

4.4 Local Workers' Experience and Practice

Survey Data

The Frontline Workers Survey was distributed to 162 'frontline' workers (i.e. those working directly with young people). Thirty-one were returned as shown in Table 42.

Table 42: Distribution and Response to Frontline Workers Survey

Workers	Number of Surveys Distributed	Number of Surveys Returned
Counsellors	22	6 (1)
LEA Education Officers	6	0
GPs	37	8 (2)
Housing Workers	2	2
Mental Health Service Workers	90	10 (3)
Probation Officers	5	5
Total	162	31

Notes: (1) One survey was returned by a school-based counsellor, one was GP-based, and four were private; (2) five surveys were returned by GPs, one by a district nurse and two by health visitors; (3) nine were returned by mental health nurses and one by a psychotherapist.

Figure 40 shows the age, ethnic identity, gender and sexual identity of survey respondents.

Figure 40: Respondents' Age, Ethnic Identity, Gender and Sexual Identity

Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Five workers were aged under-25. ▪ Seven were aged between 26-35. ▪ 11 were aged between 36-50. ▪ Seven were aged over 51.
Ethnic Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Two workers identified as Black. ▪ 23 identified as white British. ▪ Five identified as 'other' (Asian, Australian, Black American, English and European).
Gender	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 11 were men. ▪ 19 were women.

Sexual Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One identified as bisexual. ▪ One identified as gay. ▪ 20 identified as heterosexual. ▪ One identified as lesbian.
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Note: $n = 31$

- Twenty-five workers monitored the age, ethnic identity and gender of service users.
- Only three workers monitored sexual identity: two counsellors and one psychotherapist.
- Twenty-five workers were aware that their workplace had an equal opportunities policy while three were not sure.
- Sixteen workers knew their workplace policy included sexual identity. Seven workers said it did not (four GPs, one health visitor and three mental health nurses) and six workers were not sure.
- Eight workers had experienced training on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues: one counsellor, one housing worker, one mental health nurse, three Probation Officers and one psychotherapist. Seventeen workers had not experienced any training while four were not sure. Quality-wise, one worker rated this training as ‘very good’, four as ‘good’, three as ‘adequate’ and one as ‘poor’.
- Nineteen workers had no access to resources on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues while ten did (including books, leaflets and training materials).
- Seventeen workers felt that their workplace was a safe environment for staff to come out as bisexual, gay or lesbian while six did not, including two counsellors, one GP, one health visitor and two mental health nurses.
- Seventeen workers also felt that their workplace was a safe environment for service users to come out while six did not. These workers stated that:

“[Being out is difficult because] it’s a mainstream, middle-class, white environment.” (GP.)

“Not all staff would respond to sexuality issues positively and young people may feel that they will be treated differently if out.” (Probation Officer.)

“I am not convinced that our patients would be fully comfortable with homosexual doctors and nurses.” (GP.)

“[There is a fear of] other patients finding out.” (Mental health nurse.)

“Service users would discriminate against others.” (Probation Officer.)

“Traditional attitudes and culture [can be a problem].” (Counsellor.)

“Prejudice.” (GP.)

“I would not trust managers to be non-judgemental about staff members’ sexual persuasion.” (Health visitor.)

- Thirteen workers had worked with young people around issues of sexual identity while 15 had not. Of those who had, seven felt they needed additional support. These cases are summarised in Figure 41.

Figure 41: Workers’ Experience of Working with Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Young People

Worker	Case
Counsellor (in a School)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with 15-, 16- and 17-year olds who were uncertain and fearful of being gay.
Counsellor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked around relationship issues.
Counsellor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with young people fearful of being ‘found out’.
GP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with young people around health issues, e.g. HIV, smears, etc.
GP	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with a young person depressed because of his sexual identity.
Mental health nurse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with a young gay man, sleeping rough and selling sex.
Probation Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with young people around family violence. ▪ Had worked with a lesbian in prison who was then made homeless upon release. ▪ Had worked with a young Asian bisexual struggling with cultural and identity issues, trying to survive in a macho white world and trying not to be found out.
Probation Officer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Had worked with a young service user who was confused, homeless, self-harming and abusing alcohol and drugs.

- Three workers had referred young people to other agencies.
- Workers were then asked about their views of bisexuality, homosexuality and lesbianism. Their responses are shown in Figure 42.

Figure 42: Workers' Views on Bisexuality, Homosexuality and Lesbianism

Views	Workers
“Acceptable”	Two counsellors and one housing worker.
“A fact of life”	One GP and one Probation Officer.
“A personal choice”	One health visitor, one mental health nurse and two Probation Officers.
“Normal”	One counsellor, one district nurse and two GPs.
“No view”	One counsellor and two GPs.
“No problems”	One district nurse and two mental health nurses.
“Comfortable at a professional distance”	One GP.
“Tolerable”	One mental health nurse.
“Abnormal and unnatural”	Three mental health nurses.

- Workers were then asked what they thought the age of consent for gay men and heterosexual men *should* be, as shown in Table 43.

Table 43: Workers' Views on the Age of Consent for Gay and Heterosexual Men

Age of Consent Advocated for Gay Men	Age of Consent Advocated for Heterosexual Men
One worker said 15 years of age.	One said 15.
Twelve said 16.	Seventeen said 16.
Two said 17.	Two said 17.
Seven said 18.	Three said 18.
One said 21.	One said 21.
One said 40.	

