

A NEEDS ANALYSIS OF
THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL
AND TRANSGENDER POPULATION
in GALWAY, MAYO & ROSCOMMON



Summary Report

Table of Contents

Foreword from Minister Ó Cuív	3
Preface	4
Acknowledgements	5
Membership of LGBT West:	5
Membership of Research Advisory Group	5
Executive Summary	7
Summary of Needs	12
Summary of Recommendations	15
Research Methodology	16

Tá áthas orm deis a bheith agam an réamhfhocail seo a scríobh agus an tuairisc thábhachtach seo a fhoilsiú.

This very important report marks a milestone in the lives of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people in the West of Ireland.

Life for lesbian and gay people in Ireland has improved significantly in the past twenty years. The Irish Government has been at the forefront internationally in terms of providing protections for lesbian and gay people. This progress has continued with the commitment of this Government to legislate for same-sex couples by the publication of Heads of a Bill for a comprehensive Civil Partnership scheme and a commitment to enact the necessary legislation.

Foreword from Minister Ó Cuív

While this progress in being made however the reality for a significant but thankfully reducing number of people is that they seek to hide their sexual orientation for fear of negative reactions from society in general. The report also draws attention to the need for research on the particular needs of transgender people.

Many LGBT people feel isolated and socially excluded. Isolation and social exclusion are linked to poorer health, lower educational attainments, lower economic success and lower degrees of happiness and fulfilment. Conversely, embracing diversity is known to have proven effects on the individual and larger community.

This very important piece of research contains evidence of the realities faced by LGBT people in the region. It is my hope that this will result in a more inclusive society here in the West of Ireland, where being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender will no longer result in experiencing discrimination or isolation.

LGBT people are an important part of our community and it is appropriate that we look at ways of improving their greater participation in our society.

Tá súil agam go gcuirfidh an tuairisc seo le comhthuisicint agus comhchaidreamh.

Éamon Ó Cuív TD.,
Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs.

Preface

Following a consultation meeting in February 2006 in Galway to discuss the needs of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population in Galway, Roscommon and Mayo the consortium of agencies known as LGBT West was established.

Gay HIV Strategies facilitated the establishment process and worked with the agencies to identify the following objectives:

- To identify the particular circumstances and needs of LGBT people in Galway Mayo and Roscommon
- To coordinate service delivery to meet the particular needs identified.
- To engage the LGBT Community in Galway, Mayo and Roscommon in consultation and dialogue
- To promote social inclusion and challenge the perceived and the actual discrimination experienced by the LGBT Community

Commissioning this valuable study in 2007 was the first step in identifying unmet needs for this population. We were very pleased to award the tender to Cairíona Gleeson and Maire McCallion and the quality of the research is a testament to their skill, commitment and engagement with the process.

The researchers faced significant challenges in recruiting participants to the study which itself indicates the degree to which some LGBT people experience isolation and fear disclosing their identity. These challenges highlight the need for investment to build the community's capacity.

LGBT West is a prime example of partnership between mainstream agencies and community organisations to promote social inclusion for LGBT people in the west of Ireland.

It is our expectation that the recommendations in this report will be used by county and regional planners and service providers to guide their strategies over the coming years.

There has been much progress for lesbian and gay people in Ireland in the past decade. This report seeks to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the west of Ireland continue to share in this progress and have the freedom to be visible without fear of harassment or discrimination and where differences in sexual orientation or gender identity are unremarkable.

It has been my pleasure to work with the LGBT West consortium and I applaud their shared commitment to equality for LGBT people.

Ciarán McKinney
Director of Gay HIV Strategies.

Acknowledgements

The authors are very grateful to all the research participants who either filled out the survey and/or who gave so generously of their time in focus groups to share honestly their experiences and opinions. Thanks also to the many organisations who completed and returned surveys and to the community groups and one individual who put considerable time into comprehensive and valuable submissions. We hope that this research is reflective of these contributions.

In addition, the authors are grateful to members of the research advisory group who took time to give feedback on the various drafts and research tools throughout the process and to Gay HIV Strategies (an initiative of GLEN ~ the Gay and Lesbian Equality Network) who coordinated the research project. We are also grateful to a number of people outside the region who took the time to pilot the online survey and give us valuable feedback.

