

# SUMMARY REPORT

## DIGITAL INTIMACIES AND LGBT+ YOUTH: CELEBRATION, EQUITY AND SAFETY

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[READ THE FULL REPORT HERE](#)



## NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Following Brook’s house style, the terminology LGBT+ is used consistently in this report irrespective of whether it was used in the material cited. The inclusive term ‘queer’ is also used at times, reflecting key ideas from the literature or young people’s own usage of the term.

RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) is used throughout this report to reflect the English context in which the research was carried out. In Wales the new compulsory subject is called Relationships and Sexuality Education. Globally ‘comprehensive sexuality education’ is widely used, and may better reflect the aim of addressing the whole person including their sexuality, behaviour and identity rather than sex as a discrete topic.

In an English context, what had since 2000 been called SRE was, in 2019, reframed as RSE, with guidance noting the requirement for schools to comply with the Equality Act 2010, explaining ‘we expect all pupils to be taught LGBT content at a timely point as part of this area of the curriculum’ (DfE 2019).

# INTRODUCTION

As the boundaries between our private and public, online and offline, lives become increasingly porous, it is more important than ever to understand the role of online spaces in the lives of young people. Digital Romance, published in 2017, captured how digital technologies have become integral to the relationship cultures of young people. It explored the use of technology for meeting, flirting and getting intimate, breaking up and falling out. The original research identified LGBTQ+ youth as having some specific needs and experiences.

Brook commissioned further research in late 2019 and early 2020. The aim was to identify the key challenges, opportunities and resources for practice and policy development in education and beyond, specifically for supporting LGBTQ+ young people to navigate the digital landscape for the making of friendships, romantic and sexual relationships. This summary sets out the key findings and recommendations for action. The full report is available [here](#).

## Three themes emerged in the study:

### Celebration:

digital culture is a vital space of LGBTQ+ community and 'queer world- making'

### Equity:

continues to be a struggle for LGBTQ+ youth faced with the everyday realities of sexism, heteronormativity, harassment and discrimination

### Safety:

risk-taking is a normal part of teenage and young adulthood, but it is experienced by LGBTQ+ youth in distinct ways that also intersect with other aspects of identity including ethnicity, religion, poverty and neurodiversity

## The study identified key areas for action:

1. Support for effective LGBTQ+ inclusive education about sexuality and relationships and whole school approaches to inclusion and equity
2. Online safety education that is conceived as an ongoing life project; includes diverse identities; builds on young people's existing strategies for managing risk; explores the positive opportunities digital technology provides for relationship and community building; and avoids scaremongering and a primary/sole focus on risk
3. Strategies to challenge heteronormative cultures that enable abuse and harassment, rather than punitive or individualized approaches
4. Drawing commercial providers into conversations about safety and social responsibility
5. Actively supporting parents and carers to support the resilience of LGBTQ+ young people
6. Creating and networking safe spaces for young LGBTQ+ people online and offline
7. Sustainable investment in youth community spaces for LGBTQ+ young people
8. Supporting creativity/world-making – with asset-based approaches to young people's online activity.
9. Outreach facilitating LGBTQ+ 'ambassadors' to promote understanding of the needs, concerns and safety of LGBTQ+ youth in non-LGBTQ+ spaces in education and beyond

## ABOUT BROOK

Brook believes in a society where young people are free to be themselves. The reality is that societal stigma limits young people's ability to take control of their sexual health, enjoy healthy relationships and explore their identities.

Brook is committed to changing attitudes, challenging prejudices and championing equality so that all young people can lead happy, healthy lives.

Drawing on over 55 years of experience, we listen to the needs of young people to deliver a unique blend of innovative clinical services, education and wellbeing programmes and professionals training, all underpinned by our ongoing advocacy work.

In 2020/21 we supported 1.3 million young people through our face-to-face and online services. You can read our full story [here](#).

