



# ARK Policy Brief

## Practice to Policy for LGBTQIA+ Inclusion: Bridging the gap between on-the-ground youth work and high-level policy implementation across Ireland and Northern Ireland

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### Introduction

This briefing draws on learning from the All-Island LGBTQIA+ Youth Work Symposium held in Dundalk in February 2026. The Symposium was delivered by the North-South LGBTQIA+ Youth Providers Forum<sup>1</sup> and coordinated by National Youth Council Ireland. Attendees on the day included young people and representatives from voluntary, community and statutory organisations, academics and representatives from the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and the Ombudsman for Children, Ireland (OCO).

In recent years, progress has been made in Ireland with regard to LGBTQIA+ rights, representation, and recognition, with youth work and young people playing a leading role in that change (Barron, 2025). However, as Dr. Michael Barron noted in his opening address to attendees, LGBTQIA+ young people are still living “two realities at once”. Despite policy and legal advances, many continue

to face exclusion, insecurity, and harm in schools, online, and in their communities (Pizmony-Levy, 2022). Policy development has also not been universal. While legal and policy progress has been significant in the Republic of Ireland (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2024), this is not the case in Northern Ireland. While generic equality legislation through the 1998 Northern Ireland Act provides basic level protection, the Sexual Orientation Strategy committed to in the New Decade, New Approach Agreement (2020) has still not been published, and there is currently little realistic prospect that the necessary cross-party buy-in for such a strategy will be found. However, regardless of policy developments, LGBTQIA+ young people in all parts of Ireland continue to face exclusion, insecurity, online and offline harm, and uneven access to support (Downes et al. 2026).

<sup>1</sup> The North-South LGBTQIA+ Providers' Forum is an informal grouping of regional and national organisations in Northern Ireland and Ireland leading in or supporting members organisations and the wider youth work sector in the provision of youth services with/for young people who identify as LGBTQIA+. It is co-ordinated as part of the work of the North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub, a joint initiative with the Education Authority Youth Service on behalf of the youth work sector across the island of Ireland.

## Growing gap between policy and reality

The symposium highlighted an urgent need to address the growing disconnect between policy intent and lived experience and the systemic under-resourcing of youth work. Youth workers and young people report that day-to-day experiences still include exclusion, fear and unsafe environments (both in-person and online). While youth work policy is ambitious and supportive, there is a reality that without the investment in services, national initiatives that challenge hate and raise awareness, and strategies that are informed by young people, policy will continue to have a limited impact compared to its intentions. The following issues are indicative of the challenges faced by youth workers:

- In Northern Ireland, existing guidance particularly affecting trans young people in education settings has been removed and not been replaced by updated guidance.
- There is inconsistent multi-annual investment in youth settings.
- There is limited accountability for non-delivery of specific youth services that meet the needs of LGBTQIA+ young people.
- Whilst young people report being consulted, consultation findings are not acted upon, leading to disengagement and distrust of institutions.

## Escalating threats to safety and belonging

Across both jurisdictions, and Europe more widely (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, 2021), there is growing polarization and a marked increase in homophobic and transphobic hate crime and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, affecting LGBTQIA+ young people's sense of safety and belonging - both online and in person (Haynes, Scheppe, & Garland, 2025). This was also an issue which was widely reported at the symposium.

Recent statements from LGBTQIA+ organisations such as LGBT Ireland, supported by research evidence (RESIST Project Team, 2024), indicate that increases in online hate and harassment is having a direct impact in real world experiences with reported rises of in-person verbal abuse, intimidation and, in many cases, violence. Research published by Trinity College Dublin and Belong To (Higgins et al. 2024) found that 45% of LGBTQIA+ people in Ireland feel unsafe holding hands in public. The research also found that one in four members of the LGBTQIA+ community had been hit or physically attacked and 72% had experienced verbal abuse. Hate of this nature impacts visibility and representation, including seeing positive depictions of one's own identity in public - which is critically important for young people's confidence, belonging and wellbeing.

In youth work settings, as in other sectors, members of the LGBTQIA+ community are often expected to champion their own needs and rights, including in spaces where government and statutory services can sometimes fail to lead or be present (Barron, 2025). This places additional risks and pressures on LGBTQIA+ young people and workers, particularly where they are advocating without the essential levels of support.

