**LGBT IRELAND SUBMISSION**

**A MORE EQUITBALE IRELAND FOR LGBT+ TRAVELLERS**

**Who we are**

LGBT Ireland is a national charitable organisation providing quality support and information services to Lesbian, Gay, Bi and Trans (LGBT) people and their family members. Informed by the issues and experiences raised through our frontline services we also provide training and advocacy supports to advance the rights, visibility and inclusion of LGBT people and their families, living across Ireland. LGBT Ireland’s frontline services are provided by a network of seven regional helpline services which are supported by LGBT Ireland’s staff team and Board of Directors.

**Key activities of LGBT Ireland**

* The provision of **quality frontline support and information services** including; National LGBT helpline and online chat service; the Gender Identity Family Support Line, specialist peer support groups; and dedicated website [www.lgbt.ie](http://www.lgbt.ie) providing a gateway to information and supports for LGBT people across the country.
* Delivery of **training & education programmes** in LGBT+ awareness and inclusion to a wide range of statutory and community and voluntary services and groups.
* **Advocacy and policy** development to enhance the visibility, rights and inclusion of LGBT+ people in the legislative, policy and practice areas that affect their lives.

LGBT Ireland’s **frontline services** aim to reach those within the LGBT community who can experience the greatest levels of inequality and social exclusion, including;

* Young people, with over 70% of contacts to our online chat service from people aged 25 and younger.
* Families with a family member who is Trans or gender non-conforming, through our Gender Identity Family Support Line.
* LGBT+ Asylum Seekers & Refugees living in Direct Provision, through our monthly peer support group “Is Rainbow Muid, We Are Rainbow”.
* Straight spouses of LGBT people who have recently come out through our ‘Straight Talking’ peer support group, alongside a separate group for married people who are struggling with their sexuality.
* Support to those Coming Out as LGB through our ‘First Out’ groups.

LGBT Ireland’s **Advocacy** work is undertaken at individual, community & national levels. Specialist advocacy support is provided to vulnerable LGBT+ individuals through outreach (e.g.) emergency one to one support to Asylum Seekers living in Direct Provision. National advocacy includes advancing policy and legislation that will improve LGBT+ lives (e.g.) member of inter-governmental oversight committee for National LGBTI Youth Strategy, lead organisation on LGBT family rights campaign and the LGBT Champions programme targeting health & social care professionals in older age services.

LGBT Ireland’s **Training** aims to improve the rights, visibility & inclusion of LGBT people within Irish society, through providing general and specialist LGBT+ Awareness training to a range of public and private services. LGBT Ireland’s trains approx. 1,000 external participants each year from a range of statutory, voluntary and community mainstream services.

LGBT Ireland’s **Services** include national, regional and local supports:

* Daily National LGBT Helpline and online chat service responds to approx. 2,000 contacts per annum- national, international
* Dedicated website [www.lgbt.ie](http://www.lgbt.ie) which offers supports and information to approx. 75,000 visitors per annum- national, international
* Weekly National Gender Identity Family Support Line responds to approx. 200 contacts per annum- national
* Peer supports service offering a range of specialist peer groups to approx. 150 people per annum- national, regional, local

All services are free and open to all LGBT+ people who are in need of support.

**LGBT Ireland’s expertise in supporting less visible groups within our community**

Emerging predominantly through our frontline services, while also in our training and advocacy work, is a deep knowledge of the broad spectrum of ongoing issues and needs of the LGBT+ community in Ireland, as well as the knowledge of what remedies and solutions are sought and required.

Recent Irish comparative research (2016) into experiences of LGBTI youth mental health[[1]](#footnote-1) vis-à-vis general youth mental health confirm worrying trends among ***young LGBTI people in Ireland***:

* + 2 times the level of self-harm
  + 3 times the level of attempted suicide
  + 4 times the level of severe/extremely severe stress, anxiety and depression
  + 60% of LGBTI people had seriously thought of ending their own life, almost half within the past year
  + 60% said suicidal thoughts were related to LGBTI identity
  + Intersex, transgender, and bisexual people were more likely to consider ending their own life than lesbian or gay people

The National LGBTI Youth Strategy[[2]](#footnote-2) launched by Minister Zappone, DCYA, is the government response to the needs identified.

