

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction**

### **1.1 Structure of the Report**

Chapter 1 briefly outlines the aims, objectives and history of ReachOUT as an organisation, the work of the Youth Group, the aims of the Research and Development Project and the specific objectives of the research component of the project.

Chapter 2 revisits the major themes arising from the literature review. Chapter 2 also includes a discussion of some theoretical considerations and details the methodology used in this study.

Chapter 3 reports the findings pertaining to young people's experiences, issues and needs and Chapter 4, those pertaining to the institutional framework (local agencies and workers). These chapters are divided into theme-based sections. These sections in turn are then divided: the first part of each section reports this study's findings and the second part places these findings in the wider context of other studies in the form of a discussion.

Chapter 5 then concludes, ending with a set of recommendations for improving local services for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians, both specific and mainstream provision.

## 1.2 Aims, Objectives and History of ReachOUT

ReachOUT is Reading's youth project for those aged 16 to 25 who are bisexual, gay, lesbian or unsure about their sexual identity. ReachOUT was formed in 1995 with the support of Berkshire County Council and Reading Lesbian and Gay Helpline. It is presently supported by Berkshire Health Authority, the National Lottery Charities Board and Reading Borough Council.

The project is accessed by young people across the county, and further afield, as it is one of only two bisexual, gay and lesbian youth projects in Berkshire.

Its aims, as explained by one of its members, are to "help young people define their feelings about sexual identity and to develop a positive self-image. It enables us to socialise with people of our own age who are in similar situations whilst in a safe, secure and stable environment."

The objectives of ReachOUT are:

- (a) To provide an affirming, fun and safe environment for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians aged 16 to 25.
- (b) To offer a programme of educational and social activities, through which young people can meet others, build their confidence and self-esteem and end their isolation.
- (c) To offer advice, information and support via a team of Youth Workers.
- (d) To raise awareness of the experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in the wider community.

There are two parts to ReachOUT as an organisation: the Youth Group with its Reading focus and the Research and Development Project with its Berkshire-wide remit.

## **1.3 The Youth Group**

The Youth Group, presently funded by Berkshire Health Authority and Reading Borough Council, was formed in 1995. The Youth Group is ReachOUT's core work and is the principal arena for the delivery of services for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in the Reading area, although other services have been developed.

The young people in the Youth Group have the use of an accessible and safe venue in central Reading. They devise their own programme of educational and social activities and a team of Youth Workers, both paid and voluntary, facilitate and organise these activities. The Youth Workers also offer advice, information and support to these young people.

The young people are also involved in the management and planning of the organisation. Young people's involvement has been a central element in the organisation's guiding philosophy since its inception.

For more information about the Youth Group see Section 3.4.

## 1.4 The Research and Development Project

The three-year Research and Development Project, funded by the National Lottery, began in March 1997. The purpose of the project is twofold:

- (a) To develop the provision of existing and new services for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in Berkshire (the development project).
- (b) To undertake research into the experiences, issues and needs of these young people – in terms of health and housing, and to identify the particular experiences, issues and needs of young Asian and Black bisexuals, gays and lesbians – and to publish a research report with recommendations to improve local services (the research project).

The focus in the first year was the development project, more specifically the development of *existing* provision for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians, i.e. ReachOUT's Youth Group in Reading. Specific objectives included the development of a permanent, accessible and safe base/space for the workers and young people, the development of a book and video library, the development of a resource bank, networking and liaising with other agencies and the publicising of ReachOUT's services.

The focus in the second year was the research project. The specific objectives included conducting a literature review, designing the research programme, collecting the data, analysing the data and producing a research report with recommendations on how to improve local services in ways that are feasible and practical. This includes services provided by ReachOUT's Youth Group and those provided by other agencies (for example, housing services, Social Services, etc).

The third year will see the publication and promotion of the research report. The other objective is to develop *new* provision for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in other parts of Berkshire. The need for provision in three particular areas (Bracknell Forest, West Berkshire and Windsor and Maidenhead) will be assessed and the results published. ReachOUT then anticipates helping to facilitate and support the development of new bisexual, gay and lesbian youth projects in the areas if there is a need.

### **Background Information**

In terms of the history and nature of the research project, one of the themes for the disbursement of National Lottery funds in 1996 was 'youth issues' and it was on this basis that ReachOUT's Management Committee submitted their application.

The project was given the task of looking at three research themes: health, housing and the particular issues of Asian and Black young people. These themes

reflected the dominant concerns of the Youth Group at the time of the application to the National Lottery.

The research project is novel in three senses:

- ❑ Its central element is the research component and not just development work (valuable as this is). We are the only bisexual, gay and lesbian youth group in Britain to have a designated researcher.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, the findings and recommendations arising from this research project may be of interest and use to other projects, especially those working in small towns with rural hinterlands (arguably the majority).
- ❑ It is a practical (action) research project working in a community-based setting with the objective of securing improvements in local services.
- ❑ Its research themes are wider than usual, encompassing groups and issues that are not often looked at. Most research into bisexual, gay and lesbian youth issues tends to follow the agenda of major research funders, for example, looking at mental and sexual health. This project considered these issues but also focused on the issues of Asian and Black young people, and housing – areas that are often neglected.

The Management Committee favoured the approach of a built-in research component for two reasons:

- ❑ They wanted to avoid making assumptions about both the nature and type of issues of local bisexuals, gays and lesbians, hence the research component.
- ❑ They wanted to avoid ‘projectitis’, i.e. the development of services without consideration for their long-term sustainability. It was anticipated that the research project would generate evidence in terms of local experiences, issues and needs. This evidence could then be used to lobby for support for both the consolidation and expansion of ReachOUT’s work and for improvements in local services for bisexuals, gays and lesbians generally.

To make the project manageable, the Management Committee divided the project into two phases: phase one to look at Reading and phase two to look at the rest of the county. This report is concerned with phase one.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that although there are bisexual, gay and lesbian youth projects in most towns and cities in Britain, these have developed autonomously and organically. There is no national association or similar ‘umbrella’ organisation. Consequently, the origins, philosophy and remit of groups can vary considerably.

## 1.5 Objectives of the Research Project

The general aim of the research project is:

*To identify the experiences, issues and needs of local bisexuals, gays and lesbians (who are aged between 16 and 25) in terms of health and housing, and to identify the experiences, issues and needs particular to Asian and Black young people.*

The specific objectives of the research project are:

- (a) To identify the health experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians – including mental, physical and sexual health.*
- (b) To identify the housing experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians – including homelessness.*
- (c) To identify the particular experiences, issues and needs of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians who are Asian (of South Asian descent) and Black (of African and Caribbean descent).*
- (d) To study the institutional framework – local agencies' policies and procedures and local workers' experiences and practice – to assess the impact and influence on young bisexuals, gays and lesbians.*

It was anticipated that the research project would:

- Provide a platform for young bisexuals, gays and lesbians to convey their experiences, issues and needs to local decision-makers, funding bodies, policy-makers, service planners and providers and the wider public.
- Provide a foundation for the development of existing and new services, including those provided by ReachOUT, those provided by other local services and those provided by other bisexual, gay and lesbian youth projects.
- Contribute to the discourse and the body of knowledge of bisexual, gay and lesbian studies.