

No easy path

The realities of LGBTQ+ young people estranged from their families
Summary Report April 2026

Now with the TM

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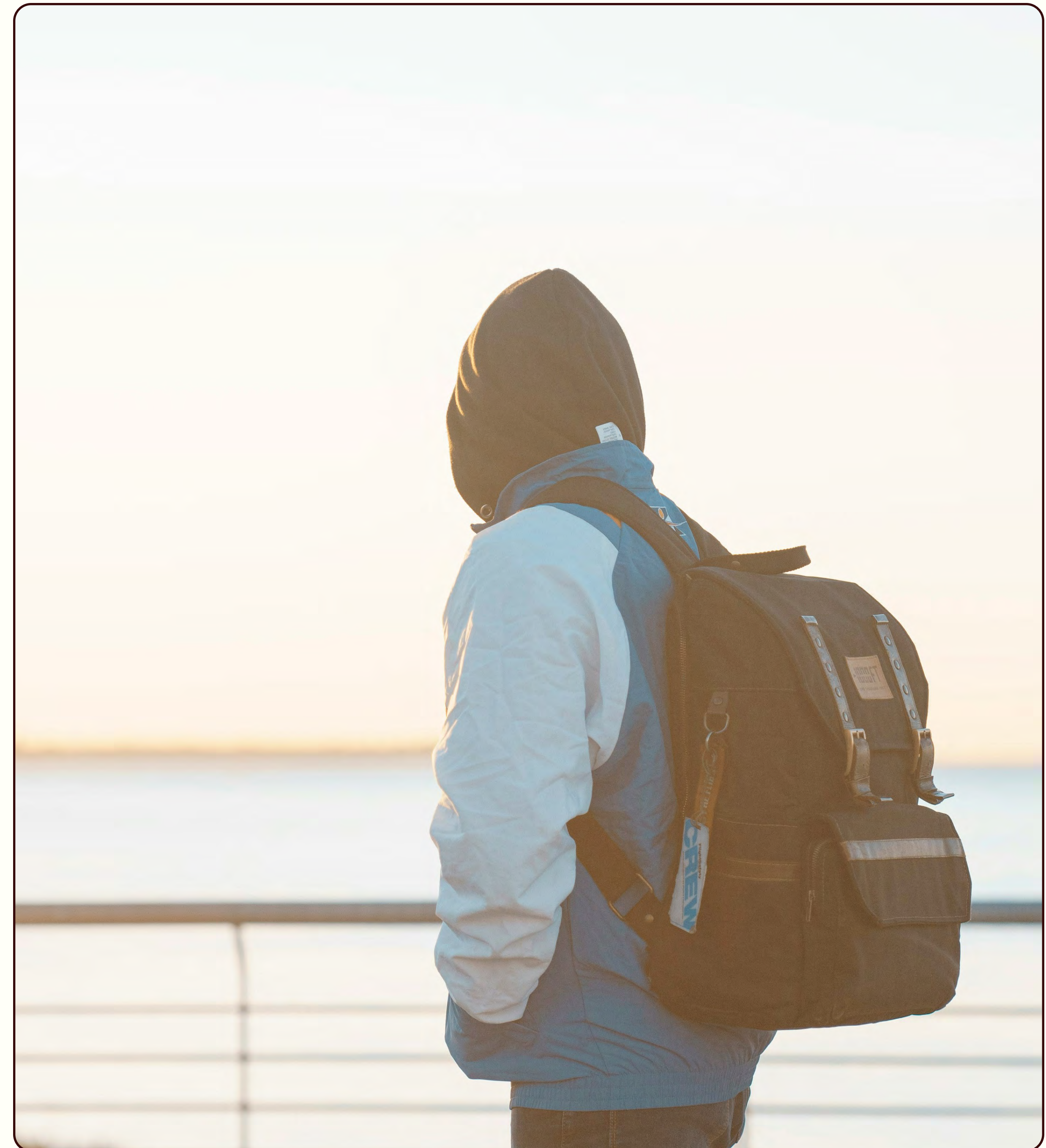
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01 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a year-long research project which Buttle co-delivered with estranged young people. The research was funded by the George Michael Fund via the Talent Fund.

Our previous project, *Surviving Estrangement*, looked at the experiences of estranged young people who are separated from their families. This research built on this and explored the role that sexuality and gender identity play in estranged young people's experiences. This is because evidence suggests that LGBTQ+ young people are at a higher risk of becoming estranged from their families.

Buttle is very grateful to the six young peer researchers who co-delivered this project with us. They drew on their own lived experiences to make this a much stronger, richer and impactful piece of research than we could otherwise have delivered.



02 How We Did It

We co-delivered this research with a steering group of six estranged young people aged 19-22, five of whom identify as LGBTQ+.