Another section of our community that LGBT Ireland has focused attention on is the ***doubly invisible older LGBT people***. There is limited Irish research on this group with *Visible Lives* (2011)[[3]](#footnote-3) still being the go-to text for an insight into the issues and needs of older LGBT people. Some worrying findings around isolation and loneliness, more recently corroborated by Stonewall UK research (2015)[[4]](#footnote-4), include:

***“diminished support networks in comparison to heterosexual peers”***

* *More likely to be single*: 40% (UK) / 43% (IRL) of gay and bisexual men are single, compared to 15% (UK) / 15% (IRL) for heterosexual men
* *More likely to live alone:* 41% (UK) / 46% (IRL) of LGB people live alone compared to 28% (UK) / 29% (IRL) of heterosexual people.
* *Less likely to have children:* just over 25% of gay and bisexual men and 50% of lesbian and bisexual women have children, compared to almost 90% of heterosexual men and women.

LGBT Ireland’s *LGBT Champions Programme*, as well as the soon to be published *National LGBT+ Inclusion Strategy* of Dept. of Justice & Equality aim to address these issues.

LGBT Ireland was a Steering Committee member for the National Lesbian and Gay Federation’s 2018 research project *Far from Home, Life as an LGBT Migrant in Ireland[[5]](#footnote-5)*. The report provided the first overview of experiences of ***EU and non-EU LGBT migrants*** living and working in various parts of Ireland:

* 48% of respondents were from EU countries, the majority coming from the UK, Poland, France, Italy and Spain. Over a fifth were from outside the EU, mainly Brazil.
* The most common reasons for migrants coming to Ireland were to find work, to study and to experience greater acceptance as a member of the LGBT community.
* For many, seeking greater acceptance also meant escaping serious risks to their safety and lives.
* Almost three-quarters of those surveyed rated their physical health negatively.
* Over half of those surveyed (57%) rated their mental health negatively.
* Many LGBT migrants are living in rural Ireland where there are currently no LGBT community resources available to them.
* ***66% of participants indicated they have felt treated with less respect in public spaces because of their race, ethnicity or migrant status.***
* ***Participants felt the system of processing LGBT asylum seekers needed to be radically overhauled.***

We outline our track record in working to increase visibility, awareness and understanding of the needs and challenges of the most marginalised within our LGBT+ community, so that the committee understand our work with LGBT+ Travellers is embedded with this expertise and insight in working with marginalised LGBT+ people even within the “LGBT+ community” itself.

The remainder of this submission will iterate our key concerns for LGBT+ Travellers as well as our key recommendations.

**Specific Challenges facing LGBT+ Travellers**

Since it began in 2016, LGBT Ireland sits on the ***National Action Group for*** ***LGBT Travellers & Roma***. This group was formed with the goal of advancing greater awareness and understanding of LGBT Travellers and Roma and their inclusion in their support organisations and communities. From the beginning, there was a dearth of research on this very hidden and vulnerable group within the Travelling community. There was also a very small pool of ‘out’ LGBT+ Travellers with which to engage in order to move the agenda forward, ensuring those affected drove the change. A snapshot piece of research by the Eastern Region Traveller Health Network (2012)[[6]](#footnote-6) in Dublin revealed shocking insights into the emotional struggles facing LGBT Travellers:

* 5 of 11 had self- harmed; they were aged between 15-18 years of age when they first self- harmed
* 6 had seriously thought about ending their life
* 5/6 stated their thoughts were *“very much related”* to being LGBT
* 2 of 3 participants with children had planned and attempted suicide
* average age of attempting suicide was 17.4 years

From the gay members of the National Action Group, many anecdotal examples reinforced this snapshot as on-going throughout various Traveller communities across the country.

