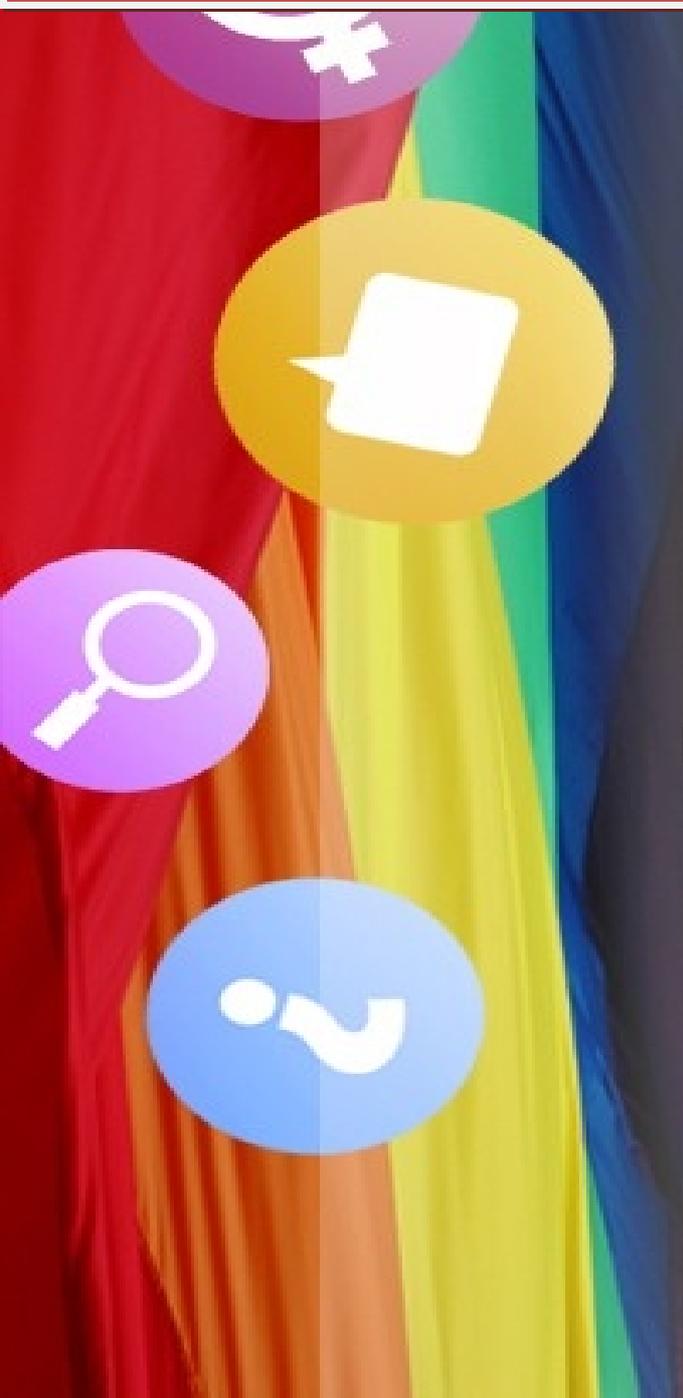


***“We are family...”***

**The Experiences of Some Families of Lesbian and Gay People in  
Dundalk**

Clarity: Research, Development and Training Ltd.  
(January 2008)



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## Opening Remarks from Dundalk Outcomers

Discovering your sexual identity is never easy. No matter what orientation we are, we all struggle when the hormones kick in. This can be a confusing and emotional time for boys/men and girls/women, and the confusion can be exacerbated when we discover that our orientation is different to that of our peers. Some young people choose to put this discovery to the back of their minds, to deal with it at another time. Some explore it and some do not know how to deal with it. But no matter how we initially react, the path to coming out is not an easy journey.

Naturally, how and whom we inform about our sexual orientation is always determined by our circumstances. We, and especially those of us who have come through the Irish school system, have a very clear understanding of what our peers find acceptable and what they don't. This can set the platform for how, and if, we disclose.

Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people, particularly young LGB people, make the decision to come out based on how they believe people will react to the news. Some people choose close friends to tell, some reveal their sexuality to their parents, some disclose to their doctors and some to priests etc. This is a critical decision because some of us risk losing someone we love and trust by revealing our sexual identity. This is not the case for heterosexual people.

With this in mind, I would like to thank the family members of LGB people who took part in this research – the parents, siblings, ex-spouses, sons, daughters and grandparents. Your contributions will help us to address the need for supports for LGB people and their families, who will, in the future, embark on the same journey as you have.

I would like to give particular thanks to all the LGB people who asked their families to participate. I fully understand that it is not easy to read about the reaction of family members to your disclosure, particularly if you have had a difficult time. There are revelations about coming out to family that readers of this report will never have encountered before and I am immensely proud of everyone who has helped bring this information to light.

Dundalk Outcomers is ten years old this year. Our organisation has been supporting LGB people all this time and we feel that we have been the rock for many when they've needed one. We have been able to

deliver this service because of the continuing support of agencies in Dundalk who have acknowledged our organisation and helped legitimize the need for this service.

The people without whom this research would not have been possible need to be thanked. They include the Social Programme for Peace and Reconciliation, Ann and Ray, who met with us twelve years ago when we started this journey. The Health Inequalities Board within the Health Services Executive (HSE) and also the Social Inclusion Unit of the HSE. The Women's Health Officer, the Men's Health Officer and the Youth Officer of the HSE, who have all worked in partnership with Dundalk Outcomers for the past four years.

The Board of Pobal, who have been very supportive of our programme, funding this particular piece of research and one of our positions within Dundalk Outcomers.

Dundalk Partnership, whose ongoing support has been invaluable and has kept us from having to close the door on more than one occasion. We have received once off grants from Louth Co. Council, the Community Foundation and the Department of Social and Family Affairs, among others. There have also been individuals and organisations who came in and worked with us voluntarily, and groups like Triskele Community Development Support Agency and individuals like Emma Jane Hoey and Will Peters, who have directed us and educated us along the road.

As you can see, this is not a journey only of gay people, but of people in the region who believe in equality and diversity; who nurture the growth of organisations like Dundalk Outcomers, which are often perceived to be of little value. The pages of this report will show the need for our organisation and for services for people who have been affected by coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual to their family members.

Thank you to Clarity RDT - who worked with the families, gathered their stories and gave them the respect they deserved, turning them into the document you hold in your hand.

Enjoy your read

*Bernardine Quinn*  
Project Co-Ordinator

## Authors Acknowledgements

In the first instance we wish to thank all of the family members – parents, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, ex-spouses and grandparents - who participated in this project. Some welcomed us into their homes, others travelled to the Dundalk Outcomers centre to meet us. Their input was invaluable and the project would not have been possible without them.

A piece of work such as this is only ever possible because of the development of a set of supportive and challenging working relationships. Therefore, we must acknowledge the support and challenge provided by the Project Steering Group members:

Gerry Farrell  
Billy Forbes  
Irene McCauley  
Kieran Smyth  
Bernardine Quinn

Una Lyons, Clarity Projects Worker, provided much needed administrative support and back up in the design, development and delivery of this project.

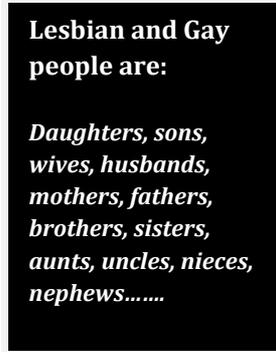
On a more personal note, as the mothers of a young son, we have four people we must acknowledge. The first two are Bernardine and Jean, who shared their home with us during the fieldwork phase of this project. The second are Kate and Sonny Morley, who take their role of grandparents to our young son Jacob very seriously and make it possible for us to travel to take on projects such as this.

