

Guidance for Schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People

The Education Authority has developed guidance for schools, EOTAS centres and Youth Service on how to support transgender young people. The guidance is non-statutory and does not constitute legal advice or impose any new legal obligations or requirements. However, it does represent emerging good practice regarding the support of transgender young people and should be considered carefully by all staff¹, in the context of their existing obligations and responsibilities.

In supporting a transgender young person, schools and other educational settings should take reasonable and proportionate steps to ensure that a transgender young person is treated fairly and their individual needs are met. When employing blanket policies, consideration should be given as to whether an exception can be made to reduce any disadvantage that the transgender young person may face. Each decision should be assessed on a case by case basis, taking into consideration a range of factors including the age and developmental stage of the young person. At all times the overriding consideration should be the best interests of the child².

Index:

1	TRANSGENDER IDENTITY	2
2	CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT	2
3	HOW TO RESPOND WHEN A TRANSGENDER YOUNG PERSON ‘COMES OUT’	4
4	WHERE PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT IS NEEDED, WHAT ARE THE OPTIONS?	5
5	WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY?	6
6	TRANSITION	7
7	DEVELOPING SUPPORT PLAN – SPECIFIC ISSUES	8
8	FURTHER SUPPORT	10

¹ Including those employees whose work is in or takes them into a school setting or voluntary youth work setting, should also make themselves familiar with any policies pertinent to those settings

² Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Also note that under Article 3 1(a) of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 in any proceedings where a court determines any question with respect to the upbringing of a child, the child’s welfare shall be the court’s paramount consideration

1 Transgender Identity

- 1.1 Most people have a gender identity which matches the sex assigned to them at birth. However, 'transgender' (or 'trans') young people have a gender identity which differs from that of their (assigned) birth sex. Put simply, a transgender boy is someone whose sex was recorded as female at birth, but who identifies as a boy, while a transgender girl is someone whose sex was recorded as male at birth, but who identifies as a girl. Some transgender young people may also refer to themselves as 'non-binary', (not exclusively male or female or somewhere in-between), while others report they feel both male and female.
- 1.2 Gender identity is different to sexual orientation (an individual's emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people).
- 1.3 In this document the term 'transgender' refers to any young person whose gender identity or expression differs from the expectations placed upon them, regardless of how they identify (e.g. whether they identify as transgender, trans, non-binary, gender queer, gender fluid, non-gendered or gender questioning).

2 Creating an inclusive environment

- 2.1 All learners benefit from an inclusive school ethos, where every learner matters and matters equally and where difference is respected. Department of Education guidance states that education for all children and young people should be provided in an inclusive environment that is nurtured within the whole community. This environment should be '*positively welcoming to all, whatever their identity*'³.
- 2.2 Schools and other educational settings can help create an environment where young people feel confident in sharing issues about their gender identity, or 'coming out'⁴ as transgender, by identifying a designated staff member to act as

³ Department of Education (2018): [Every school a good school – the governors' role. A Guide for Governors](#)

⁴'Coming out' is a term used to describe the process through which a person realises that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender and may begin to share this aspect of their identity with others.

the first point of contact. This person should also act as the “go-to person” for staff. In schools this person will usually be the pastoral care lead while in Youth Service, it will initially be the ‘worker in charge’ (with support from the Senior Youth Officer).

- 2.3 In keeping with the ethos of the school, staff may consider a range of measures to help create an environment where transgender people, alongside people of all different identities, are valued, by:
- using appropriate terminology and language;
 - adopting a gender aware approach to teaching and learning, including by tackling gender stereotypes and introducing transgender role models;
 - challenging homophobic, transphobic or any other type of bullying;
 - better understanding the experiences of transgender pupils (e.g. through confidential pupil surveys);
 - using appropriate strategies to support transgender or gender-questioning young people, including through access to information and services.
- 2.4 Additionally, as part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, schools are expected to provide Relationships and Sexuality Education under the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) area of learning at primary level and the Learning for Life and Work (LLW) area of learning at post-primary level⁵⁶. The flexibility offered by the NI curriculum also allows schools to teach RSE through other Areas of Learning.
- 2.5 The statutory curriculum for PDMU at primary level, and the Personal Development strand of Learning for Life and Work at post primary level, includes prescribed minimum content. This is a minimum entitlement that all children must **legally** receive. In addition, the Department also requires all publicly funded schools to develop their own written policy on how they will deliver RSE.
- 2.6 The flexibility offered by the curriculum aims to encourage more innovative and customised approaches to ensuring young