## Systemic under-resourcing of youth work

Calls for investment in resourcing and developing youth work at national levels are not new, however, the current threat to youth work provision is more acute than ever. Many third sector organisations (who provide the majority of specialised LGBTQIA+ youth work services) are facing increased funding instability as the economic challenges of Brexit and global conflict continue to impact funding provision. These combined challenges further destabilise an already vulnerable sector. Young people need sustainability in their lives, particularly marginalised groups who are at risk of hate or additional mental health and wellbeing challenges.

In Ireland, a youth work funding focus on delivery leaves minimal space for collaboration, reflection, training and joined up thinking and working. While LGBTQIA+ young people rightly have access to better rights and representation, they still often carry the responsibility of championing their own needs and helping to grow a society that holds them, their needs and their identities centrally in service provision and wider inclusion.

Action is needed and a collaborative voice needs to be leveraged to champion the sector and its transformative and essential work. Testimonies from practitioners and young people at the symposium highlighted that sustained investment in LGBTQIA+ youth work produces outcomes not achievable through short-term or crisis-driven interventions. Relational youth work creates trusted spaces where young people develop safety, confidence, and critical consciousness over time. These conditions enable earlier intervention, reduce crisis escalation, and strengthen pathways to education, employment, civic participation, and wellbeing. Youth work changes lives, especially within the LGBTQIA+ context, and appropriately resourced youth work transforms young people's opportunities and outcomes.

## Youth work as civil society and social justice infrastructure

Youth work was repeatedly described throughout the symposium as holding the tension between policy ambition and everyday reality – often without the institutional support required to do so. When understood as part of our civil society infrastructure, youth work operates as a preventative and developmental system that bridges statutory responsibility and lived experience, rather than a compensatory service that intervenes only after harm has occurred. Children's and young people's rights were consistently referenced throughout, as an essential starting point, not an optional luxury.

Youth work cultivates reflective, participatory citizens and provides young people with pathways, resources, and community capital as they move

into adulthood. Young people from both Ireland and Northern Ireland described youth work as a primary source of safety, stability, and affirmation; a foundation for confidence, voice, and civic engagement; and a long-term relational intervention that shapes life trajectories. Crucially, these impacts unfolded over years – not within the limits of short-term funding cycles.

Participants highlighted the persistent heteronormativity within youth work provision, which too often centres dominant cultures and interests. In this context, youth work with LGBTQIA+ young people is not a niche activity, an optional add-on, or a luxury; it is a necessary component of any modern democratic society seeking to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population.

## Cross-border collaboration and shared voice

Divergence between Northern Ireland and Ireland in legislation, policy, strategy, funding, culture and practice presents both challenges and opportunities for LGBTQIA+ Youth Provision. It can create uneven experiences for LGBTQIA+ young people, particularly in border areas, but it also creates unique opportunities for sharing, learning and shared activism. Participants strongly endorsed all-island collaboration as essential to addressing disparities and to generating and energising practice. In the context of historic separation and post-conflict realities this method of collaborative learning can also be viewed as an act of positive peace. The Forum should therefore be seen as a sustainable resource for LGBTQIA+ youth providers supporting shared voice, representation and practice.

Participants highlighted several shared priorities that could be supported through cross-border collaboration:

- **Rights Frameworks:** Empowering children and young people to be rights holders and champions, with stronger mechanisms to challenge when rights are not being upheld.

- **Service availability:** Address gaps in service provision across both regions – particularly outside of major urban areas, challenging the short-term nature of funding that undermines essential services to LGBTQIA+ young people.
- **Political culture:** Challenge legislators to uphold children’s rights and promote inclusive, safe and thriving communities – regardless of identity.

## From insight to action: recommendations

### Shared all-island policy asks

#### 1. *Children’s rights should be the foundation for youth work, policy and funding decisions – especially for LGBTQIA+ young people*

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) should be viewed as the minimum standard rather than the exception when delivering youth policies and services. Where possible, accountability mechanisms should be employed to challenge government and public bodies when they fail to deliver services, protections or inclusive policies that young people say they need. Critically therefore, children and young people should be empowered as rights holders and champions and not only as passive recipients of services.