*Catherine and Orla Egan Morley  
December 2007*

# 1 Introduction

## 1 Background and Context

- 1.1 In the early nineties, a poster started to appear in community projects all over Ireland. Reproduced below (in an abbreviated format), it asserted:



Its purpose was to raise awareness amongst the general population of the need to acknowledge that issues relating to sexual preference related to all of us, to our families, and to open up the possibility that even though there may be stereotypes, the reality is that Lesbians are all around us, even if we do not realise it, or have not made it possible for them to tell us. Many members of the Lesbian and Gay community in Ireland can remember the first time they saw this poster and the impact its studied simplicity had upon the physical environment within which it was displayed. Yes, in some situations it was just hung along with all of the other posters that came through the mail. Somehow, however, the intention didn't really matter. What mattered was that it acknowledged in very simple terms the fact that Lesbians existed in the most mainstream social structure of all, the family. As a result of this piece of work, perhaps a new poster can be developed, showing families – without defining the sexual orientation of any of the assembled family group members.

*I asked him if he was gay and he said yes. He found it difficult to tell me. I said you are no different to my other kids. I was relieved that it was out in the open and that he wasn't going behind my back. I didn't want other people to know he was gay and that I didn't know it. To me, he's just my son.*

- 1.2 When we think of the term family, many things come to mind. For some, families provide a haven from the world, a place where love and trust are expected and received for no reason other than those of kinship and consanguinity. For others, families are places where love and trust are or were expected, but never received. In the west, our common understanding of the family is based around consanguinity or descent from a common ancestor. For members of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community these definitions also hold true. Some community members experience the warmth, affection and care expected from their family of origin - parents, grand-parents, siblings, children, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews. For others, acknowledging a sexual orientation that is different has led to isolation from families of origin. This experience, of support and love or isolation and

alienation has long been the stuff of discussions of the impact of homophobia upon the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community, both in Ireland and abroad.

- 1.3 This report seeks to provide an insight into the experiences of some families of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people in developing their own personal, emotional and familial responses to the sexual orientation of their son, daughter, ex-spouse, sibling, parent, grand-child, aunt or uncle. It looks at their realisation of difference, their responses to *Coming Out*, the supports that were available or unavailable to them in developing their response, their perceptions of the impact of the sexual orientation of their family member upon their relationships within the context of their family and their recommendations for the development of services and supports for families living through this experience.
- 1.4 The families who participated in the development of this document welcomed the opportunity to participate as a way to support families and Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people in and around Dundalk to better understand each others' hopes, fears, struggles and challenges. For many, this opportunity to speak and to share their experiences came too late, having already processed the information that their family members are Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual. For all of those we met, the sharing of their experiences felt important, not least because it might help other families to find their way through the struggles and challenges and towards a place of respect, understanding and affection.

## 2 Dundalk Outcomers

- 2.1 Formally established in 1998 – although community members had been gathering to provide support for a number of years previously - Dundalk Outcomers is a social and befriending support group for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people. Located in the centre of Dundalk town, the organisation provides a safe, social and relaxed environment for the LGB people. From this base, it provides the following services:
  - Drop-in service
  - 24 hr information line
  - Confidential helpline
  - Health education workshops
  - Outreach programme
  - Befriending programme
  - Social events
  - Training – for community members and the voluntary and statutory sectors
  - Information on physical, mental and sexual health
  - Free condoms
- 2.2 A voluntary Board of Management manages the organisation and it is staffed by two full-time workers – a Project Co-Ordinator and Community Development Outreach Worker. Volunteers from within the LGB community act as a vital resource to the organisation, providing volunteer time for the various drop-in and group activities facilitated through the Centre. The organisation is funded by a package of resources provided by Pobal, Dundalk

Employment Partnership, the Health Services Executive and donations from community members.

- 2.3 During the course of the past ten years, Dundalk Outcomers has needed to provide support for the families of the LGB community at various times, even attempting to put in place a peer support group at one time. As a result of this, the organisation realised that it needed to hear the views of family members in order to move towards the development of its services and supports and made a decision to carry out a piece of research and development work around the issues.

### 3 Overall Aims of the Process

- 3.1 In September 2007, following a competitive tendering process, Dundalk Outcomers contracted Clarity RDT to carry out this piece of work framed within the context of the following key aims:
1. To work with family members of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community of Dundalk Outcomers service users in Dundalk and its environs to explore their experiences of having a Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual family member
  2. To develop a report, for publication, highlighting the experiences of family members in Dundalk and its environs
  3. To explore national and international models of practice and to work with the organisation to develop an appropriate model for the provision of support to families
  4. To identify, through this exploration, a series of specific organisational initiatives which might provide family focused support services from the Outcomers resource centre in Dundalk town

### 4 Structure and Focus of this Report

- 4.1 This report – apart from sections 1 and 2 - is structured thematically to reflect the outcomes of the research and development process work with families. As described below, Sections 3 through 7 use the words of the participants to tell stories and to reflect experiences. This report is not an academic or psychological exploration of the experiences reflected, and was never meant to be. Rather it is the outcome of process designed to acknowledge the experiences of families and to ascertain the types of family support programmes which could be delivered by Dundalk Outcomers. To some extent, it provides merely a starting point for the organisation. Nothing has been added and nothing has been taken away, names have been changed and some situations have been omitted in order to maintain confidentiality. On another level, it should prove useful to both families and organisations in reflecting upon the ways in which formal and informal support structures can be put in place.
- 4.2 In essence, Section 3 looks at the participants' experience *realisation* of the sexual orientation of their family member; Section 4 explores the participants' reactions to *coming out*; Section 5 deals with the participants' experiences of the supports available to them in the initial stages of their realisations and reactions to their family member's sexual orientation; Section 6 deals with their perceptions of the impact of their family members'

sexual orientation within the context of the family and their experiences of their communities; Section 7 explores the current relationships between participants and their LGBT family member; Section 8 identifies the key overarching and specific support needs emerging from the process and makes a series of recommendations to Dundalk Outcomers for developing support services for families.

## 5 Final Introductory Comments

- 5.1 In the final analysis, this report attempts to be as true to the words of the families who participated as possible. Thus, each section reflects the responses of parents/grand-parents, siblings, children and ex-spouses, with an introductory analysis of the issues emerging. In some cases it provides a summary at the end of a section, in others, it does not.
- 5.2 Before moving forward however, family members were anxious that we reflect their significant positive regard for their sons, daughters, siblings and parents and requested that we frame this document within that context. In their own words:

*He's the best in the world*

*He's my son, I love him – that's it*

*He's great*

*They (the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community) are brilliant people, outstanding people, special people*

*She's my sister and I love her*

*He's such a good son, the family really relies on him*

*I'm very proud of her*

*He's a good lad, that's what's important*

Process participants faced their own challenges on their journey with their Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual family member. We trust this report meets the significant challenge in reflecting the hopes, fears, challenges and struggles of such a diverse group.

## 2 Methods and Participation

### 1 Management and Timescale of the Process

1.1 Management of the process was overseen by a Steering Group comprising members of the Board of Dundalk Outcomers who took on the role of:

- Designing the terms of reference
- Managing the commissioning process
- Agreeing the process work plan
- Developing the participant contact list (in collaboration with community members)
- Overseeing the progress of the process
- Participating in discussions relating to the development of the final documents for publication and the implementation of the recommendations emerging from the process

1.2 The Clarity team comprised a Project Leader, a Fieldwork Manager and a Project Worker. Together, this team took on the role of:

- Managing contractual arrangements and client/steering group liaison
- Designing process implementation/work plan
- Design of process tools
- Contacting and corresponding with participants
- Scheduling one to one and discussion group sessions
- Facilitating one to one and discussion group sessions
- Exploring national and international best practice models of support for the families of LGB people
- Drafting of all documentation and reports emerging from the process

1.3 The process was completed between October and December 2007 and required roughly 18 Clarity team days to complete. Most one to one sessions and the group discussion sessions were held in Dundalk Outcomers. In some cases, one to one sessions were held in participants' homes to facilitate commitments. One to one sessions were held in the mornings, afternoons and evenings, again to facilitate participants' commitments. At all times, participants' confidentiality was assured and original data emerging from the process is maintained in the Clarity Archive in Castlemartyr. At no time did staff or management of Dundalk Outcomers have access to the final participant list.

