1. Introduction to LGBT Youth Scotland

LGBT Youth Scotland is the largest youth and community-based organisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people in Scotland. Our contact details are noted at the back of the document. The evidence within this document comes from the organisation’s experience working with LGBT young people for over 25 years and from our consultation with LGBT young people.

2. Overview of social isolation

The Equal Opportunities committee has defined social isolation as a measurable state of minimal contact with others, with minimal referring to both quantity and quality.

LGBT young people are at risk of social isolation when there are no socialisation opportunities available to them, when discrimination stops them in some way from seeking or accessing opportunities, and when they are not aware of their rights. Levels of feeling included within communities vary by sexual orientation, transgender identity, gender identity, age, whether they feel safe to be out about their sexual orientation or gender identity, or have access to socialisation opportunities. Young people who experience multiple forms of discrimination are more likely to have physical or mental health problems as a result of these experiences. Expendable income also plays a role in an individual’s ability to access certain socialisation opportunities, particularly when the only available socialisation takes place in commercial venues.

LGBT people can have reduced social networks if those in their family or friend groups reacted negatively to their coming out. LGBT young people may face homelessness as a result of coming out to a parent or carer, or feel as though they need to leave home in order to avoid discrimination. We asked LGBT young people about feeling included and accepted in their own family and found that overall 68.1% felt that this was the case\(^1\). Bisexual women were least likely to feel included and accepted in their own family (44.4%).

LGBT young people may also feel unaccepted or unsafe in their communities. Overall, 57.4% of all respondents said they felt included and accepted in the wider community. Transgender respondents were least likely as a group overall to feel included and accepted in the wider community (40.7%).

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\(^1\) Lough Dennell, B.L. and C. Logan (2015). \textit{Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People: Community and Identity}. LGBT Youth Scotland (Forthcoming).
Less than half (47.5%) of young people said they feel there are enough places where they can safely socialise and be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity. Transgender respondents were less likely to say they felt there were enough places for them to safely socialise than cisgender (those who have never identified as transgender) respondents, with 40.7% compared to 50.4%. While 53.5% of those aged 18-25 felt that there are enough places to socialise and be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, less than one-third (28.8%) of young people ages 13-17 agreed with this.

I do not socialise with other trans people as I don’t know any that live nearby. I could attend an LGBT youth group but I have been put off by the idea as I don’t really identify as a person within the ‘LGBT youth’ although at 24, I do fit in with the age group. I usually socialise with old friends that I have and trust, or I will socialise with the online trans community via Youtube. I do not feel comfortable meeting new people in person as it can be an extremely isolating experience when your identity is not understood.

In addition to experiencing social exclusion and discrimination, and feeling supported and accepted by the community or family, other factors that influence isolation are: understanding of one’s rights; and, feeling safe in public. LGBT young people experience high levels of discrimination within education, which has a large impact on an individual’s physical and mental health. Nearly seven out of ten LGBT young people (69.1%) had experienced homophobic or biphobic bullying in school, 24.6% in college and 13.8% at university. Transgender young people had an even harder time: 76.9% had experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying in school (69.2% in college and 37.5% in university). In situations where bullying goes unchallenged, LGBT young people lose confidence in the ability of services to keep them safe. Only half (50.2%) of LGBT young people are aware of their rights under hate crime legislation, with 55.6% of transgender young people and 49.4% of cisgender respondents aware. When we work with LGBT young people to raise this awareness, they are often surprised to learn that hate crime does not have to comprise physical harm. Placed in the context of high levels of bullying experienced within education, this lack of awareness is understandable, yet low expectations for safety can make LGBT young people feel further isolated.

3. Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

There are barriers for LGBT young people living in rural areas that are not experienced by their urban peers. First, there may not be socialisation opportunities available to them. Where there are services, such as mainstream youth groups, LGBT young people may not feel confident to access them or be hesitant about accessing a potentially homophobic, biphobic or transphobic service. Rather than considering LGBT young people a ‘hard to

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2 Cisgender is the term used to describe those whose gender identity matches the assumptions made about them based on their birth sex. It is used to refer to individuals who do not identify as transgender.
engage’ group, mainstream organisations need to do more to actively promote their services as inclusive to LGBT people. They then need to follow up on this promotion by ensuring that everyone receives a positive, inclusive and responsive service.

Other barriers faced by LGBT young people in rural areas can be distance from youth groups and the need to travel to the venue. LGBT young people may not have transportation to youth groups or may need to come out to a parent or carer in order to access transportation. Even if it is not necessary to obtain transportation from a parent or carer, living in rural areas can mean that young people need to travel long distances between towns or that they return late at night after youth groups, which may be questioned if a young person lives at home with a parent or carer.