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## BACKGROUND

The original [Digital Romance](#) research identified LGBT+ youth as having some specific needs and experiences:

- LGBT+ young people described more benefits to digital technology but experienced more online risks;
- Higher proportions of LGBT+ young people had met a partner or asked someone out online;
- LGBT+ young people were more likely to often meet people in person who had deceived them online;
- Participants did not feel that they received adequate education on positive relationships;
- Participants were clear about the need for educators to include and address the needs of LGBT+ young people when delivering education around online safety and positive relationships.

The inadequacies of relationships and sex education (RSE) were echoed in contemporaneous research. [Stonewall's 2017 School Report](#) revealed that just 1 in 5 LGBT+ young people had been taught about safe sex in relation to same sex relationships and that 45 per cent of LGBT pupils - including 64 per cent of trans pupils – reported being bullied for being LGBT. In 2018, the [Government's National LGBT+ Survey](#) found that the education system was not preparing LGBT+ young people for later life. Only 3% of respondents said they had discussed sexual orientation and gender identity at school, be that during lessons, in assemblies or elsewhere. Since then the [Government's statutory guidance on Relationships Sex and Health Education](#) includes the need to integrate LGBT content into the curriculum ; and in 2021 the Schools Inspectorate [Ofsted's Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#) highlights the need for whole-school approaches for tackling sexual abuse and harassment in physical or virtual spaces.



## CONTEXT: RESEARCHING ONLINE LIVES IN THE PANDEMIC

Covid-19 transformed our everyday lives. It changed the dynamics of the research field and policy context as face-to-face interactions were curtailed and digital platforms became the primary medium for all forms of communication. Research continued during this period, recognising the enormity of these events for the focus of our research into young people's online lives. We wanted to know how organisations working with LGBT+ youth were responding to these challenges, how lockdown reframed questions of risk and safeguarding and how generational gaps in knowledge and understanding might be bridged by this unexpected shared experience.

In a post-pandemic world we will never again think so simplistically about online and offline worlds. Many of us have now experienced the problems and pleasures of managing an identity online and struggled with controlling the blurring of boundaries between public and private personas. These are now everybody's problems, not just an aspect of youth or LGBT+ culture.

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## METHODOLOGY

### Researchers carried out:

- A literature review into LGBT+ youth and online sexual cultures and digital intimacies, sexual health interventions aimed at LGBT+ youth in general, and evaluations of interventions aimed at online safety and wellbeing for LGBT+ youth
- A Practice review via online questionnaire of 183 teachers and service providers to establish the concerns and priorities of those practitioners working with children and young people
- A Secondary analysis of over 500 LGBT+ responses within the 2017 [Digital Romance](#) dataset
- Consultations with 18 LGBT+ young people aged 14-25 in four face to face reference group consultations in three settings, urban, small city and rural
- Online events with stakeholder groups of teachers and service providers (16), parents and carers (7) drawing on emergent findings briefings developed by the research team.



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## CELEBRATION: SUMMARY

- The majority of online experiences for LGBT+ young people are positive and creative;
- Community and other spaces need to be understood as transcending an online/offline divide;
- For LGBT+ young people in particular, there is fluidity between friendships and romantic relationships;
- LGBT+ youth spaces deliver 'more than safety'; within them, LGBT+ young people can also be diverse and 'ordinary';
- Generational gaps in expertise (perceived and actual) structure how we experience and feel about information technologies;
- Safe, porous intergenerational spaces – that allow for expertise-sharing and mutual influence - are generative, vital and precious.

A key finding in the original 2017 report was the importance of online spaces for young LGBT+ people to meet each other. Research in 2020 reinforces the importance of digital practices for self-exploration, socialities, for the creation of 'queer culture' or 'queer-world building', finding and fostering support in ways that contribute to health and wellbeing, and celebration of community. Young people report finding it easier to meet people they can relate to online, especially for those who haven't come out yet or found safe spaces in their offline community:

**Lamp:** *I'm a lot more open on social media than I am in real life ... More my true self rather than a different person*

**Moca:** *I'm a lot more energetic when it comes to like talking to people online - [urban, under 16 reference group, 2020]*

