

Seeding the County

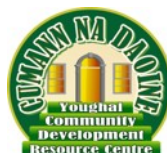
A Needs Assessment Report of LGBT+
people living in County Cork

Seeding the County: LGBT+Development Project led by
Cumann na Daoine & East Cork LGBT+ Network

Sept – Dec 2020.

Funded by Cork County Council / Department of Rural & Community Development

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Department of Rural and
Community Development

An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail



INTRODUCTION:

‘Seeding the County’ was a short-term initiative to enable the development of cohesive social networks and inter-agency actions which support LGBT+ people living in the county of Cork, particularly those living in rural areas, with an emphasis on engaging with the more isolated or marginalised members of this community. Taking place during the Covid19 pandemic, the project faced increased challenges to engagement which were addressed through the methodology.

The project aims included hearing the voice of LGBT+ people through an online survey and consultation process; to bring together a core working group of mainstream agencies to create relevant supports and interventions that will benefit the LGBT+ population; to assess existing work with LGBT+ people to date across the county and to provide a series of initiatives to support LGBT+ engagement with the history and culture of LGBT+ people.

The project was led by Community Development Worker Hayley Fox-Roberts of Cumann na Daoine and the East Cork LGBT+ Network (established 2018) and funded by Cork County Council.

EXISTING RESEARCH:

There have been a number of research reports which address the needs of LGBT+ people, however to date there has been no examination of the specific needs of rural-dwelling people in County Cork.

County Cork – particularly West Cork – is anecdotally known to have a high LGBT+ population and while there are two city projects (LINC and the Cork Gay Project) which serve the county population as well as the city, these projects may be inaccessible to people in the farther reaches of the county due to issues of transport and cost. A positive result that has come from the pandemic of 2020 is the increased use of online contact points with, for example, the East Cork Network holding weekly ‘Teatime Zooms’ and LINC and the Gay Project offering a range of online activities. However, as demonstrated in the result findings, lack of good internet provision is still an issue in rural areas.

There has been a small but valuable body of research into LGBT+ people in Ireland. Of particular relevance in the current times are the two research reports *LGBTI Life in Lockdown: the Impact of Covid-19 Restrictions on LGBTI+ Young People in Ireland* (BeLonGTo, 2020) and *LGBTI Life in Lockdown: Snapshot Survey Findings* (LGBT Ireland/NXF 2020). Both of these studies show the increased risk to LGBT+ people in terms of impact on mental health, increased isolation and reduced community contact. This illustrates the positive impact of Seeding the County project in inviting isolated people to participate in the survey and actions. As noted in the LGBT Ireland/NXF report: **Given that the survey was disseminated through social media channels related to LGBTI+ organisations, the profile of respondents are more likely to include those who were already aware of LGBT Ireland and other support services. Therefore, the level of awareness of LGBTI+ Support Services is likely to be much lower.* The Seeding the County project aimed to address this by encouraging individuals in various county areas to share the project information with other community members in their area.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY:

This short-term project operated on the principle of community development, that of empowering local organisations and people to roll out information and share learning. It also aimed to enable mainstream organisations (including Family Resource Centres and Community Centres) to identify their learning needs, to add to any existing LGBT+ work they had delivered and to be supported in extending and increasing that work as their local populations required. It further encouraged the empowerment of LGBT+ individuals in defining their own needs and in sharing information with other community members.

The project had six strands:

- Building a core group to work together in developing supports
- Encouraging the delivery of LGBT+ Awareness training to staff and volunteers in participant projects
- Providing support and governance training for existing LGBT+ peer-led groups
- Providing LGBT+ History course (online) for LGBT+ people to affirm their community culture and share their experiences.
- Provide materials and resources to increase LGBT+ visibility across the county
- Link to existing initiatives and activities, including those of LINC and the Gay Project; Youghal Pride by the Sea and the East Cork LGBT+ Network.

The work was conducted over 15 days by the Community Development Worker, supported by the staff of Cumann na Daoine and the East Cork LGBT+ Network. Simultaneously to this project, application was made by Cumann na Daoine/East Cork LGBT+ Network to the Department of Children & Youth Affairs under their LGBT+ funding strand, to continue this project through 2021. This application was successful.