The steering group met regularly and fed into every stage of the project. They led the one-to-one interviews and focus groups with estranged young people, and helped us make sense of the findings.

The research involved:

- An online survey which received 50 responses
- 10 online interviews to dig deeper into young people's experiences
- Two focus groups with LGBTQ+ estranged young people who were supported by Llamau¹ and akt²

We analysed our data to identify themes in young people's reasons for estrangement, challenges faced, and experiences of support. The steering group sense-checked the emerging themes. They also helped us interpret the findings and create our recommendations.

¹ [Llamau](#) is a Welsh charity that supports young people, women, and children at risk of homelessness.

² [akt](#) is the national LGBTQ+ youth homelessness charity, supporting queer young people aged 16-25 who are experiencing or at risk of homelessness.



03 What We Found

Drivers and enablers of estrangement

The most common reason for LGBTQ+ young people's estrangement was emotional and/or physical abuse in the family home. Sexuality and gender identity would often intensify this, and it was also closely tied to families' cultural or religious beliefs.

LGBTQ+ young people felt able to remove themselves from family when they reached points of independence. This included going to uni, finding work, joining new social groups, and entering a supportive relationship.

"I was definitely under pressure from my parents to hide both my sexuality and gender identity. And part of the way I was being threatened was linked to that."

Interviewee



Life after estrangement

LGBTQ+ young people highlighted many challenges but also some positives they experienced after their estrangement. Most of the challenges were due to the lack of a financial and emotional safety net, caused by their estrangement. LGBTQ+ identities and other protected characteristics then added layers of extra challenges to this.

Mental health was the main challenge for LGBTQ+ estranged young people

The impact of childhood trauma and abuse, as well as the practical and emotional challenges of being estranged, all impacted on young people's mental health. LGBTQ+ young people can also experience mental health challenges linked to gender dysphoria and coming to terms with their LGBTQ+ identity, especially if they were rejected by their family when they came out.

However, mental health and wellbeing can improve for young people following estrangement, as they are removed from the abuse, harm and coercion of their families. For LGBTQ+ young people, this often also meant they felt able to be who they were born to be, explore their identity and be accepted by others.

“I was finally able for the first time in my life to, like, truly present in the way that I wanted to.”

Interviewee

Estrangement creates financial and housing insecurity

Estrangement creates a difficult financial and housing situation for young people. Many young people this age rely on parents and carers for support. LGBTQ+ estranged young people do not have this safety net.

Many described being homeless or entering further risky or abusive situations to avoid

“When I first became estranged, I was staying with my boyfriend at the time. He was quite abusive, but I stayed with him so I had somewhere to stay. And then for a bit I was homeless.”

Interviewee

living on the streets. Young people also spoke about housing as not feeling very safe or inclusive because it did not account for their LGBTQ+ identity, or the fact they were disabled.

Estrangement has a huge impact on education

LGBTQ+ estranged young people spoke about the insecurity and mental health impact of estrangement affecting their attendance, ability to learn and attainment in education. Young people at university described intense pressure to plan ahead to reduce the risk of being homelessness when they graduated.

“I had to be 100 steps in front of other people who weren't estranged because I had nothing to fall back on.”

Interviewee

Estranged young people feel isolated but are supported by the LGBTQ+ community

Estranged LGBTQ+ young people often felt isolated. This was due to losing their support networks when they left their families and their friends' lack of understanding about their experiences. Family holidays such as Christmas or Easter were particularly difficult.

“I think it was lonely for me psychologically because no one could quite understand how I was feeling and my particular situation, or like the depth of it.”

Interviewee

However, some LGBTQ+ young people reported good support from friends and their families during and after estrangement. Some also found new support networks amongst the LGBTQ+ community at their uni or in their local area.



Barriers to support

LGBTQ+ estranged young people described a range of barriers to accessing support. Many of these were relevant to all estranged young people, but LGBTQ+ young people often experienced additional barriers to receiving good quality support.

Lack of understanding and knowledge of estrangement

Young people strongly felt that a lack of knowledge and understanding of estrangement amongst professionals means they do not understand the severity of its impact on young people. They

often victim blame, require “evidence” of estrangement and fail to offer good support to LGBTQ+ estranged young people. Young people spoke about professionals assuming their separation from their family was temporary, that they had chosen to leave their family, or that their lack of family support was their own fault.

Lack of understanding and knowledge of LGBTQ+ issues

Young people also reported that a lack of understanding amongst professionals of LGBTQ+ issues and their unique needs created barriers to good support. This was particularly the case for trans young people, who described professionals as being dismissive of gender dysphoria, and the challenges in accessing gender-affirming clinics due to the lack of availability and long waiting lists.

