

**LGBT**  
HELPLINE



ANNUAL REPORT 2015

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## Contents

Chairperson's Statement	01
National Coordinator's Statement	02
Who We Are	03
Statistics from our Support Services	03
<i>Website Statistics</i>	03
<i>Helpline Statistics</i>	04
<i>Instant Messaging Service</i>	07
<i>Peer Support Service</i>	09
<i>Training</i>	09
Working in Partnership	10
Our Nationwide Team of Volunteers	10

## Chairperson's Statement

What a year! This time last year, we were on the cusp of a whirlwind that would push LGBT issues to the forefront of every conversation in this country, where they would stay for a substantial part of the year.

At times, as an out woman, it was difficult to listen to the No campaign, knowing the detrimental impact this could have on our mental wellbeing, especially for those LGBT people who did not have a support system around them. This is where the LGBT Helpline became vital. It provided a listening ear for people who wanted to talk about something they had heard on radio, TV, or on the bus about 'gay people'. It also became the go-to space for people who were 'out' but had fears about being more visible in their local communities, as they took the courageous step of canvassing door to door.

We were there to give people a safe space to name their fears in private, and coming close to the vote, to support them as they worried it would not pass. This is a side of the last year that went mostly unnoticed, but for our volunteers, who were fully aware of the impact. I have been involved with helplines for over 20 years and it never ceases to amaze me how, even as we embrace new technologies, how many people still want to talk to another person, to have their fears allayed. It is important to keep that human touch and grow it with the opening of peer support groups to offer much-needed face to face support. It is also wonderful to see the new lines coming to life around the country, with Galway and Kerry launched in 2015, becoming the backbone of LGBT support in their towns and counties. When an issue arises in an area, we have LGBT people there willing to help and support their own community. It is peer support at its very best.

I see another busy year ahead for the LGBT Helpline as we grow online, in person and on the phone. We look forward to see where 2016 will bring us.

To our National Coordinator Paula Fagan, our local coordinators, and most of all, our volunteers all across the country, I say thank you for your continued commitment and selfless dedication you give to us. Without you, there would be no LGBT Helpline.

Thank you to our funders, without your support the level of service we provide would not be possible. Finally, to our callers, keep spreading the good news and know we are always there to support you in any way we can.

As you read this report, remember that all of the statistics represent someone, who for the most part, is struggling with a decision and may not have the same support you do. We need to be there for each other in this ever-changing world.

### **Bernadine Quinn**

Chairperson



## National Coordinator's Statement

### **Our busiest year yet**

2015 was an incredible year for LGBT people and LGBT rights in Ireland. The enactment of key pieces of legislation on same sex parenting rights, gender recognition, and the removal of discriminatory clauses from The Employment Equality Acts, brought about legal change which will fundamentally improve the lives of LGBT people over time.

However, it was the momentous and emotive Marriage Equality referendum campaign, which was felt most deeply. As the nation debated the issue, LGBT people heard the views of their families, friends, neighbours and colleagues, on same sex marriage and sexuality. For the majority, these conversations were positive, and came as a welcome surprise to some of our callers. However, it was also an incredibly stressful time for LGBT people, particularly for those who were not open about being gay or lesbian. Many sought support from our services to cope with the intensity of having their lives debated or to deal with negative attitudes expressed by family members or friends.

With so much focus on LGBT issues throughout the year, it is not surprising that our support services were the busiest they have ever been. Traffic to our website grew over 65% on the previous year, with one of the busiest weeks recorded in the seven days leading up to and including the referendum vote in May. The more positive landscape gave courage to many to consider leading more open lives, resulting in people of all ages contacting our services to access information and support.

### **Increased demand set to continue**

As more people open up about being LGBT, evidence from our services would suggest that, despite all of the progress that has been made, their journey will not be an easy one. Our helpline statistics show that two thirds of our callers are over 35 years of age. This can often mean they face significant additional barriers to 'coming out', for example, many of our callers in this age bracket were married or in a long term heterosexual relationship and had children. While a worrying trend from our instant messaging service revealed that, younger people who contacted us, were suffering very high levels of anxiety, often leading to self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Negative reactions from family members and peers, or the stress experienced from concealing their true identity, were factors in causing their distress.