#### 2. *Recognise LGBTQIA+ youth work as essential inclusion infrastructure*

Youth work with LGBTQIA+ young people should be viewed and treated as core social and civic infrastructure, not an optional add-on that is funded on a project or philanthropic basis. Youth work is protective, relational, rights enabling and developmental. When viewed as essential by government and statutory authorities – and funded accordingly, the potential for collaboration and learning becomes significant leading to informed services and better outcomes for young people and wider society. To enable this, long-term, strategic investment is needed for youth work

with LGBTQIA+ young people for both statutory and voluntary and community sector providers.

#### 3. *Shift from commitment to implementation*

Governments in both jurisdictions should establish measurable implementation mechanisms that “move the dial” from broad commitments to impactful delivery in the places where young people actually live their lives – communities, youth services, schools and online. The effectiveness of government policy should be measured by whether LGBTQIA+ young people are safer, more visible, better supported, participating in society and contributing towards the future of their communities. Examples of where this could take place include:

- Working in partnership with voluntary and community sector providers to conduct annual impact assessments
- Commissioning shared, regular research in partnership with LGBTQIA+ specialised organisations on lived experiences and realities
- Investing in evidence-informed frameworks and models of practice that have proven outcomes and supporting implementation through statutory agencies and grassroots organisations
- Establishing and resourcing youth-led steering groups that meet annually with ministers and departmental representatives to inform policy, strategy and funding.

#### 4. *Invest in the workforce to deliver inclusion confidently and safely*

LGBTQIA+ youth services provision often relies on LGBTQIA+ youth workers being the changemakers and leaders for their own needs and rights. Workforce investment is needed in both statutory and community sectors to increase knowledge, address bias, raise capacity and generate allyship across the youth work sector. This should come in the form of continuous development and investment as

opposed to a pilot or project mindset. Sustained workforce investment should focus on continued professional development, reflective practice, wellbeing support, effective nuanced supervision and organisational backing for staff working in challenging and politically tense contexts. With the current rise in homophobic harassment and hate crimes, workers attending the symposium reported being fearful for their own safety when delivering services for LGBTQIA+ young people. This should not be acceptable in a modern democratic society and investment is required to strengthen and support the workforce.

#### *5. Make participation meaningful, rights-based and non-extractive*

LGBTQIA+ young people are experts by experience and, under UNCRC Article 12, have a right to be heard and to have their views considered in the matters affecting them. Effective mechanisms for participation, co-design and co-delivery should be put in place to ensure that their experiences and perspectives are informing policy, strategy and services. Although the primary beneficiaries will be LGBTQIA+ young people, embedding this approach will also inform the development of a participatory and rights-based society for all.

#### *6. Valuing volunteers and volunteerism*

Over decades the advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights and services has relied on the contributions and commitment of volunteers – many of whom put themselves at risk to advocate for rights, needs and services. This contribution and allyship should be recognised for its impact not only on LGBTQIA+ peoples, but also on its contribution towards growing inclusive and equitable societies. This brief recommends that government, statutory bodies and the voluntary and community sector continue to explore ways in which volunteering is celebrated, supported, and invested in.

#### *7. Be ambitious, be brave*

Another world and another way is possible. As an island, we are currently living in the relatively

peaceful future that was once a hope of those in the past. Inclusion, equity, rights and services are within our gift. However, increasing polarisation, hate based speech and action, and community tensions are rising at a time of global challenge (Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly, 2021). As stated throughout this briefing, we have come a long way in terms of LGBTQIA+ rights and services but there is a way to go yet (and there will likely always be). The gift of government is the potential to make life better for its citizens – regardless of age, sex, belief, faith, status, ability, ethnicity or sexuality. With increases in hate motivated harassment and crime, now is not the time for ambiguity. Now is the time to grow collaboration between government, statutory service providers and voluntary and community sector to foster inclusion, to meet the need and to build the future that was once only a dream to someone in the past.

### **Northern Ireland-specific asks**

#### *1. Restore and strengthen practical inclusion guidance for trans young people*

The UNCRC is the minimum standard of services for children and young people. The retraction of guidance for the practical inclusion of trans young people is in direct contravention to those rights. This undermines the proactive inclusion of a particularly vulnerable grouping. The restoration and strengthening of guidance should be informed by LGBTQIA+ young people and the groups that represent their needs and interests. Collaborative approaches are essential to stemming the devaluing of LGBTQIA+ voices and perspectives.

#### *2. Address the structural and systemic hate*

The government should see its essential role in advancing inclusion and addressing the conditions that make young people and youth workers less safe. This should not be seen as an additional activity that is funded via a project approach but rather something that is core to the everyday work of government and statutory bodies as set out in the NI Act 1998.

