

Written evidence submitted by Ms Laura Russell

Introduction

1. Stonewall welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. COVID-19 is presenting our society with an unprecedented set of challenges, many of which are likely to disproportionately impact the most vulnerable people in our society. This includes many lesbian, gay, bi and trans (LGBT) young people. This response will focus on the impact of COVID-19, and the Government's response, on LGBT young people and the services that support them.
2. Stonewall is Britain's largest LGBT organisation. Through our [School and College Champions](#) programmes, we work with over 1000 schools and colleges across Britain to help them create LGBT-inclusive learning environments. Through our [Children and Young People's Services Champions](#) programme, we work with dozens of local authorities to help them to deliver LGBT-inclusive children and young people's services. We have also commissioned [high-quality independent research](#) into the experiences of LGBT young people.

Impact on LGBT young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of an in-person education, and on the capacity of children's services to support vulnerable LGBT children and young people

3. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have a profound impact on children and young people's wellbeing and mental health in general, because it is causing significant:
 - Loss of life and illness.
 - Social, political and financial uncertainty.
 - Changes in daily routines (including the ability to go to school, exercise, play and interact with other children, see peers and family, and leave the house).
 - Loss of school as a safe environment (this is particularly concerning for LGBT children and young people who aren't 'out' with their families or carers, or are at risk of abuse or neglect).
 - Disruption to children and young people's support services (including CAMHS, many of which already suffer from lengthy waiting lists), due to: redistribution of NHS and social care resources to manage the direct impacts of COVID-19; additional staff shortages due to staff being infected; and the need to deliver many services remotely.
4. This impact is likely to be particularly pronounced among LGBT young people, many of whom already:
 - **Experience disproportionately high rates of poor mental health:**

[School Report](#) (2017), Stonewall research with the University of Cambridge into the experiences of 3,713 LGBT young people in Britain's schools, found that:

 - **Nearly half** of trans young people (45 per cent) have tried to take their own life at some point.
 - **One in five** lesbian, gay and bi young people who aren't trans (22 per cent) have tried to take their own life at some point.
 - **Live in unsafe, isolating or precarious living situations, and are at heightened risk of becoming homeless:**

2015 [research](#) by the Albert Kennedy Trust found that **a quarter** of the British youth homeless population (24 per cent) is LGBT, with **69 per cent** of LGBT youth homeless having experienced familial rejection, abuse and violence. The charity are currently [advising](#) young people to be cautious about ‘coming out’ to family, due to the risk of homelessness.

School Report (2017) found that just **two in five** LGBT young people (40 per cent) – including only **28 per cent** of LGBT young people of colour – have an adult at home they can talk to about being LGBT, which can have a profound impact on their mental health and wellbeing:

‘I feel really isolated at home because I have no one to talk to.’

Julian, 18, sixth form college (South West)

‘My mum said she’d rather kill herself than have a gay son.’

Ahmed, 15, secondary school (North West)

5. In addition to general support services for children and young people, LGBT-specific support services are likely to be particularly impacted by the crisis. Many LGBT young people rely on LGBT-specific support services (such as LGBT youth groups; *School Report* 2017). Due to the Government’s social distancing measures and the loss of expected income experienced by LGBT organisations due to the pandemic, these are, to Stonewall’s knowledge, currently only able to operate [remotely, or not at all](#) – impacting on the quality of support they can provide to LGBT young people.
6. Trans children and young people are also being impacted by the disruption caused by COVID-19 to Gender Identity Development Services (GIDS). Prior to the crisis, the waiting list for an initial appointment at GIDS was already [over two years long](#), far exceeding NHS patients’ legal entitlements. As a result of social distancing measures, GIDS have suspended face-to-face appointments, won’t be sending any new appointments (as of [April 2020](#)), and acknowledge that ‘it is likely that some staff may be diverted to support the COVID-19 crisis’ – which is very likely to impact on the quality of care that can be provided, and the length of waiting lists.
7. **To address the particular vulnerabilities experienced by LGBT young people in this crisis, it’s vital that national and local Governments’ response to the crisis (with respect to children and young people) explicitly takes the needs of LGBT young people into account, including by:**
 - **Adequately funding LGBT-specific support services (such as LGBT youth groups, LGBT mental health support services and LGBT homelessness services) throughout the crisis, and engaging with these services to gauge demand for support among LGBT young people, and addressing any gaps in provision identified.**
 - **Ensuring that any mental health, domestic abuse, housing and homelessness support initiatives implemented to meet the demand created by the crisis are LGBT-inclusive – for example, by ensuring that all frontline staff delivering these services have received training on LGBT inclusion.**
 - **Providing signposting for LGBT young people to access LGBT-specific support services (such as remote LGBT youth groups and LGBT mental health support services).**

Impact on ongoing UK Government education initiatives

8. The Department for Education has committed to introducing statutory Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) in all of England's schools from September 2020 onwards. This promises to be a significant step forward in equipping all young people to have healthy relationships and make informed decisions in 21st century Britain. For LGBT young people in particular, the introduction of this statutory teaching promises to be particularly important, given that the previous statutory guidance for delivering Sex and Relationships Education (issued in 2000) was published under Section 28, and so contained no mention of LGBT people, families or relationships. Consequently, [our research](#) has showed that a minority of LGBT pupils have received LGBT-inclusive teaching on relationships and sex up to this point – something that the introduction of this new teaching provides an opportunity to rectify.
9. However, Stonewall is concerned about the potential impact of COVID-19 on:
 - Whether RSHE will still be introduced in September 2020.
 - The ability of schools to prepare to deliver this teaching from September 2020.
 - The Department's work to support the implementation of this teaching, including the training package and Implementation Guide for schools that they are developing.
 - The ability of schools to meaningfully engage with parents about the importance of an LGBT-inclusive RSHE curriculum.
10. In the current circumstances, given the necessity of this teaching, the previous delays to implementing it (from September 2019 to September 2020), the plans the Department already has to provide training and resources to teachers online, and the need to maintain momentum in this work, **Stonewall believes that the Department should keep the September 2020 implementation date for RSHE (barring any significant deterioration in the current circumstances, and taking into account whether schools are set to be closed in the Autumn term).**
11. **To support schools to manage their preparations for introducing statutory RSHE in these challenging and uncertain circumstances, Stonewall recommends that the Department for Education:**
 - **Clearly communicates its continued expectation on schools to introduce statutory RSHE in September 2020.**
 - **Shares its Implementation Guide and online training/resource platform (developed through close consultation with education and children's organisations, including LGBT organisations) with schools in Spring, as previously planned.**
 - **Provide brief guidance for schools on how they can continue to prepare for the implementation of this teaching (including through engaging with parents) while schools closures are in place.**
12. **If the Department for Education decides to delay the introduction of statutory RSHE, having taken into account developing circumstances, the Department must:**
 - **Promptly communicate this to schools, providing clarity that the pause is to ensure effective roll-out and reiterate the Department's commitment to this important curriculum.**
 - **Provide a new date for when this teaching will be introduced, as soon as possible.**
 - **Encourage schools to continue their preparations for introducing this teaching, including through the recommendations set out in bullet points two and three of paragraph 13.**

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