To meet this demand and enhance supports available to LGBT people in their local communities, we undertook considerable development work in 2015. This included establishing an instant messaging service to make it easier for young people to access support. We set-up two new helplines in Galway and Kerry, while plans for a service in Kilkenny are also well underway. Peer support groups for married people were established in Dublin and Cork, and a national facilitation skills training programme was rolled out to enable additional groups to be set-up in other areas.

### **The year ahead**

After a busy 2015, we are looking forward to the year ahead. Our focus for 2016 is on consolidating our services to ensure we can support LGBT people of all ages and to develop additional supports for specific target groups. These will include, offering specialised support to people who identify as trans, in collaboration with TENI, and developing additional peer support groups for family members of LGBT people.

### **Thank you**

None of this work would have been possible without the support of our funders, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them for their continued support. I would also like to thank the LGBT Helpline's management committee for their vision, commitment, and leadership throughout the year.

Lastly, enormous thanks to our nationwide team of volunteers, who work tirelessly to ensure our services are available every day of the week. None of the work outlined in this report would be possible without their commitment, passion, and resolve.

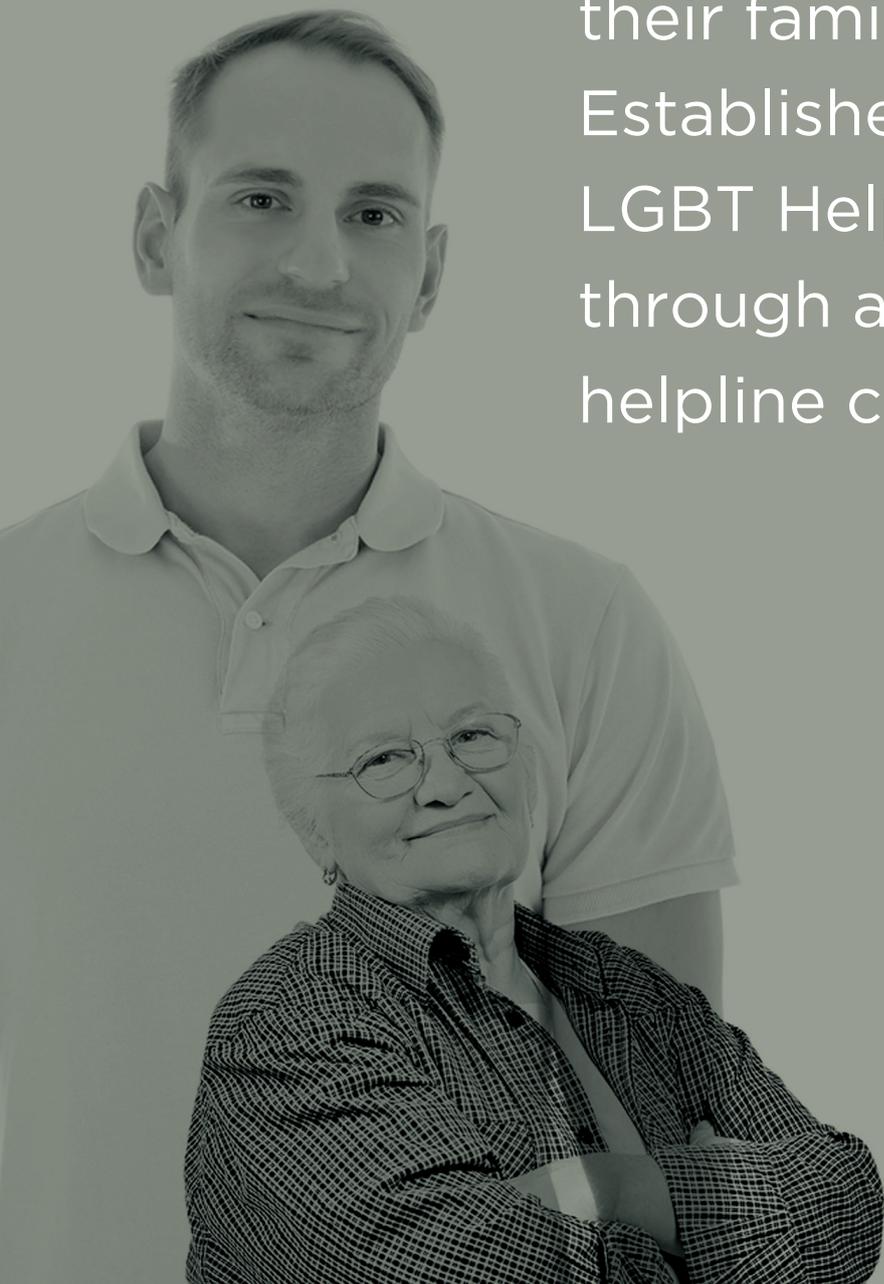
### **Paula Fagan**

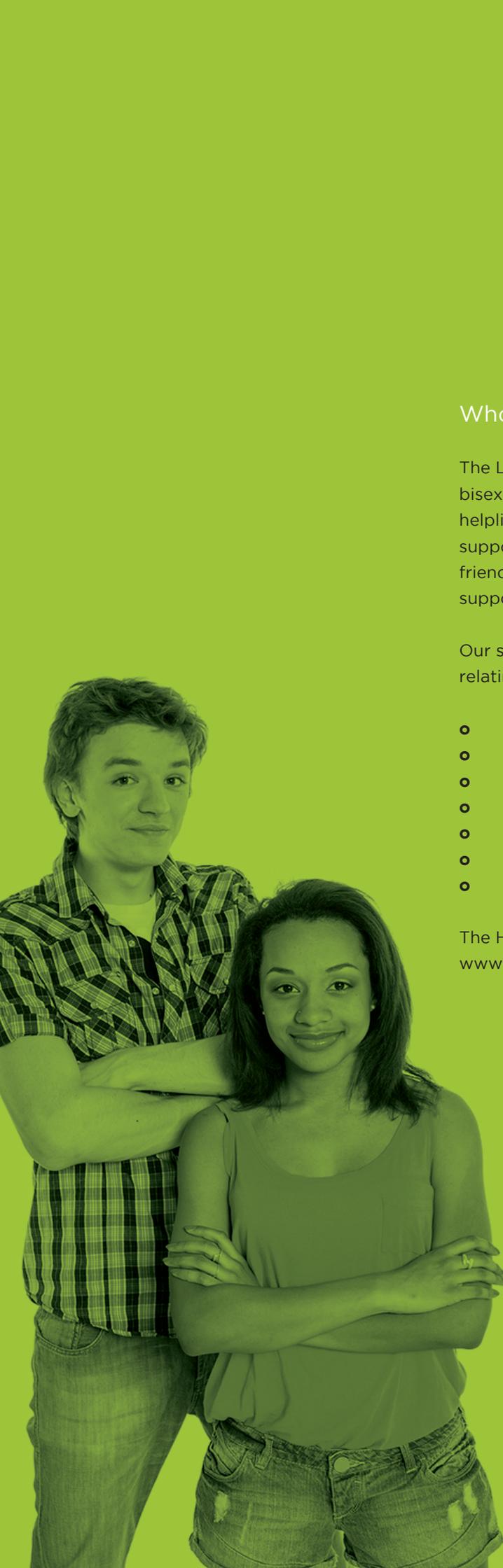
National Coordinator



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The LGBT Helpline is a national support service for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people and their families and friends. Established in 2010, the LGBT Helpline is run through a network of local helpline centres.





## Who We Are

The LGBT Helpline is the national support service for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Run through a network of local helpline centres, our teams of trained volunteers provide confidential support and information to LGBT people and to their families and friends, through the telephone helpline, online chat service, peer support groups, and the LGBT.ie website.

