

# 'Be who you want to be'

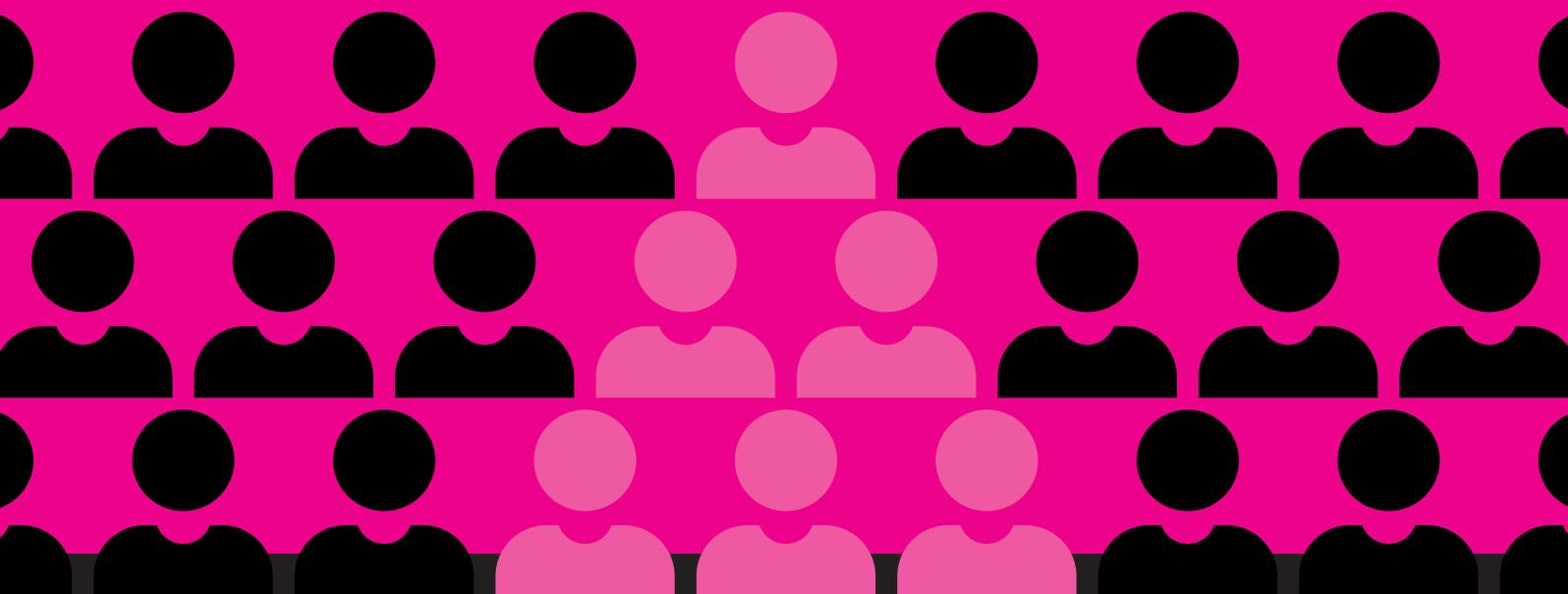
How PACE youthwork model  
promotes the emotional health and well-being  
of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people.

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*Diana*

THE WORK CONTINUES

MAY 2004



## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to the young people attending PACE Youth Work Service (PYWS) for agreeing to be interviewed and allowing observation of the groups during meetings. Particular thanks to the young men and women who gave their time to take part in group and individual interviews and to share some of their often difficult experiences.

PYWS staff were extremely helpful in providing access to young people and for undertaking lengthy interviews, talking openly and reflectively on the nature of their youth work practice. Thank you for allowing repeated access to the groups and being so flexible in supporting this evaluation process.

Thanks to the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund for funding this evaluation.

The most positive aspect of this process has been the willingness of the young people to talk about how much the provision means to them and how they know it has benefited their lives. Many of their personal experiences reflected what we know to be some of the hardships of lesbian, gay and bisexual lives, and yet these young people were positive and supportive of each other. They are a real credit to their peers and to PACE Youth Work Service and demonstrated what is often unsaid about lesbian, gay and bisexual young people: that they can be happy, fulfilled, complex and diverse individuals with their own full lives and ambitions. In short, as 'real' as everyone else.

**Tracy Hind**

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<b>Contents</b>	1. Background & methodology	3
	2. A definition of young people's mental health & national research: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People and Mental Health	5
	3. About PACE Youth Service	12
	4. Findings from interviews with staff	24
	5. Findings from interviews with young people	36
	6. Considerations regarding the young men's and young women's groups: Outzone and Girl Diva	47
	7. Outputs of national significance	50
	8. Residentials and annual events	56
	9. Conclusions	60
	10. Recommendations	63
	11. References	64

## 1. Background and Methodology

This report was undertaken during the period July 2003 to January 2004 and seeks to show how PACE Youth Work Service promotes the emotional well-being and mental health of the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) young people accessing their projects.

In 2000 PYWS was successful in receiving substantial three-year funding from the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund to develop work with lesbian, gay and bisexual young people to promote their mental health and well-being. This funding focussed on the development of holistic services to young people but also on the following specific outputs of national significance:

- Development of good practice guidelines in developing LGB youth provision
- Development of a Peer Mentoring service for LGB youth
- A national conference on LGB youth work practice

This report focuses on the following, in relation to the overarching aim of 'mental health promotion':

**How PYWS has progressed with its remit for work of national significance**

**Group work and one-to-one support services for LGB young people**

**PACE Youth Service residential weekends and annual events**

## Methodology

The evaluation adopted a range of methods to gather the relevant information:

- Review of statistical data, worker reports, group programmes and 'special project' evaluations
- 2 meetings with the Youth Work Manager
- 5 in-depth individual interviews with staff members
- 1 group interview with 5 young men
- 1 group interview with 5 young women
- 2 x observations of group work (at Outzone and Girl Diva groups)
- 4 in-depth individual interviews with young men
- 4 in-depth individual interviews with young women
- 1 feed back meeting with PACE Youth Service staff team

When young people were interviewed it was explained that the information they chose to give may be included in the report, but that they would remain anonymous. They were offered the opportunity to look at their interview and able to ask for anything they said to be removed from the report. They were also offered information and support when talking about difficult experiences they had had, and the opportunity to talk more in depth if they wished to do so in confidence. They were also told they did not have to discuss any issue that they felt was upsetting or intrusive, though all of the young people felt able to answer all questions at some length.

**Key issues discussed with staff members were:**

- PACE Youth Work Service ethos and principles
- The need for dedicated LGB youth services
- Workers' vision, beliefs and attitudes
- Workers knowledge and skills
- Boundaries, power and influence
- Role modelling
- How accessible and inclusive PYWS is
- Workers' understanding and knowledge of mental health issues
- Issues adversely affecting the mental health and well-being of LGB youth
- How PYWS helps and supports young people experiencing emotional difficulties
- Peer support
- Concept of safe space
- Challenges and rewards for workers

## Key issues discussed with young people were:

- Why young people access the service
- What experiences they have had and if the service has helped them cope with difficulties
- How young people feel they benefit from the service
- Youth Workers as role models
- What young people identified could change in the way the service works
- Their ambitions for the future

Nb. The scope of the evaluation has been limited to the actual services and products provided to young people and particular projects funded by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial as outlined earlier. The evaluation does not consider the external work PYWS undertakes with other agencies such as staff training. It does not look in depth at management or staff issues, nor at particular organisational issues.

## 2. A definition of young people's mental health

In order to understand the nature of the work that has been evaluated at PYWS it is helpful to use a common definition of what we mean by 'mental health'. The NHS Advisory Service (1995) suggested the following definition of young people's mental health:

- The ability to develop psychologically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually
- The ability to initiate, develop and sustain mutually satisfying personal relationships
- The ability to become aware of and empathise with others
- The ability to experience and integrate psychological distress without hindering development

### What are the risk factors for mental ill-health?

In order to evaluate how PYWS promotes the mental health of young lesbian, gay and bisexual people using its provision, it is helpful to understand what risk factors may lead to mental ill-health.

There are several key risk factors that can increase the probability of mental ill-health. There is a 'complex interplay' between protective factors and risk factors, and if a young person has few risk factors they generally have a low probability of developing a mental health problem. However with four or more risk factors the likelihood of a young person developing a mental health problem is increased by 20%.

Risk factors:

- Genetic influences
- Family and close relationship problems including:
  - overt parental conflict
  - hostile and rejecting relationships
  - failure to adapt to young people's changing developmental needs
  - abuse - physical/sexual/emotional
- External/environmental factors including:
  - Discrimination
  - Poor education/school support
  - Socio-economic disadvantage
  - Homelessness

Added to these risk factors is direct stress, which is a cause of much mental distress in young people. Direct stress often relates to young people's family and peer relationships.

Family and home influences, education and school life are deemed to play the most critical part in mental health promotion in young people.

(Bright Futures; promoting children and young people's mental health, Mental Health Foundation 1999, Mental Health & Illness in Young People: An Overview, Dr S. Zerman)

### Protective factors

Furthermore it is helpful to understand why young people who have had very difficult or traumatic experiences may develop mental ill-health. Many young people will experience some form of mental health problem or mental distress, but appropriate support can often prevent deterioration into mental illness. The following protective factors, or simply, what help keeps young people mentally healthy, have been identified as key:

**Self-esteem**  
**Sociability and autonomy**  
**Family compassion**  
**Warmth and parental harmony**  
**Strong social supports**  
**Encouraging and enabling young people to make efforts**  
**and to develop confidence in their ability to cope**

**Mental health and young lesbian, gay and bisexual people**

A substantial body of research, mainly from the USA but also from the UK, suggests that lesbians, gay men and bisexual people have a different experience of mental health, quality of life and mental health services than heterosexual people. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people suffer discrimination, rejection and victimisation and seem to have higher rates of anxiety, depression and self-harming and suicidal behaviour (King & McKeown 2003)

The needs of young lesbians, gay men and bisexual people need to be taken in the broader context of their lives - some of their needs will be the same as for young people in general, and young LGB people will also have vastly different life experiences from each other, so it is not possible or desirable to view them as a homogenous group. Most of the research studies of LGB young people in the UK have been local and small-scale in nature, however taken as a whole they clearly show that young lesbian, gay and bisexual people do face numerous and specific barriers in the healthy transition to adulthood and face particular risks to their mental, emotional and physical health, safety and well-being.

Young LGB people have to be skilled and resourceful to negotiate their way to healthy self-esteem in the face of sometimes overwhelming homophobia. Homophobia does take its toll on young people and research has proved that LGB youth are vulnerable to higher incidences of self-harm, suicide and depression.

An overview of international research concerning the needs of LGB youth (Warwick et al, 2000) found:

- Young lesbians and gay men were 2 - 3 times more likely to attempt suicide than other young people and are thought to account for around 30% - almost one third - of all completed youth suicides. This is disproportionately high given that around 2-6% of young people are estimated to be lesbian or gay.

A 1996 UK study found that young lesbians were especially vulnerable to mental health problems, and more acutely so when coming to terms with their sexuality. Mental health issues included:

- Depression
- Attempted suicide
- Self-harming behaviour
- Isolation
- Social rejection
- Alcohol and drug abuse

(Bridget and Lucille 1996)

Mullen (1999) finds that among young people in general, 2-3% suffer with depression, but among LGB youth the figure is 9% - over triple the incidence.

Aggleton et al (2000) find that 'a considerably increased risk for suicide is said to exist for lesbians and gay men from black and minority ethnic communities.'

### **Social and support needs of LGB youth**

Young LGB people, as all young people, want friendships, peer approval, a social life, to form relationships and to explore their sexuality. The main barriers to success in these areas are homophobic attitudes, ignorance and discrimination against lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. LGB youth are faced with media stereotypes and negative attitudes to LGB people, religious homophobia and the fact that there are at present few legal rights and laws to protect LGB people from discrimination (though there is some legal progress currently being made).

Dedicated provision for LGB youth and those questioning their sexual orientation enables them to access support around specific needs including:

- Dealing with internalised homophobia
- Coming Out
- Family
- Institutionalised homophobia

### **Dealing with Internalised homophobia.**

Young LGB people are vulnerable to adopting negative attitudes towards themselves and other LGB people as a result of being exposed to and internalising homophobia. Some of the effects of internalised homophobia include:

- Distrust and loneliness
- Difficulties in intimate/affectionate relationships
- Under and over-achievement
- Impaired sexual functioning
- Practicing unsafe sex
- Domestic violence
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Eating disorders
- Mental health problems
- Suicide

(Shildo 1994)

This highlights that there is a clear need to provide young LGBs with opportunities to address and challenge their internalised homophobia. Warwick et al (2001) found that around 10% of the young men they interviewed felt that realising they were gay was the first negative thing they could remember, and though many of them came to be happy with their sexual orientation, for a few, they still had very negative feelings about it.

### **Coming Out**

'Coming out' is far from simply telling people that you are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Peter Keogh in 'Group Outings' (1999) talks about the following stages, which characterise the process of coming out:

(i) Identity formation: - the process by which beliefs and attitudes are re-assessed and re-evaluated in the light of a new identity (i.e. realising you are lesbian, gay or bisexual)

(ii) Disclosure: - how a new sense of self is gained from the reaction of others to your new identity

(iii) Exploration: - Finding out about and making decisions about the 'gay scene'

(iv) Experimentation: - the investigation of new sexual possibilities

The time each stage takes will vary vastly between individuals. Keogh says 'It is important not to see this process as a simple transition from one state to another: from a confused and frightened childhood to an 'out 'n proud' adult lesbian or gay man. Keogh talks about the massive shifts in relationships that occur during the process, for which young LGB people will need particular support - such as negotiating the disappointments and hurt of family members, rejection by friends and peers and dealing with isolation, all the while trying to maintain some sense of self-esteem. Keogh states that what is most important is 'to give them the skills to cope with such contradictions.'

LGB young people have to contend with a variety of difficult issues, and being lesbian, gay or bisexual is most certainly not an 'easy option'. Frankham (1996) found that young lesbian and gay people have to deal with:

- Lack of accurate, clear and non-judgmental information concerning homosexuality
- Uncertainty about what being gay means and 'what causes it'
- Negative stereotypes of gay people
- Fears of AIDS/HIV
- Concerns about the potential reactions of family and friends to their homosexuality
- The knowledge that gay people are disliked and abused
- Fears for the future
- Mental health problems, such as depression

In terms of how a LGB youth group can help support young people in dealing with these issues, in Keogh's study of what a gay youth group meant to young gay men, it was a place where, unlike 'outside', in public space such as school, workplace, they had a sense of 'normality' and 'realness': These are issues that heterosexual people take for granted.

*"You don't have to put on an act, the group was a place that you felt accepted"*

*Young Man, Outzone Youth Project, (Keogh's 'Group Outings' 1999)*

Keogh's report concludes that, on top of creating valuable space for negotiating the processes of 'coming out', challenging internalised homophobia, learning relevant sexual health information and negotiation skills and forming friendships, having attended a gay youth group made young men feel 'better developed and more rounded gay men.'

### **Family**

Fear of negative reaction from family is a key concern for young LGB people. Many of the young men Frankham interviewed were aware of the negative feelings of parents, especially fathers, to homosexuality. Most wanted to talk to their family and disliked lying about or hiding their sexual orientation. Those who had 'come out' to parents had received varied responses such as denial, a refusal to discuss it, or family saying that they already knew. Though coming out to family was extremely difficult, most felt it was a 'positive step.'