The National Action Group established a training sub-group where LGBT Ireland sits. The subgroup gave itself an awareness-raising / educational task, whereby LGBT Travellers Awareness Training would be designed and delivered. Specific training tools were developed, including a series of ‘4 short videos where out gay Travellers spoke about various aspects of their lives, the challenges they faced and overcome and advice for those watching the videos, both LGBT+ and straight. The videos are:

* ‘Coming Out as a gay Traveller’
* ‘Mental health and LGBT Travellers’
* ‘Traveller Identity and being LGBT’
* ‘Acceptance for being Traveller, and gay’

These videos were publicly and very successfully launched as part of National Coming Out Day, 11th October 2018, which is part of National Mental Health Awareness Week every year. Many national Traveller leaders spoke of the importance of giving greater visibility and voice to LGBT+ Travellers so that parents can understand, accept and support their children as well as adult members of their families.

Once again on 5th March, very deliberately and strategically as part of Traveller Pride Week, coinciding with the first anniversary of Traveller ethnicity being officially recognised by the State, a 1-day LGBT+ Traveller Awareness Training was delivered. Over 25 participants (the majority from the Traveller community) from over 15 Traveller organisations in Dublin and other parts of the country, actively engaged with the training. Very real questions, cases, challenges were discussed. At coffee breaks, lunchtime and after the training finished some participants held back to talk more and seek more advice on particular family members who were either trying to come out, had come out and were facing family rejection and abandonment and so on.

Being LGBT+ for anyone is a journey into self-understanding, self-acceptance, acceptance from others, celebration. It’s a journey very often characterised by secrecy, shame, self-blame, guilt, isolation, loneliness, emotional vulnerability, harmful behaviour (alcohol, substance abuse, self-harm), mental distress.

LGBT Ireland has learned through our membership of the National Action Group and the training sub-group, that the journey for LGBT+ Travellers is characterised by very heavy burdens of shame, guilt, secrecy, anxiety, depression, alcohol and substance abuse, suicide. The pressures to conform for the defined mould of what constitutes Traveller culture, a culture Travellers fought so long and hard to have recognised, is immense. It falls particularly heavy on lesbian and Transgender Travellers who remain extremely hidden and when they do come forward, experience serious levels of violence.

In spite of the heavy burden to conform, LGBT Ireland, as part of the training sub-group, perceives a real opening of opportunities within the Traveller community to nurture the conversations that have already begun in certain parts of the community, particularly the Primary Health Care Teams, the Mental Health Workers. There is now a real opportunity to invest in training, visibility campaigns (national media, social media, posters, training) and a dedicated LGBT Traveller support service.

The alarming levels of suicide are documented in a snapshot research. From that we can extrapolate the numbers of young and not young people whose mental health and well-being are very negatively impacted by being forced to live life in the closet, or not live at all.

LGBT Ireland believes that this situation can be turned around for LGBT+ Travellers. Allies already exist in the community and this pool can be grown through training. We see this as a very doable task. Traveller organisations are key targets. Traveller sites are key targets.

The problems are known. The targets are known. The solutions are known. We now just need the resources going to the rights groups and services to bring the change which is so urgently needed.

**Racism towards LGBT+ Travellers in the LGBT+ community**

A significant reality which has come clearly into the light of day during the process of working together on the National Action Group is the experience of LGBT+ Travellers in LGBT+ spaces. A common feeling and experience is that for LGBT+ Travellers living in Ireland and inhabiting Irish society, it is easier to come out as gay than as a Traveller. This has huge ramifications for LGBT+ Travellers accessing LGBT+ spaces and services. It is often a case of being stuck in limbo, or worse, falling between two stools. An LGBT+ Traveller is encouraged and supported for the good of their mental health and well-being to come out. Having done so they face rejection and abandonment from their family (even if in the longer terms acceptance grows). They seek support and solidarity to help them through this isolation in LGBT+ spaces where, once it becomes evident they are Traveller they are also rejected, sometimes even ejected, due to the anti-Traveller racism which pervades Irish society, including LGBT+ society.