- Workers were then asked what the age of consent for lesbians *is*, and what it *should be*, as shown in Table 44.

Table 44: Workers' Views on the *Practical* Age of Consent for Lesbians

What the Age of Consent for Lesbians is	What the Age of Consent should be
Four said 16 years of age.	Twelve said 16.
	Two said 17.
Five said 18.	Five said 18.
One said 21.	One said 21.
Six did not know.	
Nine said there is no age of consent.	
	One said 50.

Note: There is no legal age of consent for lesbian women. For discussion see page 39.

- Seven workers knew about Section 28, 17 did not and six were not sure. The seven workers who knew felt that it affected their work favoured its repeal.
- Workers were then asked how they could improve their work practices in terms of working with young bisexuals, gays and lesbians. Their responses are shown in Figure 43.

Figure 43: Workers' Views on How Practice could be Improved

Worker	Improvements in Practice
Counsellors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increased contact with bisexual, gay and lesbian helping organisations. ▪ More information about services and support for bisexuals, gays and lesbians.
GPs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Monitoring of service users' sexual identity without including it on medical records.
Mental health workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More training on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues. ▪ Including sexual identity in the workplace equal opportunities policy. ▪ Presentations and workshops on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues.
Probation Officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More training on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues. ▪ Development of partnerships with local agencies. ▪ Tackling heterosexist language.

- Workers were then asked what needs they had in working with young bisexuals, gays and lesbians. Their responses are shown in Figure 44.

Figure 44: Workers Needs when working with Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Youth

Worker	Needs
Counsellors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More information and support.
Housing workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Greater awareness of bisexual, gay and lesbian issues.
Mental health workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Greater awareness. ▪ More appropriate literature.
Probation officers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ More support from senior management.

- On several occasions, local statutory- and voluntary-sector staff working with young service users around issues of sexuality contacted the Research and Development Worker for assistance. They requested advice, information and support. Figure 45 summarises these requests and the assistance given.

Figure 45: Requests for Assistance from Workers

Year	Case	Assistance Given
1997	Housing worker (Reading), working with young gay man, aged 20, who had been living with his violent partner before being made homeless. He also had alcohol problems, was suffering from depression, and was feeling suicidal at times.	Provided the worker with information and local and national contacts (including ReachOUT's Youth Group).
1997	Worker in the criminal justice system (Reading), working with a young gay man, 18, who was in custody and HIV positive. He was about to be released and needed a support network.	Provided the worker with information and contacts in local and regional HIV, housing and gay support agencies (including ReachOUT's Youth Group).
1998	Worker in the criminal justice system (Reading) involved in the delivery of training around sexuality issues.	Provided publicity and resources for the course.
1998	Student advisor (Reading) working with a student who was unsure of his sexuality and with two students who were being bullied by other students.	Provided details of local contacts and information about ReachOUT's Youth Group.
1999	West Berkshire Health Promotion drop-in workers requested workshop on working with young bisexuals, gays and lesbians.	Provided workshop with information, research project findings, and question-and-answer session.

Discussion

ReachOUT's research project found that although most workers monitored the age, ethnic identity and gender of service users, only a minority monitored sexual identity. Most workers were aware that their organisation had an equal opportunities policy and that it included sexual identity. However, only a minority had experienced any specific training on bisexual, gay and lesbian issues and only a minority of these considered this training to have been of good quality. Furthermore, few workers had access to any resources around sexual identity issues. This begs two questions: first, how can workers ensure equal access and opportunities if they do not monitor whether bisexuals, gays and lesbians are using their service? Second, how can workers deliver quality services if they have not experienced specific training and lack the resources to do so?

Most workers considered their organisation to be a safe environment for service users and workers to be out and nearly half had worked with young bisexuals, gays and lesbians around uncertainty, fear of being found out, alcohol and drugs, relationships, mental health (depression and self-harm), prostitution, violence and identity.

Most workers were accepting and progressive in their views about bisexuality and homosexuality, the majority favouring an equal age of consent for example. However, several workers exhibited outright discrimination and prejudice, a worrying fact given that they work for supposed helping organisations and given their potential power over the lives of young people.

Most workers were not aware of Section 28 and of those who were, most did not feel it affected their work and most favoured its repeal.

In terms of improving their practice, workers identified the following needs:

- The need to make contact and improve links with bisexual, gay and lesbian organisations.
- The need for information and resources around bisexual, gay and lesbian issues.
- The need to monitor service users' sexual identity *in a sensitive manner*.
- The need for inclusive policies.
- The need for specific training around bisexual, gay and lesbian issues.

In terms of workers' experience and practice, a mixed picture emerged. Some workers were aware of their organisations' policies around equal opportunities, they monitored service users' sexual identity, had experienced training around bisexual, gay and lesbian issues, had access to resources and had worked with bisexual, gay and lesbian youth. Others however had not. There was no pattern in terms of which sector a worker worked in (statutory or voluntary) or what area (mental health, etc.). Most workers were accepting and progressive in their practice, but others were not. This

situation has implications for service delivery to young bisexuals, gays and lesbians, more specifically that

- ⇒ The quality of services – as reflecting in workers' experience, knowledge and skills – may not be standard or uniform.
- ⇒ Young bisexuals, gays and lesbians cannot assume that they will receive appropriate and sensitive services.
- ⇒ Workers can potentially wield considerable power *vis-à-vis* young people, and consequently affect their lives.