They often connected this to the current harmful political and social rhetoric around trans people.

“...the government...should not be directing problems in society towards transgender people, we are humans just like everybody else and the problems in society aren't our fault.”

Survey respondent

Mental strain of estrangement

The emotional toll of having to continually explain and “prove” their estrangement to different professionals created barriers to support for LGBTQ+ young people. The overall mental load and stress of estrangement often left them with little headspace to search for or refer themselves for support.

“What I think organisations and governments and services do not understand is that when, pardon my French, the s*** hits the fan, I have nowhere else to go. I can't pack a bag and go and live with my family. Can't pack up and go home. Can't pack up and go and move in with someone. It is all on me and they don't get it.”

Interviewee

Navigating systems alone

Navigating systems of statutory support is difficult for young people who do not have the guidance of their families. LGBTQ+ young people found it difficult to know who to go to for help, how systems and services work, what support they were entitled to or how to access this. Young people found having a professional to advocate on their behalf and help navigate complex systems very useful, but it was pot luck whether they received this support.

Long waiting lists for mental health support

Mental health services were particularly difficult for LGBTQ+ estranged young people to access, especially for those with severe mental health challenges or who had experienced significant trauma. Young people described long waiting lists or only being able to access short interventions which did more harm than good. Survey respondents ranked mental health as their biggest challenge, but only just over half had received support for this.

Complexities in accessing benefits

Because full-time students aren't eligible

for benefits, LGBTQ+ estranged students described having to use almost all their maintenance loan to pay their rent. This meant working long hours on top of their studies to afford day-to-day living costs. This may limit LGBTQ+ estranged young people's aspirations or goals, either because they cannot afford to stay in education, or because it pushes them into part-time or less intensive courses.

Postcode lottery of support

LGBTQ+ young people described mixed experiences of accessing support from services and even from different professionals within the same organisation. This shows that access to support is a postcode lottery for estranged young people. A young person's access to good support is dependent on the availability and quality of local support and services, and the ability of their teacher or support worker to refer them.

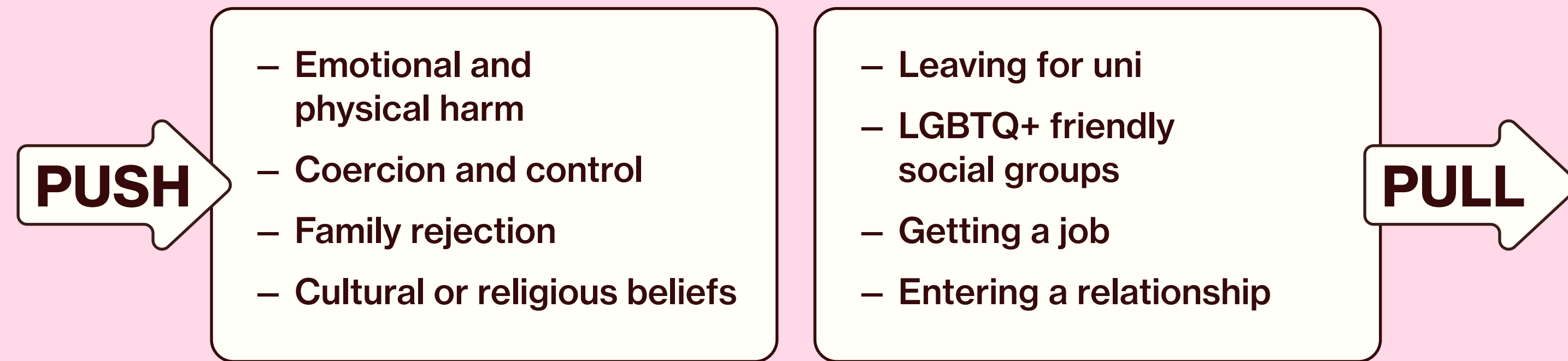
This is even more so for those who identify as LGBTQ+, as specialist services and community organisations have lost funding and support has reduced. Many never learn about the support available to them or what they are entitled to, so struggle on alone for many years.



Key findings

There were many pushes and pulls that led to young people's estrangement

The key "push" was emotional and physical harm, made worse by family members' reaction to young people's LGBTQ+ identity



What matters most to LGBTQ+ estranged young people:

1. LGBTQ+ specific support

Young people valued professionals and organisations with a deep understanding of the issues affecting them.

3. Mentors and trusted adults

Young people valued having someone "in your corner" to talk to about everyday things and provide support when things were difficult.

2. Support from friends and community

This was often more useful than formal services, helping young people become estranged and feel accepted after coming out as LGBTQ+.