For this reason of double rejection, double isolation, LGBT+ Travellers in Ireland are extremely vulnerable. LGBT Ireland suggests that a specific set of actions need to be undertaken to challenge racism towards LGBT+ Travellers in our community. These include a greater visibility of LGBT+ Travellers in our community which can only happen if the issues raised earlier in this section are also addressed. Dedicated awareness raising in key LGBT+ services, spaces to develop a core body of LGBT+ Traveller allies. There is also a need for dedicated campaigns challenging racism against Travellers and against LGBT+ Travellers which can happen at all Prides events and at all major LGBT+ events through the year- GAZE film festival, Dublin Gay Theatre Festival, The Outing, Gay Olympics to name some key ones. There needs to be greater visibility of out LGBT+ Travellers in our state services, national media including radio, TV, social media outlets of our public broadcaster RTE.

Without a dedicated series of such interventions in the wider LGBT+ community, we risk making the lives of LGBT+ Travellers worse outside of the closet, and their community than in the closet. However the secrecy of passing as straight, marrying, becoming a parent and fulfilling what’s expected of you within the Traveller culture is a timebomb waiting to happen for many in the Traveller community of which 8-10% are LGBT+. That’s approximately 5,000 Travellers. One day that time bomb will quietly explode in a death by suicide, a death by overdose and a death by all the other means through which LGBT+ Travellers are and have been dying.

LGBT Ireland urge you to take the following recommendations into serious consideration to arrest the trend.

**Recommendations**

* Appropriately resource the National LGBT+ Traveller and Roma Action Group with funding for additional human resources to take full advantage of the opportunities which are now opening up after 3 years of work.
* Appropriately resource a national LGBT+ Traveller training campaign to support the promotion of LGBT+ Traveller visibility, pride and identity within and external to the Traveller community.
* Appropriately resource a series of initiatives aimed at challenging homophobia and transphobia within the Traveller communities.
* Commission and fund national research on LGBT+ Travellers mental, physical and social health.
* Resource the development of additional supports for Traveller families who have children coming out.
* Resource the development of additional supports for Traveller families who have parents coming out.
* Appropriately resource LGBT+ services to deliver anti-Traveller racism campaigns, educational interventions in LGBT+ services and spaces in all major cities and key regional centres.

LGBT Ireland welcomes any opportunity to clarify and further elaborate on any aspect of this submission. We remain available to provide any additional information and support your committee may need in order to contribute to the changes which are so urgently needed to make life as an LGBT+ Traveller more bearable and more survivable.

Is mise le meas,

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1. Higgins, Agnes, Doyle, L, Downes, C; Murphy, R; Sharek, D; DeVries, J; Begley, T; McCann, E; Sheerin, F & Smyth, S (2016). *The LGBTIreland report: National study of the mental health and wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender & intersex people in Ireland.* Dublin: [www.belongto.org](http://www.belongto.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The [*LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018 - 2020*](https://www.dcya.gov.ie/documents/20180709LGBTINationalYouthStrategyRev.pdf) was launched on 29th June 2018. It provides an opportunity to build a more inclusive Ireland for LGBTI+ young people and is the first of its kind in the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Higgins, A., Sharek, D., McCann, E., Sheerin, F., Glacken, M. Breen, M. & McCarron, M. (2011). *Visible lives: identifying the experiences and needs of older LGBT people in Ireland*. <http://lgbt.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/attachment_233_Visible_Lives_-_Key_Findings_Nov_2011.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. **Stonewall UK. (2011).** *Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual People & Later Life* <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/LGB_people_in_Later_Life__2011_.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Noone, C., Keogh, B., Buggy, C. (2018) *Far from Home: Life as an LGBT Migrant in Ireland* [*https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/10626/2/nxf-migrants-report-screen.pdf*](https://researchrepository.ucd.ie/bitstream/10197/10626/2/nxf-migrants-report-screen.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *LGBT Traveller Health Report ERTHN\* Area”* Dempsey, C. (2012) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)