**Sam:** *A lot of the LGBT people can be in places where they don't really know anyone else that's in the same position as them and it can be isolating. So, you can talk to as many people in your life as you want but you still feel very lonely and that online gives them the chance to meet other people that have similar experiences. [urban, 16-25 reference group 2020]*

**Jimmy:** *if you're a young carer, if you are disabled and you can't maybe get to places or don't have the money to travel to LGBT safe spaces like this one... having an online community can literally save lives. [urban, 16-25 reference group 2020]*

**Harley Quinn:** *I think it's mainly to feel part of a community if I'm honest*

**Lady Gaga:** *Because you can find and feel part of a community but sometimes it can be hard to find like a right space to go to*

**Moderator:** *So, is it easy to find other LGBT+ young people online? Lady Gaga: it's easier than trying to find them in real life[...]*

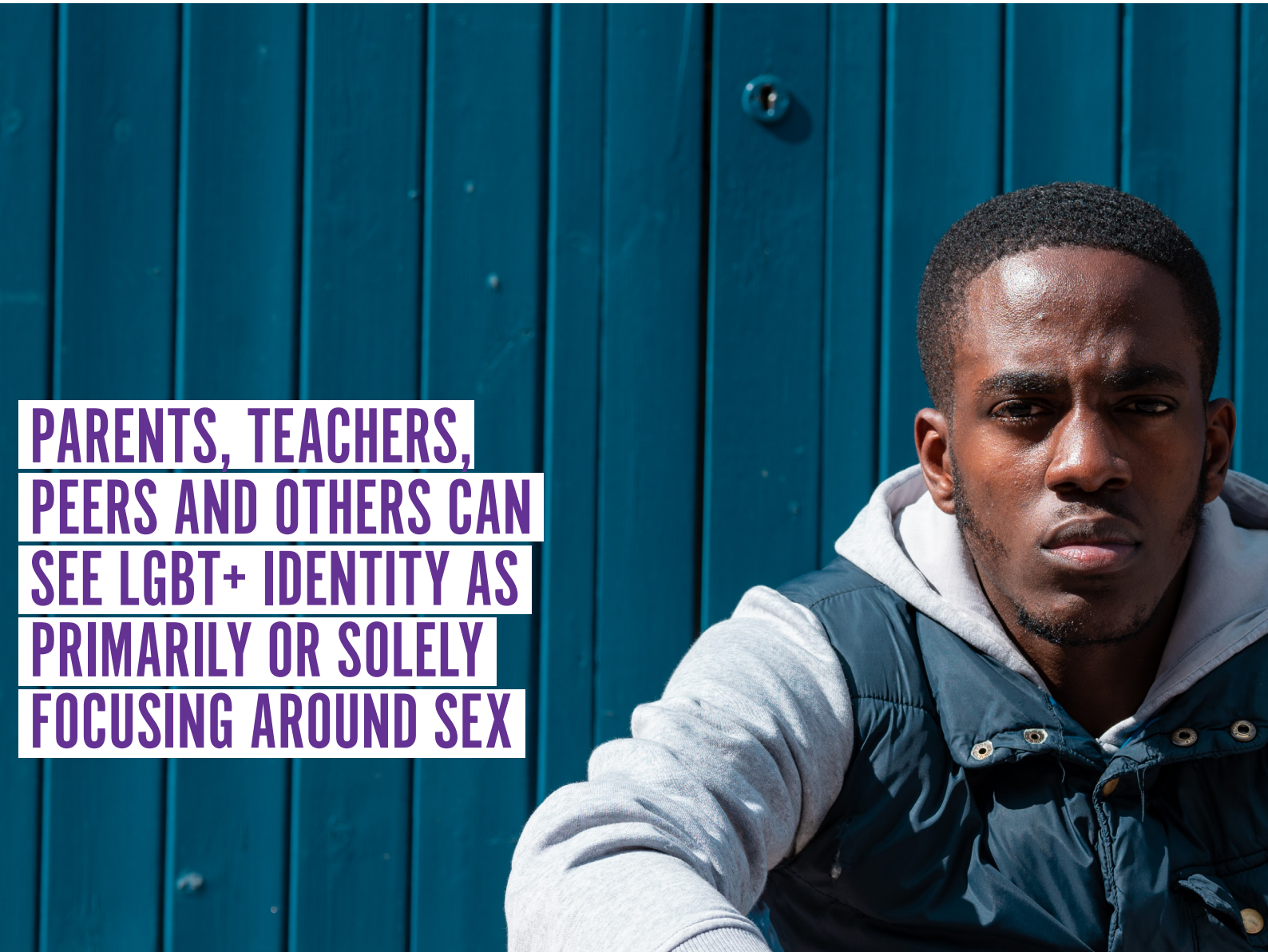
**Harley:** *they haven't come out, or they don't actually know what they are yet and are questioning - and like I know there's a few apps where LGBT+ people can just go on there and chat to each other [rural, mixed age reference group, 2020]*