Our gratitude is also extended to members of LGBT West*, the Research Advisory Group**, OUTWest, Bród Ireland, the LGBT Youth group in Galway, Galway City VEC, Roscommon Partnership, HSE West and AIDS West who provided much assistance in promoting and resourcing the research.

Finally, we particularly want to thank John Burrows, for being so generous in his invaluable advice and support, and for all his work in developing the online survey and website, processing the data, and assisting us with the statistical analysis.

Caitríona Gleeson & Máire McCallion
 May 2008

* Membership of LGBT West:

AIDS West, City of Galway VEC, Co. Galway VEC, Cumas Teo, Galway City Council, Galway City Partnership, Galway Rural Development, Gay in Galway Society, Gay HIV Strategies, HSE West, Mayo County Council, Roscommon County Council, OUTWest, Roscommon Partnership, Roscommon VEC, S/W Mayo Development Co, Western Region Drugs Task Force, West Training & Development Ltd.

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Dr David Evans (HSE West), Mairéad Lydon (Bród Committee), Ciarán McKinney (GHS) Jo McNamara (GIG Soc), Todd Morrison (NUIG), Orla Nugent (WRDTF), Frank O’Grady (OUTWest), Linda Sice (Roscommon Partnership), Dónal Walsh (Galway City VEC)



Executive Summary

This research was conducted to assess the needs of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) population in counties Galway, Mayo, and Roscommon. The research examined LGBT needs in relation to; social exclusion, social and networking opportunities and access to facilities and support services including; health, education, and community development. A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods were used including focus groups, an online survey, a written survey of service providers and an analysis of written submissions from two community groups and one individual. One hundred and thirty-two eligible respondents completed the online survey. Thirty-one people participated in the focus groups. Twenty-nine out of forty-three services returned completed questionnaires.

Key findings

Equality and Social Supports

69% of survey respondents had experienced some form of discrimination because of their sexual orientation. Fifty per cent of those who had experienced discrimination were verbally abused and twenty per cent had been physically attacked. The extent and nature of discrimination reported by respondents is of extreme concern. The impacts of discrimination can range from isolation and social exclusion to psychological distress, unemployment, poverty and a poor quality of life.

Irish legislation generally provides for protection of LGBT people in employment and through the provision of goods and services. From existing literature, it is evident that attitudes to the LGBT population have greatly improved (Irish Examiner, 2006) however, in order to address the serious levels of discrimination there needs to be systematic and societal changes to how LGBT people are treated and included in Irish society. Research shows that people who experience discrimination may also experience social exclusion or be at risk of same (GLEN/Nexus 1995; CPA, 2006). Discrimination can also impact on a person's health and general well being (Dean et al 2000).

Almost 90% of the online survey respondents always or sometimes felt isolated because of their sexual orientation. Participants described either previous or current isolation in terms of the fears that they held about others finding out they were LGBT. There is significant need for social support, information provision and visible inclusion of LGBT lives across social, cultural, educational and economic spheres. The high levels of discrimination and isolation experienced by research respondents highlights the need for all social inclusion programmes to recognise the impact of anti-gay bias and hostility and develop responses to address LGBT social exclusion.

Social Networking

Half of the respondents said that their sexual orientation had stopped them sometimes or always from taking part in social activities in their local communities. This research also found a high level of need for a variety of LGBT specific social outlets and supports to build confidence and encourage social networking. Over eighty six per cent of survey respondents stated that they would access LGBT social events if they were available to them. The nature of these supports varies depending on the individual, in terms of both their experience and extent of coming out. Half of the survey respondents stated that they would use a coming out support group if it was available to them.

The provision of more formalised contact points in the form of a LGBT resource centre/café with meeting areas, a central information point and a befriending/coming out support group were identified as possible solutions to breaking isolation and creating a sense of community and social networking in Galway City. In Roscommon and Mayo most of the respondents from the online survey and participants in focus groups identified the need for a LGBT drop in centre and meeting place in Castlebar, which they felt could run an outreach support service throughout Mayo and Roscommon.