### 2 Seeking and Supporting Families to Participate

2.1 In order to kickstart the process, the Project Leader and Fieldwork Manager facilitated a *Queer Conversation* in Dundalk Outcomers in order to work with the community to ensure ongoing communication with the community regarding the design and implementation of the process and to support them to request family members to participate. Following this session, which was attended by over thirty community members, the Clarity team developed clear process information materials and participation guidelines for distribution through the community.

2.2 Once the materials had been distributed, Dundalk Outcomers staff worked with community members to develop a contact list which was forwarded to the Clarity team. The Clarity team then disseminated written requests to potential participants. Once these initial requests were followed up by telephone conversations to ensure clarity of purpose, a series of one to one sessions were scheduled at the convenience of participants. This process of seeking and supporting families to participate was important as it set out a clear pathway into the process for families and ensured that confidentiality was respected. In addition, it afforded potential participants an opportunity to engage with the Clarity team prior to the one to one sessions and allowed them additional time to assess whether or not they wished to participate. Initially, it had been envisaged that ten one to one sessions and ten focus groups would be held. Following the *Queer Conversation*, however, it became clear that the numbers required for this were not available and it was agreed that, instead, that the focus should be upon implementing one to one sessions. In addition, all of those who participated in one to one sessions were invited to a group discussion session at the end of the process.

### 3 One to One Sessions

3.1 The individual one to one sessions focused upon the following thematic areas:

- First Realisation
- Coming Out
- Initial Reaction
- Formal Supports Available
- Personal Support Structures
- Potentially Useful Supports
- Impact of Family Member's Sexuality
- Changes (if any) in Relationship with Family Member
- Contact with Dundalk Outcomers
- Recommendations around Supports for Families
- Potential Users of Recommended Supports
- Key Issues Facing Families

### 4 Facilitated Group Discussion

4.1 The facilitated group discussion focused upon:

- Sharing and checking in on the outcomes of the one to one sessions
- Developing recommendations for Dundalk Outcomers

In addition, this session provided an opportunity for families to network socially, although this intention was not originally envisaged.

### 5 Participation in the Process

5.1 Overall, twenty three family members participated in the one to one sessions, comprising the following:

- 20 women / 2 men
- 8 parents (1 father/7 mothers)
- 1 grand-mother

- 5 children (4 daughters and 1 son)
- 7 sisters
- 1 ex-spouse
- 1 niece

Participants ranged in age from sixteen to eighty six. Of those twenty three, ten participated in the facilitated discussion session.

## 6 Final Comments on Methods and Participation

- 6.1 The method designed for the delivery of this particular process are not easily categorised into any particular methodological framework. Rather, it developed from an awareness of the most useful approaches to ensuring that participants were facilitated to explore their experiences and to share those in a manner in which they were most comfortable. In the one to one sessions, the approach was to facilitate a semi-structured conversation, but also to leave enough space for participants to explore potentially different areas to those related to the pre-defined themes. Within the facilitated group discussions, participants were facilitated to discuss the issues emerging with each other, to lead the discussion and to respond to issues as they arose.
- 6.2 For these reasons, the Clarity team and the Dundalk Outcomers' Steering Group are clear that this was, indeed, a developmental process which took as its starting point the views and experiences of participating family members. In the initial stages of the process, the issue as to whether to ask participants if they had experienced homophobia was discussed in detail. The emerging decision was that this would not be appropriate as it might flavour the manner in which participants explored their experiences. When one reads the words of participants, it becomes very, very clear, however, that almost all of the participants had experienced some form of homophobia in their journey with their Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual family member.
- 6.3 In relation to participation, we must also make a number of comments. On the one hand, the process which we adopted to seek and support participation was successful; we met a significant number of people in a relatively short period of time. On the other, the participants we met would seem to have integrated the sexual orientation of their family members into the context of mainstream family life and had moved from initial misgivings, fears and shock towards a place of acceptance, love and support. We did not meet a participant who refused to engage with the Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual orientation, lifestyle and culture of their family member, who shunned that family member – or their partners or friends - or who refused to accept and support their family member. We met people of strength and tolerance who agreed to participate because they knew of others within the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community who were encountering significant difficulties with their families of origin and hoped that their participation might smooth the path for families to be more accepting and open to difference. Another important point to note is the significant dearth of men who were available to us. In some cases, the mothers and sisters spoke of their husbands and brothers and to us it seemed like they were taking their place.

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## 3 The Realisation

### 1 Introduction

1.1 In this section, we look at families' realisation of the sexual identity of their son, daughter, grand-son, grand-daughter, parent, sibling, aunt and uncle. Throughout, participants identify a series of levels of realisation – from absolute ignorance through to the affirmation of a long held belief. For some, the realisation came out of nowhere, or began to ferment as a result of a particular incident. For others, we get a sense of there always being some level of knowing that something was different, that something was – as the family member got older – being hidden. Parents, Grand-Parents and Ex-Spouses were more likely to be shocked than siblings – although not in all cases – as the following stories illustrate.

### 2 Parents / Grand-Parent

Some parents had no idea that their child was gay until they were told directly. Most had a sense that their child was 'different' in some way, although they would not necessarily have realised that they were gay. One parent had 'an inkling' that their child was gay. For two others, it was a particular incident which triggered their realisation. Two parents knew that their child was gay before they were told; one then asked her child directly if he was gay, the other waited for her child to tell her.

.... I did know he was different from my other son. He had no interest in tractors or boys' toys. He was only interested in books. He loved dressing up as TV characters and he never played with his brother. But he was so gentle; he was like a Mammy to his little sister - so attentive. My sister bought him a Barbie Doll, I was furious with her. He often found it hard to make friends, he was sensitive and gentle. He was bullied in primary school and we addressed it and it was dealt with. Then he was bullied again in secondary school and we did the same thing. By then he had started to keep himself to himself. He decided to go away to University....

....When he was quite young we were on holiday and a kid called him gay, I think that started me thinking about it, but on and off, not all the time or anything. He was always playing with girls, I think somewhere deep down I always knew....

....I didn't realise anything was different until he told me....

....I had an inkling - when he was at primary school a nurse came up to the house and made some nasty comments...he was a giddy type when he was younger....

....I didn't realise it, not for a second. One day a letter came for him, it was open, almost as if I was meant to see what was in it. It was full of photos of men and I didn't know what to think. I rang him and told him I didn't like what I saw, he came straight home...

....She was a very quiet child. I remember in the late 'eighties she was always very close to girls. I started to suspect something then. I had lots of lesbian and gay friends. It wasn't something new to me. I moved to England and came home one Christmas....

....It was always men phoning him. I started to think. I said it to his father that I thought he might be gay. I remember he used to go to Dublin a lot...

....I remember she wanted to wear boys' clothes for her confirmation. I always thought she was an unhappy child. I wondered what that was about.....

### 3 Siblings

Only one of the siblings had no idea that her sibling was gay before she was told. All the others knew to some extent that their sibling was gay.

....Do you know, I always knew. We were close in age....

....She was always a tomboy. I had gay friends and when she was twelve or thirteen, she was mad about one of them. She really related to him. When she was seventeen, I asked her if she was a Lesbian. She denied it. She never had a boyfriend. My gay friends hinted that she was a Lesbian....

....I always knew, even before I was told, there was just something....

....He always used to play Barbie's with me, so it was no shock....

....I have two lesbian sisters and a gay brother. I had no idea before they told us....

....I kind of always knew, there was just something there. When he went away to college, he became more open....

....I realised early on when he was a teenager, but I didn't put a gay label on it. He was always slightly different. When he was three or four, he took my doll, washed her hair and burned it. He always tended more towards girly things; he always had a very feminine character....

### 4 Children / Niece

Two of the children had no idea that their parent was gay until they were told. Another child felt that maybe she knew on some level that her parent was gay. Three of the children began to realise that their parent was gay between the ages of 11 and 13.

....I didn't know until he told me when I was about twelve or thirteen....