LGBT+ young people can get affirmation, sustenance and inspiration from their peers online. Although they may encounter homophobic and transphobic views, they also witness LGBT+ youth and adults pushing back against harassment.

Heteronormativity sexualises LGBT+ identities, meaning that parents, teachers, peers and others can see LGBT+ identity as primarily or solely focusing around sex. Parents and teachers often see risk and protection from harm as their key focus. While young people sometimes use online spaces to discuss sexual preferences and explore communication about sex in a safe way, this is only one part of its function for them. LGBT+ professionals are 'attuned to the importance of creating spaces for young people to be themselves' rather than 'the sole representative of an entire community' and in which 'being LGBT+ is the least interesting thing about them'.

During the pandemic LGBT+ youth services moved from face to face to virtual provision. This facilitated the participation of young people from rural and suburban areas as well as those who find the online context easier e.g. those with anxiety. The importance of these rapidly-implemented, safe online spaces is reflected in reports professionals received that the practices for turn-taking and confidentiality that they modelled in these spaces were being reproduced in young people's other online spaces. This shows the rich potential for mutual exchange and learning across generations:

*We are getting very nice reports about those spaces feeling like an extension of the youth group spaces and being very supportive and young people giving each other very nice accolades and peer support within that. [Youth work manager interview 2020]*



**PARENTS, TEACHERS,  
PEERS AND OTHERS CAN  
SEE LGBT+ IDENTITY AS  
PRIMARILY OR SOLELY  
FOCUSING AROUND SEX**

## EQUITY: SUMMARY

- Despite diversity under the LGBT+ umbrella, there are shared experiences of oppression and marginalisation within heteronormative cultures;
- Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) is seen to be out of date, both in terms of old fashioned binary sexual politics (straight and gay) and a failure to engage constructively with contemporary digital cultures;
- Schools should be a safe space for everyone, but they are not yet for many LGBT+ young people;
- LGBT+ young people struggle to access useful education for themselves and face becoming an education for others;
- An inclusive curriculum depends on an inclusive environment;
- The commercial imperatives of digital media platforms create specific inequities for marginalised young people;
- The home continues to be a space of inequality, with a wide range in experience reported by participants regarding how supportive parents / carers are and thus how open they can be

In 2003 the law was changed equalising the age of consent for all sexualities. In 2010 the Equalities Act made 'sexual orientation' and 'gender reassignment' protected characteristics, on the basis of which discrimination is unlawful. Yet in 2021 these policies still need to be turned into lived equity. The resources needed to rectify inequality include, for example, inclusive RSE, safe school space, but also home as safe space, and consideration of how online spaces may breach rights and expose users to harassment.

A key part of this is understanding how heteronormativity generates risk for gender and sexually diverse young people. Inclusive practice becomes safer when heteronormativity is noticed and addressed. Without these underpinnings, targeted work has the potential to be stigmatizing. Evidence from specialist providers and from young people themselves show that it is possible to create spaces in which LGBT+ young people can be ordinary and diverse.