Young LGB people need to safely explore with others the most appropriate time and method of disclosure of their sexual orientation - for example, enlisting the support of a trusted friend or close family member such as a sibling. Not all young LGB people can come out to family for fear of safety, or for religious or cultural reasons, and nor should they be encouraged to if it places them at risk.

### **Institutional Homophobia**

All of our institutions can be said to be homophobic and heterosexist: that is, they discriminate against LGB people and promote heterosexuality as the 'norm'. As such, lesbian and gay people:

- Receive little or no accurate information at school relating to lesbian, gay and bisexual people
- Are exposed to religious condemnation and hatred
- Are exposed to constant media homophobia
- Do not see lesbian and gay partnerships afforded the respect, rights and acknowledgement of heterosexual marriages

### **Violence and bullying**

Research highlights the hostile environment within which young LGB people are growing up:

A high proportion of LGB young people have been the victims of homophobic violence - almost all of them (90%) have experienced verbal abuse because of their known or perceived sexual orientation. Schools were implicated in many of these incidences, with school staff seen to be unsupportive or inactive in tackling homophobic violence and abuse.

- Queer Bashing (Mason & Palmer 1994) found that 48% of under-18 LGBs had experienced homophobic violence, 61% had been harassed and 90% verbally abused. 50% of violent attacks on young LGB people were perpetrated by other students at school/college. 40% of violent attacks took place in school.
- GALOP's report into the experiences of violence of 202 LGB young people in London (1998) found that young lesbians and gay men were less likely to report attacks against them for fear of disclosure, escalation of violence, of not being believed, or believing that somehow they were to themselves to blame because of their sexuality.
- Warwick et al (2001) found that victimisation and bullying at school ranged from being teased through to serious physical assaults including being knocked unconscious by a homophobic pupil. For most respondents there were 'lasting negative outcomes, largely in relation to difficulty developing personal and social relationships.'

"I came out at high school and basically lost all my best mates...I look back and feel like I've had a reasonably empty childhood and it's prevented me from getting too close or being too open with people I don't know inside out." Paddy, 20 (Warwick et al, 2001)

- Aggleton et al (2000) note that 'While bullying may often be linked to school settings...none of the contexts in which young lesbians and gay men live are risk-free. Whether at home, at school, or work or in the community, lesbian and gay young people to varying degrees feared for their safety, concealed

their sexual orientation, and incurred verbal and/or physical violence.' They also note that the earlier a lesbian or gay youth identified publicly as gay, the higher the level of victimisation.

Indeed, GALOP (1998) found that 18% of homophobic physical attacks on LGB young people, and 57% of incidences of homophobic harassment took place within the family home.

#### **Implications of homophobia on educational achievement**

- Rivers (2000) has reported that 56% of LGBs who were bullied at school showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder a year after leaving and that the bullying suffered had significant implications in terms of absenteeism, low educational attainment and the potential for self-harming behaviour.

#### **A holistic approach to promoting mental well-being**

Warwick et al suggest that instead of just focussing on risk-related factors in order to remove the risks from young people's lives, it is just as important to identify the protective factors that promote health and well-being. He states that not only do individual and interpersonal factors influence health and well-being, but also social factors shape the context and settings of young people's lives - such as families, schools, and workplaces. Young people themselves stress the importance of relationships with families and friends in achieving and maintaining a sense of well-being. It is plain to see that if positive peer relationships are achieved then this contributes to a sense of improved well-being, just as negative relationships - such as peer and family rejection as a result of homophobia - can impact badly on a young LGB person's ability to stay healthy.

Warwick and Aggleton (1998) found that young people themselves have a more holistic sense of their total well-being and don't 'compartmentalise' their health into one topic or another, such as 'sexual health', 'drug use', 'healthy eating'. This would suggest that a holistic approach to health promotion is more appropriate than focussing on discrete topics.

Peter Aggleton (1996) -states how important it is to acknowledge 'that health risk is influenced by a range of factors such as age, social background, place of residence, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and material resources available.

Douglas states that the risks to health and well-being faced by young LGBs from black and minority ethnic communities has not been researched in depth in the UK. However, Warwick et al (2001), point out that young LGBs from black and ethnic minority communities are faced with racism as well as homophobia, a 'double disadvantage that can be detrimental to health and psychosocial functioning.'

#### **Housing**

Safe and appropriate housing is one of the biggest issues of concern for young LGB people in London (Hind 2002). Access to adequate and safe housing impacts upon health, particularly upon mental health. Young LGB people cannot take for granted that their families will continue to provide a home for them if they disclose their sexuality or if their sexuality is discovered. Douglas (2001) writes that analysis of records kept by two specialist homelessness agencies

found that in a third of cases of LGB youth homelessness, the housing crisis was prompted by the inability of families to accept their child's sexuality.

In his 1999 report *Social Inclusion: Reaching Out to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth*, Andy Mullen found that LGB youth were three times more likely to have been homeless than heterosexual youth. He also established that for those who did not disclose their sexuality to family for fear of rejection, the consequences were 'fear of discovery, pressures of being dishonest and constraints on personal freedom.'

For many homeless young LGB people, experiences with housing services were negative. Many housing providers did not ask about sexuality, or the young people did not feel safe disclosing to them, and this could result in either running away from services or sharing housing with other people who had homophobic attitudes. Homophobia and a lack of awareness among housing support staff also compounded these problems. (O' Connor & Molloy, 2001)

To conclude, there is a growing body of research which identifies the manner in which LGB youth are excluded and discriminated against, and identifies clearly some of the risk factors and stresses that impact upon the mental well-being of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. It is within this context that PYWS operates and its overall aim is to promote the emotional well-being of its users so they are better equipped and supported to deal with the challenges of being young and lesbian, gay or bisexual. PYWS aims to facilitate a healthy transition to adulthood for LGB youth and this report aims to show how they succeed in doing this.

### 3. About PACE Youth Work Service (PYWS)

PYWS is the youth work arm of PACE, a lesbian and gay voluntary sector project based in North London that works to promote the health and well-being of lesbians and gay men. PACE offers a range of services for the lesbian and gay communities including counselling, family mediation, group work and mental health advocacy. PACE's mission statement is as follows:

'PACE aims to promote the emotional, physical and mental well-being of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals from diverse groups and cultural backgrounds through the provision of a wide range of high quality services provided by lesbians and gay men.'

PACE Youth Work Service caters for LGB young people 25 and under. The primary aim of PYWS is:

'To provide a safe and welcoming environment for all lesbian, gay and bisexual young people, where they can find non-judgemental information and advice on a range of issues relating to their sexuality. This includes an opportunity for mutual support with other young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure of their sexuality - which helps foster a positive self-image and build self-esteem.'

Funding for PYWS comes from a variety of sources including charitable trusts, the major funder being the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, and local authority youth service funds and PCTs.

The services offered to young people are:

- Weekly youth groups for young people 25 and under
- One-to-one advice and support on a range of issues
- Speedy access to other PACE services
- A website
- Access to resources including Internet, gay press, a lending book and video library
- An in-house magazine
- Residential weekends
- Annual events
- Referral to other services
- Assisted referral (i.e. accompanied by a worker)

The core of the service is the youth groups. There are four weekly groups for young people; three based in Highgate and one in Finchley; all in North London. The youth groups are as follows;

#### **Outzone**

Group for young men 25 and under who are gay, bisexual or unsure of their sexuality. This group meets Friday evenings 6.30-9.30pm in the premises of an arts-based community centre in Highgate, North London. It is staffed by two gay male workers.

#### **Girl Diva**

Group for young women 25 and under who are lesbian, bisexual or unsure of their sexuality. This group meets every Monday evening 6.30-9.30pm in the same community centre premises and is staffed by two lesbian workers.

#### **First Move**

A group for gay and bisexual men and those unsure of their sexuality under 25 years old. The group meets in North Finchley on Monday evenings from 6.30-9.30pm and is staffed by two gay male workers.

### **One UP**

A group for under-18 year olds who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure of their sexuality, meets early evening, every Thursday 4.30-7.40pm at the community centre venue in Highgate. The group has a particular focus around support with issues of school and family because of the lower age range. It is staffed by male and female workers.

### **Annual events**

There are five significant events in the PYWS calendar for young people:

- Young women's residential
- Young men's residential
- World Aids Day event
- Summer School
- Pride march

The importance of these events for young people is considered further in this report.

### **Communications**

PYWS staff produce a regular newsletter which is sent to up to all young people on their mailing list regardless of whether they attend services, and have developed and maintain a highly professional and popular website.

#### **Newsletter**

PYWS produces a monthly newsletter which is posted on the website and sent to all young people who have indicated they want to receive it on their registration form - currently around 220 young people. The newsletter is sent to all PACE staff and other professionals who request it; it is currently sent out to 25 other agencies. The Outzone Senior Worker produces most of the content with contributions from other staff members.

The main function of the newsletter is to inform the young people on the register about the weekly groups, to promote special events and to provide information on various issues regarding health promotion, such as safer alcohol use, drugs information etc.

The newsletter is an important communication tool with young people who do not or are not able to access the groups for various reasons and helps to keep them in touch with PYWS.

#### **Website**

The website is fully maintained, edited and updated by Outzone's Senior Youth Worker. Over the last two years the website has developed from a 30-page site containing basic information about Outzone and Girl Diva, to a comprehensive site of over 170 pages of information relevant to LGB young people in London. The site includes personal stories, photos of group activities, support information, links, listings and full PYWS information. The Outzone section is particularly well-developed. At end December 2003 the site had received over 41200 hits (averaging 218 hits per week)

The benefits of the website mean that young people with Internet access can gain information about PYWS and a range of related information and links, in an anonymous way and at any time of the day or night. Young people can email PYWS and there is a target response time of 5 days. The majority of new users at PYWS have contacted the

service by email after viewing the site. Comments from young people signing the site guest book include:

*i love the site and i would luv to come to one of the groups, but for some reason I'm really scared, i don't know, anyway, maybe some day i might join you, fingers crossed! Young site visitor, UK*

The newsletter is available in edited form for downloading from the website, as well as events information, booking forms and programmes. This is particularly useful for young people who do not want their personal information kept on a database at PYWS.

The site is due to be redesigned to place an emphasis on PYWS as the organisation, as opposed to the separate groups

The site plays an important part in promoting the services to young people, but also to other professionals. However, unsuitable IT equipment at PYWS and lack of hours and for the worker to undertake this and the newsletter work mean he is using his own IT resources from home and some voluntary time to keep the communications up to a high standard.

#### **Other services**

PYWS also offers a range of external services to other agencies, the most significant being training for staff in formal and informal education on tackling homophobia and supporting LGB youth. These services are not covered in the scope of this evaluation.

#### **Staffing**

PYWS has 5 member of staff; a full-time Youth Work Manager, two part-time Senior Youth Workers on 24 hours a week and 18 hours per week respectively, and two part-time Youth Workers on 6 hours per week each.

#### **User involvement in PYWS**

Young people are routinely involved in contributing to the website and newsletter, and in long-term programme planning for the groups. Young people who take part in particular initiatives also participate in the planning and evaluation, such as for World AIDS day events, residential and Summer School. A young people' steering group was temporarily established for the Peer Mentoring Project detailed further in this report. Young people are involved in evaluating PYWS though informal feedback recorded at sessions and more formally through questionnaires and evaluation forms, such as at the end of residential. There is no youth steering group or user group set up to work with the staff team in any other way at present.

### Profile of young people accessing PYWS, 2002 & 2003

2002 statistics (Data taken from 2002 membership summary, Outzone & Girl Diva only, based on 47 weekly sessions for Outzone and 44 weekly sessions for Girl Diva)

#### Outzone

- There were 533 total session attendances
- An average of 11.3 young men attended each session
- The total number of new members for the year was 63
- Number of recorded telephone enquiries for the year was 63

#### Age:

- 30% of members were 18 and under
- 44% of members were 19-22
- 26% of members were 23-25

#### Ethnicity:

- 61% of members were White European
- 11% were Black Caribbean
- 3% were Black African
- 3% were Black Other
- 3% were Irish
- 3% were Chinese
- 3% were Bangladeshi
- 3% were Indian
- 2% respectively were: Asian Other, British Asian, Turkish, Cypriot and White American

#### Residency:

- 93% came from inner and outer London boroughs
- 7% came from outside London or 'unknown' regions

#### How new members heard about Outzone:

- 27% found out through the website
- 23% found out from friends
- 15% found out from Time Out (London listings magazine)
- 11% found out via the gay press
- 11% found out via other groups
- 5% found out through Lesbian and Gay Switchboard
- 3% found out through Social Services or CAB
- 2% found out through school or college
- 3% found out in other ways

#### Girl Diva

- There were 373 total attendances
- An average of 8.4 young women attended each session
- The total number of new members for the year was 46
- Number of recorded telephone enquiries for the year was 56

#### Age:

- 37% of members were 18 and under
- 42% were 19-22
- 21% were 23-25

No further details recorded

2003 statistics (Data taken from quarter samples, Girl Diva and Outzone July-September 2003. No statistics available First Move and One Up)

**Girl Diva statistical information for the period: July - September 2003**

Total number of 3 hour sessions for the period:	11
Total session attendance for the period:	115 visits
(Excludes. Summer School Pty 22/08/03 & one to one work)	
Number of sachets of lube distributed:	10 (Est.)
Total number of young women enquiring about Girl Diva by telephone:	15
Total number of young women enquiring about Girl Diva by email:	13
New members information:	
Total number of New Members for the period July - September 2003:	8
By ethnicity:	
White European:	3
Irish:	
Black African:	1
Black Caribbean:	1
Asian Other:	1
Chinese:	
Mix Race:	2
By age:	
14 year olds:	1
17 year olds:	2
18 year olds:	1
19 year olds:	2
22 year olds:	
23 year olds:	1
24 year olds:	1
By Location:	
Lambeth:	1
Enfield:	
Haringey:	4
Southwark:	1
Westminster:	1
Islington:	1
Outside London:	2
	(Southend x 1)
	(Thornton Heath x 1)
Heard about group via:	
Website:	1
Friends:	1
Other Groups:	1
PACE:	
Poster/Leaflet	

Gay Press	4
Social Services	1
Jackson's Lane	1
Average age of Girl Diva members:	17

### OutZone statistical information for the period: July - September 2003

Total number of 3 hour sessions for the period:	10 (Including Residential)
Total session attendance for the period:	148 visits (Excludes. Summer School Pty 22/08/03 & one to one work)
Number of condoms distributed:	40 (Est.)
Number of sachets of lube distributed:	40 (Est.)
Total number of young men enquiring about OutZone by telephone:	20
Total number of young men enquiring about OutZone by email:	15
New members information:	
Total number of New Members for the period July - September 2003:	10
By ethnicity:	
White European:	4
Irish:	1
Black African:	1
Black Caribbean:	1
Asian Other:	2
Australian:	1
By age:	
14 year olds:	1
16 year olds:	2
19 year olds:	1
22 year olds:	4
23 year olds:	1
24 year olds:	1
By Location:	
Newham:	1
Enfield:	2
Haringey:	1
Brent:	2
Lewisham:	1
Islington:	1
Outside London	2 (Southend x 1) (Thornton Heath x 1)
Heard about group via:	
Website:	4
Friends:	3
Other Groups:	1

PACE:	1
Poster/Leaflet	1
Average age of OutZone members:	21

### **Age difference**

Both 2002 and 2003 recordings show that on average, members of Girl Diva are four years younger than members of Outzone. A greater percentage of members of Girl Diva are under 18. A greater percentage of members of Outzone are aged over 23. This difference is discussed further in the report when comparing the needs presented in the two groups.