....Around the time my parents split up I used to joke that Daddy must have been gay to leave Mammy. Maybe I knew it subconsciously, he is camper than he realises!

...When I was about thirteen or fourteen, I saw magazines in his room full of men. I heard it on the street, there was a lot of local gossip. I think it all put it in my head....

...I realised it when I was about thirteen or fourteen, but I never talked about it....

...My earliest childhood memory is my Dad and Mum living together but sleeping separately. There was another woman living with us. I thought she was the au pair. Around ten or eleven, I realised she wasn't and I started to wonder why she was sleeping with my mother....

## **5 Summary Issues in Relation to *The Realisation***

5.1 In this section we have seen how some family members had absolutely no idea, some had "an inkling" and some just felt their child, sister, brother or parent was different in some way. In all cases, however, the realisation began a process of "coming out", the subject of the next section of this document.

## 4 Coming Out / Reactions

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 Family members' reactions to their relative 'coming out' were very varied, as can be seen from the quotations below. Overall reactions were mostly positive, with parents in particular making sure that their child knew that they still loved them. Even those parents who really struggled to come to terms with the fact that their child was gay made sure to tell their child that they loved them.
- 1.2 Many of the difficulties encountered related to worries about the family member, being concerned that they would be ok, be happy and that they wouldn't get hassle. This showed an awareness of the homophobia which exists in society and anxiety about its impact on their relative. A big issue for some people was letting go of their ideas of who that family member was and how their life would be, for example letting go of the idea that they would get married and have children. Some people talked of a sense of grief – grieving because the person they thought their relative was no longer existed.
- 1.3 A number of people experienced particular difficulties. Even in these cases, however, it wasn't the fact that their relative was gay that caused the difficulties but issues associated with this. Key issues here would be the impact that hiding one's sexuality has on one's relatives, particularly when it has been hidden for a long time, and the impact on family members of other people's negative reactions to the fact that their relative is gay.
- 1.4 Those who found it easiest to deal with were those family members who had always known or suspected that their relative was gay, and those who already had contact with the gay community.

### 2 Parents / Grand-Parent

....A letter had come for him, it was open – there were photos of men. I rang him and said I didn't like what I saw. He came home from college. He said his case was downstairs still packed – If I wanted he would just go and never come back. I told him that the day someone puts you out of the house I'll be right there after you. No matter what you are you're still my son and I will always love you. But it was a big shock. I felt I had to grieve, to let go of the image of how I thought his life would be and accept the fact that he wouldn't have kids....

....He came out to his mother and she told me. I said to him "Everyone to their fancy and I to my Nancy", meaning you go your way and I'll go my way. What can you do? Your son is your son no matter what. It's not his fault – its just the way it is. You have to support him no matter what. I just accepted it. I wasn't disappointed or anything. I was just a bit sad that he might not have kids....

....I had kind of suspected that she was lesbian but I was waiting for her to tell me. She was finding it difficult to do that. Eventually her brother-in-law told her that either she told me

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or he would. So she sat me down and told me. I told her that I already knew. She was so relieved to have it out in the open and not to have to hide and pretend. As long as she was happy, I was happy. At least she didn't have cancer – she's there and living her life – that's what is important....

....I asked him if he was gay and he said yes. He had found it difficult to tell me. I said you're no different to my other kids. I felt relieved that it was out in the open and that he wasn't going behind my back. I didn't want other people to know he was gay and that I didn't know it. To me he's just my son. He's great – he does the Hoovering...

....He came home from college and stood in the kitchen and said I want to make an announcement. At first he said he was bisexual to try and ease the blow. I was shocked. I told him I loved him and that it didn't matter what he was. But it took a while to sink in and deal with it. Then we were able to talk and laugh about it. He introduced me to his boyfriend and we got on well with him....

....On the morning of my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday my other child told me that my son and daughter were gay. My world collapsed. I lay on the couch all day – I couldn't even wash my hair for my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party. It was a nightmare. Everything crowded in on me. I thought people would think better of a murderer than a gay person. I was devastated by it – especially because there were two of them. I didn't want it – I wanted it to go away. I had been living in this cocoon of happy marriage and then this monster hit. I thought it was the worst thing that could ever happen to a family. I was in the depths of despair. I cried every day for a year and a half. It occupied my every waking minute. It is difficult from a heterosexual point of view – you can't relate to same-sex relationships. All your hopes for your kids are gone – I was in grief. In your wildest fears for your kids this wouldn't have figured. I had had no contact with gay people. But when I found out I made sure to make it clear to my son and daughter that I loved them and nothing changed that. I found it difficult to cope but I wouldn't reject them. They are two brilliant people – outstanding people, special people.

....The children's father told me that they were gay. It took a while to sink in, it was a bit of a shock. Then I realised that it didn't make any difference to me – they're my grandchildren and that's it. I adored them. They're fabulous kids, wonderful people - they stand out as exceptionally good people....

....He was in the house with a friend one day and she was saying that mothers know everything and I said yes we do. A few days later he came into the kitchen in bad form. His sister was giving out to him, saying 'what's wrong, did you murder someone?' He said 'if you had my worries'. She said 'why, are you gay?' And he said yes. I told him I knew and gave him a hug. He cried. I said it didn't matter, we love you. I talked to him about it. But it broke my heart that he wouldn't have kids....

....He came home from college one weekend. He was drunk and upset and told me he had something to tell me. I thought he was going to tell me that he had got someone pregnant.

I was shocked. I asked him when he had realised and he told me he had known from an early age. I was upset that he had had to deal with it on his own. I was worried about him. I spent the weekend crying because of what he had gone through and what was in front of him. I didn't realise that there were so many gay people and I was worried that he wouldn't be happy. I was sad that he wouldn't get married and have kids. But he's my son, I love him and that's it....

### 3 Siblings

....My mother told me but I already knew. No reaction because I already knew. It was just part of him....

....I asked him. He had been planning to tell me. He had just told my mother. I was a bit shocked when he said he was gay, even though I knew. I gave him a big hug and told him I loved him. It was a big relief for him....

....I always knew she was lesbian but we hadn't talked about it. One night we were driving around, my sister, my husband and myself. My sister was drunk and said 'I've something to tell you'. My husband said 'If you're going to tell us you're straight we'll be awful disappointed.' I had no reaction because we always knew....

....My mammy told me. I sent her a text saying 'I heard your news!'....

....When she was 17 I asked her if she was lesbian – she denied it. But I knew she was. My gay friend told me that my sister was lesbian. She moved out of home and moved in with an older woman. I asked her again and eventually she came out with it. I always knew so it was not a shock. I was worried for her – worried that she would be hurt or get abuse, that she would be discriminated against. I was annoyed that she couldn't come out and say it to me; I was upset that she couldn't come and talk to me....

....He told me and my reaction was, 'Oh my God, you'll never have kids'. I talked it through with him. I was worried that he might get hassle or that he might have a hard life because of it....

....I had realised early on that he was gay and I put that gay label on it when I was around 16. It was unspoken – there was no actual coming out to me. But there was a public coming out a few years later which had a huge impact on my family. His coming out to my parents was quite traumatic and dramatic. He made a film about coming out and came out to my parents just before the film was shown on TV. I was angry at him for the way he did it – I felt he didn't give the family time or space to deal with it before it was shown on national TV. My father took it badly – it was the loss of how he thought his son's life would be – and he was worried about him, that he might be attacked or that he was being led. My mother said 'do you think I came up the river in a bubble' and gave him the names of gay men in the area! For me I was sad seeing my father struggling with it and I was angry at the way he did

it – I felt it wasn't fair for my parents. I was the one who was trying to support my family in dealing with it....

....We were in the garden and he said 'I need to tell you something'. At first he said he was bisexual to try to make it easier and then later told me he was gay. I was ok – I kind of knew anyway. Initially I didn't want to talk about him having boyfriends but I'm fine now, I ask him loads of questions now....

