

Stonewall Youth Volunteering Programme

Homophobic bullying is endemic in British schools. Stonewall, the national lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) charity has launched a new Youth Volunteering Programme to put young people at the heart of the campaign to tackle the problem.

Who are Stonewall?

Stonewall was founded in 1989 to repeal Section 28 – legislation which teachers assumed prevented them from addressing homophobic bullying or “promoting” homosexuality. Section 28 was finally repealed in 2003. Other successes have included helping achieve the equalisation of the age of consent, lifting the ban on lesbians and gay men serving in the military and securing legislation allowing same-sex couples to adopt. More recently Stonewall has helped secure civil partnerships and ensured the recent Equality Act protected lesbians and gay men in terms of goods and services.

Even after the repeal of Section 28, many schools were left unsure of how to discuss LGB issues and lacked the confidence and understanding to tackle homophobic bullying. In 2005 we launched our Education for All campaign to raise awareness of homophobia and homophobic bullying in Britain’s schools and to help local authorities, education professionals, schools and young people address these issues. The Youth Volunteering Programme is part of that campaign.

How does homophobic bullying affect young people?

Recent Stonewall research (*The School Report*, 2007) indicated that:

- Almost two thirds of young lesbian, gay and bisexual people have experienced bullying
- 92 per cent have experienced verbal abuse and 41 per cent physical abuse
- Over a third of all young people don’t feel safe at school
- Where schools have explicit policies that state homophobic bullying is wrong, young people are 60 per cent less likely to be bullied

Young people who experience homophobia and homophobic bullying may fail to reach their potential at school if they are not supported the bullying is not tackled. This in turn may impact on their lives and future prospects:

- Lesbian and gay pupils are more likely to leave school at 16 despite achieving marks that merit continuing with their educations
- Two in five say they fear that bullying will continue if they stay
- Three in four bullied lesbian and gay young people say they feign illness or play truant to escape the impact of bullying

What is the Youth Volunteering Programme?

Young people have a vital role to play in tackling homophobia and homophobic bullying. Stonewall’s Youth Volunteering Programme will empower them to make positive changes in their local communities by campaigning on issues of importance to them. The programme will support them to set up campaigns and also facilitate accredited training. Through regular meetings Stonewall will help them develop the skills and confidence they need to carry out their campaign. Young people already in youth groups may wish to work on a campaign within their group and integrate the Stonewall programme with work they are already doing in their area.

Example campaigns could be:

- Working with local authorities to tackle homophobic bullying in their schools and communities
- Helping sexual health services to be inclusive of LGB young people
- Working with local authorities to set up an LGB youth group in their region
- Developing a presentation about young people's experiences of homophobic bullying to be delivered to schools in their regions
- Working with local police to create an information pack for young people about how the criminal justice system works in relation to homophobia and bullying in schools

Because volunteers work on campaigns in their local area, they can work in partnership with existing projects for young people to ensure their campaigns have local relevance. Furthermore organisations which provide services to young people and involve them in the development of their work can benefit from fresh and innovative ideas about how to tackle homophobia in their local area.

How will young people benefit from the programme?

It is not only LGB young people who are affected by homophobia and homophobic bullying. Making young people of all sexual orientations feel included and valued in all the services they use will transform the lives of a significant number of young people.

The programme will offer young people:

- National Open College Network accreditations: NOCN are a nationally recognised accreditation body in skills such as speaking & listening and developing leadership skills
- Awards in recognition of their voluntary work
- Membership of a network of young volunteers across the country
- Regular training to develop their skills and self confidence
- The full support of Stonewall throughout their volunteering

How can you get involved?

- **Work with Stonewall:** if you work with young people who are already doing some great work on the issue of homophobia, we can work with you so that the young people gain the benefits of the Stonewall programme (accreditation, meeting other young people, the awards) whilst continuing to work with friends from their youth group on their own campaign
- **Tell young people about the programme:** Stonewall can supply free information packs to distribute to the young people your service works with and we can come and talk to you about how young people can get involved
- **Tell other professionals about the programme:** forward this information to other professionals working with young people and let them know they can contact Stonewall for further information
- **Invite the volunteers to engage with your service:** whether you are Head of Youth Services, a sexual health worker, manager of a youth group, youth worker or another professional working with young people there are countless ways our volunteers could help you create a safer and more supportive community for young people affected by homophobia and homophobic bullying.