### **Activities and services on offer**

PYWS offers young people a structured and varied programme of activities and services. Members are involved as a matter of course in helping plan group programmes weeks in advance. A typical programme over 8 weeks might include:

- Soho lesbian and gay café visit
- Meeting to plan residential
- Video night
- Visiting project to talk about sexual health
- Pop quiz night
- Knowing your rights - how the law affects young LGB people
- Love, sex and relationships; a crash course in the skills of knowing what you want; getting what you want and avoiding some of the heartache.
- Visiting project to run workshop on alcohol use and harm minimisation

### **Group observation sessions**

Two group sessions were observed in September 2003; Girl Diva young women's group and Outzone young men's group.

### **Girl Diva**

The space used for Girl Diva sessions is the meeting room next to the PYWS office and the office itself is made available so young women can have computer and free Internet access. Entrance to the group is through a side door of the community centre so young women do not have to enter through the centre if they don't want to. The group has privacy and is fairly shut off from the rest of the community centre. Workers spend half an hour before the group making the place look welcoming; posters featuring lesbian and bisexual young women from diverse ethnic backgrounds are put up on walls and doors. A display board featuring more posters and articles is set up in a corner of the room. Leaflets and magazines are set out on a large table, including PWYS' newsletter, free lesbian and gay press and more commercial lesbian publications. A well-stocked video and book lending library is available, as are hot and cold drinks. Chairs are arranged around the room, ambient music is played and lamps are switched on. The atmosphere created is relaxing and welcoming. Sessions at the Girl Diva space usually follow a particular structure: one hour of 'chill-out time' where young women can catch up with each other, gain access to the Internet and computer for free, play music and talk to the workers: following that is a workshop or other structured session as agreed in advance with the members when setting the programme.

Workshops may last up to 90 minutes with a short break in the middle. The last part of the evening is more informal socialising when young women are often arranging to meet each other during the week or to go out at the weekend. Workers are also available for 1-2-1 discussions if needed, though there is little private space available.

**On the evening of observation the following took place:**

During the first 20 minutes three young women arrived, and greeted the workers energetically. They settled themselves quickly into the office space, using the Internet and sorting out drinks. The Senior Worker was in the process of confirming who was attending the upcoming residential, so there was much discussion of this and about returning forms. Over the next hour another four young women arrived and the workers were engaged in discussions with groups and individuals, catching up on their week and chasing up residential forms. There was a lot of lively chat and joking and young women greeted each other with warmth and some teasing about things that had happened during the week. Many of the young women were clearly in contact with each other between sessions. Young women were relaxed about the session being observed and took some interest in the evaluation, asking what it would be used for. All of the young women who were approached to be interviewed as a group at a later date agreed and were keen to give their time.

After about an hour, with a total of eight young women in attendance, the workers brought the group together in a circle to welcome everyone and introduce each other. There were no new members that evening but there were other visitors to be introduced including the workshop leader and two women from the YWCA who were conducting research into the lives of young lesbian and bisexual women and wanted to ask the young women if they were interested in taking part.

Notices of upcoming events were read out and young women were reminded about a residential planning meeting the following week. Following this, the workshop leader was introduced, a hair and beauty specialist who would run a hairstyling session.

The young women attending the group were mainly at school and college; a couple were in work. The interaction between young women and workers was very positive; young women constantly approached the workers to chat or to involve them in a discussion or a joke. The workers were attentive to young women without being intrusive and there were lots of short one-to-one catching up chats with young women. Workers asked young people how their week had been, how their job or college was going and about other plans they had. Workers clearly retained information about what was going on in individuals' lives and were following up with them to see how they were getting on. This clearly had the effect of making the young women feel valued, as they were keen to discuss what was going on in their lives with the workers and their peers. There were a couple of young women who did not interact with the group as comfortably as the others, and the workers were observant of this without drawing attention to it.

**Outzone**

The space used is a large meeting room with chairs and tables set up for meeting around, a good-sized open space in the centre, computer stations at one side that can be used and folding doors that pen onto

another small empty hall that can be used for group activities. There is also a sink and kitchen equipment. Entrance to the space is through the large community centre doors and then off via a small corridor to the left. The group has privacy yet is not shut off completely from the rest of the busy centre.

Prior to the sessions the workers prepare the space to make it welcoming for young gay and bisexual men. This includes putting up posters featuring young gay men and LGB young people, displaying information leaflets and club flyers, and providing a wide array of gay press including PYWS' own newsletter, free gay magazines and more commercial gay literature. In addition young men can borrow from an extensive book and video library. Chairs are arranged informally around several tables to bring the group together in a circle.

The sessions that are held at the group premises usually follow this structure: one hour at the beginning of welcoming members and catching up on their week, informal discussions between peers, new members greeted and introduced to everyone, tea and coffee, cold drinks and magazines available, computer and Internet access for free. Between one hour and 90 minutes of structured activity follows, usually a workshop or discussion on a particular subject, and the final 30-60 minutes is spent socialising at the end, often in the café area of the community centre and often followed by a visit to a nearby pub. Workers accompany the group to the pub if they want to go during session time. Most members are over 18. Under-18s are discouraged from drinking alcohol. Workers are available during the session for 1-2-1 sessions with young people if needed but there is little private space available.

**On the evening of observation at Outzone, the following took place:**

Shortly after the group opened, three members arrived and began chatting to each other and the workers. This was very good-natured and one member helped a worker make drinks for everyone. It was officially a 'new members night' aimed at easing in young people who were attending for the first time. On this occasion, one young man who had first contacted by phone was attending for the first time and had travelled some distance from outside London to attend. When he arrived the Senior Worker immediately welcomed him, made him a drink, briefly introduced him to the other members and sat with him to explain a little about the group and go through a welcome pack with him. The 'welcome pack' is given to all new members and contains guidelines for the group, a registration form, a newsletter, copy of the current programme and referral booklet for other relevant services. The welcome pack is a feature of all PYWS groups.

During this time other members arrived and sat down to chat to the others. Some members were reading magazines singly or together. The other worker not engaged with the new member circulated between the young men, joining in their informal discussions. The members were a very articulate and confident group and there was a high level of banter. One young man who had not attended for several months turned up and was immediately welcomed enthusiastically by his peers. The new member was then introduced to individuals who welcomed him and asked him a little bit about himself and talked about the group. Several members individually approached him to welcome him.

After about an hour there were nine young men and workers asked members to arrange chairs in a circle in another part of the room and everyone gathered. The workers welcomed everyone and members took turns to introduce themselves to the group and say a little about how their week had been. The Senior Worker then read out notices that had arrived for the group during the week, and went through the current programme of activities, highlighting a forthcoming National Film Theatre Trip and planning for the World AIDS Day event. An announcement was made that 'MJ' was celebrating his birthday that week. Members were invited to bring up any items for notice or discussion, and a couple of members said they were arranging a night out and anyone who wanted to come should talk to them.

The Senior Worker then announced the workshop would be preparing the group's banner for Pride and a space was cleared and materials brought out to start making the banner. At this point several of the young men decided to go on the computers instead and another few drifted off to chat, read magazines and make more drinks. Four young men got actively involved in setting up the banner to be designed. During the activity other individuals become involved for a while and drifted off again according to interest. The workers continued to circulate in the room and talk to young people, also coming back to the banner-making group at times. A couple of members came into the group half way through the session and joined various peer groups to chat or go on the Internet.

When the banner making activity finished, workers and young people tidied up the room and the group left to go for a drink in the nearby pub.

The interaction between workers and young people was very easy and laid-back, there was a constant flow of gentle, good-natured chat. Workers demonstrated skill in bringing other young people into discussion with each other, and were subtle in their facilitation of peer groups. Aside from leading on the group activity, the workers kept a fairly low profile in the group and allowed the energy and enthusiasm of the members to take over.

### **First Move and One-Up**

Visits were not made to these two groups due to the time limits of the evaluation. Young people who attend both groups were included in the evaluation. Workers have provided further information on these groups:

#### **First Move**

Between 8 and 10 young men regularly attend First Move. Almost all of these young men also attend Outzone. The focus of the group is primarily social, but young people can access some individual informal counselling during sessions. A group work programme has been established, combined with member-led activities such as trips to film festivals. The workers facilitate workshops every three weeks on a variety of topics that members have chosen. These include educational sessions around sexual health, relationships, coming out to family and friends, and dealing with homophobia. The group members have become involved in the sessions, presenting their own experiences and advising each other on issues they feel they are coping well with. Workers feel this helps to foster and reinforce an atmosphere of safety and support in the group.

To increase the sense of group 'solidarity' the workers have organised monthly social events, mainly aimed at helping members with little experience of the commercial gay scene to feel more comfortable. This includes trips to Soho LGB cafes and venues. Other social events have no 'gay theme' and are more about having fun together as a group by going bowling or ice-skating.

Although First Move and Outzone follow a similar structure and have similar programme content, First Move provides a more informal and relaxed environment than the Outzone Friday night session that has more of a focus on gearing up for the weekend. Senior Worker hours have gradually been reduced over the last few years from 15 to only 8 hours per week so resources for this group are less than for Outzone. This impacts on the ability of staff to respond to young people's needs and to offer support time to individuals. Young people wanting one-to-one support are mostly referred to either the Senior Worker at Outzone, who has more hours, or to external services.

First Move meets in a different venue from all the other PYWS groups. The centre they meet in houses other well-being services, connexions advisers, housing and health projects with which First Move has an excellent relationship. They are able to regularly make and receive referrals with these other projects and are able to permanently display LGB youth information at the premises rather than set it up and take it down each week.

One First Move worker is also the Senior Youth Worker at Outzone, which provides continuity for the young people attending both projects.

### **One-UP**

The One-UP group is for young men and women who are 18 or under. This group's main function is to provide an opportunity for young service users to meet up and access peer support. The group offers a much less structured programme and informal setting than the other three groups. The group is also smaller which can enable longer time for discussing personal issues during the session.

Often the young people will work on small projects together like designing artwork for the project's web site, or writing articles for the newsletter, but often the time is used to discuss weekly events or issues affecting their lives. The young people present similar issues identified in other PYWS groups, but with much more emphasis on schools, bullying, issues with parents and isolation.

### **Membership**

The weekly groups attracts between 5-8 young people a week, and runs from 4.30-7pm; this timing allows members to return home early evening, and there are fewer concerns about explaining whereabouts to family members. There are currently 28 young people registered, the youngest of whom is 15. There are 16 young women and 12 young men. 12 of the members are White, 9 are Black, 4 are Asian, 2 are Greek and one identifies as Irish.

The young people who attend can also attend the older groups. Often they will initially attend One-Up and then gain confidence to attend an older group.

One-Up members often have limited freedom and finances. This of course can limit their access to other services and the commercial gay scene. They are also much more likely to not identify as gay or lesbian, but as bisexual, and workers must use language that is inclusive and materials that support bisexuality. The workers recognise that some younger people will identify their sexuality differently in different situations. In One-Up there is less emphasis on 'coming out' and more emphasis on exploring sexuality issues as a whole. It is easier to facilitate this in a mixed group setting. For example in the men-only groups there is an assumption that all young men attending will be gay and those who identify as bisexual may get less support from the other young men.

Workers have also found that younger LGB people are more likely to have strong friendships or networks with those of the opposite sex than their older peers. This can create a better understanding of each other's issues.

### **Under 18s and confidentiality**

The group membership is always lower than other groups and it often difficult to keep contact with under 18 members through mail-outs as they usually can't receive this material at home in confidence. Young people who need to keep their sexual identity from family members are able to tell family/carers that they are attending a mainstream or 'ordinary' youth project. When under-18s want to attend an event or residential away from the centre PYWS will use separate headed paper and contact details that do not state that the project is LGB. This ensures the young person can take part and feel secure that their sexual identity remains confidential.

Workers feel that individuals in this group must remain much more secure and contained. This is due to the fact that many will be experiencing homophobia at school or college, or from family members at home and cannot easily remove themselves from this.

In the last few months PYWS has developed a new email mail-out that appeals to this group and means they can get updates and information regarding the project. PYWS would like to develop this service and utilise technology to maintain client contact, and to offer support via this route.

#### 4. Findings from Interviews with Staff

In-depth individual interviews with staff were undertaken in order to establish the understanding of, and methods of promoting, the well-being of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people using the service. Interviews showed staff were working to a common understanding of the needs of LGB youth and to the principle that 'all of the work is about mental health promotion in the broadest sense'. Workers were unanimous in saying that the most important work they could do to promote well-being was to facilitate peer support and the development of peer networks outside of the group confines. While individual support is made available, lack of resources mean a finite number of sessions can be offered each week. The real emphasis of PYWS is to empower young people to seek their own solutions to problems, to prevent dependency on the project, and to use their peers for mutual support and encouragement.

##### The ethos and principles of Pace Youth Work Service

Workers were asked if the staff team had a shared vision and purpose underpinning their youth work, and if they worked to particular principles in providing a service. Workers all agreed that a key aim was to provide a space for LGB young people that is both social and educational and largely informal, that they can access when they need to and not feel pressurised to commit to. At the same time the workers operate 'some kind of holding structure...mostly a space that's supportive and accepting of young people as they are.'

Workers felt a key sense of purpose in 'enabling and empowering young people to form social groups outside of the project so they have a group of peers.'

Most of the workers felt that there was a common purpose but that this was not explicit or had been achieved without a consensus.

Its difficult to answer - we have never sat down as a team and spelt out our mission statement or ethos or philosophy. I can't say explicitly whether we formally work towards the same vision. I think from formal meetings and contact it seems like we see our work in a similar way. Everyone has their own style but I'd see the team as having the same ideas about the kind of space we provide for young people. PACE Youth Worker

Our vision is that if we allow them to be themselves they open up more and are more confident about themselves. PACE Youth Worker

Three of the five workers felt that the team should spend some focussed time reflecting on the work:

In general youth work could do more to develop reflective practice, it's a common problem. No we don't do it here. That isn't uncommon. We all come to it from very different places and we bring those experiences with us. A big problem is the fact that we make a lot of assumptions about what it is to be a LGB person, and what it is to be a youth worker, and we could do a lot more to discuss what that is and how to use it to benefit the young people we work with. For me personally I would like to see less focus on life, love and sex stuff with youth people and bring a wider perspective on sexuality and what it means or we could reinforce the boxes young people are trying to escape from, creating new pigeon holes. PACE Youth Worker

One worker spoke about the need to provide the 'three principles of youth work: safe space, a programme of planned informal education, and facilitating the personal and social development of young people.' They felt that this was clearly what the team was working to provide.

Workers spoke at length about the work being underpinned by the need to promote the ability of young people to cope with emotional difficulties:

It's more about mental health promotion rather than dealing with a crisis; we work in a positive and holistic way. There are going to be people with specific mental health issues, but we are working on the model that you will face issues that will impact on your mental well-being - i.e. the stress of coming out has an impact on your mental health. This promotion of self-esteem and coping has an impact on your positive mental health and equips you, and is also about maintaining a positive identity in young LGB people who do have positive mental health and not letting homophobia impact on that. Nobody's mental health stays static, we can help provide an outlet - if you know you can talk to someone through a problem.... and it's more about showing how positive being gay can be. This is shared by the team - that ethos. PACE Youth Worker

#### The need for dedicated LGB Youth Services

All staff views were that LGB young people do not have their needs met in mainstream youth provision. This was not only in relation to emotional and mental well-being, but in areas such as sexual health, drugs and alcohol education and in the skills and knowledge needed to make appropriate referrals to external agencies. Workers felt that staff in mainstream provision were ill-equipped to cope with the needs of LGB youth, and where LGB youth were not 'out' to mainstream staff, there would be no attempts made to provide inclusive informal education.