A number of rationales for having a resource centre/café or a drop in centre were described by participants. These broadly fell under the following themes:

- providing support for people coming out
- providing up to date information and support to all LGBT people
- being a central visible focal point for both the LGBT population and the broader community
- providing a physical venue for meetings, events, courses, special interest groups
- providing a regular social element such as a café to break isolation and offer opportunities for people to meet other LGBT people
- provide training and awareness raising for other service providers including state agencies
- provide LGBT-centred services such as a GP for those people who do not feel confidence in their own GP's understanding of LGBT issues.
- Provide a space where specific support groups could be operated and which would support the needs of transgender people, young and older people and LGBT parent supports.
- In terms of meeting social needs in a more immediate way (as many participants felt that it could take time to get a resource centre established) suggestions included providing an up to date website with information about LGBT events and activities and the organisation of social events, which will not all be centred around alcohol.

Lack of information is a barrier to accessing services.

Many participants described the importance of information provision for four main reasons;

Networking - To let LGBT people know on a regular basis about different events and services available. This is crucial in terms of isolated people and the rest of the population having access to up to date, inclusive and appropriate information.

Rights - To inform LGBT people about their rights regarding equality legislation

Visibility – Seeing information about LGBT events, services and issues can help break the isolation which many LGBT people may experience.

Inclusion - Where general services are seen to display LGBT information this can provide an indicator to a person of the openness of the organisation to LGBT people.

A considerable amount of community development work needs to be resourced in order to respond to the extensive gaps that have been identified by participants in terms of social networking supports. In particular, there needs to be investment in predevelopment work to increase LGBT volunteering and enhance community leadership.

The importance of legislating for same sex partners and LGBT families was highlighted by both focus group participants and online respondents. The equal recognition of same sex couples with heterosexual couples was seen as an important social change in order to achieve a greater equality for all LGBT people in Ireland.

Community

There was a very low level of awareness and use of general community services by research participants. Many of these community organisations while expressing a willingness to engage with the LGBT population had in most cases not done so as part of their planning or consultation processes and many were unsure of how to engage with the LGBT population. However, the majority of services surveyed (sixty seven per cent) completed the questionnaires and some of the Family Resource Centres (FRCs) and Community Development Programmes (CDPs) indicated that they had been involved in developing an LGBT code of practice with West Training, the Regional Support Agency. At the same time some of these and other respondents reported that the LGBT population was not currently a target group. A number of services referred to the fact that they were working with other marginalised target groups e.g. Travellers, other ethnic minorities, and women. This type of response did not demonstrate awareness that LGBT people are a part of all marginalised population groups. All organisations should ensure that service provision is consistently conducive for LGBT people to feel safe to be open about their sexual orientation. Responses need to be based on principles of respect and equality and free from presumptions of heterosexuality.

Health

50% of participants were presumed heterosexual in health care. A cross cutting theme in relation to health service provision was participants experience of being presumed heterosexual. The results of the online survey showed that half of respondents reported having been assumed heterosexual by their family doctor. This was consistent with previous research which found that heterosexuality is often assumed and that health professional's lack of knowledge about someone's sexual orientation may prevent them from delivering the best outcomes (Neville & Hickson 2005).

Participants also described the need for creating more visibility and providing information and leaflets in waiting rooms. Positive experiences in accessing health services were described by some focus group participants. Examples were outlined of how their health professionals treated them 'normally' taking into account any differences regarding their sexual orientation, when relevant. However, a number of participants also described how health professionals reacted negatively to disclosure. This was a cause of stress and anxiety for the participants in question; in some incidents it discouraged the participants from returning to the service. A recent HSE document (HSE, Feb 2008) recommends the development and implementation of training and awareness programmes for all staff (p 12). In the UK good practice guidelines for health professionals have been developed to respond to the needs of LGBT users and their families (UNISON, 2004 and NHS 2005). There is a need for all health professionals to ensure that they do not presume heterosexuality as this could unwittingly exclude LGB people. Existing good practice guides could inform future staff training programmes.

Fewer LGBT people consider themselves to have good mental health. Sixty eight per cent of the respondents to the online survey considered themselves to have very good or quite good mental health. This contrasts with the Western Health Board study where eighty five per cent of the general population consider themselves to have very good or quite good mental health (Evans & Jones 2001) A number of participants described the need for counsellors and therapists to have training to raise their awareness of LGBT issues and experiences.