### 3. Balance the policy and legal score card

The 2026 ILGA European Rainbow Map (ILGA: International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association) highlights the disparity that exists for LGBTQIA+ peoples living on the island of Ireland with Ireland ranked at 14 and the UK ranked at 22. Policy makers in Northern Ireland must engage with LGBTQIA+ organisations and representatives to understand and lead on areas where change and better rights and representation is needed.

#### Ireland-specific asks

##### 1. Re-centre LGBTQIA+ young people in the Government's National LGBTIQ+ Strategy

In recent years, Ireland has been recognised globally as having some of the most progressive policies in relation to sexuality and gender and in 2025 the Irish Government launched National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy. While welcomed, it has been identified that there is a need to re-centre young people within the strategy and all annual delivery plans to ensure that appropriate focus and investment is given to essential youth services.

##### 2. Fund expertise, collaboration and long-term capacity

Current policy recognises the gaps that exist in terms of provision and prevailing unmet needs and challenging life experiences of LGBTQIA+ young people. Funding for youth services and specialised groups should recognise the need for learning, reflection, collaboration and specialist expertise. While investment is rightly focussed on delivery, there is minimal space for Continued Professional Development, sector collaboration and relationship development, opportunities for shared learning and cross-border collaboration. Evidence from the symposium suggests that funding is currently over-targeting activity, and under-resourcing learning to the disadvantage of young people and the organisations that serve them.

### At a glance: What Needs to Change

The symposium pointed to a clear conclusion: LGBTQIA+ inclusive youth work is not a niche add-on but essential social and democratic infrastructure that connect people, foster community relationships and enable citizens to participate in public life (Barron, 2025; McDermott et al, 2024). To move from formal commitment to lived inclusion, policymakers in Northern Ireland and Ireland need to strengthen implementation, accountability, safety, and sustainable investment. At a time of heightened hate, government and statutory agencies must take seriously their role in promoting an inclusive society and addressing hate crimes and hate speech. This needs to be both proactive and reactive in its delivery. Legal and policy frameworks are important. However, proactive national and regional strategies are also required that promote a truly inclusive and diverse society. To be effective these policy frameworks and strategies need to be properly implemented and regularly monitored. Long-term collaboration between statutory and the voluntary and community sectors is essential.

LGBTQIA+ young people need more than supportive policy language. They need visible implementation, safe and inclusive services, meaningful participation, and sustained investment in youth work.

- From commitment to implementation - with clear accountability for delivery.
- From short-term funding to sustained investment – recognising youth work with LGBTQIA+ young people as essential inclusion infrastructure.
- From consultation to meaningful participation - ensuring LGBTQIA+ young people shape the policies and services that affect their lives.
- From isolated practice to shared North-South action - strengthening collaboration, advocacy and learning across the island.

- From risk carried by LGBTQIA+ communities to responsibility shared by systems - with government, statutory bodies, funders and the youth sector working together.
- From polarisation to togetherness – providing brave leadership, cohesive strategy and investment to grow the inclusive, rights based and needs-led societies that all citizens deserve
- Safety and belonging must be actively built, not assumed.
- Short-term funding undermines the long-term relationships that help young people thrive.
- Youth work with LGBTQIA+ young people is a core civil society infrastructure, not an optional add-on.
- North-South collaboration can turn uneven contexts into shared learning, advocacy and practical action.

## Key points

Through a series of roundtables, presentations and the sharing of real-life youth testimony, the symposium identified several key themes that impact and limit the ability of LGBTQIA+ young people across the island to thrive including:

- The gap between policy intent and lived realities of LGBTQIA+ young people is not mainly about policy language. It is about whether LGBTQIA+ young people experience safety, belonging and support in everyday places.
- Policy commitments need delivery mechanisms, investment and accountability.
- Across the island, policy should recognise youth work with LGBTQIA+ young people as rights-enabling infrastructure and fund it accordingly.
- In Northern Ireland, trans inclusion guidance, anti-hate work and policy leadership need urgent attention.
- In Ireland, youth-focused implementation and investment in specialist expertise are essential.

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The symposium took place as part of the work of the North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub, a joint initiative between the National Youth Council of Ireland and the Education Authority Youth Service on behalf of the youth work sector across the island of Ireland.



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