Our services offer support and information on a range of issues relating to sexuality and gender identity, including:

- o **Coming out as LGBT.**
- o **Dealing with isolation, loneliness, and depression.**
- o **Relationship problems.**
- o **Sexual health.**
- o **Parental and family support.**
- o **Dealing with the impact of homophobia and transphobia.**
- o **Finding LGBT supports and events in your local area.**

The Helpline number is 1890-929-539 and our website is [www.lgbt.ie](http://www.lgbt.ie).

## Statistics from our Support Services

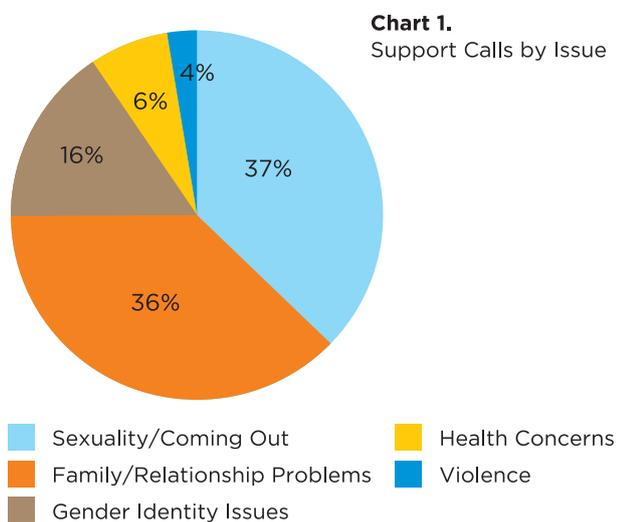
### Helpline Statistics

Being able to talk to someone, who will listen without judgement, can be a lifeline for people who are confused or struggling with their sexuality or gender identity. Our helpline volunteers are trained to deliver confidential, non-judgemental, listening, support and information to LGBT people, families, friends, and professionals.

Operating seven days, for a total of 19 hours per week, the helpline received 3,609 calls in 2015, representing a 13% increase on 2014. Of the calls received, 53% were from LGBT people and family members in need of support, 22% of calls were from LGBT people, family members, and professionals looking for information on specific issues or specialised supports, while 25% of calls were hang-ups.

### Support Calls

Of the support calls received, the five main issues that people contacted us about are outlined in chart 1 below:



Calls relating to sexuality were the largest category of call to the helpline at 37%. People of all ages looked for support around the discovery and acceptance of themselves, or a loved one, as being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, or questioning of their sexuality. Many callers in this category had experienced mental health difficulties resulting from the stress of concealing their true sexuality and from the stigma they had experienced or associated with being LGB.

**Family and relationship problems** also featured very strongly in calls. A range of issues arose under this category. People in same-sex relationships looked for support with relationship problems including information on LGBT friendly couple counselling. Many calls came from people in heterosexual marriages phoning for support when they or their spouse had come out as LGBT. Younger callers needed support to cope with difficult reactions from parents or to explore how to tell their parents about their sexuality or gender identity.

**Gender identity** was the main issue in 16% of calls. For many callers under this category, simply being able to express their true gender to another person, in confidence, and without judgement, was very significant. Calls recorded under gender identity, included calls from people who cross-dressed, as well as from those who self-identified as trans, transgender, transsexual, and gender queer. Many callers were not out to anyone about their true gender identity, and as a result felt extremely isolated and battled with depression and hopelessness about their situation. For others, who could be more open, the issues that arose related to coming out to family members including children, seeking information on medical services, and on trans support groups

**Health problems** were the main issue in 6% of calls and included mental, sexual, and general health issues. However as mental health problems were a common theme in the majority of calls to the LGBT Helpline, the details are documented under the other main presenting issues for the callers.

Callers experience of violence included disclosers of homophobic and transphobic bullying and abuse, and also incidents of domestic violence. The support and information sought by callers under this category included an opportunity to discuss the impact of the abuse, to consider personal safety measures, and to get information on services for victims of violence.

The final category of calls were **hang-up** calls, hang-ups happen where the caller puts the phone down immediately after it is answered or after a silent period. For many, calling the helpline marks their first time talking to another person about being LGBT or questioning their sexuality or gender identity. For this reason hang-up calls are a significant feature of our service, as it can take a caller several attempts to find the courage to speak to one of our volunteers.