Online and offline solidarity exists between different groups within the LGBT+ umbrella. Despite the specificity of their identities and the experiences associated with them, young LGBT+ people identify common experiences of oppression and see each other as joined in combating heteronormativity.

*Maisie: I think, even though obviously different LGBT groups are different, I think actually we probably face a lot of the same kind of struggles.*

*Moca: Although they are a little bit different but we all have like similar struggles. Because people who are outside of the community sometimes don't understand how difficult their words are like when someone uses the... am I allowed to use slurs?... like when people say "faggot" or "tranny" they don't really know the implications of that so like people in the community they all understand what it means.*

*Clock: And it's horrible.*

*Moca: So, they're all connected ... They're more connected than you think. [urban, under 16 reference group 2020]*



By contrast, institutional spaces such as school curricula appeared to them to reflect an older sexual politics and a preoccupation with heterosexual risk. A key issue raised by young people in the 2017 survey and focus groups was the inability of school Sex and Relationships Education (SRE) to engage with the spectrum of sexual and gender identities.

## BARRIERS TO EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Many of the contributors to this research spoke of wanting equality for LGBT+ youth. Much of their focus was on schools to deliver on this equality with an emphasis on the potential of RSE – with its shift from the biological to relationships – bringing hopes that it would be more inclusive and accessible for everyone. Young people think schools should be a safe space to do LGBT+ inclusive RSE, but they're not yet. Embracing diverse sexualities and gender expressions within the curriculum was seen as an essential part of building a more inclusive society.

*... students are more liberal and more kind than we give them credit for. They're more intelligent than we give them credit for. If schools actually buckled down and taught students LGBT+ information that would make their school itself more inclusive it will absolutely be safe enough to do so, without a doubt. [urban, 16-25 reference group 2020]*

Conversely, young people spoke about feeling exposed, with responsibility placed on them for educating others:

*Lauren: Yeah so if you are the only gay person in your class and you had some sort of you know education about LGBT people you'd be scared that everyone is just gonna stare at you because they know that you're the only gay one or they're going to judge you or whisper to their mates about what they think so. [rural, mixed age reference group]*

Professionals defined RSE as educating, informing and keeping students safe which requires active inclusivity. They identified more sensitive use of language including use of gender-neutral language as 'little changes which can make a big difference to those in the room'

Some teachers felt the need for more specific LGBT+ focused resources on online safety, others for more generally inclusive curriculum across all the issues covered in RSE and that an inclusive curriculum must reflect and be reflected in an inclusive environment, including the creation of safe spaces within schools.

Joker and Harley Quinn debate the value of '*secret and confidential spaces*' that involve some kind of invitation or referral by teachers, and more open spaces that can include where you can go 'to support a friend and... to learn about LGBT+ and the whole... shabam'.

Online there are networks that better cater for and reflect diversity, enabling the formation of smaller communities of interest around particular identities but also around shared interests (such as fandom and gaming communities). However, hate speech (e.g. toxic masculinity) impacts how free and safe people are online. The lack of explicit consent for sharing and identity sign-up functions that reinforce the gender binary can make it harder for LGBT+ youth to separate lives and identities; and filters may block their access to LGBT+ sites and platforms. These features are 'baked in' to the architecture and commercial functions of the online and need more critical attention than they often receive.

Young people depicted home as varying from 'liberal' and 'chilled' parents who even suggested dating apps for them to use, to constrained and unsupportive relationships. Many decried carers' 'overbearing' responses and invasions of online privacy, even if intended or recognised as an expression of care.

*Moca: Most teenagers nowadays they are very personal with their social media, because that's sometimes the only place they have. Having an adult look through your phone without consent is a very big breach of privacy that parents should not do*

Parents themselves articulated an enormous and unmet need for measured and helpful information and support in understanding their children's digital lives. 'Home' can be a resource that defends young people against the damage caused by inequities in the world beyond and thus is an appropriate space for making and claiming equity.