#### 4 Children / Niece

....She never actually came out to me when I was a child but when she was drunk she would talk about her love for her partner. We talked about it in later years – she would talk about how it was for her to be gay in Ireland and how it was to have to hide it and keep it in. I had no problem with my mother being gay but she told me not to tell anyone and so I was full of fear as a child – afraid of it getting out and people viewing me differently....

....He took me out for a meal. He asked me if I knew why he and mummy had split up and I said joking that it was about him being gay. He said he was. I was shocked, laughing. I hadn't expected him to say he was gay. I told him I loved him. I was more worried about mummy and how she would feel about him being gay – it didn't bother me....

....When I was around 15 he sat me down and said he was gay, that he preferred men. I remember him telling me and it all fell into place – everything made sense then. I told a few friends but they already knew. It didn't bother me, didn't affect me....

....I realised it but never felt the need to talk about it. I knew it was different but I just accepted it. I worried about what other people would think but that didn't impact on how I felt about it....

....He told me he was gay, that he had been gay before he met Mammy and that he fell in love with her, but that the gay feelings had come back. I was shocked – I had no idea before. I didn't know what to say. It was a bit awkward at first but I got used to it....

....He sat me and my sister down at home and told us he was gay and that was why he had moved out. He said that just because he was gay didn't mean that I would be gay. I was in shock for a while then it just sank in – I got used to it. I got angry about it - but mostly about the fact that my father had moved out rather than because he was gay. I felt that I had lost control over my life. People at school found out very quickly and boys were giving me abuse about it and I had to fight back or the abuse would have kept going. I was getting in trouble in school and getting in trouble at home – I wasn't doing my homework – I just sat around- I couldn't do anything. I felt I was getting hassle from everyone. I was anxious going to school because of the hassle and fighting. I was depressed and felt suicidal....

## 5 Spouse

...He told me he was gay – I had no idea before that... I was relieved initially because I thought he wasn't going to leave and that we would sort stuff out together. I even suggested marriage counselling but then he left. He said his cards were on the table and he couldn't help me deal with it because he had caused the problem. I went mental. I lost loads of weight and developed a stress related illness. It was very difficult. I felt suicidal. I started drinking heavily....It was difficult having to keep it in. Yet I would have been mortified and embarrassed if people knew.

The hardest thing for me was the deceits, lies and cheating. I felt really bad that I didn't know, that he didn't tell me. I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel. I couldn't understand why he had done it to me. I wanted to throw myself in the river but I couldn't because of the kids. It was like a death – the person I thought I was married to was gone – but he kept reappearing –he was still around – that was very difficult to deal with. It was like a death but I couldn't get through the grieving because he was still around. I wasn't just dealing with the impact on me, also dealing with impact on the children. It was horrific. There were lots of arguments, lots of hurtful things said. I kept thinking 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph – what happened?' I thought I had a fab marriage, nothing wrong with it – then bang. How could I have not seen the writing on the wall?

...The break-up of the marriage was very big deal – I still loved him – I couldn't just put those feelings in a box somewhere. It was very hard to see him with someone else. I was shocked. I couldn't take in the concept that he was gay. The splitting up was a bigger issue than him being gay. In many ways it was like the break up of any marriage – but it was the lies and deceits that were the hardest to deal with – that he never told me. Sometimes it was ok to see him and other times I couldn't cope with it – I would look at him and think 'what have you done?' After the kids went to bed I would sit up crying and drinking. But I finally copped myself on. I had to let it go or it would have eaten me up. It felt like there were lots of stumbling blocks that I had to get over – that I had to keep dealing with new stuff – dealing with the initial period, dealing with him moving out, dealing with him having a boyfriend, dealing with people finding out etc. ...

## 6 Summary Issues in Relation to Coming Out / Reactions

6.1 To re-iterate, reactions to a family members' "coming out" varied. What we see is that it is of paramount importance to ensure that this diversity of experience is reflected in the ways in which future services are development. In many ways, whether the reactions were positive or negative would seem to have been influenced by two key factors, namely:

- ***Degree to which the relative's sexuality was hidden.*** Family members coped best where they had been aware of their relative's sexuality at an early stage. In these cases it just wasn't an issue for them. Conversely the greatest damage was caused where someone's sexuality was hidden for a long time and where family members had to deal with the negative impact on the gay person themselves of hiding their sexuality and with the fact that they had been lied to and deceived.
- ***Contact with, and awareness of gay people, prior to finding out that family member was gay.*** Family members who had contact with gay people and who had gay friends

found it much easier that those who had no contact at all with gay people. For this latter group they were dealing with something completely new and which was surrounded by myths and misinformation.



## 5 Supports

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 None of the family members were aware of any formal supports which were available specifically for them. Many felt that they had no need for support. Some got support from other family members or from friends. A couple of people tried unsuccessfully to get support from gay organisations. They found that the organisations' priority was to support the gay person and they did not provide the support they needed.
- 1.2 Some people turned to the people they would traditionally go to for support and help in times of difficulty, i.e. their doctor or priest. However the reactions they received were varied and too often were negative and unhelpful. They found that these doctors or priests did not understand the situation and were not in a position to provide support to the families.
- 1.3 Most stated that they would like to have been able to access supports when they were dealing with their relative coming out. They were particularly interested in being able to talk to someone who had been in a similar situation and understood what they were experiencing. They also wanted to be able to access information to help to alleviate their fears about their gay relative.

### 2 Parents / Grand-Parent

Most parents were not aware of any formal supports that were there for them when their child came out to them. One parent heard a programme on Kenny Live which gave a telephone helpline in Dublin. She stayed up half the night to get through to them. She went to Dublin with her husband and met up with other families and talked things through. However, while she found this helpful, there was no follow-up from that meeting. Some parents felt no need to seek support.

Some expressed concern that the families who were experiencing the most difficulty probably wouldn't take part in a support group. It was felt that a confidential phone line would be useful for people who weren't willing or ready to take part in a group. Parents also felt that it was important to advertise any support services which were established so that people would know about them. They suggested putting an advert in the local paper and notices in churches and doctors' surgeries.

...It never dawned on me, I didn't need it. He was ours and that was it. I didn't hide it – I'd tell everyone. He's the best in the world....

...We just supported him and that was it. We didn't feel we needed support. He's a good lad – that's what's important....

...I didn't really need support. I didn't care what anyone thought. I loved them, that was it. I was happy and content with them the way they were....

Other parents found it difficult to tell anyone.

....I told no-one initially. I was very isolated at the time. I found it hard to tell my family....

....I was ashamed. It was a long time before I could tell my family....

Some parents supported each other in dealing with the news that their child was gay.

....Myself and my husband supported each other....

Some parents turned to siblings or close friends for support.

....I went to my sister – we cried together and she told me she was there 100% for me....

....I spoke to a friend. She said ‘What about it? He’s still your son.’....

....My friend’s son died. Then her other son came out to her. She said ‘so what, no one is dead.’ That put it in perspective for me....

Some parents turned to their doctor, priest or other religious figure but did not always receive the support they were looking for.

....I talked to my doctor about it – he laughed at me and practically ran me out of the surgery....

....I had a chat with a nun in Knock – she was very supportive and nice and kind...

....I had an uncle who was a priest – he put us in touch with a Provincial in Dublin who worked with gay people. He was very helpful but I felt he didn’t really understand what we were going through as parents....

....I went to Lough Derg and talked to the Prior. He was very good and nice. He sent me a cutting about Cardinal Hume saying that all love is good, even homosexual love. That really helped and it started me to begin to come around. The Cardinal’s words were key – they changed my way of thinking. It made so much sense. I was then very hurt when Pope John Paul said gay people were intrinsically evil – I was livid and hurt and angry....

Many parents would have liked to have been able to access supports, in particular to be able to talk to others who had been through a similar experience.

....I needed someone to talk to....

...I would have liked to talk to another mother who had been through it, to talk about how I felt....

....I would have liked to talk to people who had been through the same experience....

...To talk to someone who knew more about it, who could explain things to you. Someone to call up...

...I would have liked somewhere to go and talk things over with someone, to help let go of my hopes that she would have gotten married and had kids....