4. Financial support

This made a huge difference to young people's lives. For students, bursaries and scholarships can be a lifeline, but are often competitive.

LGBTQ+ estranged young people face many challenges...

Mental health

Financial and housing insecurity

Isolation

Disrupted education

..and barriers to support:

Navigating systems alone

Long waiting lists and complex criteria

Postcode lottery of support

Lack of understanding from professionals

Experiences of receiving support

LGBTQ+ estranged young people had mixed experiences of support following their estrangement. This included statutory support, LGBTQ+ specific support, informal support from friends and the wider community, mental health support, support from education providers and financial support.

Statutory support can be dismissive, judgemental and difficult to access

Government support (e.g. CAMHS, Jocentre Plus) was often found to be dismissive, judgemental and difficult to access. This was linked to the stigma around estrangement. LGBTQ+ young people also found that these services did not provide holistic support that met their full needs. If a young person has a bad experience of statutory support, it can put them off of trying to access this support again when they need it.

LGBTQ+ specific support can make a big difference, but often isn't accessed

LGBTQ+ estranged young people valued professionals and organisations with a deep understanding of the issues affecting them.

This was especially the case for those with multiple protected characteristics. Despite this, LGBTQ+ organisations were one of the least accessed types of support amongst survey respondents. Some interviewees explained that they did not access LGBTQ+-specific support as it was not a core part of their identity.

“I never went to any sort of organisation about, you know, LGBT plus like that. It was just kind of something I dealt with on my own. I didn't see it as a big deal.”

Interviewee



Informal support from friends and community is most important

This was often more useful to LGBTQ+ estranged young people than formal services. Many talked about friends and their families helping them become estranged. Others valued support networks of other young people with similar experiences. The LGBTQ+ community was also an important source of support, as they do not make assumptions about young people's relationship with their birth families.

Mentors and trusted adults are highly valued

Mentors were important for LGBTQ+ estranged young people, who often don't have support networks. Young people valued having someone "in your corner" to talk to about everyday things and provide emotional support when things were difficult. However, it was often down to luck whether a young person found someone to provide this support.

Financial support makes a huge difference

Where LGBTQ+ young people had received financial support, this made a huge difference to their lives. For students, bursaries and scholarships can be a lifeline; however, these are often competitive. Bursaries from individual universities and student finance also helped but were often not enough to live on.

"So if I'm going into a group of straight people or Indian people, I feel like me being estranged, it's going to be a big deal. But if I'm in a group of queer people, I think they're much more accepting and they understand that families come in all different shapes and sizes and sometimes families are awful."

Interviewee



05 Recommendations

To address the challenges faced by all estranged young people, Buttle repeats its recommendations from our Surviving Estrangement report for:

1. **The Government to adopt a single, statutory definition of estrangement** which legally recognises these young people as a group in need of statutory support.
 2. **The Government to establish an entitlement to statutory support for estranged young people** across social care, education, health, welfare and housing.
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We're also calling for:

3. **A clear, straightforward way of proving that a young person is estranged to be developed and adopted by professionals.** This should include whether a young person needs extra support around their LGBTQ+ identity.
4. **Professionals working with young people to receive training on estrangement,** to reduce the stigma and judgement estranged young people experience. This should highlight that LGBTQ+ young people are at higher risk of estrangement.
5. **Funders, trusts and foundations to increase their funding and support for specialist LGBTQ+ organisations** who are best placed to support LGBTQ+ estranged young people.

Finally, we have created a set of actions for Buttle, which include:

1. To plan and launch a **national awareness raising campaign** to boost understanding of and support for estranged young people, and persuade the government to action the policy asks set out above.
2. To develop a **“quality mark”** for organisations offering support to estranged young people. This will be co-created with estranged young people and set out the standards young people expect of support.
3. To lead the creation of an **advocacy service for estranged young people**. This will provide advice on accessing support, legal matters and challenging decisions that affect them.
4. To develop a **directory or “one stop shop”** website for estranged young people, which maps out the support available in their local area.
5. To improve our own support for LGBTQ+ estranged young people, by:

- Thinking about how our grants can further support estranged young people at key transition points and over a longer term.
- Increasing our visibility among specialist LGBTQ+ organisations and taking action to ensure our grants and work more widely are inclusive of the LGBTQ+ community.
- Being strong in our support of LGBTQ+ young people, especially in helping challenge the harmful political rhetoric faced by trans young people.
- Encouraging other grant-making organisations to also take these actions.

CC1.06 Workspace
Kennington Park
1-3 Brixton Road
London
SW9 6DE

020 7828 3211
www.buttleuk.org

@buttleuk:
[f](#) [in](#) [@](#) [X](#)

Registered Charity No - 313007
Scotland - SCO37997

Buttleuk TM