Defining the research parameters

The Research aimed to identify the support needs of LGBT young people aged 13-25 years in the counties of Limerick, Clare and Tipperary. Specific research objectives included:

- To examine the demographic profile of LGBT research participants
- To identify services that the young LGBT population are currently accessing
- To explore services that LGBT young people would like to use/see
- To identify current gaps in services as perceived by the young LGBT population
- To highlight current challenges as experienced by the young LGBT population.

Research design

The research design included a triangulation approach (quantitative and qualitative). An online survey was employed, followed by focus groups and interviews. The research was carried out by a team of researchers from the University of Limerick: Patricia Mannix McNamara, Eva Devaney and Emmanuel O' Grady. The research working group consisted of members from Rainbow Support Service, Ballyhoura Development Ltd, Belong To, Garda Liaison, Clare Youth Service, Clare VEC, Foróige, Limerick Youth Service, Paul Partnership, Tipperary Regional Youth Service, South Tipperary VEC, and West Limerick Resources.

Research participants

167 people responded to the online survey, 135 of those were in the target age group (13-25). While a significant majority (81%) were in the target age group for the study (13-25), only 8.5% of the sample was found to be less than 18 years of age. The under 18's are therefore under represented.

Three focus groups were carried out with a total of 13 participants and 10 individual interviews were conduced.

Different geographical areas in the region were unevenly represented. Approximately two of five respondents to the survey reported they resided in Limerick City, followed by one-quarter in County Limerick. Only 14% resided in County Clare and only 7% in County Tipperary. This distribution probably reflects current provision of LGBT specific services, such as Rainbow Support Services located in Limerick city. Almost seven in ten respondents reported being third-level students, and one in five was employed. Only 7% were secondary school students. This mirrors the age profile of the respondents, with most respondents in the 18 – 25 age groups.

More males (54%) than females (45%) completed the survey. A small proportion (1.2%) recorded their gender as Transgender. This is consistent with previous recent national research (YouthNet 2003, Minton et al. 2008, Gleeson and McCallion 2008, Mayock et al. 2009).

Key Theme 1: Level of Comfort

While almost two-thirds of the sample reported that they felt comfortable or very comfortable with their stated identity, one-third of respondents reported feeling uncomfortable or unsure about how comfortable they felt. This group may be at higher risk for emotional health problems as not fully accepting one's sexual identity can impact negatively on levels of self-esteem and self-confidence.

Key Theme 2: Hierarchy of Acceptability

A clear hierarchy of LGBT acceptability emerged, with levels of acceptability highest amongst friends, followed by family and community. Approximately half of the respondents reported that they perceived LGBT to be acceptable within their family, while almost one in five reported LGBT was not acceptable. Almost half of the respondents to the survey live (or lived) in a home where they do/did not feel accepted, which can be a source of distress for young people. This may have serious implications as positive relationships in the home have a protective effect on emotional health. It is clear that there is a need for provision of support for these young people.

Parents themselves also need support in the process of accepting their child's sexual identity and in developing positive relationships with their LGBT child.

Key Theme 3: Disclosure

Many reasons were given for not disclosing one's sexual identity; including fear of rejection, fear of not being taken seriously, fear for physical safety, protecting parents in a small community and losing friends.

Practitioners in different health and social services need to raise awareness of developmental needs and health risks for young LGBT people. Services should not automatically presume heterosexuality as this is a barrier to accessing help. Services need to be explicitly LGBT friendly.

Key Theme 4: Health Impact

Navigating sexual identity is a time of great stress for young people. Coming out can be accompanied by isolation and loneliness and can have significant adverse impact on emotional well being. Increased susceptibility to substance use at this time was identified as well as the potential vulnerability substance use places upon the young person. Increased risk to suicidal thoughts was also identified by some participants.
The risk factors to health associated with LGBT make a convincing argument for the need for service provision for LGBT young people. A multi-disciplinary approach is essential.

Key Theme 5: Homophobia

The prevalence of homophobic bullying among participants in this study indicates that there is great need for LGBT support services. Schools emerged as significant in the prevalence of institutional, personal and cultural homophobia. This was attributed to several factors including; attitudes of principals and teachers within schools and the strong religious influence that was perceived to continue to dominate Irish education.

Students in rural schools run the risk of receiving even less support. This is further compounded by the reluctance of rural teachers to engage with LGBT issues. Nationally some great work has been done such as the BeLonGTo campaign for schools. More is needed. Schools need to foster links and network with support services. The reluctance of schools to

engage with LGBT issues and with this research indicates that there is quite a journey to go for schools to become more inclusive.

Key Theme 6: Rural Urban Location-Impact on Accessibility

The adverse consequences of rural living for LGBT acceptability and/or support are an issue. Participants associated rural living with close-mindedness, less freedom to be open about one's sexual identity and prevalence of traditional thinking which led to stereotyping and homophobia. Some indicated fear of being assaulted as they perceived their rural community to be strongly homophobic.

The isolation of living in rural Ireland and being away from centres such as Rainbow means little or no access to the LGBT community for participants. Access to a regular public transport system is often limited and negatively impacts on capacity to access LGBT services or support. This reiterated the need for effective transportation and also the need to have smaller, more local support groups under the larger Rainbow umbrella. Clearly, pressures face all LGBT youth, but these are particularly pressing in rural areas that may be less supportive of LGBT young people and that have limited public transport thus increasing societal isolation and alienation.