However some parents, particularly those who were finding it difficult to cope with the fact that their child was gay, felt that there was nothing that anyone could do to support them.

...I don't think anything would have helped me at that time. I didn't want to talk to anyone. Nothing could change the situation, and that was what I wanted. I was wallowing in my own grief....

All the parents felt that a peer support group would be useful to give parents and families an opportunity to meet others in a similar situation and to talk about their concerns.

...It would be great to have someone to contact to talk about what is going on for family members, especially when a child has just come out, someone who has gone through similar experience....

...Best support of all is communication. Don't bottle it up. Get families together in Dundalk Outcomers to talk....

...Get together and talk openly....

...Somewhere to come to, to have a cuppa and talk about what is going on....

### 3 Siblings

None of the siblings were aware of any formal support services that were available for them. Most of them didn't feel any need for support. Most just talked to their gay sibling, to their friends and to their partners. Some also talked with other gay friends. One felt very let down by the gay community and the fact that they had offered no support to the family. The gay community had actively encouraged her sibling to come out in a very public way, without thinking through the impact that this would have on the family.

While most of the siblings didn't feel that they needed support, most felt that it would be useful to have support services in place. Others expressed concern about their gay sibling and were anxious that they be able to access support services in Dundalk. The siblings made a number of suggestions in relation to supports they would like to see established. Most felt that a peer support group would be useful where people could go to talk to other family members. They also felt that a phone line and one-2-one support would be important, especially at the beginning. In addition, they felt that families need information to counteract myths about lesbians and gays. This group felt that it was important that these services be advertised widely so that families would know where to go for information and

advice. They suggested putting posters and leaflets in doctors' surgeries and health centres to advertise the services. They also stressed the need to provide information and training for key people in the local community that families were likely to turn to for help, such as doctors and priests.

....I didn't need support – my brother was gay – that's just the way he is....

....I didn't feel the need for support....

....I've never been one for making a big deal of it. You're gay – so what? We're not going to keep talking about it forever. I don't talk about being straight all the time....

....I talked to my friends. I got a lot of support from my gay friends....

....There was no follow-up in terms of providing support for the family....

....It would be good to have some support service where you could go and talk about it – talk to people who understand and can help you deal with it....

....I would have liked some reassurance that he was going to be ok....

Many of the siblings expressed concerns about their parents, and would have liked to have seen supports in place for them.

....I would have like information on how to cope with it for my father, how to deal with his sense of loss and the grieving....

....The older generation need more support than younger people....

....It would have been useful for my mother to have access to some support and information....

....I felt bad that there were no supports there for my brother – he had to hitchhike to Drogheda for support....

....You might not be ready for a group in the beginning....

....I feel some people might be more inclined to use a helpline because it is anonymous and then maybe move on to a support group later as they got more confidence....

....Provide information and help people understand and move beyond the negative messages about being gay that we got growing up. Re-education families about what it means to be gay....

They also felt that families need information and advice on how to deal with other people's possible negative attitudes to gay people.

#### 4 Children / Niece

None of the children were aware of any formal supports that were available to them. Some felt no need for support. However, most of the children stated that there was no one for them to talk to and they felt that this had had a detrimental impact on them. One child accessed a counsellor through a family member. However the other children at school noticed that the child was out of school on a regular basis to attend the counselling and began to give the child more hassle so the counselling stopped. They then went to a youth social worker through another family member. The social worker advised the child to do something physical to get the anger out and to take up free time so as to avoid just sitting around thinking about everything. This proved to be valuable advice. One child stressed the importance of creating a situation where children feel safe and able to open up and talk about what is going on for them. Fear of people knowing that they were accessing support or counselling can prevent children from accessing these services. One child stopped going to counselling because of getting hassle from other children when they found out. Another child expressed fears of people knowing that they were accessing supports.

The children made a number of suggestions in relation to the kinds of supports they would like to see established. They stressed the need for children to have someone they can call and talk to, someone who will listen to them. They also stressed the need for children of lesbians and gays to know that they are not the only ones and to be able to meet other people in similar situations – the importance of knowing that you are not alone. One child suggested that a confidential phone line would be useful as a first point of contact.

They also stressed the need to provide age appropriate supports. Providing opportunities for young children of lesbians and gays to socialise and integrate with other lesbian and gay families can prevent these children feeling isolated and feeling that they are the only ones in the world with a lesbian or gay family. Early opportunities for social interaction can prevent the development of problems when the children are older. They felt that there was an onus on gay parents to contact organisations like Dundalk Outcomers to get help and support for their children. One suggestion was for Dundalk Outcomers to organise social events for lesbian and gay parents and children to meet one another. Different kinds of supports would then need to be developed for older children and adolescents. A peer support group was suggested, although one child expressed some reservations about this. They stressed the need for adult involvement in youth supports to give information and advice and to damp down on the opportunities for overdramatising the issues.

....It didn't bother me so I didn't look for support....

....I didn't feel the need to access supports....

....I had no-one to talk to....

....I didn't talk about it....

....I didn't tell anyone....

....I just bottled it up for a while....

....I didn't know how to talk about it. If I had been able to talk to someone straight away that would have really helped and would have helped me to avoid slipping into depression....

....Hurling saved my life. I threw myself into hurling. If it wasn't for hurling I would have been in trouble....

Most of the children would have liked to have been able to access support services.

....It would have helped to have had someone to talk to....

....It would have been useful to know that you weren't the only one and to realise how common it is....

....It would have been good to have had someone to talk to and get advice from – someone who was there just for me – separate from the family....

....I would have needed someone to build a relationship with me over time so that I felt safe to open up....

....I might have been afraid to go in case people found out....

....It is important for children to have the opportunity to come together....

....I think that if you got lots of young people together to talk about having gay parents that it would make a bigger drama out of it than it needs to be....

....You could talk without having to go in and meet someone – if you were seen going in to somewhere like Dundalk Outcomers you could get more hassle....

A few children suggested using the internet to provide services and supports.

....It would be easy to find information....

....You could get advice without having to talk to anyone....

## 5 Spouse

The spouse went looking, unsuccessfully, for support from lesbian and gay organisations. She looked in the Yellow Pages and phoned various lgb organisations in the North looking for support. However she was told that they only helped the lesbian or gay person themselves and their immediate family and that they couldn't help a spouse. She finally told a friend who sent her a book *My Husband is Gay*. There were email addresses in the book for straight

spouse organisations. She got in touch with them but they were based in America and England and told her that they weren't in a position to help her. She told her sisters but found that they were so angry about what had happened that it didn't help her. She went to her local priest and told him about her situation. He told her to go home like a good Catholic girl and when her husband decided to come back she'd be there. Finally she felt she just had to let go of all the negativity and difficulties she was experiencing. She went to America and went on a helicopter ride over the Grand Canyon. She would really have liked to have had someone to talk to who could relate to what she was going through. She meets up with a few other families in her area where one spouse is gay but she meets them separately – the families don't know the other families. A priest put her in touch with them and he told her that he knows of 27 families in the area where one partner is gay or lesbian!

....It really helped – I read it loads of times....

....They just got angry too and it all escalated – it was a whirlpool of anger....

....I threw all the bad feelings and baggage out the window – I let it go. Life begins today....

## **6 Summary Issues in Relation to Supports**

- 6.1 Family members stressed the need for a variety of supports to meet the varying needs of family members. These included support groups, confidential phone lines and internet information. This would enable people to access services without having to meet someone if they didn't feel ready for that, while providing opportunities to meet others in similar situations for those who were ready to do so. Family members also stressed the need for age appropriate supports, particularly for the children of lesbians and gay men.
- 6.2 For spouses, the issue of accessing supports was exacerbated by the silence surrounding the very public breakdown of a marriage. Thus, on this basis, it is clear that a support service (help line and peer support group) specifically for spouses is urgently needed. Spouses could also use email to get in touch with other straight spouses and have someone with whom to talk things through.