OUTCOMES:

- Core group established with 13 member organisations: Skibbereen, Cobh, Dunmanway, Bandon, Carrigtwohill, Beara & Mallow FRCs; Cumann na Daoine, Caha Centre; Bród West (Clonakilty), LINC & Cork Gay Project.
- Training needs identified and collaborating organisations catalogue their resources.
- Queer Chronicles: LGBT+ History & Culture course includes presentations & film screenings, with an element of oral history and developing personal archiving skills, in conjunction with Cork LGBT History Project.
- Poster and sticker designs developed and printed for distribution across the county. 200 posters (Seeding the County & Bród West); 400 stickers ('County Cork supporting it's LGBT+ Community' & Bród West)
- Recognition that LGBT+ groups do not necessarily have the resources to take on further work, that staffing levels in partner organisations is limited, and the value of mainstream organisations in promoting visibility is acknowledged.
- Youghal Pride by the Sea delivered (online event) with the assistance of local activists, and participation by 10+ local businesses displaying LGBT+ visibility material
- Donation of an LGBT+ research resource collection to Youghal Library.
- Weekly Zoom meetings hosted by the East Cork Network ran from September – December and continue into 2021
- LGBT+ Youth cafe project (funded under DCYA) was revived as an online project which continues successfully into 2021.

CONSULTATION PROCESS:

The online survey was disseminated through social media (Cumann na Daoine and East Cork Network Facebook pages); core groups organisations were asked to disseminate it through their own channels and LINC shared the link with participants in their online groups. The use of paper materials (posters, leaflets) was limited due to Covid19 restrictions, and this impacted on the number of respondents.

70 responses were received in the period October – December 2020. Of these, 18 people agreed to participate in ongoing online consultations "the Consultation Group".

DEMOGRAPHICS:

70 responses were received. Overall, respondents engaged fully with the survey, including comments and suggestions as requested. These findings will further inform actions in the 2021 project.

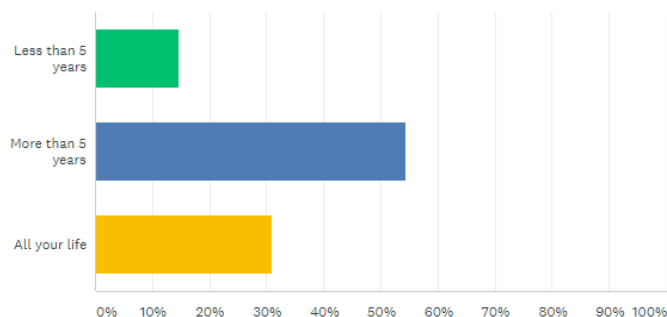
The highest percentage of respondents (28%) was in the 55-64 age bracket, followed by 20% between 35-44. The lowest response was from under 18s (2%) and then over 65s (8%). 55% of respondents were from West Cork, 30% from East Cork and the remainder spread between North Cork and neo-city suburbs. 75% of respondents identified as female, with 15% male and others identifying as Trans, non-binary, neo-gender and epicine¹.

These results are unlikely to reflect the actual population of the area; more likely reflecting the trope that women have increased networking skills, and that older men are more likely to be isolated to a degree that local word-of-mouth does not reach them. We must acknowledge that the 'insider status' of the worker herself may have encouraged a greater word-of-mouth spread amongst lesbian/bisexual women. There is also the issue (reflected in one respondents comments) that older men, still living with the memory of having been criminalised, are less likely to engage in community activity.

51.47% of respondents identified as lesbian; 16.18% gay, 20.59% bisexual and 14.71% heterosexual. Interestingly, while this survey was clearly targeted at LGBT+ people, responses illustrate a commitment to being an 'LGBT+ Ally' from this cohort. Other sexuality identities were recorded as pansexual and amour-gender²

How long have you lived in County Cork?

