensitivity to particular concerns. We welcome the future establishment of a ‘director-led forum’ in driving action and monitoring progress and would stress the need for inclusion of voluntary sector organisations on this forum. The Rainbow Project current provides advice and assistance to many statutory and non-statutory

organisations around issues of sexual orientation and would welcome the opportunity to input into this forum.

6.0 Proposed Actions

- 6.1 Regarding actions proposed by the Trust to tackle health inequalities and deliver services, we welcome the emphasis on early childhood development, particularly mental health. In a significant piece of research carried out in NI it was found that 21% of LGB people had attempted suicide, 71.3% had suicide ideation, 30.7% had self harmed, 65.3% had experienced difficulties at school and 33.9% had experienced negativity at work⁶. This is a key area of concern for The Rainbow Project. These mental health issues are attributed not to a person's sexual orientation in itself, but rather the various social barriers that must be overcome for a person attracted to someone of the same sex to feel emotionally fit, in particular cultural and societal homophobia and heterosexist.
- 6.2 There is a high prevalence of drug misuse, alcohol misuse and eating disorders among young LGBT people in Northern Ireland, as well as a disproportionate prevalence of verbal abuse (65%), physical abuse (35%) and sexual abuse (17%) which all combine to contribute to poor mental health among members of the LGBT community⁷.
- 6.3 Moreover, poor mental health among young LGBT people is attributed to homophobic bullying within schools in NI and a lack of clear and comprehensive policies within schools to address this. A recent review found estimates of 30% to 50% of young people who were same sex attracted had experienced bullying. Despite this only 6% of schools made specific reference to homophobia in their anti-bullying policies.⁸
- 6.4 The evidence around the causation factors of mental health issues of young LGBT people and the disproportionate impact of poor mental health of the LGBT community is compelling. Therefore we strongly welcome the emphasis the Trust is placing in working with schools to 'develop empathy in primary schools.' We would therefore stress the need to include an age appropriate and comprehensive programme of sexual orientation awareness and acceptance within our schools diversity programmes and relationship and sexuality education curriculum, within any such programme rolled out by the Trust, as homophobic bullying and inadequate redress of the issue is a major contributor to mental health problems with young LGBT people, leading directly to health inequalities in later life.
- 6.5 We welcome the Trust's proposals in developing a Travellers Strategy and the development of a business case for two part time Traveller Health Advocacy workers. Health inequalities among the Travelling community in NI are stark and

⁶ Ibid

⁷ SHOUT, The needs of young people in Northern Ireland who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and or transgender; Youth Net, December 2003

⁸ Douglas et al., 1997; Warwick et al., 2004

need addressed. We also believe that given the considerable health inequalities within the LGBT community, the level of isolation as well as the social and economic barriers for the community, that a similar strategy should be developed for the LGBT community. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has commented on the need for greater protection for the rights of young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people (UN, 2002). It is within this international context, as well as the considerable barriers here in Northern Ireland that the need is established for such a strategy. We would urge the Trust to develop a business case for LGBT Health Advocacy workers in parallel to the proposed work with the Travelling community. The Trust should explore best practice and similar precedence in health foundations and primary care trust in the UK.

- 6.6 The Rainbow Project welcomes the proposals to improve workforce health. Delivering a diverse friendly workplace is vital to improving health and cohesion within any workforce. The Rainbow Project provides sexual orientation awareness training, which the Trust has utilised before and we would encourage the Trust to continue to use this service and work towards a diversity friendly workplace.
- 6.7 We commend the Trusts proposals in the document regarding the promotion of equality of opportunity, particularly the proposal to *'produce a new Equality Scheme outlining the Trust's commitments, plans and actions to address inequalities related to Section 75. Conduct an audit of inequalities to identify the recurring and prominent areas of inequality at both a local and regional level and [to] develop an action plan in response to findings'*. We would stress the clear need for a comprehensive and full consultation with the Section 75 groups affected disproportionately by said inequalities in this process and The Rainbow Project is happy to work with the Trust throughout this process.
- 6.8 Further, we welcome the proposal to develop a good relations strategy in partnership with the community, however we would stress that this strategy needs to go beyond the groups outlined in Section 75 (2) of the Northern Ireland Act to cover all categories in Section 75 (1). Recent research carried out by the Institute of Conflict Research found that those who held the most bigoted views toward LGBT people are people who said they did not know or had not met anyone who was LGBT⁹. While the Equality Commission in NI found that most people displayed positive attitudes, negative attitudes expressed were directed at travellers (28%), LGBT individuals (21%) and Eastern European¹⁰ individuals (20%). This is an indication that this is a good relations issue. Those people who displayed the least bigoted views had said they knew or had met someone who was LGBT. We would urge the Trust to consider carrying out a wider good relations exercise within the proposed actions.

7.0 Conclusion

- 7.1 The Rainbow Project welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft strategy, Inequalities in Health; A Strategy for the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, and

⁹ Institute of Conflict Research, QUB, UU, Jarman, N., March 2010

¹⁰ Equality Awareness Survey 2008, Equality Commission NI, June 2009; www.equalityni.org/research

broadly welcomes the general direction that the Trust is proposing to take to tackle health inequalities. However, we do have significant concerns about the noticeable lack of reference to sexual orientation and same sex attracted people.

- 7.2 Given the significant health inequalities faced by LGBT people there is a clear need for specific reference to be made for inclusion of LGBT issues within the finalised document.
- 7.3 We broadly welcome the human rights approach being adopted by the Trust and the Equality Scheme being proposed and would like the Trust to note that in order for this to be successful, meaningful consultation needs to take place with vulnerable communities and organisations categorised in Section 75 (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 7.4 Access to services is a major barrier for the LGBT community, who are disproportionately impacted by social inequalities in employment, health care, education and services generally. The UNCRC made specific reference to this in their comments referring to a greater need for protection of young LGBT people in Northern Ireland (UN, 2002). While significant legislative advances have been made over the last number of years, there still remains a need to address the social attitudes of NI society to LGBT people, break down barriers, tackle heterosexist and homophobia and deliver a more equal and fairer access to opportunity for the LGBT community.
- 7.5 The Rainbow Project is happy to meet with the Trust to discuss the draft strategy and provide further comment and clarification on points raised in our submission.