## 6 Impacts

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 Many family members were emphatic that their relative's sexuality had absolutely no impact on their lives. Some emphasised the positive impact having a gay relative has had on their lives. They said it had made them more broad minded and aware of the issues which affect peoples' lives.
- 1.2 Some talked of how it had enriched their lives, bringing new people into their world and how they often had 'great craic' with their relative's gay friends. For some, the immediate impact of finding out that their relative was gay was devastating. It sometimes turned lives upside down and sent family members into the depths of despair.
- 1.3 However, those family members who experienced negative impact often emphasised that it was not the fact that their relative was gay itself that caused the problems. The biggest difficulties were caused by the impact of someone hiding their sexuality and how this affecting themselves and their families. Other negative impacts were caused by having to deal with real or feared negative reactions from other people. In another instance, the issue of alcohol addiction – identified as being one result of the hidden sexuality of a parent – and the violence associated with it caused significant difficulty.

### 2 Parents / Grand-Parent

Most parents were emphatic that their child's sexuality had no impact on their lives. One parent had really struggled to come to terms with the fact that her child was gay. She was devastated by it and was in the depths of despair. A number of things helped her to come to terms with it. A statement by Cardinal Hume saying that 'all love is good, even homosexual love' was really important for her. The son of a friend of hers died. Then her friend's other son came out to her. She said 'so what, no one is dead.' That helped her to put it all in perspective. At the time it had seemed like the worst thing in the world to find out that her child was gay. An illness in her family put that in perspective and helped her to set her priorities straight (excuse the pun!).

....Indeed it hasn't!....

....None whatsoever!....

....No impact....

....I cried every day for a year and a half. It occupied my every waking minute....

....I was ashamed. But I wouldn't feel like that now....

....The Cardinal's words were key – they changed my way of thinking. It made so much sense....

...It takes time to deal with it. I have changed dramatically over the years. My child being gay is low down my list of priorities now.....

### 3 Siblings

Most of the siblings were again emphatic that their sibling's sexuality had no impact on their lives. One sibling said that the only impact was the loss of potential nieces and nephews which made her a bit sad. Two spoke of the positive impact their sibling's sexuality has had on their lives. They felt that it had made them more broad minded and aware of issues which affect people's lives. They also felt that having a gay sibling had enriched their lives and given them the opportunity to meet new and different people.

....Absolutely none. It has never been an issue. I don't care what other people think....

....It has broadened my experiences – made me more open and aware....

....It has made me more aware of issues like bullying and self-esteem....

....I have met so many nice gay people through my brother. It has given me an opportunity to meet lovely people....

....It's quite fun at times – we have great craic – good nights out....

### 4 Children / Niece

Two of the children said that their parent's sexuality had no impact at all on their lives. One issue which arose was the fact that the children of lesbians and gays also have to come out to their friends and when they meet new people. It wasn't seen as a big issue, but was something which impacted on their lives.

For some of the children finding out that their parent was gay had had a huge impact on their lives. However they all emphasised that it was not the fact that their parent was gay that was the problem. The problems they experienced were caused by the impact of hiding one's sexuality and dealing with other people's negative attitudes to their parents' sexuality.

One child experienced significant problems with other children at school once they found out that the child's parent was gay. The child received a lot of hassle from school mates and ended up in a number of fights. This child ended up feeling very angry, depressed and even suicidal. However, he repeatedly emphasised that it was not the fact that his father was gay that led to the problems; it was the fact that his father had moved out and his world had turned upside down and he felt that he had lost control over his life. That, combined with the hassle at school, caused the problems. Another child spoke of the impact of finding out that her parent had been hiding his sexuality from her, her siblings and her mother. If they had known earlier it would have been easier to deal with. Another child also spoke of the impact of hidden sexuality on her life. Her mother had felt unable to come out and she really resented having to hide who she was. To deal with this pain her mother ended up

drinking heavily and when drunk was physically abusive to her partner. This was witnessed by her children on a regular basis. As children, she and her siblings lived in fear of their mother's violent outbursts. These experiences had a huge impact on her life and her relationships and were a contributory factor in her own drug and alcohol abuse. However she also feels that having a gay parent had a very positive impact on her life and suggested that having a gay parent made her more assertive and helped her to appreciate equality and diversity. Alcohol abuse also had a negative impact on another child. When her relative was trying to deal with his drinking the family would have to go to meeting with him – she was a teenager and found it very embarrassing.

....It was my life being turned upside down and other people's reactions to him being gay, rather than him being gay that affected me....

....If it had been open from an early age it wouldn't have been a big deal – it would have hurt everyone less. It was the lies that hurt more than him being gay....

....My earliest childhood memories are of lots of blood, the house being bashed up and sitting in a police car....

....It was great having a gay mum. She was so open minded about everything. People's intolerance of her made her more tolerant....

....His drinking was a bigger and more difficult issue than him being gay. The drinking caused difficulties. Being gay was just part of who he was.....

## 5 Spouse

Finding out that your spouse is gay obviously has a huge impact on your life. The biggest difficulty was dealing with the betrayal of trust, the lies and the deceit. In addition a spouse usually has to deal with the impact of the subsequent breakdown of the marriage, dealing with their spouse moving out and coping emotionally and financially. A spouse is often dealing not just with the impact on their own lives but also on the lives of their children. Coping with these impacts caused huge stress for the spouse, leading to stress related illness, heavy drinking and feeling suicidal.

....It turned my life upside down.....

....I trusted him and I felt so betrayed....

....The lies and deceit had a bigger impact than the fact that he was gay....

....The splitting up was a bigger issue for me than him being gay. In many ways it was like the breakup of any marriage but it was the lies and deceit that were hardest to deal with – that he had never told me.....

## 7 Current Relationships

### 1 Introduction

Most family members stated that they had become closer to their relative after they had come out. They felt that they could talk more openly about what was going on for them and that there wasn't this huge pressure to hide a big part of their lives. One child stated that the relationship with the parent was less close after he came out but stressed that this had more to do with the fact that he no longer lived with the family than the fact that he was gay. The most negative impact on a relationship was for the ex-spouse. The spouse coming out led to the breakdown of the marriage and a complete breakdown of trust.

### 2 Parents / Grand-Parent

One parent said that finding out about a child's sexuality had no impact on their relationship. Two parents felt bad that, because they hadn't been aware of their child's sexuality, they hadn't been able to support their child when they were coming to terms with their sexuality. They wished that they had known their child was gay and had been able to support and help them more. All of the other parents said that it actually made them closer once their child's sexuality was out in the open. They felt that they had a better relationship with their child and could talk better and more openly with one another.

...We were always close....

...We have become closer and better friends. I can relate better to him and talk about things that are going on for both of us....

...We get on better, can talk better about everything. I'm relieved for her that it's out in the open. It was a weight lifted off her shoulders when I reacted well....

... I'm proud of her....

...We're closer – he didn't have to hide something anymore....

...We got closer – I wanted him to know that I'd always be there for him....

...We got closer – I adored them even more....

...I felt guilty; that I had let him down, that he was going to counselling to deal with stuff....

...I regretted that I hadn't been there for him when he was being bullied, that I didn't know he was gay....

### 3 Siblings

Like the parents, the siblings all said that when they found out about their siblings sexuality it either had no impact on their relationship because they were already close, or that any impact it did have on their relationship was positive.

...We're closer since she came out – she's more comfortable and confident and we get on better....

...It was a relief for him when I knew and supported him. He had had difficulties dealing with being gay and it helped him to talk to his sister....

...We were closer when she finally came out to me....

...Knowing that he was gay meant that I didn't miss out on parts of him – I could share all that was going on in his life. We wouldn't have been as close if he had had to hide being gay....

### 4 Children / Niece

The experience of the children of lesbians and gays was very varied in terms of the impact on their relationship with their parent once they became aware of their sexuality. One child talked about becoming less close to their parent but felt that that had more to do with the fact that their parent no longer lived with them, than the fact that he was gay. For some it had no impact on their relationship. Others felt that it made them closer to their parent.

...It didn't change our relationship in any way....