## SAFETY: SUMMARY

- Risk is real: there are both generalised risks facing LGBT+ youth due to the effects of social exclusion and heteronormativity as well as quite specific risks which may be associated with intersecting inequalities, specific sexual identities, communities and the design of platforms;
- Risk is a normal part of teenagehood and needs to be recognised and managed to mitigate the worst harms;
- An emphasis on risk in educational approaches may alienate the very people that it aims to protect;
- Messages about risk need to be balanced with positive accounts and representations of the potential for healthy relationships;
- Online safety is an ongoing life-project that grows alongside a digital footprint;
- There is an important protective role for supportive adults with whom trust is built and renegotiated over time;

Across this research, from the different stakeholders involved, there was a concern with ensuring the safety of LGBT+ young people in their use of digital media and in the process of growing up as confident and secure young people able to make positive relationships. There was also recognition of the real effects of heteronormativity, meaning that LGBT+ young people may be faced with more challenges than their cis-straight peers, including isolation from community, bullying and harassment, and rejection by family. The search for acceptance, belonging and intimacy are likely to be bound up together resulting in a greater reliance on digital methods for meeting others and self-discovery.

There is a need to balance warnings of risks with positive accounts and representations of potential for healthy relationships; young people were adamant that online sociality could be a space for self-making and community. However, all stakeholders involved in the research were also frank about the perils of life online and that, importantly, risk is uneven. Although the effects of heteronormativity produce a powerful binary between cis-het and 'others', in practice how far individuals experience risk and what those specific risks are, is shaped by additional factors associated with their identity including ethnicity, religion, disability, poverty and geography.

Young people without the protective resources of a supportive family and/or community may have also less resilience in the face of the kinds of inequities that arise from heteronormativity. Economic risk is also vital, amplified by lockdown, with some young people unable to afford to get online, and others drawn into risky money-making activities.



**LGBT+ YOUNG PEOPLE MAY BE FACED  
WITH MORE CHALLENGES  
THAN THEIR CIS-STRAIGHT PEERS**



## FROM SCAREMONGERING TO SAFEGUARDING

A common feature of public and policy discourse about young people's online behaviours is to frame the online 'world' as inherently dangerous for young people. For LGBT+ young people, especially, risk dominates the research agenda. Practitioners report a high level of concern perceiving LGBT+ young people as vulnerable because of their need for affection, isolation; emphasising e-safety issues such as catfishing, image abuse and grooming.

Personal stories from young people, from parents and from professionals confirmed that there are genuine risks of exploitation and harm facing LGBT+ young people on and offline. However, young people also see risk as part of everyday life. They may have specific vulnerabilities, but also because of everyday experience they are also often more savvy and informally teach or mentor each other. There is a 'necessary distrust' of people met and relationships made online with recognition of the dangers of exploitation and deception.

Risk is seen as an intrinsic aspect of online engagement, not as something that can be eliminated, or even avoided, but something that must be recognised and managed in order to mitigate the worst harms. These conversations about risk are nuanced, with different risks associated with specific online platforms and a specific understanding of each is needed to stay safe.

*Lauren: I think that all apps are as dangerous as each other because there's always one thing on each app that you should be careful. Like, so Snapchat obviously, don't send anything inappropriate because it can stay there forever, they could screenshot it and spread it. Facebook, really, don't talk to people who don't have any mutual friends or have just found you out of nowhere, and then Instagram, you've got people that are trying to follow you then you have any idea who they are and always liking your pictures always saying how gorgeous you are even though they don't know who you are. (Small city mixed age reference group, 2020)*

Some young people are able to get support from parents and peers with online safety and talk openly about their experiences, but managing their privacy and the risk of being outed is a key concern. Not being able to confide safely in parents or peers, or receiving unhelpfully restrictive responses when they do, may make LGBT+ people more vulnerable to blackmail, and sexual or criminal exploitation.

*Sometimes, boundaries are set because parents are scared. If information was shared and discussed so parents were not so scared, it could be discussed more broadly so young people knew better what the dangers were. [Parents consultation group 2021]*

Community spaces such as LGBT+ youth clubs and projects are life-saving for young people and their families, but they can provide a space that goes beyond safety – a space where they can thrive.