What we are trying to do is provide a safe space that is not available in mainstream projects - I know this from experience. The hostile environment young people face in school is replicated in youth projects, also those workers are not equipped or don't have the capacity to challenge homophobia or to facilitate them to face the challenges of empowering them and equipping them to face the world as LGB adults. PACE Youth Worker

Workers were clear that it was almost impossible to promote the mental well-being of young LGB people through mainstream service provision. The factors needed to make this happen consistently were not in place; it would necessitate an absence of homophobia and discrimination, a full understanding of the issues affecting LGB youth, a guarantee of physical and emotional safety and provision of peer support.

### The need to provide a safe space

Workers talked about there being few 'places of safety' for LGB young people. For many young LGB people, the main spaces in which they spend their lives, home, work, school, could not be counted as being safe. Difficulties with family relationships, fear or inability to 'come out' at home caused tension and despair for young people, including the fear of being rejected by family members. Fear of 'discovery' was high for young people who had not come out to family members. Several young people using the services had experienced abuse or harassment at school because of their known or perceived sexuality. Others felt pressure at work and felt unsure about the reaction from colleagues if they come out.

Workers spoke about how young people valued the safety of coming to the projects and 'being themselves, being real, no pretence or barriers'. The exclusively lesbian, gay and bisexual nature and focus of the group meant that 'at least once a week they can really be themselves'.

**They can be openly, safely gay here and that means that they may not even want to talk about being gay, they might want to talk about something completely unrelated, but the important thing is, they can just be.** PACE Youth Worker

This 'place of safety' could not be underestimated - more than one worker mentioned PWYS providing 'a lifeline' for young people.

Careful thought had been given to the actual physical safety of young people as well as their emotional well-being. The groups meet in two venues in North London, both very close to underground stations and in well-lit areas. The Highgate community centre is described by members and workers as 'very gay-friendly' and hosts a lot of group work and performance and arts-based work. When the groups are meeting they have exclusive access to rooms which they can display lesbian and gay posters, books and magazines in, and have their own entrance to the rooms. At the same time there are other activities in the building and the community café is open. Many LGB youth groups do not meet in a centre where other groups are meeting because of the issues of confidentiality and safety, but this arrangement works well for the three Highgate-based groups. There have not been any issues of abuse or harassment by other centre members.

Another aspect of having a 'safe space' was in regard to young people needing an alternative to the commercial lesbian and gay 'scene'. Young people who were interviewed have spoken in detail about this further in this report.

Workers spoke about the pressures young people faced on the scene, particularly with regard to sex, image, drugs and alcohol, and how the youth groups were an antidote to that, a place where they could be 'themselves as themselves' without substance use or the pressure to look and behave a particular way.

**In relation to the safe space issue, what we are doing is providing a safe space away from LGB scene, as that provides many challenges. Here they can find peers who face the same challenges, and relationships don't have to be about sex, which is a pressure on the scene. Coming here is about just having relationships with peers that are about friendship, solidarity, support and peer modelling.**  
PACE Youth Worker

### The importance of role modelling

Workers were asked about the importance of role modelling for LGB young people. PYWS expects its workers to openly identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual in order to act as role models for LGB and questioning young people. Most of the workers felt this has immense value, as many LGB youth will have grown up with only negative or 'shameful' concepts of lesbian and gay people.

In terms of models, young people don't often have an opportunity to see what a lesbian or gay relationship looks like. Heterosexual relationships are modelled everywhere. We need to affirm that it's okay to be gay as a central principle to what we are doing. Help them to develop a positive affirmation of their sexuality, also that it's okay not to be sure about that and that we can facilitate that process of enquiry. PACE Youth Worker

Almost all of the workers spoke of the importance of modelling 'reality', 'normality' and 'having a life'. Workers felt they were using their own experiences of coming out and mental health issues in relation to the young people, giving them 'something to draw on, to empathise with'.

We can provide, hopefully, role models of LGB adults who have a life, deal with dilemmas, be real and ordinary... that they can see that you can be like me and be gay and that it's not going to limit you... Also personally, being the age that I am, there's that thing that your gay life doesn't just end, that you can be gay and 36. Showing them that I'm still here. PACE Youth Worker

However one worker pointed out the extra pressure on LGB workers as 'possibly the only role models they have' during a crucial time in young people's self-development and realisation. This was quite distinct from the modelling expected from workers in mainstream provision, and at times could exert pressure for some workers on the strict boundaries between workers and young people.

The relationships you have are very different from the ones in generic youth work, because of the lack of positive role models for LGB youth. You could be the only examples, so there is a lot placed upon you by young people that maybe generic workers don't get. Something around - the issues raised in LGB youth work are on a much more sophisticated level so your relationship can be a lot more intense - you can have dialogue that is more personal because it is about sexuality. Therefore some disclosure of your own experiences is necessary for them to relate to you. PACE Youth Worker

Workers felt it was important to keep a balance between 'being yourself but keeping your own problems and issues out of the picture.' One worker felt the nature of being a LGB worker in an LGB project was the very definition of 'specialised' work; she felt workers were exceptionally skilled in walking a tight line between essential disclosure of self to model and promote self-esteem, and knowing where to draw the line for the sake of personal privacy and maintenance of boundaries. This was a consideration many heterosexual workers would not face, as they would not be under such pressure or expectation to be a successful 'straight person.'

It's probably okay to say you've had a bad day, but it is more important to show how you are coping with that bad day. You can't be seen to 'go under' because until they have other role models you can be a beacon of hope. It is a pressure, though. PACE Youth Worker

### Boundaries, power and influence

The team were asked how much power and influence they felt they had in the lives of young people, and whether this was always used wisely. Workers felt that they potentially had a huge amount of influence and power over young people, and that it was of great importance to know how to use this wisely; to use it to encourage young people to find their own direction, to be non-judgemental, to increase their self-esteem and make healthy life choices.

We have a tremendous amount of power and its very easy for us to take that control, I am very aware of that and try to give them that power back - they can rely on us and try to ask for help in all aspects of their lives. I try to give them guidance about how to handle things themselves and encourage them to see that you have to make mistakes in order to learn, it is important they are empowered.

PACE Youth Worker

All staff spoke about the importance of 'water-tight' boundaries when working with young people, especially young people who may be vulnerable and for whom a worker could be the first adult to really listen to them. However workers acknowledged throughout the interviews that there is a difference between generic and LGB youth work, and that this could best be described as the issue of 'identifying with the young person' rather than 'empathising'. This could mean a worker supporting a young LGB person through an issue that they themselves have experienced or are still experiencing as a result of being lesbian or gay. This situation had potential for testing boundaries.

Most of the time this influence is used wisely, yes, totally. There are times when the relationships between staff and young people have become too intense and the young person will only take advice from one particular worker and will act upon that advice. As we're in a position to give advice, you would never recommend that it should only be one worker. Workers should share the 'burden' of influence. There are times when the workers have become too close to young people and have crossed boundaries that have then been difficult to eradicate i.e. giving out your mobile number, because you need to meet them to accompany them somewhere, but then they have got your mobile number. Trust can be abused; you have to work at keeping boundaries up. PACE Youth Worker

One worker spoke about the fact that many of the young people can be very vulnerable when they first come to the groups, and some continue to be vulnerable. He suggested some of the young men have either negative or non-existent male role models and 'are looking for someone to anchor them. You can be very powerful in their world.'

Another worker spoke about 'trying not to be too powerful - always use the group as the main focus of their support.'

Because we are probably the first gay people they have encountered it is important that we send out a clear message about where we are coming from and what we can offer them, which isn't the world! Be upfront and honest about what we can and can't offer. If I don't know something I can probably find it and will endeavour to do so. No false sense or prescription of what it is to be gay. PACE Youth Worker

Most workers felt that maintaining a balance between support and influence, and maintaining a friendly, relaxed, social group atmosphere

without being the young people's 'friends', were a huge responsibility and one of the biggest pressures of the work. Some young people had thought the workers were their 'friends' because of the encouragement and support given, yet workers had to ensure that young people knew they could not have a friendship with a worker, without rejecting that young person.

The boundaries between workers and young people are carefully explained to young people on joining the group and are reinforced throughout group activities. These include obvious boundaries such as no relationships between young people and workers, no personal numbers given out or socialising with young people outside of work time. It is explained to young people that these boundaries are there to protect them and generally young people appreciate that.

#### Facilitating peer support

This was for workers the most important aspect of promoting the health and well-being of LGB young people. While workers have the skills and knowledge to provide young people with much of the advice and information they may seek, this was seen as a lesser priority than the formation of sustained peer support. Workers felt the relationships within the group were the biggest factor in raising the self-esteem of young people. The creation of friendships with other lesbian, gay and bisexual young people was the prime motivation of young people in coming to the group, and workers prioritised the need to facilitate this and nurture this in the groups.

For many young people, at the beginning processes of coming out it's very affirming to be in an environment with other young people who have had similar experiences and then it's normalised. In everyday life they feel their experiences are very abnormal, which alienates them and makes them feel abnormal, unrecognised, invalidated. This normalising couldn't be done in an environment that wasn't lesbian and gay. For a lot of LGB youth they have never met or known other gay or bisexual people, and they acknowledge this and share this. It's very affirming to meet people who are not feeling like freaks. It gives you a more realistic picture - dispels some of the terrible fantasies they have of what gay people are like. It also helps people who are at the beginning stages of finding an identity to make friends and a supportive network, enabling them to access the gay scene in a way that is more conducive to a better experience on the gay scene.

PACE Youth Worker

#### How accessible and inclusive is PYWS?

The staff team feel that the services are on the whole inclusive but that there are a few important changes that need to happen. The ethnicity of young people accessing the services was very diverse and not unfairly representative of the London population as a whole (see earlier statistics); including African Caribbean and Asian young people, and young people from refugee and asylum seeking communities. The proportion of young women accessing services was also high, at between 40 and 45 per cent. Where workers felt the service could significantly improve was around the areas of learning disability, physical disability and mental health issues.

The problems I've encountered are around mental health and learning disabilities. I have worked with young people who come to group who are autistic, for instance. and I would like to offer them a better

service but can't because of the needs of all of the group, and it's the same with disability. Practically we are not doing enough around disability and disabled young people. PACE Youth Worker

One worker felt that the service needed 'to recognise we can't be all things to everybody' and felt that the service was most successfully accessed by young people who had a certain level of social ability and could therefore 'fit in better.'

This was repeated by another worker who said that the service 'does not actively look after people who cannot function in the group format'. This worker felt this was due to the lack of resources to offer more 1-2-1 or intensive support, and that young people who have in the past needed intensive support have been referred outside of the group or worked with in a different format:

**This does exclude them from the support network here but we don't have the resources to manage and the group suffers.**

PACE Youth Worker

Another worker thought it was a shame that the Highgate groups met in a disability accessible building but the service did not seek to actively promote itself to young people with disabilities. They also thought that this was an area that workers would need further training in.

**I think is the only area we are lacking in really but you need proper training and support.** PACE Youth Worker

#### **How the service is promoted to young people**

Many of the young people who initially made contact with the groups, via phone or email, discovered its existence through the Internet. The Outzone and Girl Diva websites are sophisticated, informative and innovative sites that are attractive and reassuring for young lesbian and gay people. The site attracts a lot of hits and emails come in from all over the UK. Mostly the staff refer people on to services in or near their area and do not have the capacity to enter into individual correspondence. Young people who call or email are encouraged to make a visit as soon as they feel able, and they can be supported via phone or email until they feel able to come to the groups in person (see 'Communications')

The service advertises the youth group in Time Out, London's main listings magazine, and the lesbian and gay press. They also do mail outs to other agencies in London and there are flyers in lesbian and gay venues and links from lesbian and gay websites.

The service has had quite a high media profile with several articles in mainstream press and magazines. These have always resulted in a large number of contacts from young people and one worker feels advertising in teen magazines, or having a regular article, would reach a lot of young people.

However the service does not actively undertake outreach to promote its services at this stage. The groups have a healthy attendance level, though workers felt some targeted outreach to under-represented groups should be considered.

### Workers' understanding and knowledge of mental health issues

While PACE itself works in the field of lesbian and gay mental health, PACE Youth Work Service is not a mental health agency in that workers do not work in a therapeutic format with clients, nor do most of them have training to work in this area. One of the workers, who does provide formal counselling, is training to be a counselling psychologist, but it is accidental that a member of the team has those skills. Most of the workers believe that, viewed holistically, all of their work with LGB youth is about promoting positive mental health and preventing some of the factors that could lead to mental ill-health.

In itself struggling with your sexuality and the whole process of coming to terms with it yourself is a process fraught with possible mental health issues like anxiety and depression that are around for a lot of young people who access our groups. Although we might not do work directly related to mental health, by allowing young people to feel happier about who they are as LGB people we are implicitly helping them to feel less anxious, more able to engage with others, families, colleagues, school etc. in a way they feel they don't have to hide. Mental health is fundamental to what we do.

PACE Youth Worker

One worker felt that it was important that young people should not associate the group with being explicitly about mental health promotion as this would put them off, particularly as many young people have at some time already associated being lesbian or gay with being somehow 'abnormal'. As with the issue of a shared vision, the team did not feel they completely shared the same understanding of the concept of mental health promotion in their work:

We have our own issues about how we deem mental health and we are working that out more. There are some different concepts within the team about mental health. PACE Youth Worker

The remainder of the team felt that the promotion was two-fold; one aspect being direct work to address issues that were presented:

We refer to other PACE services which is a mental health charity and we make it known we are a part of their services. We have worked with psychologists at St. Ann's who sometimes come in and do work around depression and anxiety. Quite a lot of young people turn out to have been on antidepressants, and many may need more in the way of professional help than we can offer them. We make sure we are well resourced to refer. PACE Youth Worker

The other being to adopt a more holistic approach:

We are providing a preventative service - support to help them manage their own mental health and prevent mental ill health. I think we need to recognise that at some point in their lives 1 in 4 people will experience mental health issues, LGB youth may experience the trauma of bullying and rejection, whether or not this is something they bring to the group. We make no judgements or assumptions about what a LGB person has or is experiencing and we aim to meet them where they are. There is often mental abuse from family, especially for younger gay people and we are always mindful of that.

PACE Youth Worker

### Issues adversely affecting the mental well-being of LGB young people

Workers were asked to identify the particular issues that young people accessing PYWS identified when accessing support from peers, the team or when seeking counselling or referral. The main issues identified were also the reasons many young people identified when asked why they had sought out a LGB youth group.

The main issues mentioned were:

- Isolation
- Shame, feeling like living with a terrible secret
- Anxiety about what will happen when 'found out'
- Bullying
- Homophobia in home and school environment
- Coming out to family and friends
- Family problems or rejection by family

One worker spoke about many young people initially 'feeling depressed about the prospect of life with this terrible secret, the prospect of a gay or lesbian life that is filled with despair and loneliness'. He believed that dispelling those feelings in young people was a key achievement of the service and a testament to the success of the 'promotion of good health' holistic approach.