...I can chat to him more about girly stuff – we're more comfortable. He takes me shopping and buys good presents....

...I got closer to her when she came out and got more comfortable about her sexuality. She was much happier in herself and we became closer....

...I haven't been talking to him as much but that's probably because he moved out and wasn't around as much. We're less close, not because he's gay but because we have less contact. He doesn't really understand what's going on for me....

### 5 Spouse

Finding out that her spouse was gay had a very negative impact on their relationship. It led to the breakdown of the marriage. In the spouse's view, there was also a complete breakdown of trust.

...We don't have much contact now – nothing in common now. Our lives have gone separate ways. I don't rely on him anymore....

## 8 Key Support Needs Emerging for Families

### 1 Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this final section of the report is to attempt to weave together the support needs identified by process participants. Clearly, throughout the course of this document we have seen the importance of developing services which reflect the needs of different family members at different times. For example, parents may need certain supports to be available to them during the “*coming out*” period of their child and then, as their awareness grows, and their own “*coming out*” evolves, their support needs will change.
- 1.2 These differing levels of support needs are not only acknowledged by parents, but also by siblings and children. For spouses, the issue is often more complex – as reflected throughout this report – for a Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual support agency like Dundalk Outcomers to provide. In this instance, the organisation may find itself working with the Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual and the Heterosexual partner. For children, the need for supports to be age appropriate and confidential must also be borne in mind. Below we attempt to reflect this diversity of needs for support. On another level, process participants identified a series of overarching support needs. Again, these are reflected below.

### 2 Overarching Family Support Needs

- 2.1 In all cases, families identified the importance of hearing positive stories and seeing positive role models. In the case of parents, this was reflected in their identification of the need to meet with other parents. For siblings, this issue was not as important, but still seemed useful. For children, the importance of meeting others with similar stories was re-iterated over and over again. For the spouse in particular, the opportunity to engage with others in a similar situation was of paramount importance, especially given the lack of opportunity during her difficult journey. As stated in the introduction to this section, the issue of differing needs at different times and choices in terms of available was clearly stated by all process participants.
- 2.2 In addition, participants felt it was also important that social opportunities which could be attended by Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people and their family members would go a long way towards providing support – especially for those who were not interested in more formal support structures.
- 2.3 Following on from the identified support of engaging on some level with others in the same situation, participants were clear that they needed access to resources which would support family members to reflect upon the issues facing them and make decisions for moving forward based upon the acknowledged experience of others outside of their locality. Here, participants spoke of the need for a resource library to be made available which would have books, magazines or videos which they could borrow.

- 2.4 In essence, these overarching or shared support needs can be identified as:
- To see and hear positive stories;
  - To speak with, learn from and garner support from others in similar situations;
  - Access to varying types and levels of support at different points on the journey;
  - Access to resource materials;
  - Access to supports that, at the same time, acknowledge the differences and similarities of experience.
- 2.4 Finally, process participants were clear that organisations such as Dundalk Outcomers needed to be more open to providing services for family members as well as Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people. In addition, the need for the definition of the term family member to be kept broad so as to include ex-spouses was re-iterated. The rest of this section moves forward from these overarching and shared support needs into the types of support needs identified by different groups.

### 3 Specific Support Needs Identified

#### 3.1 Parents/Grand-parents

For parents and grandparents, the particular support needs identified were:

- Confidential support services;
- Appropriate professional support/advice/counselling services;
- Peer support services;
- Social and informal networking opportunities;
- Access to relevant and appropriate resource materials.

#### 3.2 Siblings

For siblings, the particular support needs identified were:

- Social and support networks;
- Access to relevant and appropriate resource materials.

#### 3.3 Children

For children, the particular support needs identified were:

- Age appropriate and confidential support/advice/counselling services;
- Access to age appropriate resource materials;
- Opportunities for social interaction and networking with other children of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual parents;
- Access to images and resources which reflect and promote positive images of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual parents and families.

### 4 Nine Specific Recommendations for Meeting the Support Needs of Families

- 4.1 In the context of the one to one and final discussion group sessions, participants were asked to identify a set of specific recommendations to be explored by the Board of Dundalk Outcomers as options for the provision of services and supports for families. It is important to note here that the final recommendations put forward below comprise a composite

package or range of measures for achieving the aim of providing services and supports for the families of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people, and should not be viewed as a *pick and mix*.

- Putting in Place of a Confidential, Family Support Help Line
- Facilitation of a Number of Family Member Focused Peer Support Groups
- Development of Page on Website to Provide Information and Access to Specific Family Support Resources
- Development and Mediation of Internet Based Message Board / Chat-Shout Space for Families of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People
- Facilitation and Hosting of Specific Social Events for Family Members
- Facilitation and Hosting of Specific Information Sessions for Family Members which Focus upon Counteracting Myths about Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People and which Provide Practical Assistance in Dealing with Negative Attitudes and Responses
- Development and Maintenance of a Family Support Resource Library
- Implementation of a Publicity Drive to Ensure that People are made Aware of the Services and Supports Available through Dundalk Outcomers
- Provision of Awareness Training Programme for People to whom Families may turn for Support (e.g. doctors, priests, community workers, youth workers etc.)

## 5 Closing Comments

5.1 As stated at the outset, this report has sought to provide readers with an opportunity to reflect upon the experiences of some family members of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people in Dundalk and its environs. Its primary aim has been to provide a starting point for Dundalk Outcomers to engage in a process of developing specific and appropriate support services for those families – grand-parents, parents, siblings, children and ex-spouses. Through reflecting the experiences of real people in real situations, it should also be read as an argument for the resourcing of the identified support services.

5.2 If the authors were asked had the participants in this process experienced Homophobia, we would have to say yes, but to varying degrees and at varying levels and perhaps not explicitly. In spite of this, however, participants were willing to allow us to use their experiences to identify the sorts of issues and challenges not only faced by them, but by others in similar situations. Perhaps what is needed is a new poster, one which states:

**Lesbians, Gay and Bisexual People  
have:**

*Grand-mothers, grand-fathers,  
mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles,  
cousins, brothers, sisters, sons and  
daughters.....*



**Clarity**  
Research, Development and Training Ltd.

*working throughout Ireland towards social inclusion*

Established in 2003, **Clarity Research, Development and Training** is a wholly independent, social inclusion support agency working throughout Ireland with community and voluntary groups and organisations, statutory agencies and government departments committed to social inclusion. Our team of skilled research, development and training professionals aim to provide high quality, cost effective and, above all, useful services designed to meet the specific needs of particular clients. In addition to our social inclusion focused support services, we also operate a Community Resource Centre in Castlemartyr.

In all our research, development and training work, we are committed to being part of a process that enhances opportunities for social change in an Ireland where the gap between rich and poor is continually widening. We work within a framework of inclusion, participation and equality with a focus upon achieving significant and strategic outcomes for the communities of interest and geography served by our clients.

#### About the Authors of this Report

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**Orla Egan-Morley, M.A.**, is a graduate of University College Cork where, following graduation with a Master of Arts, she was appointed Director of the Higher Education Equality Unit, a post she held for eight years. Following this, Orla completed significant work on the history of the Lesbian community in Cork, resulting in publications in Ireland and abroad. A founding Director of Clarity, Orla's particular skillset lies in the areas of facilitation, community based research and support, equality training and homophobia awareness. ([orla@clarityrdt.com](mailto:orla@clarityrdt.com)).

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Dundalk Outcomers is a social and befriending support group for gay, lesbian and bi-sexual people. Our drop in centre provides a safe, social and relaxed environment for our gay, lesbian and bi-sexual community and is located in the centre of Dundalk town. It has been open since 1997. We provide the following services:

- Drop in service
- 24hr information line
- Confidential Helpline
- Health Education Workshops
- Outreach work
- Befriending
- Social Events
- Training within our community
- Training provided to the voluntary and statutory sectors.
- Information on Physical, Mental and Sexual Health
- Free condoms

Funding for the delivery of our services comes from a variety of government and statutory agency sources and donations from our community.