LGBT young people we work with, particularly those in rural areas, often raise concerns about their safety when using public transportation\(^3\). Although more than three quarters (78.7%) of all LGBT young people feel safe using public transportation, only half (51.8%) of transgender young people feel safe using public transport. Those in urban areas were most likely (88.3%) to feel safe using public transportation, followed by 76.3% of those in suburban areas and falling to 64.6% of those in rural areas. Buses are of particular concern as young people cannot simply move to another carriage, as they would on a train, if experiencing discrimination. Reporting opportunities on public transportation need to be improved and enforced. The reduced transportation options in rural areas mean that LGBT young people must often choose between using public transportation and not taking part in socialisation opportunities.

Those living in rural areas are more likely to think homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are a problem in both Scotland and their local area. Our research has found that 67.7% of those living in urban areas consider their local area to be a good place for LGBT young people to live, compared to 49.5% of those living in suburban areas, and just 27.1% of those living in rural areas\(^4\). Rural respondents were also less likely to feel included and accepted in their families and communities.

- 74.8% of those who live in urban areas felt included and accepted in their own families, compared to 64.1% of those in suburban areas, and just 56.3% of rural respondents.
- In the wider community, 69% of urban respondents felt included and accepted, while only 51.6% of suburban respondents and 45% of rural respondents said the same.

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These concerns are also raised by LGBT young people living in areas without LGBT youth groups, through online youth work.

4. Impacts of social isolation
Young people who are isolated or excluded from social support may feel depressed, anxious, rejected, have reduced self-esteem, may withdraw further, engage in substance abuse or other coping mechanisms such as self-harm, or develop suicidal ideation and behaviours. When LGBT young people experience homophobia, biphobia or transphobia from family, their community or local services, their resilience to deal with isolation is reduced.

5. Best practice
LGBT Youth Scotland has two youth work projects that are good practice for engaging LGBT young people who experience social isolation. The Digital Youth Work project began in 2012 and is web-based. The livechat is supported by a team of youth workers who undertake direct chats on a one-to-one basis and support LGBT young people from across the country (and many other countries). When the livechat functions are closed, young people can send messages to the digital youth workers. The top issues raised by LGBT young people within this project are: coming out as LGB or T, difficulties at school (bullying or generally acceptance by peers), family problems, relationship problems, and information about youth groups or services.

Another digital youth work approach comes from an online youth group piloted in the Scottish Borders. This project was supported by Scottish Borders LEADER and took place through an online chatroom platform. The online youth group evaluated well, with key learning highlighting the importance of having a set staff member to sign in at a specific place and time to facilitate and lead activities for young people. The young people have said that they gained a lot from the experience.

6. Improving and influencing policy
Services must be proactive in their approach to all protected characteristics if they are to help reduce the social isolation of young people. This relates to policy through the planning and delivery of services, as well as in meeting legal requirements under the Equality Act 2010. All community, youth, and children’s services should have policies in place to ensure that LGBT young people are not disadvantaged, discriminated against, or excluded as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Making this explicit can help to reduce LGBT young people’s fears of discrimination from a service or feelings that the service would not meet their needs. Child and Community Planning processes, should consider the impact of (a lack of) services on sexual orientation and transgender identity. Planning should also be mindful of the third sector services in a young person’s life.
Public bodies should actively and consistently undertake needs assessment and monitoring of all protected characteristics and feed this in to impact assessments and equalities outcomes. At present, public bodies often state that there is ‘no’ evidence or ‘no’ impact on sexual orientation and gender reassignment. We are aware of these statements remaining in place from one plan to another, without research or information sought in the interim. While stating this within assessments shows that a service is complaint with the Equality Act 2010, it does not fulfil the intention of the Act to ensure equality of opportunity or promote good relations between those who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

7. Effective awareness-raising within communities
Programmes should be rolled out within voluntary and statutory community organisations such as youth groups, to ensure that all staff are aware of LGBT identities and fully trained in responding to and, where possible, preventing homophobic, biphobic and transphobic discrimination. Voluntary and statutory services should use promotional materials and resources that visibly include LGBT identities and undertake the following actions to ensure that LGBT young people feel valued and included in their local community:

- All youth and children’s services should undertake awareness raising and educational initiatives with young people to increase their understanding of the rights of LGBT young people and reduce homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.
- Groups, activities and clubs for young people, whether statutory or voluntary, should be offered and clearly advertised as explicitly LGBT-inclusive to ensure that LGBT young people feel supported to safely socialise while being open about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

These steps, combined with clear policy considerations described above, would increase LGBT young people’s inclusion in community based socialisation opportunities.

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