⁵ Department of Education (2015): [Circular 2015/22 - Relationship and Sexuality Education \(RSE\) Guidance](#)

⁶ Also see guidance from ETI on [Relationships and Sexuality Education in Primary and Special Schools – report of an evaluation by the Education and Training Inspectorate](#)

people are both safe and well-informed about all of the issues they face in modern society. In this context, RSE provides an excellent opportunity to address the issue of transgender identity.

2.7 In line with CCEA guidance, schools can also increase knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ matters in an age-appropriate way that is in keeping with the school's ethos and RSE policy. To support schools to plan and develop approaches to teaching controversial or sensitive issues at a whole-school and classroom level, CCEA has developed specific guidance around Teaching Controversial Issues at Key Stage 3.

2.8 Updated guidance, for both primary and post-primary schools, can be found on the CCEA website at the links below:

- [Guidance for primary schools](#)
- [Guidance for post-primary schools](#)
- [Circular 2015/22 - Relationship and Sexuality Education Guidance](#)

2.9 Additionally, resources can be found on CCEA's [new RSE hub](#). The Youth Support Group, Carafriend, has developed a specific resource for youth services, [A Youth Workers Resource: Encourage LGBTQ+ Inclusive Practice](#).

3 How to respond when a transgender young person 'comes out'

3.1 Staff have a significant role to play in responding to a pupil who 'comes out' to them. Where a pupil 'comes out' to a member of staff in a one-to-one situation, it is important that the staff member responds respectfully. Staff are not expected to have all the answers or to make a judgement in relation to a young person's current or future gender identity, but they are expected to respect the uniqueness, individuality and specific needs of each pupil, in line with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland's core values⁷ and the values⁸ set out in EA's Strategic Plan (2017-27).

⁷ General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland's [Code of Values and Professional Practice](#), page 5

⁸ Education Authority (2017): [Interim Strategic Plan \(2017-27\)](#), page 12

- 3.2 The points below include some advice or ‘tips’ to teachers and other staff in responding to a young person who is questioning their gender identity, or who feels they might be transgender:
- *Don't panic: they don't expect you to be an expert;*
 - *Say 'thank you': the fact that they have trusted you enough to speak to you is a privilege;*
 - *Ask what support you can give: listen to what they say;*
 - *Don't deny their identity, or overly question their understanding of their gender identity;*
 - *Don't agree to anything you're not sure of;*
 - *Ask what name and pronoun you should use to address them. Check if that's all the time or in certain circumstances;*
 - *Ask if you can share information and with whom (let them know that you will not share their information with anyone unless they give their permission or there is a risk to themselves or others);*
 - *Arrange a time to meet up again, to check in and see how they are doing;*
 - *Check if there's anything else they want to talk about.*

3.3 Where a young person comes out to a member of staff, this should be treated as confidential information and should only be discussed with a parent/carer with the young person's consent (unless the staff member has legitimate cause for concern for the young person's safety). It is helpful to discuss with the young person if they have “come out” at home and what sort of support they have received from their parents and siblings.

3.4 Young people who are experiencing issues in relation to their gender identity can often find it helpful to speak to other young people experiencing similar feelings. For further information on the support organisations working in this area can be found at [Support in Northern Ireland](#).