Workers suggested that some other issues were similar to those faced by any young person: anxiety about sexual relationships, body image, fitting in with peer groups, etc. Why these common issues could become more serious issues for LGB young people was the lack of people/places to go to for support, especially when a young person was struggling with or concealing their sexuality. One worker also identified particular pressures (for young gay men mostly) based on image and lifestyle:

There's something around living in London that is very different for LGB youth - the pressure to be a certain type of gay person is much harder. The aspirations of gay men are so high - to live a particular lifestyle, earn a certain amount of money, have a certain body and attractiveness, its so hard to live up to, its very image based and you need fantastic social skills. PACE Youth Worker

Another worker said there were a small number of young men attending the project who had eating disorders. A worker from Girl Diva said there had been a few incidences of self-harm, and several workers disclosed that there were young people who had experienced suicidal thoughts.

### How the team works with these issues

The workers seek to deal with these many issues in a variety of ways, but always to take the lead from the young person who has raised it.

The main responses are:

- Offer 1-2-1 support
- Address the issue in a workshop
- Facilitate peer discussion
- Referral to PACE services
- Referral to other services
- Assisted referral (worker may accompany young person)

Workers and young people will agree to discuss things - it will be facilitated as a workshop and made acceptable to talk about, there are no taboos, we will address it and if not in a group, then we will find out how your peers deal with it. There is 1-2-1 support and the biggest support is for the group to discuss an issue and when they finish they may continue to discuss or swap phone numbers and informal peer support develops. The group help develop hopefully open and honest dialogue. They can get 1-2-1 support and access to other PACE services. The counselling service offers 12 sessions. PACE Youth Worker

When young people are referred to PACE or an external agency, the workers can track the young person's progress appropriately. This could be in the form of an informal chat and update with the young person or if the young person has stopped attending the group, the worker may call them. However this is not a policy and seems to be up to the individual worker.

PYWS are able to refer young people directly to PACE for counselling where they can access a maximum of 12 sessions (free of charge).

There has been a 170% increase (over 2002/3) in the number of young people from PYWS being referred to counselling, advocacy and employment advice services at PACE.

#### Recognising and supporting a young person in crisis

All of the workers felt that they possessed the skills to recognise a young person at risk of, or actually experiencing a mental health crisis. Four of the five workers felt well-equipped or knowledgeable enough to support a young person in this situation and to locate or provide suitable intervention if needed:

We do recognise that some young people may come in a crisis and we try not to allow this to spill into the group, we will set up 1-2-1 or referral if appropriate. We like to get some background and what may be behind an issue. We need to judge if we have the skills to deal with what is being presented. PACE Youth Worker

I don't feel a lack of knowledge or overwhelmed by it but I'm always a bit anxious if someone is communicating a high level of distress. For a young person just being able to talk about it is some relief. You don't have to always respond immediately. PACE Youth Worker

#### Training

Workers were asked to identify the training they have participated in that have assisted in developing their skills and knowledge around working in a holistic way to promote the emotional and mental well-being of LGB youth. The following were listed (note that workers have not had training in all of these subjects; that this is a cumulative team list)

- Working with young gay and bisexual men**
- Anti-discriminatory practice**
- Models of peer support**
- Peer education**
- Group work**
- Sexual health**
- Transgender issues**
- Working in LGB youth work**
- Go Girl training - raising self-esteem in young women**
- Counselling psychology**
- Tackling homophobia.**
- Sexual health & self-respect**

Some workers had also undertaken other training related to the work, including

**Child protection**  
**Protective behaviours** (how to protect yourself as a worker)  
**Health and Safety**  
**First Aid**  
**IT**

While the skills base of the workers is high, most expressed a desire for specific training around mental health issues and the opportunity to identify further training needs related to LGB Youth Work.

#### What staff find the most challenging aspects of their work

All of the team found different aspects of the work the most challenging. One worker felt the lack of resources meant the team were always limited by what they could offer the young people, and that this sometimes meant letting young people down, especially with limited hours to offer support:

We tend to home in on the bit we can do and find resources for those we can't do. There's very little capacity to support individuals on an ongoing basis one-to-one, which is needed. PACE Youth Worker

Another worker felt that being 'relatively young' among young people meant always keeping focussed on boundaries was an issue:

Keeping boundaries and realising that at the same time they perceive you as a friend but you are a professional and a youth worker.

PACE Youth Worker

This worker also found remaining motivated and aware a big challenge when new members joined and 'the same issues, the same problems, keep arising'.

One worker felt they weren't able to give enough time and thought to the development of pieces of work they wanted to initiate because of time spent on administration. He would like more time to develop pieces of research and evaluation 'in order to let people see the worth of the work'.

One worker found the 'demanding' nature of the groups hard, especially when dealing with multiple support needs:

There are certain assumptions that you are this youth worker with all your life intact. In fact you might be dealing with some similar issues to them in your personal life. They are very demanding and the work is intense. PACE Youth Worker

Sometimes I feel like I don't have the necessary skills to support every single emotional need, yet feel as a youth worker I am expected to know this. PACE Youth Worker

Two other workers mentioned that working with external agencies was difficult:

Working with other agencies can be problematic - such as social services and police who don't take youth work services seriously. Our lack of credibility can be frustrating. PACE Youth Worker

The biggest challenge for one worker was the different approaches to work within the team that was sometimes seen to impact upon young people because of 'competitiveness' between some of the services, in

particular a rivalry between the male and female services. This was borne out by the young people in interviews, with several young women complaining that the young men's services are better resourced.

Further to this was the lack of clarity as to whether PYWS were an integrated part of PACE, or a 'separate arm'. It was felt that neither service understood their position and this created a tension, particularly for the Manager who has a foot in both camps.

One worker had a totally positive outlook on the challenges they faced:

Everything is a challenge, which I enjoy. The young people are the challenge, I'm always looking for new exciting things for them, they come up with some fantastic ideas, working here is a big challenge.  
PACE Youth Worker

#### What the team found most rewarding about their work

Most of the team stated that witnessing the personal growth in young people attending the project was the most satisfying aspect of the work:

Seeing a young person who's come to the group anxious, depressed, hopeless and despondent unable to mention the word gay, after a few months seeing a very different person in front of you; comfortable, making friends, relationships, exploring their sexuality, has told family or parents and is in a very different place than they were before.  
PACE Youth Worker

The young people - seeing how they develop and change, often in such a short space of time, they come on in leaps and bounds, go from being scared of 'gay' and about being gay, and move on so quickly with their confidence.  
PACE Youth Worker

One worker felt that the response from other professionals in the field made them feel proud of what PWYS had achieved: 'many seem quite envious of our work and the way we work'.

Other workers found inspiration from the young people:

Young people's ideas - their creativity and energy is amazing, and it's great to feel you are facilitating young people's abilities and we are not all depressed and miserable.  
PACE Youth Worker

In terms of my own lesbian identity I can feel inspired by the young women - how they are dealing with issues and so young, I can take a lot of strength from that. It's a really important project; I feel I'm doing something useful by being part of it.  
PACE Youth Worker

The service manager has been with the project from its early beginnings as a 12-hour a week young men's project and felt a sense of pride at how the service had evolved:

My motivation is.... an overall sense of how successful that project has been and grown. The fact is, we've survived and maintained good patterns of work and a very successful piece of work. We've also learned well from our mistakes and remained transparent and honest. The most rewarding thing is the feedback from the young people; I met a young man the other day who is now 29, he now shares a house with the 4 guys he became friends with here and they have developed a successful peer relationship - that is beyond any workshops we can run.  
PACE Youth Services Manager

## 5. Findings from interviews with young people

Young people were asked to say why they had first made contact with PYWS, why they felt they needed an LGB youth project and how they found out about it in the first place. They were asked to identify if they felt attending PYWS and using its services had helped them in any way, and whether they felt any happier or more confident as a result of coming to PYWS. They were asked to talk about negative experiences they had had as a result of being lesbian, gay or bisexual, and if PYWS had helped them to deal with these issues in any way. Particular questions were asked about their relationships with their families, experience of violence and/or bullying and homophobic and racist abuse, housing, coming out, relationships with peers, and coping with feeling alone or low. Finally they were asked to make any suggestions about developing and improving PYWS services.

Interview participants

### Young women

Five young women took part. Two were aged 17, one 18, one 19 and one 20 years old. Length of attendance at Girl Diva varied from 4 months to 2 years. Three young women were African-Caribbean, one was South Asian and one was White British

### Young men

Five young men took part. One was aged 17, one 21, two 22, and one 24 years old. Length of attendance at Outzone/First Move varied from 5 months to 2 1/2 years. Two young men were White British, one was Chinese, one was South Asian and one defined as Arabic

### Why young people first came to PACE Youth Work Service

When asked why they had first made contact with one of the PACE youth groups, the young people gave the following reasons, most of them having similar reasons for first attending:

**Had not met anyone else lesbian or gay**

**Feeling lonely or isolated**

**To make friends**

**So hard to deal with being gay by yourself**

**Wanted to find people who could understand me**

**To make my life better and happier**

I really do think you need to make friends for a start...its hard to just do it and deal with it on your own. You need peer support, to make friends. Young man

Many of the young people expressed a sense of 'inevitability' that they would find something like PYWS because they were so ready for it, after sometimes many years of keeping their feelings to themselves. One young woman in particular stated that she 'knew if I didn't do something to help myself soon then I would just go downhill.'

Once young people had made contact they found accessing the group simple and straightforward, and most of them spoke about the warmth and friendliness offered when they first attended. Some found it harder than others to keep coming but having found the courage to attend, wanted to persevere.

The first couple of sessions I came to I was just really quiet and kind of amazed by everyone, I didn't speak much. I was okay about that but I worried if people thought I was unfriendly. But I'm like the opposite now! Young man

### How young people made contact

50% of the young people interviewed first found out about the groups via the Outzone and Girl Diva website. The Internet is a useful and relatively anonymous way of finding out about lesbian and gay youth contacts. However many families, schools and local authorities (including libraries and statutory youth services) have a net screening or 'nanny' that makes it impossible for young people to search using the words 'lesbian' or 'gay'. When the Internet can be accessed, Outzone's website can be easily found.

Young people progressed from surfing the site to making their first call to the group. The welcoming, fun and accessible language and images on the site make it very attractive to young people. For those young people not yet ready or able to contact the group, it provides a wealth of information, advice and resources, and reassurance to young people. One young man felt able to make contact soon after visiting the site:

**I saw the website - it looked funny with all those people enjoying themselves. I wanted to be with them.** Young man

Other young people found out about the group either from lesbian and gay listings or Time Out listings, one from a friend who already attended and another via a LGB youth group he attended elsewhere. That particular young man found Outzone offered him more of what he was looking for:

**My other group informed us that PACE were having a Summer School last year and I came down and thought everyone was nice and since then I've stuck with here. I think when I first came here it stuck out that it was relaxed and informal and gave you the freedom to do what you want to do. You feel you have a choice.** Young man

Some of the difficulties the young people have experienced  
Young people were asked to discuss difficulties they experienced related to their sexual orientation. They were asked about bullying at school or at work, family problems, negative self-image, homophobic violence or abuse. While few had experience homophobic violence outside of the home, many of the young people experienced very difficult family relationships, sometimes accompanied by domestic violence and the threat of homelessness.

Young people were then asked to identify if they thought PYWS had helped them cope with these issues in any way.

### Feeling low or depressed

All of the young people identified having felt very low about themselves at some point in relation to being lesbian, gay or bisexual.

**I had a very difficult time when I was between 10 and 13 because I had a serious problem with my ears and nearly lost my hearing - it impacted on my social skills. I felt so terrible and I had this underlying feeling that I was also gay. I started to think that because I was gay I was having all these problems.** Young Man

**In my life - we all have good and bad times, for me it was a coming out issue, I was low but not depressed, at the weekends I would sit and watch TV. I knew I was gay and I wanted to be gay and I wanted to tell people I was gay. I just had nobody to go out with and it was very awkward, I would drink a bottle of wine and get low.** Young man

I think I was quite depressed before I came here. Young woman

Young people then spoke confidently about their ability to cope better with feeling down or depressed as a result of attending the youth groups, particularly to do with drawing strength from their peers' experiences:

I feel more able to cope with problems there. Just last week we were talking about this - one of the young men came from Iran on pain of death - he was persecuted and put in prison for 6 months and came to England to escape that. I thought - if he can do that I can face anything. It was a real inspiration to us. If I felt down again people here and the workers here would pick up on it and I would get the support I need. Young man

People here give me advice about, you know - what is the right time to tell parents, hearing other people's experiences - the other young people and the workers. Young woman

I've not felt that low since coming here. For me coming to Outzone has been a milestone. Young man

One young man spoke about being able to 'no longer hold on' to bad experiences and about accessing support from the youth workers:

Haven't felt that down since being in this group - took ecstasy which caused a bad experience and I felt down. I feel I should no longer hold on to these things though. I have told the workers here about problems - I've been referred to a counsellor from THT who I see every week. That helps a lot, I was surprised how quickly they arranged it, and it was done in days. Young man

### School

About half of the young people interviewed had experienced homophobia, or feared homophobia at school. This ranged from school friends 'retracting' from the young person, to young people feeling afraid for their own safety.

I feel at school they had no understanding so their only reaction was to retract from me. Young man

I was 11 when I thought - okay you're gay. I was 13 and going to an all boys school, started falling for guys, had to keep it quiet - everything bad was gay, if they knew I was gay, I would have feared for my life in some ways. Young man

My college is full of homophobic kids, you know, it's dangerous. Young woman

One of the young men felt that coming out and gaining the support and confidence of his peers had helped him to challenge the situation he was struggling with.

When I felt more confident I told them the situation - this is me, I'm gay, I'm not some pervert who wants to rape you. I found that when I could put it across in plain and simple terms - the Muslims and Christians at school went on about it - but I said, I didn't choose to be gay, and maybe who would living in this society - but I'm not going to change and there's nothing you can do to change me. Young man

### Family

Many of the young people were living in difficult family situations, often related to the family's religious beliefs. Several of the young people felt insecure at home and unsure for how long their family would continue to offer them a home:

Because my sister is a Christian she goes on about lesbians and most of what she says is directed at me. Everyone at home knows - I told my mum, she told everyone else. It's hard at home. At the moment it's very hard. I'm trying to move away but I'm going about it myself. Don't really know where to go to get help. Haven't spoken to the workers about that. I would like some help. Young woman

One young woman was finding living at home hard because she felt unable to come out to her mother because of her mother's homophobia:

Kilroy today was about parents finding out their kids are gay - my mum said they are evil - I feel like I can't talk to her - she doesn't know about me. I live at home and my older sister knows - she's cool - keeps it from mum - can feel low or depressed because of that.

Young woman

One young man felt that he was able to come out to his family after growing in confidence through attending Outzone:

I came out to my parents, something I didn't think would be possible. It comes from within but Outzone offers you an opportunity to do that.

Young man

One young woman felt that there wasn't much that could be done about changing her home environment until she was in a position to leave home. For her, Girl Diva provided 'a refuge, and I could be detached from that home environment.'

