

Written evidence submitted by Focus: The Identity Trust (BYC034)

Background

1a /Focus: The Identity Trust is a registered charity in Northern Ireland which exists to provide peer support services to Transgender and Intersex Individuals and their families in N.I. and the Republic of Ireland. It's core ambition is to make the island of Ireland the exemplar in terms of service provision, social integration and acceptance of its constituency in every community.

1b/The trust carries out its mission by provision of direct services, collaboration and partnership with other providers in the third and statutory sectors together with lobbying and advocacy on behalf of it's constituency. The trustees attach the following briefing papers on our ethos and some of our activities. including our latest initiative "The Gender Identity Panel" which is our attempt at truly participatory democracy.

We are pleased to be able to offer the following comments in relation to the current youth select committee 2017: inquiry into body image.

2/ How body image affects Transgender and Intersex individuals

Transgender and Intersex young people in general largely experience low levels of self esteem and poor mental health stemming from their experience of gender dysphoria particularly around the start and throughout puberty. Their sense of dissonance between their inherent gender identity and assigned sex and unhappiness with their body through the hormonal changes brought about by puberty, leads to abnormally high levels of poor body image. This incongruence between internal self determined gender identity, body image and self esteem results in disproportionately higher levels of experience of mental ill health, self harming practices, suicidal ideation and actions amongst this cohort when compared with the rest of society.

This incidence of poor body image coupled with adverse peer pressures and lack of societal acceptance results in young transgender and intersex individuals withdrawing from social interaction and leisure activities particularly sporting activities. It should be noted that in addition to peer pressure and poor body image the very regulations imposed by some sporting bodies actively militates against the inclusion and involvement of transgender individuals in sport (we have evidence of this in research we have undertaken and can make available to you)

It is our view that there are few if any positive examples of existing campaigns in relation to body image for our particular constituency. One of the few exceptions was the BBC Whales documentary "Sweet sixteen" which dealt at some length at positive body image for a young transgender woman.

We commend the work being undertaken by The Trans Media Watch initiative which is slowly but surely promoting more positive images of and for transgender individuals.

3/ The Internet Social Media and Messaging

The media in general, but especially visual media such as television, streaming services and social media have the power to have both a positive and negative impact on individual body image particularly amongst young people. This would particularly hold true for transgender individuals both male and female. There are many examples of positive diary blogs mainly from the US which

feature young transgender girls throughout their transition process during puberty. These are often honest accounts of the difficulties experienced by the individuals' autonomous body image particularly around flirting and dating.

Social media in particular has the potential of having a negative and damaging effect on the self esteem and body image of young transgender individuals by promoting unobtainable body aspirations and false expectation of unreal, unattainable body images.

Young Transgender Individuals engagement with social media around body image including sexting exposes them disproportionately to the risk of bullying by peers and potential partners which can lead to poor self esteem which often promotes the cycle of self harm, self medication, suicidal ideation and ultimate suicide completion.

4/ Education

In terms of education and the integration of the promotion of positive body image across the whole school curriculum we would again commend the school which featured in the documentary "sweet sixteen". It has obviously been very useful in promoting body image across the whole curriculum as evidenced by the acceptance and integration of Llyr's social transition to such an extent that she herself was totally body confident in attending the school prom and her acceptance by all of her peers .

There are many examples of good schools adopting such positive approaches unfortunately however they are not the norm and particularly not the norm here in N.I. The RSE curricular in particular needs to specifically address diversity in gender identity, sexuality, family make up, relationships and diversity of body shape, size and divergence from expected norms.

Here in N.I there are some positive examples of organisations which promote integration of all individuals regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, ability , religion, and ethnicity and we would offer the example of the Belfast Friendship Club a rotary club of Ireland imitative as a paragon of inclusivity where positive body image is particularly promoted. On occasion when members of our peer support groups have been in attendance there have been more than 20 languages being spoken simultaneously being spoken in the room.

5/ Health implications

The recent emergence of specialist healthcare provision for gender variant children and transgender adolescents has made real inroads into the creation of positive body image and provision of positive mental health of those transgender individuals s who have ready access to these services.

there has been an exponential growth in referrals over the last number of years to such an extent that the number of referrals is doubling every five years and shows no sign of having peaked as of yet this has obviously led to increasing waiting lists for these specialist services which in turn causes additional poor body image low self esteem and poor mental health. This vicious circle needs to be urgently addressed by the creation of additional services coupled with expansion of existing services.

Executive summary

Focus:The Identity Trust would make the following comments

1/ Transgender and intersex young people experience disproportionate levels of poor body image due to their gender dysphoria especially around the start of and throughout puberty.

2/ The incidence of poor body image, peer pressure and lack of social acceptance results in young transgender individuals withdrawing from society and becoming very socially isolated.

3/ There are few if any positive examples of appropriate body image for Transgender and Intersex individuals.

4/ The media and social media in particular can have a positive impact on the body image of Transgender individuals and we particularly commend the BBC Documentary " Sweet sixteen" as a positive example and also commend the work of "trans media watch"

5/ Social media can be a two edged sword and can lead to particular negative body image experiences for Transgender individuals which can ultimately be fatal.

6/There are not enough examples of the promotion of positive body images in schools in general across the whole curriculum. We would again commend the BBC program "Sweet Sixteen" and the school featured in it as a positive role model to promote good body image for our constituency. Nearer to our home we would encourage the select committee to examine the example of the "Belfast friendship club" which we feel has much to commend in its practice.

7/ In terms of health implications of poor body image amongst Gender variant children and Transgender adolescents, we recognise the excellent work being undertaken by the specialist Gender Identity Services for this cohort. The reality however is that they are being swamped by exponential increases in demand which will not be met without expansion of existing and the addition of more regional services.

8/ Failure to adequately address this growth demand will inevitably result in fatalities amongst Transgender and Intersex young people nationally.

June 2017