4 Where professional support is needed, what are the options?

4.1 Young people who wish to seek professional support in relation to gender identity issues can be referred to professional support services. At times, staff may need to help a young

person access wider support, whether that comes through their school, their GP or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

- 4.2 Young people experiencing gender dysphoria are usually first referred to CAMHS where they will undergo an age-appropriate assessment for gender dysphoria (the medical condition) and any coexisting mental health concerns. If appropriate, CAMHS can then make a referral to Northern Ireland's specialist child and adolescent Gender Identity Clinic – the Knowing Our Identity Service (KOI). Support is based on a staged model of care, which includes, where appropriate, information and advice and therapeutic intervention, before physical intervention (including prescribing medication) is considered.
- 4.3 Under the age of 16, the only physical treatment that is recommended for children struggling with gender identity issues is puberty blockers. The decision on whether to prescribe puberty blockers is made by a multi-disciplinary team, which may include specialists such as mental health professionals and paediatric endocrinologists (specialists in hormone conditions in children).
- 4.4 Schools and other educational settings involved in supporting pre-pubescent young people or young people with additional needs should refer to the *Guidance for schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People*.

5 What does the law say?

- 5.1 Schools should ensure that transgender young people, are not singled out for different and less favourable treatment from that given to other young people. In particular, schools should take care when employing blanket policies and consider whether an exception can be made to reduce any disadvantage that the transgender young person may face. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland recommends that schools adopt a best practice approach to the treatment of particular groups of young people, more specifically that:

'Good practice extends beyond the mere letter of the law to include pupils who are disadvantaged because they are

*transgender, or because of their religious belief and political opinion*⁹.

- 5.2 Schools also have many other duties which cover transgender young people, including their duties under education legislation to promote and safeguard the well-being of all pupils in their care. In addition, those who work with children, young people or families, in whatever capacity, have a particular responsibility to promote their welfare and ensure they are safe.

6 Transition

- 6.1 Not all transgender young people will want to change how they express their gender identity. However, some may wish to *socially transition*. Social transition usually involves a young person wearing clothes, adopting a different name or using the facilities which corresponds with their gender identity.
- 6.2 Some young people socially transition as a way of alleviating gender dysphoria (the discomfort or distress that is caused by a difference between a young person's gender identity and their sex assigned at birth) or as a way of exploring life in another gender role. Social transition does not have to be an all or nothing approach and should always be led by the young person, taking into account their age, developmental stage and understanding.
- 6.3 Generally, if a young person makes a request to staff to transition, it is expected that a designated person will set up an initial meeting with the young person, and (where appropriate) their parents and relevant health professionals to establish what help or support they need, if any. In advance of the meeting the designated person should consider the advice of any medical professionals already involved with the young person (e.g. CAMHS or the Knowing Our Identity Service). Accessing such advice will require the consent of the young person and where appropriate, their parents.
- 6.4 While some staff or parents may wish to know the pupil's transgender status, this information is confidential. Staff should not disclose a pupils preferred name, pronoun, or other

⁹ ECNI Website: [Good Practice: A transgender pupil](#)

confidential information relating to their transgender status to another parent or third party without the pupil's permission and where appropriate, the agreement of their parents.

- 6.5 Where consent has been given to disclose a young person's transgender status to other pupils, staff should be prepared for any genuine uncertainty or concerns that may be expressed by other young people regarding the transition of a transgender young person. Further advice on this issue is included in the detailed guidance, *Guidance for schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People*.