Another young woman felt at risk of homelessness if she came out:

The only reason I won't come out to my mum is so not to get chucked out. Deep down I don't know if I would get chucked out but I'd get a lecture about how evil and dirty I am. Young woman

The same young woman also felt she was beginning to develop protective skills for herself:

Feel like I'm developing the skills to know when it is and isn't a good time to come out. Young woman

One young man was living with a hostile father, who had also been violent towards him. Despite the hurt this was causing him, the young man felt he had developed resilience and that his father would have to accept this:

Before coming here I was bullied quite intensively at school and my father when I came out was quite violent towards me. I knew that my reality was that life isn't a bed of roses. Living at home you can't get away from your father, and I don't make a point of hiding myself from him. He recognises that I have my own room and my own space and I'm establishing my own boundaries, something I couldn't do before. He respects me in the way that he knows I am not afraid of my own life and that I will go through pain to get what I want. Young man

### How young people described the difference PYWS had made to their lives

Young people had an enormous amount to say about the changes that had happened in their lives as a result of their participation in one or more of the groups. There are the key changes they identified:

- Forming friendships
- Gaining confidence
- Accessing and coping with 'the scene'
- A gateway
- Coming out
- Being happier
- Shared experiences and peer support
- Help and support when you need it

#### Forming friendships

The young people interviewed all spoke about the difference finding lesbian and gay friends had made to their lives. Some were very articulate and passionate about this. For nearly all of them it was the biggest success of their involvement with the youth groups and the single biggest motivating factor for their continued attendance.

Initially it gave me my first gay friends. You can feel so isolated if you don't - feel castigated and isolated, and if you have some gay friends it can make your life feel so more bearable. Young man

The whole issue is about friendship more than anything else. I don't require counselling or advice about sex issues.... some people do but that's not why I'm here. Young man

Several young people spoke about feeling more at home in the youth projects than anywhere else, and finding a sense of family with the other young people.

I think this is more my home than my family home. Young woman

All of us are so close now. It's that thing about it being a family. Young woman

The sense of friendship and belonging that young people expressed seemed to be felt more keenly by some who had experienced a lot of isolation and 'feeling different' from their peers at school and college. For some young lesbian and gay people their gay peers were the first 'real friends' they considered they had.

I needed to make friends - they are my friends not just on a Friday night but the rest of the week as well. Young man

#### Gaining confidence

Young people felt they had gained enormously in confidence since attending the youth groups. This confidence was apparent in many ways, not just in feeling more confident about their sexual identity, and the young people felt this confidence impacted on all areas of their lives.

I had to muster a lot just to come here and the confidence grew. I thought if I'm gay and these are gay people I need to mix and I feel more confident now - I was the first in my school to come out and others have followed since. Young man

I've gained more confidence in myself, I can say to people I don't like that, I'm not doing it, to stand up to my boss, to be more open to people, to say hello to people, to just be more confident in every way.  
Young man

Importantly in terms of mental health and well-being, young people identified that this confidence allowed them to cope better with difficulties and stresses they encountered.

I've not felt really low since coming here. For me coming to Outzone has been a milestone, I've come out and feel more confident. I came out to my parents, something I didn't think would be possible... before coming out I never thought about my future - when you're in the closet you daren't think about your future. New challenges have come along but the confidence I have and the support I have access to - I feel able to tackle anything that comes along. Young man

One young woman felt that as a result of attending Girl Diva she now had the confidence to be herself:

It's made me much more confident - I never used to speak out in front of people, I was just quiet and kept my thoughts to myself. It's brought me out a lot from myself. I feel like me now, not someone else, before I wanted to be that person and now I am. Young woman

One young man felt he had found the confidence to literally transform himself:

If you met me 6 months ago you wouldn't have recognised me - and you wouldn't have liked me.... I had long hair and a beard and I was the kind of person no one would sit next to on the bus. I am more relaxed and I can talk to people. The beard and the hair were like a front to keep people away from me. I started dropping my guard with people and letting myself know them and them to know me... amazing.  
Young man

#### Accessing and coping with 'the scene'

The lesbian and gay commercial club and bar scene was viewed by many of the young people as a 'necessary evil'. Many spoke of the pressures of drugs, alcohol and casual sex, as well as the need to look and behave in a certain, acceptable way. While most of the young people felt that they wanted to be able to 'go on the scene' because there were exciting times to be had, they felt that the youth groups gave them opportunities to do that safely. This meant they had peers to go with, the knowledge that the groups offered some thing safer and different if they didn't like the scene, and importantly, they had discussed with peers and workers issues like the pressures, the effects of alcohol and drugs, the potential dangers, negotiation of sexual relationships and issues of personal safety. Some of the young people particularly valued the sense of safety and awareness this had given them:

Now that I think about it, when I first went out on the scene, it was a very harsh and a place full of agendas and a lot of people wanting things - particularly sex, but at the same time I wanted to explore and experiment, and people get preyed upon. I felt because I had this place behind me I didn't fall into promiscuity or drugs - I think a lot of people do it because they think there is no alternative but I knew there was; this place, and that was a great thing for me. I did everything very young, which probably was a mistake. This place has given me safety. Young man

It sounds really extreme, really everyone takes so many drugs, it's all based on image and people are.... I have a theory that club like this are taking advantage of young gay people - something quite camp and fake and image based so everyone who goes there feels they have to fit in and drugs make you feel you fit in - their time to shine, king of the castle etc. This place is like an antidote to that - its daylight, it's not superficial. When everything goes wrong on the club scene you know you've got something here more relaxed - its about communicating with people that have something in common with you, its more challenging to come here than in a club - you have to be real.  
Young woman

#### A gateway

Several young people spoke about the groups being a lever or gateway for other development and opportunities in their lives. For some this meant being able to develop a social life with lesbian and gay friends outside of the groups, and for others it meant being able to go out on the scene, to lesbian and gay venues. For one young woman and young man PYWS was a door to other personal development opportunities:

It's not the place itself which changes you - it's a gateway, a way of access to other things, to communicate with other things which you wouldn't have been able to find out about otherwise, I've discovered the scene since coming here, had a relationship since coming here, met lots of new friends, some of which are really close... it's had a real influence on what I do day to day. Young woman

Coming here gave me the opportunity to progress. Homosexuality is still so frowned upon. They will let you do here what you want to do but the support is there from the workers. By coming here I found my first boyfriend and found out so much about humanity and other people. Feel I started out on the right footing - feel you can be who you want to be. Young man

#### Coming out

Most young people felt that as a result of attending the groups they had grown in self-confidence and self-belief. Hand-in-hand with this came the belief that they should not need to hide their sexual orientation or be ashamed of it. Some young people had come out to many friends and family members as a result. For other young people they felt they had developed the skills to know when to 'protect' themselves by not coming out, or how to judge when it was best or safest for them to do so. Developing these judgement skills was something many of the young people felt they had learnt.

People here give me advice about you know - what is the right time to tell parents, hearing other people's experiences - the other young people and the workers. Young woman

Confident telling people I'm gay or lesbian - I get to know people first and I see how they are at around other people and if they are cool I tell them. Young woman

I'm not scared what people think. I had told about three people before I came here - I'd chosen to tell them because they were cool. I'm still choosing who to tell, but more of them. Young man.

### Being happier

As well as feeling more confident, the young people interviewed felt much happier with their lives as a result of attending PYWS, of making friends and being able to be open about their sexual identity:

I wanted to meet more people my age, make friends, try to have a happier life, I knew that to make my life happier I needed to include more people into it. Recognising you're gay is the initial stage but I need to share experience and emotions and this group does that excellently. Young man

I feel much more happier 'cos the friends I have made here are great to me and much more supportive. Young woman

One young woman talked about the difference being happier had made to her life, as opposed to the sadness and loneliness she had previously felt:

I'm happy because I'm not nervous and anxious or worried about being gay, I'm not worried about being on my own I've got more self confidence, I know being gay is normal and okay. If people were not coming here I would be quite lonely and sad and if you're not happy in your life, then..... Young woman

### Shared experiences and peer support

As well as making meaningful friendships in the groups, young people highly valued the opportunities to share with and learn from peers' experiences in terms of being able to cope better with adverse experiences. Young people also valued being able to offer their own experiences to help other young people:

I come in here and I feel like I can offer my advice and compared to where I was 12-15 months ago...it's a hard long slog but I got there. When you can mingle with peers in the same boat as you that's a huge achievement. Young man

One young Black woman spoke about being able to talk to peers about being Black and lesbian, when often she felt she had to think of herself as being one identity above another:

I think the racial diversity is really good. There are gay people here who know about racism 'cos of their backgrounds. Young woman

One young man spoke about the sharing of experiences enabling close friendships to form based on that common ground:

I have made very good friends here, the closest friends I've ever made, so I'm not alone now and I won't be alone. They've gone through similar experiences, so they can tell you there is light at the end of the tunnel. If I didn't have those kinds of friends I wouldn't know what to do. Young man

Developing peer support networks is PYWS central aim, and the young women were unanimous in their views that this was the main benefit of attending the projects.

You feel welcome, and respected and trust your friends. You don't feel judged. Young woman

The young men debated this more in their focus group; three of them felt this was the main benefit, one disagreed and another felt that the groups were not so much focused on developing friendships as letting young people 'be themselves'.

You can make new friends here - I've made some very good friends here, but that's a lucky thing, its not geared to wards that. I think the group is less about that than just a forum to be yourself. Young man

After further discussion the young women felt that only those who had built up friendships over time could rely on support, and that not enough support from peers and workers was available to newcomers, meaning that sometimes new people were left out and had to fend for themselves:

For new people there isn't enough support, there are some people for whom coming here is not a good experience. Better communication could make them stay. Young woman

Help and support when you need it

Being able to access support when needed from both workers and young people was another valued aspect of the youth service. Most of the young people spoke with high regard for the skills of the workers and their ability to 'pick up' when a young person needed support.

If I felt down again people here and the workers here would pick up on it and I would get the support I need. Young man

I would be happy to go to (youth workers' names) first of all, you know they are the group leaders and they are at our level. Young man

Aside from the informal support accessible to young people from peers and workers, PYWS offers formal counselling to young people via the mental health services offered at PACE and outside agencies. In addition one of the workers is qualified and able to offer a number of sessions to individuals as 'holding sessions' until their referrals come through (there is usually a waiting list).

Not all of the young people were aware of the counselling facility. However what was extremely important for young people was knowing they could come to the groups and find someone, either a peer or a worker, in whom they could confide and gain support. This was clearly a benefit to the young people.

Youth workers as role models

Young people were asked how they viewed the workers and if they thought of the workers as role models for themselves. Several of the young people said they 'looked up to' the workers but most said they admired them for being themselves, for being real.

I do look up to them to an extent...they always act like teachers and tutors but they show they are human beings; they are laid back and relaxed. I respect them. They show that they respect the young women. Young woman

The role models aspect of it is just them being open and congenial, but you wouldn't want to aspire to be them, it's about a way of being, how to be very open without having be in your face, that facet that they are gay men, open and comfortable with themselves and no big deal, is the most powerful and helpful thing. They are not fashionable or edgy - plain people who are gay. Young man

### Young people's suggestions for what changes could be made to the service

Young people were asked to identify what could improve the experience for young people accessing the service and what changes could be implemented. Several young men and women wanted the groups to come together more often:

I think if they could improve it they should bring Girl Diva in with us and not be so much separation - come together once a month, not be separate because of gender. Young man

One young woman wanted more provision at other times apart from evenings:

They are doing what they can do the best - maybe the time is too late - it gets dark early and sometimes if you are not out to your family they don't know where you are and you have to lie to your parents. Would like weekend or daytime stuff, but I know workers want their weekends. Young woman

One young woman simply wanted 'a pool table', while another had a lot of suggestions for how the service could develop:

Generally there is a lack of specific services for young women - I think there's a lot more for young men, and young gay men are so much more accepted than young women are. There should be more holistic and specific things- like sports and yoga, something that is more of a personal interest. They could advertise it better and more people could come. There are loads of gay youth that are out there and need it - where are they? - they should be packing out the doors. Until their advertising is bigger and bolder this won't happen. My school isn't that far from here and I felt isolated - I didn't know what teachers would support me or be hostile - they should have a presence in those schools - they should be there - even just stickers or in the school handbook, 'cos people need to feel safe about who to talk to - and you just don't know. If you were black and getting racism you could maybe talk to a black teacher. But I didn't know if there was any gay teachers...I suspected, but it wasn't talked about so you suspected that they were in hiding themselves or not allowed to be gay - doesn't fill you with confidence. Young woman

One young man wanted less going to the pub on a Friday night and more socialising in other ways:

I wish we could go out more socially with the group - we tend to go out once a month to cinema or theatres or cafes, and to socialise and go bowling more with the women's group. Young man

### Young people's ambitions for the future

Despite many negative experiences in education, most of the young people had ambitions to go to college or university. Most wanted to carry on living in London, though some thought it was too expensive and others wanted to travel. Several of them mentioned wanting to be in a relationship.

I want to go to uni, I'm going to study music and get any job I can get in music and aspire to and do my utmost to become a composer. And a loving and steady relationship. That's all I want. Young man

One young man's priority was to move out of home due to the homophobia he was experiencing:

I'm doing a diploma in economics - I wanted to go back to school. I'd like to move out from my family - they are like, gay life, leave it at the door. My mother is catholic, bible in one hand, ready to bash me with. I'd like to work in a bank and have regular hours, regular and stable. It's very expensive to rent in London - may move out up north, Manchester, Liverpool or somewhere. Young man

In general the young people were optimistic and ambitious for their future, though some were unclear as yet as to what they wanted to study or in what field they would like to work. Several of them had full or part-time jobs already and a couple were combining work with study. Certainly for a few young women they were dealing with a lot of distractions and some chaos in their lives and they felt unable to articulate a future for themselves at this point

Finally, in two short exercises young people were asked to describe, using three words only, the way they felt before they walked through the door to the youth groups, and three words to describe how they felt now:

Then    Now

<b>Defensive. Buried. Alone.</b>	<b>Comfortable. Approachable. Feeling.</b>
<b>Lonely. Friendless. Unconfident.</b>	<b>Friendly, family, fun</b>
<b>Scared, nervous, eager</b>	<b>Family, proud, love</b>
<b>Nervous, lonely, anticipation</b>	<b>Relaxed, happy, enthusiastic</b>
<b>Hesitant, petrified, hopeful</b>	<b>Helpful, safe, fun</b>
<b>Powerless. Nervous. Unsure</b>	<b>Confident, calm, normal</b>
<b>Excited, nervous, unsure</b>	<b>Relaxed, comfortable, liberated</b>
<b>Scared, excited, enigma</b>	<b>Accepted, proud, confident</b>
<b>Proud. Lonely. Unhappy</b>	<b>Fun, jokey, interesting</b>

Young people were then asked to give one sentence to say how they felt attending PYWS groups had positively influenced their life as a young lesbian, gay or bisexual person:

'It has given me confidence and a sense of being who I am'

'The group has made me more confident within myself and my sexuality'

'To meet others in the same boat, meet friends, share experiences and social life with friends and people outside of the group'

'It has given me the confidence to act myself by showing that there are others facing exactly the same problems, and by providing an avenue to make friends'

'It has given me my first gay friends with whom I can discover gay life'

'Opened me up. Gave me a chance to talk about my sexuality to people who actually want to listen'

'It has made me more friends and I co-operate and go out on the scene'

'Found friendship and happiness with my sexuality'

## **6. Considerations regarding the young men's and young women's groups: Outzone and Girl Diva**

Discussion with workers following observations of groups and interviews with young people has raised the issue of the difference in needs presented at the Outzone and Girl Diva groups, which are the most accessed groups at PYWS.

The group of young men interviewed were older than the group of young women, by an average of 4 years and by as much as 7 years. In general, and this was articulated by workers from PYWS, the young women were presenting with more needs than the young men. The young women were mostly in school and college where several of the young men had careers, and almost all of the young women were living at home, where half of the young men were living independently. The level of confidence among the young women was seen to be lower in general than the young men. Age and gender factors contribute to why this may be, and earlier studies of the groups have drawn further conclusions about the difference in needs and, importantly, about how mental health needs can or cannot be dealt with.