### **Information Calls**

The top five types of information and signposts sought by helpline callers were:

- 1. LGBT friendly counsellors & psychotherapists**
- 2. Parent support groups**
- 3. LGBT youth groups**
- 4. Sexual health services**
- 5. Support groups for married people**

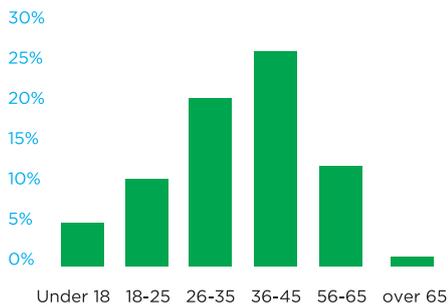
Providing information is a significant part of the helpline service. The most frequently sought information was in relation to LGBT friendly counsellors and psychotherapists. To assist our volunteers, we engaged with the membership of the IACP and PSI to build a database of professionals with an interest in, and experience of, working with LGBT people.

Information on parent supports and youth groups were regularly sought by callers. With younger callers Belong To Youth Services and LGBT youth groups around the country are frequently signposted to by our volunteers. For family supports, Loving Our Out Kids (LOOK) and Transparency, a support group for parents of trans children, provide welcome support options for parents.

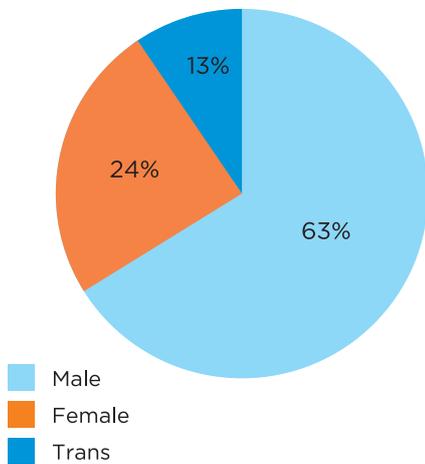
Sexual health concerns also come up regularly and volunteers are trained to provide safer sex information as well as signposting to sexual health services around the country.

A gap in supports for spouses of married callers began to be addressed this year by the establishment of our peer support groups in Cork and Dublin. Additional groups are needed in other areas alongside more groups for those who are married and LGBT themselves.

**Chart 2.**  
Age Profile of Callers



**Chart 3.**  
Gender Identity of Callers



### Age Profile of Helpline Callers

In chart 2, we can see the breakdown of the age of people contacting the LGBT Helpline.

Where age was known, over half (54%) were between 36 and 55 years of age, with 14% of callers 56 years and older. A further 20% of callers were between 26 and 35 years, highlighting that many people struggled with sexuality and gender identity issues far beyond their teenage years. 12% of callers were younger than 26 years old, with the statistics from our new instant messaging service indicating that young people favoured seeking support online where this was available.

### Gender Identity of Helpline Callers

Chart 3, outlines the gender identity of callers to the LGBT Helpline. Where callers' gender was known, 63% identified as male making up the largest category, followed by female callers at 24%, which represented an increase on the number of female callers in previous years.

For statistical purposes, we have included a variety of gender identities and expressions within the category Trans. Of the 13% of callers categorised as Trans, this includes those who self-identified as Transgender, Transsexual, Transvestite and Gender Queer.

## Instant Messaging Service

In July 2015, the LGBT Helpline launched a new instant messaging service in partnership with Gay Switchboard Ireland. Initially the service was available at weekends, rolling out to seven days per week from 1st September 2015. For the first six month period from July to December, we undertook 162 support chats through the instant messages service.

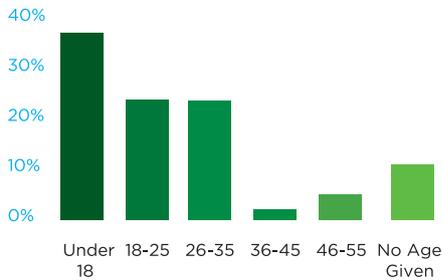
### Age Profile of People using Online Messaging Support

The instant messaging support is accessed anonymously. However, we gather some demographic information from an optional anonymous questionnaire, which people can submit after using the service.