Answered: 68 Skipped: 2



A majority of respondents (29) live in rural areas, with 27 in towns and 15 in villages. Nearly 5% live in areas recently incorporated into the city boundaries. An equal number of respondents live in owned or rented homes; however 10% live in the family home and 1 respondent in emergency accommodation. Whilst 54% are happy with their accommodation, over 34% would like to move. 10% say they have difficulty finding suitable accommodation. 29% of respondents live alone. Many had positive reasons for living in their chosen location: "*Nature, artistic community, family*"; "*the city was too crowded*", "*I live across the lane from the house I was born in/grew up in*", "*great community and environment*", reflecting that rural living is a definite positive for many. However others had less positive experiences: "*We needed to get out of the house before this because we were feeling threatened by the landlord, this house was available*", "*lost job and home in previous*

¹ epicine - one having both male and female sexual characteristics and organs; at birth an unambiguous assignment of male or female cannot be made. Synonyms: androgyne, epicine person, gynandromorph, hermaphrodite, intersex.

² Amour is the word for the abstract love concept, but can also be used in the singular form to mean a beloved person (mon amour) of either gender.

town”, “Loss of my home due to illness exacerbated by the 2008 downturn/crash”, “There was no other rental house available anywhere” and “I prefer living here than being homeless”. The housing crisis and high rents impact all strata of community.

Challenges to living outside the city focused on poor transport, lack of social contact and poor internet connection, with one respondent feeling it was “*easy to get lost mentally*” and for another “*how I look*” created a challenge. While 68% of respondents were happy with their internet connection, 32% reported poor or non-existent service.

Nearly 75% were employed (full or part time), 15% self-employed and 10% - slightly less than the current national average – unemployed.

INFRASTRUCTURE:

When asked about access to transport, 29% said they had limited access to public transport, and 2% had no access. As one respondent commented “*Irish [public] transport is totally shambolic*”. However 46% of respondents had access to a car.

Asked about access to health supports, 48% had their needs met locally, 40% have their needs met in the city, however 7.5% said they could not access relevant supports in the county. A small percentage (<4%) did not know how to access health supports. Nearly 32% of respondents described their internet access as poor. Given the survey required internet access to complete, it is unsurprising that none mentioned an absence of internet provision.

Findings show that overall there is a relatively high engagement with local representatives: 80% know all or some of their local TDs and Councillors; 40% had contacted them with a specific issue and found them helpful (although 12% had contacted them and it was not helpful). 42% were aware of some representatives’ stance on LGBT+ issues, and 15% aware of all representatives’ attitudes. Asked what these elected representatives could be doing to promote equality and inclusion, answers focused around three areas:

COMMUNICATION:

“*Public naming of support and value/respect for our community and our particular issues*”, “*Say the words out loud and in public in a positive context...keep talking about the LGBTQ + community and our concerns*” along with community consultations to ensure community-led statutory planning and enable discussion on party policies (which would also support the suggestion that they ‘reach out and learn more about the community’).

EDUCATION & LEGISLATION:

Help to introduce an updated curriculum in secondary schools in regards to Sexual Education (sexual health/sexuality/gender identity/sexual ethics and consent).

Proactively ensure enactment of Hate Crime legislation.

Advocate for inclusion of sexual identity in the next census.

PARTICIPATION:

Attend more Pride events

Instigate commemorations of historical LGBT+ dates or world LGBT+ celebration days

Source funding for LGBT+-specific spaces

This high engagement with public representatives is reflected in 78% of respondents being interested in joining a lobbying group (aims of such a group was not specified).

HEALTH & WELLBEING:

60% reported their physical health as 'good' and 5% as 'poor'. Over 14% stated they had ongoing physical health problems and 8.5% living with a physical disability. Nearly 18% reported 'ongoing mental health problems' and although the majority expressed their mental health as 'good', 9% reported it as 'poor'. 61% describe their sexual health as 'good' although 32% have not had a sexual health check in the past 5 years, or at all, and a small percentage did not know how to describe their sexual health.

The vast majority (75% in some cases) are 'out' to their family, friends and work colleagues ("*and the press*" in one case). 64% are out to their GP, though less (37%) to other health services. However as the following quotes show, it is not always easy to be out: "*It's harder for me to come out now that I'm with a transgender man than when I was with women*"; "*I don't feel I have ever had the chance to experience my bisexuality because there was no services for me to explore it at a younger age so I was in a heterosexual relationship for years and now I don't want to come out as bisexual publicly*" and "*Only online friends, Nobody in real life*". The age of coming out was spread between the teenage years (14) and older ages, with the oldest at 47. Some reported that they had come out at a young age, and then entered into heterosexual relationships, coming out again at a later age. The average coming out age was 23.