Clinical Psychologist Iseult Twamley conducted a study of the Girl Diva group September 2002 - May 2003; 'Young women's experiences of attending a lesbian and bisexual community support group' and she has summarised her findings below:

'This qualitative study aimed to explore individuals' experiences of a community support group for lesbian and bisexual young women. Ten group members aged 16-25 (average age 19) were interviewed twice over a period of six months. Semi-structured interviews explored access to the group; needs and motivations of the group members; experiences of the group; benefits and challenges of attendance; individuals' attitudes and beliefs about sexual identity and how these were influenced by attending the group.

Participants described their struggles and distress at coming to terms with being attracted to women, and reconciling this with negative messages about homosexuality in the culture. Five of the women admitted self-harming and suggested that the practice was prevalent in the support group. A questionnaire to measure psychological distress (the Brief Symptom Inventory) was administered and half of the women achieved a diagnosis of significant psychological distress on this.

The young women talked about feeling that there was 'something wrong with me'. All of the women described a sense of 'not fitting in' with friends and family and of feelings of isolation. These feelings of isolation were perpetuated by a perceived need for secrecy. Secrecy was a major source of stress for the young women, both in terms of self-censorship and vigilance, and the impact of deception on their close relationships. Most detrimentally, secrecy about their orientation and romantic relationships cut the young women off from potential sources of support at home and school, and this was experienced as very painful and isolating.

### **What women got from the group**

Participants described a strong drive to meet other LGB youth, and accessing the support group was described as an important route to meeting other young lesbian and bisexual women, and it proved a powerful mechanism for combating isolation. Joining the support

group gave the young women access to an accepting peer group from which they could recruit friends and girlfriends in a non-threatening age-appropriate environment. This is a crucial opportunity in terms of their own development and helped to normalize their experience of adolescence.

The support group represented for the young women a valuable and (in some cases) exclusive environment in which they could be open about and explore their sexuality. In particular they spoke about the freedom of talking to others 'who understood' about their sexuality, a freedom from the censorship they were imposing on themselves in other areas of their lives. Women spoke about feeling that they 'fit in at last'.

Participants also spoke about the importance of the support group, in particular the facilitators, as a source of support. The participants spoke warmly of the friendliness and approachability of the group facilitators, and they were acknowledged by several of the women as a central attraction of the group. The facilitators were felt to be approachable, willing to listen, and a helpful source of information and advice. Even those with existing support networks were appreciative of the chance to learn about 'being lesbian' and to be introduced to the lesbian and gay 'scene'. Structured workshops (for example on sexual health) were valued by the young women for giving them information that was not addressed elsewhere.

#### Particular challenges of running a group for young lesbian and bisexual women

There are particular challenges to running a group for young lesbian and bisexual (or questioning) women, which emerged during the study. In particular it became clear that the young women found it difficult to discuss issues related to shame about their sexuality, feelings of depression and self-harming behaviour. The young women's accounts were often contradictory; participants spoke of feelings of self-acceptance and happiness about their sexuality whilst in the same interview discussing feelings of self-disgust. Partly this can be explained by wider taboos in society generally about talking about mental health. However, the participants were also keen to be seen to 'fit in' to the group and to appear attractive to other members, and talking about 'issues' was seen as incompatible with that. The young women were proud to consider themselves independent and adult, and it was clear that in thinking about the group they were often conflicted between the desire to have fun, get a girlfriend (all the things they were unable to do elsewhere) and the desire to address issues of concern to them. It was evident that a group with a specific and imposed 'therapeutic' agenda would not be attractive to the women.

#### Need for further resources and recommendations

In summary, my research concluded that this was a group of women with a high level of need, women that were unsupported elsewhere. For most of the young women, this group represented the only space where their emerging sexuality and relationships were validated. Appropriate training needs to be provided for facilitators, who are working with young women experiencing high levels of distress and self-harm. Ongoing supervision is essential to address group process issues (such as relationships within the group), referral pathways, and the role of the facilitator - who may often be the individual's only source of support. The open, voluntary and informal nature of the

group is crucial to attracting young women to attend, but means that the conditions that would enable direct and explicit discussion of mental health issues cannot be met. As such, the group might benefit from a psycho-educational approach (workshops on depression, self-harm etc).'

Twamley's in-depth study has confirmed what workers themselves have said; that an explicit approach to dealing with mental health issues would be counter-productive, and yet there is a high level of need and distress within the group which workers have to deal with.

Peter Keogh conducted a six-month evaluation of the Outzone group in 1999, 'Group Outings; young gay men's experiences of coming out at Outzone' and drew similar conclusions around the 'mental health aspect' of the provision:

'Workers...give one-to-one support around specific problems. Although the young men access this service, there is clearly a reticence to admit to this within the group....Need, if expressed in this particular way, is seen as mildly stigmatised.'

Keogh concluded that although Outzone is established in order to respond to need, part of this response is 'creating an environment where young gay men do not see themselves or their peers as needy.'

Although no study had focussed on the gender differentials among members when expressing need, these two studies suggest workers are facing similar issues around the need to create 'group solutions' and peer support mechanisms to deal more effectively with issues young people are reluctant to bring to a worker.

A key difference between the culture of Outzone and of Girl Diva, however, is that Outzone is constructed more as a group for young men who, regardless of personal needs, have well-developed social skills and are able to make a success of their membership of the group and form relationships with peers. Workers suggest that 'like attracts like' and that young men who do not gel with the group are more likely to cease attending, as their individual needs cannot be met by the workers alone. Keogh has noted that 'young men with deep seated psychological problems are unlikely to benefit from membership of Outzone'.

Girl Diva, while also placing much emphasis on the facilitation of group support, has retained members with high individual support needs and with less-well developed social skills, yet has no added resources to offer. Again this may be due to gender factors but to suppose these without investigation would not be particularly useful.

A further issue, not necessarily related, is that while PYWS is successful in attracting and retaining young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds, Girl Diva in particular attracts a high number of Black young women. This may be due in part to the fact that the Senior Worker is a Black woman and that the programme and guest speakers reflect the diversity of the group. More consideration of the success of PYWS in general and Girl Diva in particular in working with ethnically diverse groups of young people would be valuable.

## 7. Outputs of national significance

### 7.1 Development of good practice guidelines for LGB youth provision

In recognition of the lack of a framework for LGB youth work nationally, and in response to consultation with London-based projects, PACE Youth Work Manager has developed a set of national guidelines for LGB youth work.

These guidelines have been nationally disseminated for consultation and approved by the National Network of Individuals and Organisations working with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth. The guidelines will be launched at the National LGB Youth Work Conference in Manchester in July 2004

### 7.2 Development of a Peer Mentoring service for LGB youth

One of the specific projects funded by the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund was the development of a young lesbian, gay and bisexual peer mentoring project at PYWS. Two six-week (one session per week) training courses ran, March-April and October-November in 2001 and eight young people took part in each (16 young people total). Though most of the young people completed the course, the service did not develop and was not successful.

Young participants and the youth work team have evaluated the project and identified why they felt it was unsuccessful in its early form. PYWS have since progressed to developing less structured means of access to peer support as a positive outcome of this experience.

#### AIMS

The main aims of the project were:

- To provide one-to-one peer support and befriending for young people under 25
- To train and support young LGB people as mentors to offer their peers support, a listening ear, provide information, resources and signposting to other sources of support and information

#### Ethos

The ethos of the project was to provide support on issues raised by the young people themselves, not to train mentors to respond to particular issues. In this sense the project was to be 'flexible and person-centred'.

The young people were not expected to become or replace youth workers or advice workers.

#### Objectives

The initial objective was to train up existing young members who wanted to develop these skills and then evaluate the initial training in order to fine-tune it for the next group of mentors. The input of LGB young people into the process was key to developing a successful pilot and their evaluation of the training vital for ensuring the training programme would be relevant and accessible to future young people. The youth work team would all be available to young mentors to provide extra guidance, support their needs and help develop their skills

The young people who were first recruited from the youth services were aware the scheme was new and that they would be taking part in and helping shape a new initiative for PYWS.

### Prospective Young Mentors

The first training session attracted 8 young people that had used PYWS in the past or were currently using the service.

Six young people completed the course.

### Training

The Peer Support Project training was devised by the Youth Work Manager. The Manager undertook some basic training in Peer Support work with London Youth, and also contacted various peer support projects in the UK for advice and information. The programme was developed to run for six weeks, with the training taking place in the evening once a week for 2 1/2 hours.

The initial training took place at PACE offices at Hartham Rd. The young mentors were given food and refreshments and paid travel expenses.

The training in the first session focussed on setting discussion topics to enable various issues to be raised by young people that would inform what needed to be covered in the following sessions with 'homework' being set every week. Role-play scenarios were also to be used.

The group also considered working policies around confidentiality, group ground rules, boundaries, commitment, administration, and support.

The group soon identified several areas of work that they would like to concentrate on over the six weeks; these included:

- Coming out to your family
- Sex and Relationships
- Bullying
- HIV tests and sexual health
- Where to go (the gay scene)
- Religion and being gay or lesbian
- First time sexual experiences
- Using other services and groups

These themes were identified as the 'main' themes the group should discuss and explore.

After the two training courses were completed PYWS decided to discontinue the project as it was proving unsuccessful. Evaluation with the youth work team and the young people concluded the following:

**Young mentors needed more time to consider their position in providing advice and support to other vulnerable young people.**

**The mentors found it difficult to accept boundaries issues with other young people and felt that sexual or romantic relationships could be formed, as they sometimes are with peers in the group. The team expected a certain 'working ethic' very similar to those laid down in worker guidelines, and this caused dissension in the group.**

**The conflict between maintaining personal morals and offering non-judgemental advice to young people was also problematic at times.**

**The training was too short and those attending demonstrated high levels of anxiety around meeting other young people.**

**The young people found the training commitment too long and had difficulty in attending all sessions.**

**The mentors wanted to develop the social support element to the service and felt that this was best done informally.**

**Training venue was too hard to find.**

Positive outcomes of the pilot sessions were:

**The training provided an opportunity for in-depth discussions, in a safe and creative environment.**

**The discussions led to members of the group offering support to each other which benefited young people outside of the training programme**

**The team benefited by being part of an experimental learning experience, by disclosing and sharing some experiences with young people.**

**The young people felt able to construct and influence the training programme and could see this in action.**

#### Observations and recommendations by the youth work team

The youth work team discusses and identified further issues that contributed to the decision to cease the pilot:

- The team felt that the concept of young people as peer mentors can be very rewarding for both parties and provide much needed support, but that it can be fraught with issues that can cause more distress to an already vulnerable group.
- Once the training programme was completed the dropout rate for young mentors was very high. The team felt that the young mentors still needed a lot of support themselves and were often not in a position to offer support to others.
- Young people were using the training sessions to access peer support rather than participate in the training.
- Often the most vulnerable young people and those with less well developed social skills wanted to volunteer. It was very difficult to select and refuse young people, many of whom had already experienced rejection in their lives, or had suffered mental anguish around issues of not being 'good enough'. The project felt a sense of responsibility to these young people and did not want to compound negative feelings of self worth.
- It became apparent from discussion that often the peer mentors were presenting issues themselves that they needed to work through, before they could embark on engaging with others.
- For marginalized groups, like LGB youth, who have constantly been de-valued it is difficult for them to separate their own experiences of this from others objectively.
- Arguably young LGB people have more emotional needs at this time in their lives than their heterosexual counterparts, so this client group may not always be best equipped to work effectively with others in need. Workers considered that many

young people who initially make contact with PYWS are in some form of emotional need.

- Ideally a mentor would be someone who may have been attending services previously and has worked through some of their own issues before embarking on the role of peer mentor.
- The recruitment process is key to successful peer mentoring schemes, and this was probably the weakest part of the project's development. Young people were not selected on aptitude and ability to take on the role.

### Observations on youth peer support projects in general

Following the initial early difficulties with the pilot project the Youth Work Manager contacted other agencies delivering peer support projects to discuss the problems. Similar issues were affecting many projects, particularly the challenge of retaining young mentors. Youth is a particularly demanding and chaotic time in a person's life, there are many competing demands and choices being made and young people are very wrapped up in their developing independent identities. On a weekly basis many changes can occur that impact on a young person's ability to undertake a long-term commitment.

The PYWS team felt that, added to this the challenges of being lesbian, gay or bisexual and dealing with the many stresses and pressures this can bring, many young people attending PYWS would not necessarily benefit from a structured peer mentoring scheme.

### Developing alternatives

In order to continue to respond to young people's desire to meet with other young people and provide peer support, several alternative methods of possible peer support were identified that would enable for this to happen within the project:

- Semi-structured peer support through a befriending scheme
- Peer support through existing youth groups
- Providing social events to gain larger peer networks
- Identifying young people to act as volunteers on special projects and within groups.
- Encouraging all young people involved in the project to share their experiences in various workshops and discussion groups
- Residential weekends with peer-led workshops
- Newsletter and website support by young people.
- Support using other media, like texting and emails are vital to young people, and PYWS would like to offer this service in the future. PYWS are currently considering how this might work within the service.

Young people have responded well to leading discussions and workshops on issues and providing good practical support based on their experiences to others.

Young people are actively involved in planning and organising social events which can make a significant difference to their peers by providing greater social contact with others, both inside and outside of the group. By providing the opportunity for friendship networks to flourish this can create on-going informal peer support beyond the limitations of the groups.

Following the training course the team have organised events and workshops that seek to address a wider range of concerns. The team believe they can better meet the needs of those young people who are more vulnerable who need to access information without identifying their personal issues to other young people at the groups.

**Encouraging and facilitating young LGB people to work with others and share their experiences can impact positively on others, and this work needs to continue in all of our services.** Youth Work Manager

### 7.3 A national conference on LGB youth work practice

The Youth Work Manager has taken a leading role in the development of a National Network of Individuals and Organisations working with lesbian, gay and bisexual young people. This network, founded in June 2001, aims to develop a stronger policy voice for LGB youth provision. The Youth Manager has been chairing this network while it has been building up membership, developing a strategy for sustainability and planning a national conference which will focus on both policy and practice issues in working with LGB young people. The Network aims to support and build regional and national LGB Youth Service Networks in order to offer support to isolated workers and build the capacity of the LGB Youth Service. Objectives include:

- To address strategic development of the sector
- To share good practice
- To address policy

The National Network is well attended with up to 20 workers attending meetings currently held every quarter. There is a strong commitment and need for the Network but currently some of the most isolated workers are not accessing the Network and it is under developed and lacks a coherent and agreed strategic direction. The National Conference will be a pivotal project to anchor the work, bring people together and support future development of a sustainable Network, thus being an important aspect of PYWS work of national significance

#### The National Conference

Due to be held in July 2004, The National Network Conference will offer a stimulating mix of skills-based workshops, networking groups, keynote speakers, research and policy discussions, based on consultation with LGB youth workers to meet diverse professional needs and interests. Individual worker needs will be met through the provision of opportunities for regional networking and other discussion fora based on common professional interest and the opportunity for workers to discuss challenges they face and access support and encouragement from colleagues.

The conference will also look to:

- Invite discussion with representatives of national children's and young people's agencies to build a picture of current and future developments related to LGB youth work.
- Publicity about current concerns and developments in LGB youth work on a national level.
- Facilitate fun, celebratory activities that brings together the knowledge and skills of workers and produce a national skills audit

A key role of the conference will be to attract workers from rural and isolated projects, part-time and volunteer workers through use of targeted outreach and provision of bursaries to attend the conference. Outcomes from the conference will be disseminated through a conference report and through a set of key recommendations to feed into good practice nationally.