Chart 4 highlights the popularity of this type of support with younger people, with 33% of people who filled in the questionnaire indicating they were under 18 years of age, and a further 23% aged between 18 and 25 years.

People falling in the age groups 36 years and older accounted for 9% of the questionnaires received.

**Chart 4.**  
Age Groups using Instant Messaging



### Reasons for Accessing the Instant Messaging Service

Where a reason was specified for accessing the instant chat, they were similar to those on the helpline.

Chart 5 shows sexuality was the highest support issue at 45%, followed by messages discussing gender identity at 31%.

The anonymous nature of online support, with people not having to worry about how they look and sound, may explain the higher portion of online messages on gender identity compared to 16% of calls.

Relationship problems were the reason for 7% of chats, while information was looked for in 5% of messages.

## Website Statistics

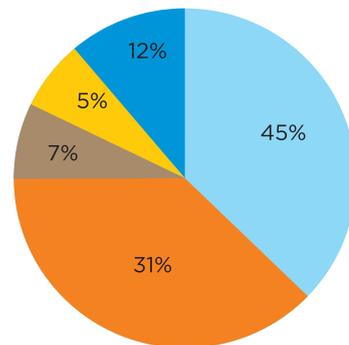
This year saw a significant growth in the number of visits to lgbt.ie, with 86,511 visits by almost 73,000 visitors in 2015, representing a 65% increase on the previous year.

Not surprisingly the busiest weeks of 2015 were in May and June. With over 6,622 visits to the website during the week of 17th to 23rd of May in the run up to the marriage equality referendum vote, and between the 28th June and 4th July during Dublin Pride.

Lgbt.ie provides details of LGBT supports in local areas and information on aspects of sexuality and gender identity which concern LGBT people, their families, friends, and professionals. During 2015, the five most visited pages were:

1. **What is LGBT?**
2. **Get Support in your Area**
3. **Get Information**
4. **Get Information – Coming Out**
5. **About Us – Helpline Opening Hours**

**Chart 5.**  
Reasons Given for Online Chat



- Sexuality
- Gender Identity
- Relationship Problems
- Information
- Reason Not Given

## Peer support service

The LGBT Helpline receives many calls and messages from people who are married, or in a long term heterosexual relationship, and who are questioning their own, or their partner's, sexuality or gender identity. Due to the secrecy often associated with this situation, both partners can feel isolated and unable to reach out to family members and friends for support.

In response to this emerging need, the LGBT Helpline set up three peer support groups at the end of 2014. These groups, based in Cork and Dublin, offer support to people in heterosexual relationships, where one partner has revealed, or is questioning that they may be, LGBT and all three groups ran throughout 2015.

Two of the groups are aimed at 'straight' spouses, offering confidential spaces for individuals to talk to other men and women who are going through a similar experience. Both groups have proven to be very successful, with group members reporting huge benefits from the support received, making a very positive impact on their lives.

**"In all of those years I never spoke to anyone about my situation, there is a huge need for the group. It is great to talk to other people in the same situation who understand what you are going through. You can get things off your chest and listen to others."**

### **Spouse Peer Support Group Participant**

The third group, based in Dublin, offers support to women who are married or in a long-term heterosexual relationship, and who are exploring their own sexuality or gender identity. This group has grown quickly since the first meeting in October 2014. Women attending this group found that talking to other people in the same situation, and the understanding and support which followed, was extremely beneficial.

A long established support group for women exploring their sexuality 'First Out' was added to the LGBT Helpline service in November 2015, further enhancing the support available for LGB women in Dublin.

In their first full year in operation the groups supported 37 people on an ongoing basis. Given the success of these initial groups and the demand for the service in other areas, the LGBT Helpline is planning to set up additional peer support groups in 2016.

### **Training**

Despite huge strides in LGBT rights in recent years, callers have told us they are still extremely reluctant to discuss sexuality or gender identity issues with mainstream service providers, for fear of a negative consequence. Conversely, a safe and supportive environment, that affirms LGBT identities, can have very positive outcomes.