A majority (86%) of online respondents rated their sexual health as very good or quite good. Half of those who felt it would be relevant to them said they would participate in sexual health awareness workshops. A lot of focus group participants raised concern about what they perceived to be an emerging complacency towards safe-sex practices amongst younger men. There was a considerable gender distinction in relation to STI checkups. Some online respondents commented on the satisfaction they had with the existing clinics with the exception of some of the waiting areas, which one respondent claimed would prevent him from returning again. Health promotion initiatives should focus on sexual well-being in addition to addressing STIs.

One in two of the online respondents reported having a smear test in the past three years. Of a specific target age group of women for regular smear tests (26–44 years), 55% had a smear test in the past three years. A number of women across the focus groups revealed how they were misinformed by their GP who told them that they did not need

smear tests because they were lesbian. This is consistent with the literature (O’Hanlon in Equality Authority 2002). Clearly there is need for clarification among GP’s in relation to the needs of lesbian women to have smear tests. The National Cervical Screening Programme should ensure that all health service providers are aware of the importance of smear tests for lesbian women.

Levels of smoking, alcohol and drugs use appear to be significantly higher in the LGBT population. A higher prevalence of smoking, alcohol consumption and use of recreational drugs (over lifetime, past year and past month) was reported by the online survey respondents when compared with current national prevalence studies (Kelleher et al 2003, NACD 2008). In existing research literature there are mixed findings when comparing these health behaviours with heterosexual populations. Some of the differences in findings may be related to the sampling methods. Those studies that show a difference have tended to use convenience sampling. Results from this research should be interpreted with caution as this was not necessarily a representative sample. However, findings are consistent with other LGBT studies for smoking and drugs. There is discrepancy in the literature regarding elevated alcohol consumptions, particularly for men. Further detailed studies are necessary to investigate causal factors and effects of alcohol consumption amongst the LGBT population. In addition, future national prevalence studies should explicitly include sexual orientation. However, provision of targeted services to the LGBT population should not be dependent on elevated levels of consumption but should be consistent with the delivery of services which meet the needs of the LGBT population.

Adult Education

Only 9% of respondents took part in adult education programmes. Participation in adult education is low with very few focus group participants or online respondents having participated in adult education programmes and initiatives. Of those that had experience of adult education, some indicated that their sexual orientation was not relevant to the content of the courses. However, it would have prohibited them from fully engaging in the social and group dimension of adult learning. In a few cases participants indicated that they did not finish an adult education course because of homophobic comments made by course participants which were not challenged by the course tutors/lecturers.

In addition, a significant number of focus group respondents spoke of their negative experiences of being an LGBT person in post primary education. As with all adult learners it is likely that previous learning experiences from primary and second level education will influence their participation in lifelong learning. There is a need for all education providers, including community organisations, to ensure that the adult education learning environment is conducive to respect and inclusiveness in the content, delivery and culture of the courses. Further research may be warranted to consider why there is such a low level of participation by the LGBT population in adult education.

Summary of Needs

The needs of the LGBT population in the region are summarised in five sub-sections:

- Social networking and support
- Service provision and planning
- Health
- Transgender specific
- Education

Social Networking and support

It is recognised that a number of groups already exist to provide networking and socialising opportunities; however the following gaps have been identified:

Many respondents reported experiencing isolation and discrimination both of which need critical attention. Sustainability in community-led supports for the LGBT population is a critical issue requiring planned resourcing and partnership. There is a need for social activities that are not based on alcohol and creative initiatives to provide support for people who are geographically isolated and who may have fears about their sexual orientation or gender identity being disclosed. There are specific needs of sub-groups in the LGBT population such as women, people with disabilities, transgender people, people from minority ethnic groups, parents, older people, recognising that some LGBT people experience multiple discrimination and require proactive initiatives to promote social inclusion . Young LGBT people in Roscommon and Mayo would benefit from the successful initiatives for LGBT young people developed in Galway city. There is a general need for information targeting LGBT people as well as promoting their visibility. The need for LGBT-focused spaces and resources, including LGBT resource centres was also identified.