PYWS will have a key role in the steering group organising this conference and the Youth Work Manager will launch the Good Practice Guidelines there.

#### Other work of national significance

There are other important initiatives and pieces of work that PWYS staff have been involved in that have significance on a national level. The Girl Diva Senior Worker was part of a group of women youth workers who successfully fundraised to produce an educational CD ROM for school and youth settings aimed at lesbian, bisexual and questioning young women. This was produced in association with Brook England, The Healthy Gay Living Centre, London (now part of Terence Higgins Trust) and other youth project partners. The Senior Worker was a member of the steering group overseeing this resource which has been disseminated to education directorates, youth services, libraries, equalities units and LGB youth projects all over the UK.

## 8. Residentials and Annual Events

While it is through attendance at the weekly groups that most of the young people feel they benefit from PYWS, it is the annual events that many of the young people highlight when talking about the friendships and relationships they have built up. For workers also, these intense events are not only a highlight of the year for young people but lead to significant and positive changes for individuals and the dynamics of the groups.

There are now five regular annual events:

- Young women's residential
- Young men's residential
- World Aids Day event
- Summer School
- Pride march

### Residentials

For both young people and workers the residentials are the undisputed highlight of the PYWS year and focus fairly intensely on the development of young people's self-esteem. For workers these represent an intense amount of hard work and organisation, while juggling many other tasks, but the rewards are clear:

This experience was thoroughly enjoyed by all and members reported afterwards that it helped them feel better about themselves as gay or bisexual young men and also helped them feel a greater sense of belonging and a greater motivation to continue to want to participate in the future. Report on Outzone/First Move residential 2003

There are two weekend residentials each year; one for young men and one for young women, and occasionally a mixed residential, with up to 12 young people attending each time. They usually take place in young people's outdoor centres in the countryside. PWYS staff team consult with young people on the planning and organisation of activities, so young people have a sense of ownership of the weekend and a willingness and commitment to taking part in all activities. The residentials are 'themed' around the issues of identity, self-esteem and developing assertive skills and confidence. This often relates to developing friendships and relationships and may cover sexual health, drugs and alcohol use. Workshops, small and large group discussions are interspersed with physical activities such as raft-building and group cycling, obstacle courses and 'high adventure' (activities at tree height) designed to increase team co-operation and encourage young people to take the risk of trying a new activity and increase their sense of self-confidence as individuals and as a team.

Residentials have included:

**Believe in yourself, for who you are!: Girl Diva residential weekend for young women 25 and under focussing on who you are and how to feel better about yourself.** (Girl Diva, October 2003)

**Me, myself and us: a free weekend for gay and bisexual young men 25 and under focussing on boosting self-esteem and confidence, understanding who we are and assertiveness skills.** (Outzone & First Move, July 2003)

**Understanding who we are: developing self esteem in young lesbian and bisexual women** (joint residential Girl Diva and Harrow LGB youth group, September 2002)

**Love - Sex - Lifestyle: for gay and bisexual young men aged 25 and under** (Outzone residential September 2002)

PYWS staff use a general model for their residentials that includes the setting of ground rules, establishing the safety and security of young people and the use of ice-breakers and games to break down barriers between individuals. Workshops will focus on issues such as identity formation and affirmation of self, looking at behaviour under certain circumstances, understanding the triggers for feeling low and how to recognise and deal with these. Young people are encouraged to have frank discussions in small groups and feed back into the larger group. Outcomes of the sessions are recorded anonymously. Young people evaluate the residentials and a report is produced by staff for each residential, enabling the learning from each one to further develop the next.

Young people's feedback on the residentials

**When asked to say what they had learned over the residential, young women said:** (Understanding who we are residential 2002)

'How supportive workers and group were with each other - how relaxed the weekend was'

'How to form a 'safe space' in my mind'

'To believe in myself more....I am still learning from others'

'Being you is important - it's ok to feel down'

'To trust, to feel, to laugh'

**When asked to say what they had learned over the residential, young men said:** (Love - Sex - Lifestyle residential 2002)

'become more aware of my responsibility to myself'

'To strive for what I need'

'I've learnt how much flexibility and potential for change some relationships have'

'I am accepted for who I am'

'To trust in other people more'

The residentials are an important event for the individuals who attend and for the life of the group. They bring the young people together in a way the group sessions cannot do, and over the course of a weekend young people become much more aware of their peer's needs and of how much they can do to support each other. Young people achieve a raised awareness of self-identity and a confidence boost, and friendships are formed and consolidated. Often, more isolated members of the group have bonded with others and formed relationships that will continue to develop and provide them with much-needed peer support:

The residential to Matlock was the first time I've ever been away with people my own age - absolutely fantastic to be away with these guys for two nights and two days, I usually go away on my own and go hostelling. We talked all night about us, and coming out, and being together - bonding - you can't buy those kinds of experiences ... it was wonderful. Young man

### World AIDS day event

For the last five years the young people at PYWS have produced a cabaret style show to mark World AIDS Day. The show is designed and delivered by young people and is primarily used to highlight the issues around HIV and AIDS to a wider audience and to other young people.

### Worlds AIDS Day 2003

The event entitled 'QueerStarz the Unrivalled' was styled on the Popstarz television programme and took place on Saturday 30th November at Jackson's Lane Theatre in North London. The event was publicised in various press and through the web site. During the cabaret show performers are asked to contribute their thoughts around issues of HIV and AIDS. Young people also present current facts around HIV and AIDS, some of these through their performances of singing, poetry or rapping.

The audience can also pick up various resources that are produced by various agencies. This year's event was the most successful to date, with over 190 people attending the show and after show party. The event also attracted many more young LGB people to use our PYWS services in the weeks following the event.

The performance also provides other services and professionals an opportunity to network and meet-up with each other in an informal setting. The event is recorded on video and young people then edit and format the video so others can watch the highlights and use it as a tool for discussion.

The event is a culmination of over 3 months' work by the youth team and other workers. During the rehearsals many discussions take place around HIV and AIDS, which make for informal learning sessions with young people. Also young people are able to learn new skills and perform, enabling them to feel more confident about themselves. Feedback from the audience is also highly appreciative and many return every year to see the performance. Over the 5 years it has now become an established annual event that many look forward to and want to be part of.

The young people in interviews spoke of the WAD event as one of the highlights of their year and some expressed how they felt it brought everyone together:

*It's brilliant, you work on it for ages and then it all comes together, and it brings everyone together which doesn't usually happen.*

Young man

*I got involved and did some backstage stuff. It was good fun. I made friends with people I didn't really know before. I will do it again next year.*

Young woman

As with the residential events, the intensity of working together to a common aim and being in peer groups without actually being in the weekly group sessions, had a strong effect on the young people's relationships and on their self-confidence;

*It would have been really scary to do it on your own but I got involved with Summer School and thought I could perform at World AIDS day, and so we all did! But you know because everyone's involved you don't worry about not being able to do it - you just all do it and have an amazing time. We were on such a high afterwards.*

Young man

### Summer School

PYWS helped co-organise the 'QueerCollege' event in October 2001 in partnership with Birkbeck University and other London LGB projects. This event, spread over 4 days, offered workshops, seminars, creative arts classes and discussions for LGB young people under 25, with a focus on promoting higher education. Over 70 young LGB people attended. The success of this event led to PYWS organising the first ever 'Summer School' in 2002 for young LGB people with an informal education and youth work focus. Ninety young people attended. Summer School was repeated in 2003 and has proved both times to be an extraordinary success in engaging young people from the existing groups and in attracting new attendees to take part in a range of fun and educational workshops.

As with the residentials, Summer School focuses strongly on issues of self-esteem, confidence-building, assertiveness and communication. In 2003 there were workshops such as 'Demolishing Depression', 'Getting to know you' and 'Assertiveness skills'. In addition there were drama and creative writing workshops focussing on communication and self-expression.

### Pride march

Many of the young people attending PYWS have not attended the annual Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Pride (or Mardi Gras) event in London. PYWS organises for the groups to attend the march together, and in the months beforehand young people make banners to carry on the march. The Pride events inspire workshops that provide an opportunity for the young people to learn about the history of the lesbian and gay liberation movement and to discuss some of the cultural and political changes that have occurred in recent years.

Workers note that often the discussions have 'real meaning' to young people particularly when learning about community and history, and helps to 'place their identity in a context'.

One worker stated how the young people felt about attending the pride march:

**The actual march was experienced as very moving for the members. For many this was their first march and they felt privileged to be part of something so affirming.** PACE Youth Worker

## 9. Conclusions

The main conclusions to be drawn from this report are as follows:

### PACE Youth Work Service

- PYWS successfully provides many 'protective factors' that help prevent mental ill-health in young people, including the development of self-esteem, strong social support, sociability and autonomy, and encouraging and enabling young people to make efforts and to develop confidence in their ability to cope.
- PYWS offers a range of support services and products for young people that are developed in consultation with users. Its communications are well-developed and the website is particularly successful in attracting young people both to the site and to the groups
- PYWS achieves outcomes that belie that lack of resources and worker hours. While this is a great success, the pressure on workers can be intense.
- Attendance at the groups is high and consistent. There is a wide age range attracted (15-25 years) and the service is successful in attracting and retaining young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds.
- Young people under 18 are offered less structured sessions so that individual support needs are prioritised. Young people under 18 are presenting with more needs related to family, school, bullying and lack of freedom and finance.
- An Email support service is being developed at PYWS, particularly with the under-18s in mind.
- PYWS staff are working to a common understanding of the needs of the LGB young people
- PYWS staff work to the principle that all of their work is about mental health promotion in the broadest sense
- PYWS' key aim is to promote the well-being of young people through raising their self-esteem and facilitating peer support and the development of peer networks. There is clear evidence from workers and young people that this is achieved.
- The real emphasis of PYWS is to empower young people to seek their own solutions to problems, to prevent dependency on the project, and to use their peers for mutual support and encouragement
- Young people can access one-to-one support but limited resources mean this cannot be offered as much as is needed
- PYWS work to common objectives but feel there is sometimes a lack of shared vision and a lack of reflective practice
- PYWS provides a vital 'safe space' for young people that is free of homophobia and allows them to be themselves. This safe space is often a lifeline for young people
- Young people attending the groups are free from the pressures of the commercial lesbian and gay scene with its emphasis on sex, drugs, alcohol and image. They feel safe enough at PYWS to be able to discuss these pressures openly and gain support from peers and workers
- Workers see themselves as important role models for young LGB people, particularly to dispel the negative beliefs many of them have internalised around lesbian and gay people

- Workers feel the pressure of being role models and of working with multiple needs presented in 'specialised provision'
- Workers feel there is often a thin line between empathising with young people and disclosure of personal information. Workers may often have experienced, or be experiencing, some of the difficult issues the young people present with. This is a pressure not common in mainstream provision
- Workers feel they potentially have an enormous amount of power and influence in the lives of the young LGB people and consider seriously the implication of this to ensure they use this influence wisely
- Workers have strict boundaries with young people but need to be vigilant to ensure these boundaries do not become blurred because of over-empathy
- PYWS is successful in being inclusive around young women and young people from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds
- PYWS is not yet successful in being inclusive around young people with learning and physical disabilities, yet recognises that it cannot be 'all things to all young people'
- Workers do not feel PYWS is able to offer a service to young people in high mental distress
- Young people who need intensive support are not likely to have their individual needs met but may benefit from peer support
- It is important to PYWS that young people do not associate the groups as being 'for young people with mental health problems' as this will deter them from attending, and in any case is not the focus of the service
- Workers can 'track' the well-being of young people who have gone on to access other services but this is ad-hoc
- PYWS team seek to address issues in the group work format rather than individualise issues
- There has been a 170% increase in the number of young people being referred to PACE counselling, advocacy and employment services
- Workers have identified a need for team building
- Workers found the work with young people challenging but highly motivational and rewarding, particularly in seeing the personal growth in young people over time.
- Young women accessing the project are on average 4 years younger than young men accessing the project
- Young women in general seem to be presenting with higher individual support needs than young men but there are no extra resources to deal with this
- Workers are highly valued by young people as both role models and sources of support
- Young men with high individual support needs and less well-developed social skills are unlikely to receive the support they need
- Young people say they value it but are unlikely to admit to peers that they access one-to-one support

### Young People

- Young people attending the provision experience multiple pressures and difficulties including many of the 'risk factors' for mental ill-health
- Many of the young people prior to contacting PYWS experienced feelings of depression, isolation, low self-worth and hopelessness
- Many of the young people had experienced, and continued to experience, homophobia and isolation within their own family
- Several of the young people were experiencing homophobia or fear of homophobia at school and college
- Young people identified that they were able to cope with problems better since attending PYWS
- Young people felt they were developing better 'protective skills' including knowing when to come out to others and when to not disclose their sexual identity for personal safety reasons
- Young people were able to confidently identify the positive changes attending PYWS had made in their lives, including 'being happier, gaining confidence, forming friendships, coming out, accessing and coping with the gay scene, sharing experiences and peer support, and getting help when needed'
- The most important aspect of the service, for workers and young people alike is that it is a place to develop peer support networks
- Peer support is crucial to the well-being of LGB young people
- Local schools need to be aware of PYWS

### Outputs of national significance

- Good practice guidelines in LGB Youth Work have been produced and will be launched in July 2004
- The peer mentoring project was unsuccessful and will not be repeated
- The National Conference of LGB Youth Workers will take place in 2004

### Residentials and annual events

- Residentials are a highlight of the year for young people and provide a focussed opportunity to develop peer relationships, raise self-esteem and boost confidence in taking part in new activities. They are a model of good practice for working with young LGB people.
- World AIDS day, Summer School and Pride March all offer young people the opportunity to work as a team, achieve new skills and gain new experiences to increase their confidence.

## 10. Recommendations

### 10.1 Current service provision

1. PYWS staff should undertake a team building event to facilitate agreement and understanding of a shared vision for the service, and to develop more supportive relationships between co-workers
2. PYWS staff should undertake training on supporting young people with mental health issues
3. PYWS staff should identify their training needs as appropriate to the services provided currently and for future development. PACE to try to secure funding to ensure training needs are met.
4. PYWS staff to consider the higher support needs presented by young women and what resources may be needed to meet these pressures
5. PYWS staff to consider the issue of individuals with high support needs being referred on, in relation to child and vulnerable adult protection issues. To consider developing a strategy for tracking young people at risk if they are referred on.
6. PYWS to undertake targeted outreach to under-represented groups
7. Staff to undertake training related to working with under-represented groups as appropriate - i.e. work with young people with disabilities
8. PYWS to provide more opportunities for the young men's and women's groups to come together
9. PYWS to consider that newcomers to groups may need more support from workers
10. PYWS to ensure all young people know what information, advice and support they can access through the service and that this information is easily accessible

### 10.2 Future service provision

1. PACE to seek funding to continue and develop the service
2. PYWS to consider increasing worker hours to alleviate the pressure on workers
3. PYWS to develop guidelines for one-to-one work with young people and consider increasing the number of available hours for one-to-one support
4. PYWS to consider the recommendations for Girl Diva from Iseult Twamley's report
5. PYWS to consider promoting the residential models as models of good practice to other LGB youth providers
6. PYWS to look at other alternatives to young people having to wait a long time for PACE referrals, particularly for young people's counselling
7. PYWS to consider developing a stronger local schools presence

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