In 2015, the LGBT Helpline, worked with a number of organisations to enhance their knowledge and skills on LGBT issues to ensure their services were as LGBT friendly as possible. Our awareness training was delivered to over 370 volunteers from a number of groups including; Samaritan branches in Athlone, Dublin, Kilkenny/Carlow, and Newbridge, Parentline, and the Future Voices programme.

The LGBT Helpline staff also supported the training of 44 new volunteers for our own helplines, and organised our annual national training weekend for existing volunteers, which was held in Galway in June.

## Working in Partnership

Working in partnership is a core principal of the LGBT Helpline and, alongside our collaborations with LGBT groups and organisations, we also work in partnership with other agencies in the mental health sector.

One such partnership is with Samaritans. Working together since 2012, both organisations benefit from the support and training received from each other. Through Samaritan's direct dial initiative, callers to the LGBT Helpline can divert to Samaritan's 24 hour helpline, offering a welcome safety net when our lines are closed. Samaritan volunteers' can enhance their knowledge of LGBT issues through our LGBT awareness workshops, delivered at Samaritan branch meetings and speaker events across the country.



Dublin volunteers at the Ploughing Championship, Sept 2015

## Our Nationwide Team of Volunteers

Our dedicated team of over sixty volunteers, worked tirelessly all year to deliver services to thousands of people throughout the country. Volunteers are the heart of the organisation and our services simply could not run without them.

Alongside delivering support and information, volunteers also took part in awareness raising campaigns, trained up new volunteers, and supported the development of new helplines.

Some of the highlights from their great work are outlined below:

### **Cork & Kerry**

The newest member of the LGBT Helpline is our service in Kerry. With the active support of our Cork volunteers who helped to train and mentor the new recruits, a small team of Kerry based volunteers are ready to start taking calls in January 2016. Operating from the KYDS Youth

Centre in Killarney, this helpline will enhance supports available to LGBT people living in Kerry.

The Cork team supported training of new volunteers for their own helplines based in the Cork Gay Community Development programme and in LINC's women's resource centres. Some of the volunteers also trained as facilitators by completing the LGBT Helpline's facilitation skills programme which ran in Cork in February 2015.

### **Dublin & Louth**

In September, we were delighted to share a stand with Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) at the National Ploughing Championship for the third year in a row. Over 80,000 people attend this event each day, and our Dublin volunteers distributed thousands of pens, leaflets and postcards promoting our helpline services. As well as distributing information, volunteers were on hand to chat with the many people who dropped by the stand to talk about their own experiences of being LGBT in rural Ireland and to find out information about support services in their area.

Our Louth volunteers had a busy 2015 too. Based in Dundalk Outcomers LGBT resource centre, volunteers took on additional duties alongside their helpline shifts to help out at two regional conferences, organised by Outcomers, on Trans Health and Domestic Violence in Same Sex relationships.

### **Galway & Mayo**

It was a busy year for our member helplines in the West. Our new LGBT Galway helpline was established with huge support from volunteers from the Outwest Gay Helpline in Mayo. LGBT Galway started taking calls in June 2015 and expanded their volunteer team in October with an additional round of volunteer training. With a move to the Teach Solais LGBT Resource Centre planned for early 2016, this helpline has quickly become a vibrant LGBT support service in the Galway area.

Alongside running their local service and supporting the development of the Galway line the majority of Outwest volunteers also found time to train as peer group facilitators, completing the LGBT Helpline's facilitation skills programme which ran in Galway in May 2015.

## Acknowledgments

The LGBT Helpline would like to thank Pobal, the HSE's National Office of Suicide Prevention, and the Community Foundation for Ireland, for their financial support of the project during 2015. We would also like to thank GLEN, for their continued fiscal and administrative support.

Lastly, our sincere thanks to our network members; Cork Lesbian Line, Dublin Lesbian Line, Dundalk Outcomers, Gay Information Cork, LGBT Dublin, LGBT Galway, LGBT Kerry, and Outwest Gay Helpline.