Some of the benefits of being out were cited as: "*Not having to self censor, evade, worry about what people might think when they find out*", "*Not lying about your life to family*", "*No hiding or wondering what people might think*", "*self-esteem, confidence, mental health, relationships*", a "*weight off your shoulders, able to be yourself and find the people who accept you for you*" and "*I get to share my excitement about dating and include my partner in social activities. I get the social capital of being in a couple. I can meet other people who are LGBTQ*" One noted "*I find it very useful to be out to my GP and sexual health centre. They're able to give me advice to protect my sexual health from all possible partners. It also makes me feel more comfortable disclosing relevant information as I know they're non judgemental*".

"People see me as a joke, my identity seems funny to them"

Other respondents identified the benefits of being out as "*very few, if only to meet other queer people*" and expressed other challenges including "*Some people still have outdated attitudes and can be homophobic*", "*Heteronormative expectations of my marriage to my husband*", "*It's hard to have to correct assumptions that I'm straight over and over and to come out over and over again*", "*...the main issue I have is how to come out when my partner goes by male pronouns. It makes it harder - there's more to explain*" and "*I hate being the spokesperson for queer women to a lot of people in my life. I'm the only non straight person some people at work and in my family know (or know they know), and it can be exhausting even when it's well-intentioned*". Concerns around homophobia, safety and the loss of friends/family were evidenced.

56% of respondents had experienced verbal abuse based on their sexuality, 13% physical abuse and 36% discrimination in employment. Of these, nearly 90% did not report these abuses to Gardai. A number of respondents cited homophobic employers as a reason they had left a job.

Over 42% felt isolated from their community, with another 18% feeling isolated from everyone.

"The closet is a dangerous place: Ireland needs to do a better job of making the country safe, welcoming & inclusive for queer folk"

IMPACT OF COVID19:

52% of respondents felt that Covid19 has impacted negatively on their mental health, with 20% stating it has worsened existing mental health problems. One person described their sense of community under Covid as *“very broken”*. On a more positive note, one respondent stated *“...a stronger sense of uncertainty and a new caution or alertness unconsciously but it is welcome by me too...but some positives for me and my mental health, slowing down, drawing clearer boundaries, focusing on what matters to me most and what is bringing me most joy and growth...”*. A number of respondents noted that the online forums provided by LINC, East Cork Network and the Gay Project have been ‘lifelines’ and some mentioned the strengthening of community in their area outside the LGBT+ community.

Division within the non-straight community has also arisen: *“Seeing [some of] my community fall for cover conspiracies and right wing haters has been the most difficult to digest”* and *“It’s hard living in a community that has such divided attitudes to the virus and to mask wearing. I tend now to only see the people who are behaving with a similar amount of Covid precaution to me”*. Predominantly, however, respondents expressed loneliness, isolation *“It is not noticeable to people in my life how much I am isolated because everyone is isolating. I see no one but it’s going unnoticed”* and the difficulty of engaging on screen, particularly between generations: *“I just have a hard time feeling included when I’m [on screen] with other LGBTQ people. Especially if they are younger”*

During Covid, 33% of respondents have kept in touch with their community through online meetings, and 45% through individual online contact.

“Community is family”

COMMUNITY

A sense of belonging, openness and comfort, family, solidarity, freedom, safety, home, connection, love...these are all words that respondents shared as what the LGBT+ community means to them.

Pre-Covid, 50% of respondents had frequent contact with other LGBT+ people, 28% occasionally and the remainder rarely or never. The difference during this past year is evidenced above. A slightly higher percentage (88%) made online contact during Covid19. In all the various identifications of ‘community’, a sense of shared experience, commonality and not needing to explain oneself come through strongly. One respondent felt that community is *“a broad umbrella term characterised by diversity. It’s a collective of communities...common interests & purpose”* and this reflects the varying

By having a community, we don't feel so alone about it”

needs of individual people expressed throughout this project.