7 Developing support plan – specific issues

- 7.1 There is no formal evaluation or diagnosis that a young person needs to provide to have their gender identity recognised and respected. However, where a young person requests to transition at school or other educational setting, it is good practice for the designated person to develop a support plan, in consultation with the young person and their parents. This will help clarify expectations and avoid any misunderstandings or breaches of confidentiality. The support plan should establish the extent of the transition (where requested) and clarify arrangements around the sharing of information and how to handle potential common challenges. A template Support Plan is included in the detailed guidance.
- 7.2 During the meeting, staff are expected to address issues regarding gender identity in a 'sensitive, non-confrontational and reassuring way'¹⁰.
- 7.3 The support plan should include consideration of the following points (where appropriate):
- timing of the transition;
 - name and pronoun changes including the circumstances around use
 - change of uniform;
 - plans for access to toilets, changing rooms and taking part in activities;

¹⁰ CCEA (2018): [Relationships and Sexuality Education Guidance](#), Section 3

- communicating the changes to the wider school community (or other young people within the educational setting);
- young person's experiences and perceptions concerning safety (including process for reporting bullying and harassment);
- other support e.g. access to CAMHS (or resilience support), educational psychology, counsellors or other medical professionals

7.4 Guidance in relation to each of the specific issues listed above issues can be found in the detailed *Guidance for schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People*. Section 9 includes advice in relation to confidentiality, information and support for parents.

7.5 In all decisions, the safety and well-being of the young person must be the paramount consideration. Staff should adopt a case by case approach to the assessment of risk, weighing concerns around safety and victimisation against benefits including the alleviation of psychological distress and improved self-worth of the young person concerned. Assessment of risk should be accurate and not used to unnecessarily delay social transition. However, where appropriate, a phased approach may be adopted.

7.6 Schools and other educational settings are not required to take any decisions regarding the appropriateness of medical treatment for a transgender young person, but should have regard to advice given by those medical professionals who are providing support and/or treatment for the young person. They may also need to allow them time off for medical appointments, in the same way as they would for any other child who needs to access medical services.

7.7 While being transgender is not, of itself, a safeguarding or wellbeing concern, some transgender young people may present to staff with issues which may or may not be connected with their gender identity (for example anxiety or depression) and should be referred, as appropriate, to CAMHS services. Where a member of staff has safeguarding concerns, he/she must report this immediately to the Designated Teacher / Youth Worker who has specific responsibility for child protection.

- 7.8 Where there are concerns about the safety of a child, the sharing of information in a timely and effective manner between organisations may be necessary for safeguarding reasons, to reduce the risk of harm. Further information in relation to safeguarding, can be found at Section 9 of EA's detailed *Guidance for schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People* or by contacting the EA Child Protection Helpline on 02895 985590.
- 7.9 As regards support, the school or other educational setting should be flexible and set regular dates for review of the plan, particularly in the first stages of the transition. The young person should also be reminded that even if they agree a support plan, they can change their mind at any stage of the process or take steps to reverse the transition.

8 Further support

- 8.1 The full report *Guidance for schools, EOTAS Centres and Youth Service on Supporting Transgender Young People*, includes further information on the issues included in this summary report including detailed guidance on specific issues relating to the support of a transgender young person.
- 8.2 If you have questions about anything in this guidance, or would like to speak to a member of staff about supporting a transgender young person, or by contacting the Operations and School Governance Team (relevant contact details are set out below).

EA Contact Information

If you have questions about anything in this guidance, or would like further information or guidance on how to support a transgender young person, please contact the Operations and School Governance Team.

The relevant contact details will depend on the location of your school:

Locality 1 - (Schools in Council areas of Fermanagh & Omagh, Mid Ulster, Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon)
Operations and School Governance Team
Education Authority
Clounagh Centre,
Brownstown Road,
Portadown
BT62 3PY
T: 028 3836 8159

Locality 2 (Schools in Council areas of Derry and Strabane, Mid and East Antrim, and Antrim & Newtownabbey.)
Operations and School Governance Team
Education Authority
Antrim Centre
17 Lough Road,
Antrim,
BT41 4DH
T: 028 9056 6871

Locality 3 (Schools in the Council areas of Newry Mourne & Down, Ards & North Down, Lisburn & Castlereagh, and Belfast)
Operations and School Governance Team
Education Authority
Belfast Office
40 Academy Street
Belfast
BT1 2NQ
T: 028 9056 4189