Key Theme 7: Desired Supports

The results of this study strongly evidence the significant need for support for all LGBT people and in particular LGBT young people. Social networking was clearly the most pressing need. In prevailing cultures of homophobia, it is unsurprising that the need for a safe environment in which to make friends was a recurrent theme for LGBT young people.

Drop in services, one to one support and individual counselling were all strongly articulated needs. LGBT groups were associated with solidarity and advocacy by participants.

Participants also desired service provision that was specifically targeted for LGBT but also service provision that was not exclusively LGBT, in other words a blend in the targeting of services. While specific LGBT support is necessary, it was felt that advertising more general services meant that those who were not out might be able to come to youth groups that had LGBT sub groups without having to 'out themselves.' Also participants were resistant to what they called the cliché of gayness.

Other supports identified were web access and substance use support. Given the potential health impact associated with LGBT identified earlier, it is little surprise that these emerged as articulated needs.

Key Finding 8: Transgender

There is little Transgender representation in this study. This is in keeping with both national and international research trends. Transgender people often worry about being open about their sexuality in case they face aggression, discrimination or misunderstanding (Spunout 2009). Therefore, it is little wonder at the limited representation in research. The insights gained from this research indicate the need to approach further research and specific needs identification for Transgender people in a grounded and informed way.

Service Provision Recommendations in Brief

Setting	Recommendations	Focus
Service Provision	LGBT service planning needs to acknowledge the large degree of diversity that exists among the LGBT population.	Social Support
	Personal development should be an integral aspect of LGBT youth support work: building self-esteem, self-confidence and resilience are essential activities. LGBT youth support should also have specific focus on building skills for disclosure.	Personal Support
	Funding for adequate resources such as meeting venues is essential. It is also essential to support continuous professional development of LGBT youth workers in terms of facilitation skills, personal development and para-counselling skills.	Rainbow Funding
	Education among the heterosexual and LGB communities in order to dispel the many myths that surround Transgender issues.	Social Support
	Mental health, sexual health and substance use need to be included as topics in support programmes for LGBT youth.	Health Support
	Mainstream drug and alcohol services need to be aware of LGBT young people as a risk group as well as gain knowledge of the specific challenges they experience. Proper referral structures for substance misuse are necessary for LGBT youth.	Health Support
	There is an urgent requirement for ongoing access to counselling for LGBT young people.	Personal Support
	Social and emotional support structures are needed for young LGBT people who may not have any support in the family or in the community.	Rainbow Support
	Social isolation for rural LGBT young requires urgent consideration. Smaller satellite LGBT groups are urgently needed in rural areas. It is recommended that these function under the Rainbow umbrella with Rainbow as the anchor. Drop in services are essential to rural satellite support. Transportation is essential in offering rural support.	Rural Support
	Access to the web for LGBT young people is a pressing need especially in rural areas. A dedicated information officer with IT expertise and skills in using technology in outreach is required.	Rural Web Support
	Peer based support and local education initiatives supported by local community and rural development initiatives would enhance support of LGBT young people in their own communities.	Peer Support
	There can be little doubt as to the urgency of support and education for parents of LGBT youth.	Parent Support
	The development of a parents' network could aid in the education and support of LGBT parents in the community.	Parent Support

School Specific Recommendations in Brief

Setting	Recommendations	Focus
Schools	LGBT culture needs more visibility in the school curriculum.	National Policy
	LGBT should be an integral part of curriculum provision such as Social Personal and Health Education and Relationships and Sexuality Education, particularly as both of these subjects deal with developing identity, decision making and health.	National Policy
	Those involved in pastoral care (guidance counsellors/year heads/form tutors) need to be educated on LGBT issues. Pastoral care teams and school counsellors need to be made aware of local LGBT services so that schools and LGBT services can liaise closely in supporting young people. This can be achieved via national in-service processes linked to SPHE.	National Policy
	Pre-service and in-service teacher training should include LGBT issues, awareness and information.	National University
	Policies that protect, value, and nurture young LGBT people are essential in schools.	National Policy School Specific
	All school staffs need to be educated in order to understand the impact of homophobic bullying on young people.	National Policy School Specific
	Schools need to have a zero tolerance of homophobic bullying which should be an integral aspect of the school bullying policy. The policy needs to make explicit reference to the unacceptability of homophobic comments, name calling and aggressive behaviour.	National Policy School Specific
	Schools need to promote poster and information campaigns such as that of BeLonGTo which attempts to address homophobia in schools.	National Policy School Specific
	Schools need to include LGBT support contacts along with the other help contacts advertised.	National Policy School Specific
	At a national level, a greater understanding of LGBT issues should inform educational policy.	National Policy

Research Specific Recommendations in Brief

Setting	Recommendations for Further Research	Focus
Research Specific	Research specific to parental support would help to illuminate the potential for parents to become a collaborative network.	Parent Support
	Research that celebrates LGBT identity would aid the profile of the LGBT community.	LGBT Profile
	There is need for further research into the protective factors of LGBT identity. Some cope quite well while for others it is a significant challenge that impacted on health.	LGBT Health
	This research focused on need assessment. There is scope to deepen this research regarding the experiences of LGBT youth (under 18).	LGBT Support
	Research into the impact of LGBT on families would also be of benefit in deepening the understanding disclosure processes among families.	Family Support
	The potential for research to increase advocacy for the LGBT community is evident. Such research can also facilitate dialogue within the LGBT community itself.	LGBT Profile
	Specific research on Transgender experience, need and support is warranted.	Transgender Support