Community events – Prides and regular pub nights – had been well attended in the past, and a wide range of other activities participated in: LGBT+ choirs, art projects, sporting groups, regular community events, yoga and parties all featured as means of meeting with others in the community. However 54% reported that there were no events in their area, i.e. they had to travel to attend, and 24% stated lack of transport (public or private) was a barrier to attending events. 46% said that not knowing other people would be a barrier to attendance.

“My sense of [community] is stronger than ever thanks to online forums...but the loneliness is pretty crippling”

When asked what type of events respondents would like to attend in their area, the following suggestions were made:

Dancing (<i>a popular choice</i>)	Sports and arts
Gay bar & venue-led events	Meet & Greet events
Coffee mornings, Social nights	Film nights, Book clubs, Dinner clubs
Group trips	Intergenerational projects
Activities: choir, crafts, volunteering	Nature & environmental projects
DIY groups	Fertility and health information

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE:

We asked respondents if they were aware of LGBT+-specific organisations operating at national, regional and local level, naming the following:

Cork Gay Project; LINC; Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), National Lesbian & Gay Federation (NXF), BeLonGTo LGBT Youth Services, Bród West Cork, LGBT+ Youghal Network (East Cork Network), LGBT Ireland, Gay Community News (GCN), Cork Pride and local Prides.

Overall these were well known with LINC, Cork Pride and Cork Gay Project being best known. Other organisations identified were Cork Sexual Health Centre, Gender Rebels Cork and mention made of Novas and West Cork Women Against Violence. Over 30% of respondents had taken part in social activities and 32% said they were actively engaged with one or more of these organisations. Asked how LGBT+ organisations could better serve the needs of those outside the city, suggestions included the following:

- Run workshops and events in schools
- Provide group supports for people unable to get to the city (i.e. outreach)
- Support small local groups to develop without forcing structures on them
- Make subsidised therapy available outside the city
- Host consultations in rural areas.
- Work with local mainstream organisations to raise awareness of specific rural/nonurban needs.
- Collaborate with community leaders
- Set up sub offices in rural areas
- Create regular spaces: monthly social evenings & drop-ins and support days in local towns.
- Hold events in smaller towns, giving local people opportunity to participate in bigger events
- Run / support local Prides
- Develop online meetings versus 1-1 to reach a wider audience.
- Improve communication between existing organisations

A good level of awareness of statutory organisations within the area was referenced, primarily Family Resource Centres, Domestic Violence Services, Youth Services and Community Centres. Mentions were made of the Local Authority (Cork County Council) and CoAction, for people with disabilities. This question was asked in relation to how such services could better support their LGBT+ clients.

One respondent identified local Family Resource Centres as running specific supports: *“Skibbereen Community & Family Resource Centre are doing good work and could use more support for the work they do...Bandon has a very gay friendly coordinator who is supportive. West Cork Counselling Support Services will also see LGBT people for subsidised counselling if they need it”*

A number of means were identified that could increase statutory support of LGBT+ people:

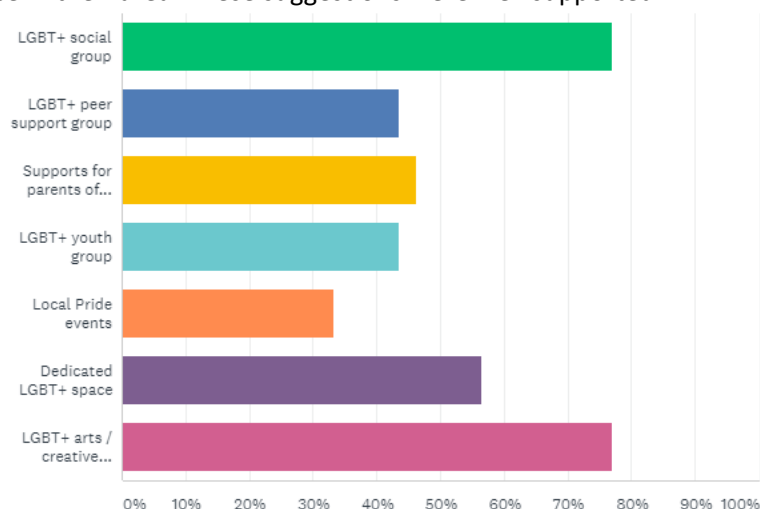
- Increase visibility – demonstrate that LGBT+ people are welcome
- Raise awareness about LGBT+ people with disabilities.
- Host regular drop-in events (led by LGBT+ organisations or community activists)
- Train staff and volunteers in LGBT+ Awareness; review their commitment to inclusion annually and provide training for new staff.
- Recruit LGBT+ volunteers
- Funding community-led activities
- Embedding LGBT+ inclusion in their policies, materials and action plans (including clear and accessible equality statements);
- Provide space and support for community-led activities
- Provide accessible information on support networks and organisations in the area and update this as needed.