Service provision and planning

The inclusion and identification of LGBT people as a target population in the planning and delivery of community, health, educational and social service initiatives and programmes is key to addressing the social exclusion and discrimination reported in this study. There is a need to address assumptions of heterosexuality and the lack of inclusive imagery and messaging from service providers as this can reduce the appropriate effectiveness of services. There is also a need to monitor the targeting and take-up of services by LGBT people.

Health

There is a need for further research on the apparent prevalence, impacts and causal factors of smoking, alcohol and drug using behaviour in the LGBT population. Specific health promotion initiatives for this population are also needed. Lesbian and bisexual women and healthcare service providers need relevant information promoting uptake of cervical screening services. Health professionals need appropriate training on the health needs of the LGBT population.

Transgender

Further research is needed to identify the specific needs of transgender people in the region. Information on support services to transgender people and basic information on transgender issues for service providers were also identified as critically needed.

Education

The low take-up of adult education services by the LGBT population indicates the need for initiatives to encourage LGBT people to engage in adult learning.

Summary of Recommendations

Research participants identified a broad range of needs to be addressed in order to enhance LGBT social inclusion, reduce discrimination and ensure an equality of access for LGBT people to health, adult education and community services.

In order to address the low levels of community supports, high levels of isolation and discrimination and the barriers to accessing services experienced by the research participants, it is recommended that:

- Community development is carried out to generate active, accessible and sustainable LGBT community infrastructures, in both Galway City and in other areas throughout Mayo, Roscommon, and Galway.
- Resource spaces are established to coordinate social networking opportunities and provide access to information and supports for all LGBT people in the region. Responses should be tailored to the range of support needs and diversity of the LGBT population, as well as catering for the geographical distinctiveness of other areas and Galway City.
- Mainstreaming LGBT issues across all service provision agencies is key. All agencies should ensure that service provision is consistently appropriate and accessible for LGBT people to feel safe to be open about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Responses need to be based on principles of respect and equality and free from presumptions of heterosexuality. LGBT people should be included in planning, consultation, service development, data collection, monitoring and evaluation. The LGBT population needs to be recognised as a target group in all social inclusion initiatives and programmes.
- Up to date information on all LGBT matters is publicly available. It is important that information about LGBT supports and needs is included in relevant information provision to the public.
- LGBT visibility should be increased by the range of stakeholders involved in service provision and employment. LGBT people should be supported to be confident and open about their sexual orientation (or gender identity if appropriate) recognising the impact on quality of life for LGBT people.

Research Methodology

This research was conducted using a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches for data collection. The research methods included a literature review, an online survey of the LGBT population, semi-structured focus groups, a written survey of service providers and an analysis of written submissions from LGBT community groups and one individual.

Snowball sampling was used to identify participants through existing networks and gay venues (including websites/forums). This was in order to reach those who might not respond to advertisements or visit LGBT venues or social events. Existing LGBT groups also used their databases (mainly e-mail) to promote the research. In addition, direct mainstream advertising was conducted to invite people to self-select to participate in the research.

A website was designed to present information about the research project and its promoters. Information about the research was disseminated through local media in each of the counties. The diverse and mainly invisible characteristic of the LGBT population in this region required that creative methods of engaging people to participate in the research were adopted.

Research Ethics

The researchers adhered to research ethic guidelines as set out by the Irish Sociological Association¹ In addition; they considered good practice guidelines for researching the LGBT population (Kandirikirira, 2004).

Research Limitations

Despite extensive promotion and contact strategies the limited community networking infrastructure made it difficult to access participants for the focus groups.

It is difficult to determine the representativeness of the sample, despite the relatively large sample there was limited participation of transgender people, people with disabilities, and only 1% participation of ethnic groups other than white Irish. The power of this study to detect differences between males and females may have been limited by the sample size.

The study has covered a broad number of topics, so in many instances a broad analysis was deduced rather than a very detailed one.

The study was restricted in terms of interviewing people under 18 because it would have been necessary for them to get permission from their parents. In addition, the Office of the Ombudsman for Children advised the researchers that it would be unethical to invite people under 18 to complete the online survey.

This study was focused on needs in terms of sexual orientation. However, because the study includes transgender people an expectation was raised in terms of addressing issues in relation to gender identity. A separate needs analysis should be conducted to consider transgender people and their needs in relation to their gender identity.

1 Sourced from www.sociology.ie