## AREAS FOR ACTION

### INCLUSIVE RELATIONSHIP AND SEX EDUCATION (RSE)

RSE as a mandatory subject is still in its infancy and there are opportunities to shape and improve both content and delivery. RSE must be inclusive of non cis-heterosexual identities and challenge heteronormative cultures that enable abuse and harassment. This change involves language, images and information, values, methods and responsiveness. Inclusive RSE plays a crucial part in engaging and responding to the questions of LGBT+ (and all) youth. It also recognises the diversity of identities, relationship and family types that are part of the school and wider community, but are concealed or ignored by conventional approaches to RSE.

Schools need access to training and resources from expert organisations to give them the confidence and skills to ensure that delivery of the whole RSE curriculum is inclusive. They need to ensure that their curriculum and approach is informed by student voice and reflects the lived experience of all in the school community. However, care needs to be taken not to place responsibility onto LGBT+ young people to educate others, nor to see LGBT+ young people primarily or exclusively through their sexuality.

The RSE curriculum alone cannot make schools inclusive and safe. Whole school approaches need to be developed to make the classroom, the corridor and the playground safe; and to provide support for those young people whose gender or sexuality make them vulnerable at home.

### INCLUSIVE ONLINE SAFETY EDUCATION

Online safety education will be most effective if, alongside risk, it explores the positive opportunities digital technology provides for relationship and community building, inclusion and celebration of diverse identities.

Online safety education needs to acknowledge and respond to diverse gender and sexual identities and their intersection with disability, ethnicity, religion, geography and poverty which can influence their online interactions and may increase risk.

Scaremongering should be avoided, and young people's existing knowledge and strategies in this area should be acknowledged and built upon. Assumptions should not be made about young people's existing skills or vulnerability. Online safety should be treated as a skills-based life-long project; with an emphasis on promoting safety practices that are revisited and updated over time in line with age, stage and digital footprint.

### RESOURCING ANTI-HARASSMENT STRATEGIES

Challenging the broader cultures that enable abuse and harassment is necessary for LGBT+ equity and essential work for schools and other online and offline spaces.

### DEMANDING MORE FROM DIGITAL MEDIA PROVIDERS

Schools, youth services and other public bodies are frequently tasked with providing solutions to many issues of (youth) community, risk and safety, often without resource provision to help them do so. However, what is also needed is a nuanced conversation about the responsibility of digital media platforms and companies to increase safety for LGBT+ young people while maintaining the accessibility of their vital online spaces, and relevant content.



## CREATING AND NETWORKING SAFE SPACES

It is valuable to acknowledge, connect and identify (including with visual insignia) safe spaces for LGBT+ youth online and offline.

## ACTIVELY SUPPORTING PARENTS AND CARERS

Parents and carers can play an important role in supporting the resilience, wellbeing and safety of LGBT+ young people in partnership with schools and community organisations. Investment is needed in the education and support of families and carers of LGBT+ youth; and providing peer support for and between parents, including during times of crisis.

## SUPPORTING YOUTH COMMUNITY SPACES

Sustainable funding for LGBT+ youth work and youth spaces within the LGBT+ community is vital. Having access to such spaces (online and offline) plays an important part in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of LGBT+ youth.

They model positive intergenerational relationships within the LGBT+ community and provide trusted and authoritative points of contact for parents/families, schools, colleges and the wider youth service. Most importantly, they provide spaces where LGBT+ youth can be ordinary, diverse and included; a place where they can thrive.

## SUPPORTING CREATIVITY/WORLD-MAKING

Young people are creative within online spaces and can be agents of change in their own right. Asset-based approaches are needed that recognise their knowledge and experience of identity and community-building online and invest in creative digital projects for LGBT+ youth and youth workers.

## OUTREACH AND EXCHANGE

There is an important role for projects to facilitate LGBT+ community groups and 'ambassadors' to work in schools, colleges, universities, digital platforms and non-LGBT+ spaces to promote understanding of LGBT+ young people's needs, concerns and safety.