It was also noted that ‘rainbow capitalism’, i.e. business targeting of LGBT+ people in order to increase business, may be counter-productive as it “often further covers up the actual deep rooted issues” and over 20% mentioned the need for increased awareness of Transgender people and healthcare.

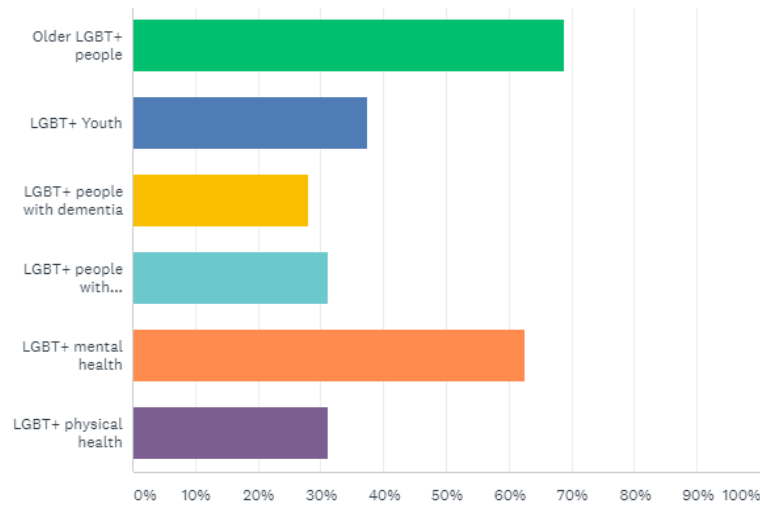
Asking if LGBT+ presence could be increased in local communities, only one respondent felt the existing presence was enough: recommendations for increasing presence included the visibility materials referenced above, an emphasis on GP surgeries promoting their gay-friendly status and statutory services such as Tulsa and HSE offering more acknowledgment in their printed materials. Providing GCN and support information in community centres and public spaces was also recommended, as was the development of a business directory listing “*LGBT+ merchants and (genuine) allies*”. <24% were unsure about an increased presence: this may reflect potential negative impacts of such increases or simply mean they were unsure of how this could be achieved. 57% were willing to distribute visibility materials within their own areas, and an additional 6% in other areas along with 22% saying they might be willing. This willingness ensures a community-led approach, and enables distribution over a much wider area than would otherwise be possible: it also strengthens the community’s empowerment.

FUTURE PARTICIPATION:

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to the supports and activities they would like to see taking place in their area. These suggestions were well supported:

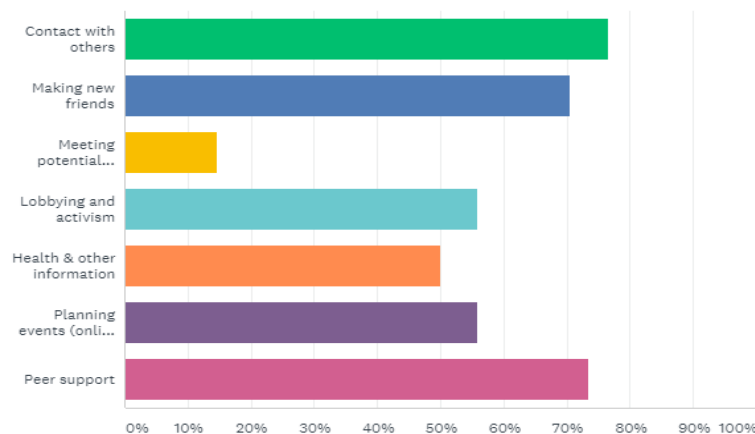


Asked about the needs of the most marginalised and which sectors need most support, these were the responses:

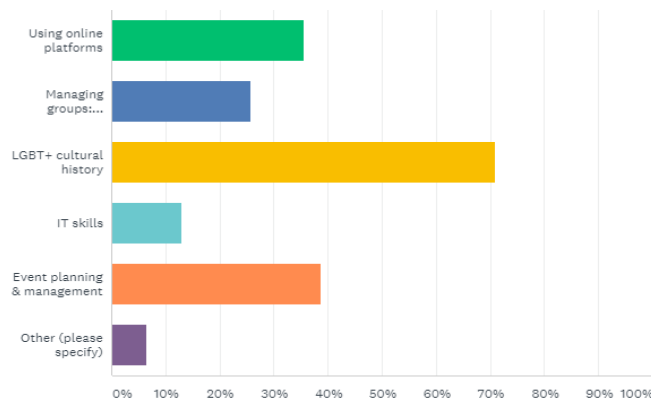


When asked, over 50% of respondents said they would be interested in helping to start a group, with assistance from LGBT+ or statutory organisations, and a further 17% interested in starting projects without assistance from any external organisation. 50% of respondents participated in a skills audit, acknowledging their willingness to use these skills within the community.

Nearly 60% of respondents said they had interest in joining a county-wide network, with another 28% interested in local networks. Respondents felt such a network could offer:



Alongside the training offered in this short-term project, interest was shown in a range of training courses. 'Other' responses included sourcing funding, specific software skills and specific craft skills.



KEY FINDINGS – NEEDS:

<p>Addressing isolation: Create safe, visible and accessible spaces where people can meet Newsletters and information leaflets made available through community and public spaces Improved transport and internet services Local organisations working in partnership with LGBT+ people or groups Create safe dedicated spaces and events; local community venues</p>	<p>Supporting community: Build on the existing sense of community & people’s willingness to engage in networking Upskill community members to deliver supports and interventions Provision of relevant training Support for local & county-wide networks and groups Mainstream advocacy in partnership with LGBT+ people</p>
<p>Increasing visibility: In healthcare settings In community and public venues Acknowledgment of diversity within the LGBT+ community Locally-focused interventions impact strongly Increasing visibility materials in public spaces</p>	<p>Increasing statutory awareness: Production of LGBT+-inclusive materials Training for staff and volunteers Enactment of hate crime legislation In schools, churches, sporting activities and community organisations</p>
<p>Communication: Between state services and community Between elected representatives and community Enable contact between LGBT+ people, using online as well as physical strategies Provision of drop-ins and localised LGBT+ supports Co-hosting of groups & actions between FRCs and LGBT+ people</p>	

FUTURE ACTIONS:

With the successful allocation of further funding, the findings of this research project will inform the 2021 Action Plan and a number of identified issues can be explored. This funding enables increased staffing, which in turn enables greater outreach and support, albeit virtually while Covid19 remains active. Networks as defined through consultation can be supported and a range of training will be delivered. One respondent’s suggestion of an ‘LGBT Town Hall’ may be an excellent format for lobbying networks and/or consultations.

Establishing contact with some of the less vocal LGBT+ population has created an environment in which this contact can be developed both within the community, and with the community organisations in each area. It is vital that this communication be maintained, and using a variety of methods which can support interaction during Covid19 and beyond.

The Working Group of organisations and the individuals’ Consultation Group will continue to operate, meeting virtually at regular intervals to share learning and resources; to develop supports in consultation with the community and to ensure continuity of support as groups and activities emerge.

Building Community—Increasing Visibility
Networking ~ Training ~ Participation

SEEDING the COUNTY
Building LGBT+ Networks across County Cork

Contact us at 0879890336 / SeedingTheCounty@gmail.com
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