

**SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT CONSULTATION ON THE LGBT COMMUNITY
IN SCOTLAND (2002)**

REPORT

by

Highland LGBT Committee

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INTRODUCTION

The Highland LGBT Committee has been in existence since February 2002 and consists of representatives from the Highland Gay Men's Group, Highland GLB Youth Group and Lesbian Mothers Highland. The group was originally formed to organise events in Inverness for Pride 2002 (the first time Pride had come as far north as Inverness) and was the first time members of all the various LGBT groups had worked together on a single project. The Highland Lesbian Group do not wish to associate themselves with the Committee but individual members of the Highland Lesbian Group are actively involved.

A rural community

We feel it is important that we take part in the Scottish Executive's consultation because policies and projects which work well in the Central Belt may need to be reconsidered and adapted to suit the particular needs of the LGBT community in the Highlands and if this is to happen, our input is essential.

Diversity and Difference

The success of Inverness Pride 2002 underlined the fact that

1. there is a thriving LGBT community in the Highlands;
2. the Highland LGBT community face problems often not encountered, or considered, by communities in the Central Belt; and
3. the various groups within the LGBT community (and the members within those groups) have different views, aims and priorities which must also be acknowledged if the community are to work together effectively.

Problems faced by the LGBT community in the Highlands

1. Isolation – the Highland area is vast and contains numerous small villages and townships; transport to and from the major towns and cities can be difficult from these remote areas, particularly for people who rely on public transport and/or are on limited incomes. Access to information, support or counselling services based in Inverness or further afield can be very difficult;
2. Influence of the Church – despite dwindling congregations, the churches, particularly the Free Church of Scotland, have a huge influence over Highland society and are immediately critical of anything they see as “promoting homosexuality”.

Pride Scotland's request that a rainbow flag be flown from the Council's headquarters prompted a campaign by the Church to prevent the Council allowing any Pride events to take place in public buildings;

3. Invisibility – for the reasons above, the LGBT community is by necessity largely invisible. This makes it difficult for people to find out about its existence and become part of it, adding to the feeling of

isolation; GPs are often unaware of who or where to refer patients who request information on LGBT issues;

4. Hostile local press – biased reporting and the dominance of anti-gay correspondence on the letters pages promotes homophobia and perpetuates the fear and isolation already suffered by the LGBT community.

KEY ISSUES

1. HEALTH

- 1.1 Non-discrimination - Health service users need to be reassured by information campaigns that they will not be discriminated against because of their gender identity or sexual orientation and that they will not encounter homophobia from staff at any level;
- 1.2 Awareness – new campaigns/strategies are required to draw attention to the sexual health needs of gay and bisexual men and women, and to indicate where advice and information can be obtained;
- 1.3 Women's health – non-discriminatory access to all services including counselling, mental health services and fertility treatment;
- 1.4 Drug and Alcohol abuse – links must be forged between NHS services and other voluntary organisations to ensure non-discriminatory support and counselling services are available to all sections of the community.

2. EDUCATION

The Equality Network's recent questionnaire for schools, teachers and education authorities is an important step forward and we look forward to hearing the outcome. Lesbian Mothers Highland are keen to support and participate in any ongoing research into current education policy and practice in respect of LGBT issues.

We expect widely differing experiences by gay parents and children throughout the Highland area. Where individual schools or teachers are keen to put Section 2A behind them and incorporate LGBT issues in the curriculum, we feel most are afraid to do so.

In the Highlands, pressure from the Churches (in particular the Roman Catholic Church and the Free Church of Scotland) and fear of negative attention from the press mean schools and teachers are wary of doing anything which might be seen as "promoting" homosexuality.

- 2.1 Schools and education authorities must not be allowed to ignore the fact that families exist where one or both parents is gay and must not be allowed to discriminate against such families in any way;
- 2.2 LGBT issues must not be marginalised. LGBT issues extend beyond the realms of sex education. They are issues which affect all of us every day in every part of our lives. Equality throughout the whole curriculum must be assured;
- 2.3 Schools must be allowed to offer non-judgemental support to pupils who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual or are questioning their sexuality and whose parents are gay, lesbian or bisexual. This should include the provision of information and access to other counselling and support services;
- 2.4 Training must be given to teachers and guidance staff in dealing with LGBT issues in the classroom and beyond, including homophobic bullying and abuse.

3. POLICING

The Northern Constabulary have shown willingness to support and co-operate with the LGBT community in the Highlands by sponsoring a flag for Pride 2002.

However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the behaviour of many officers in the field has been unacceptable and that reports of homophobic incidents have not been taken seriously or dealt with satisfactorily. We are aware that victims of homophobic attacks rarely feel confident about reporting incidents to the police and as a consequence many attacks go unreported.

We feel that it would be useful to commence dialogue between the LGBT community and the local police forces regarding the following issues:

- 3.1 Homophobic attacks (physical and verbal);
- 3.2 Policing of known cruising areas;
- 3.3 Domestic incidents involving same-sex couples and their families.

The issue of homophobia within the various police forces in Scotland has also been raised. We would welcome a comments on this from the Northern Constabulary, together with any strategy they may have in place to combat internal homophobia should they consider it exists.

4. ARTICLE 13

Article 13 of the European Union Treaty requires legislation by the UK Government in 2003 to ban sexual orientation discrimination in employment.

Whilst welcoming this move, we would prefer these new laws to go further and encompass a ban on discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in the supply of goods and services.

Not only does this affect the LGBT community in the Highlands who often face discrimination on a daily basis (in bars and clubs for example), it also has repercussions on the tourism industry.

Tourism accounts for 28% of jobs in the Highlands and Islands. The Highlands and Islands are the most popular tourist destination in Scotland for overseas visitors, with 8 out of 10 of them visiting the region while on holiday in this country. (Figures supplied by the Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board)

Instances of same-sex couples being refused accommodation in a double room are not uncommon. That this discrimination will remain unchecked does little to promote the image of Highland hospitality at home or abroad.

5. LACK OF INFORMATION / POSITIVE IMAGES

5.1 Local GPs and other health-care professionals are often unaware of who or where to refer patients who request information on LGBT issues. Citizens Advice Bureaux are similarly ill-equipped.

5.2 There is a dearth of positive images of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered in health campaigns and advertising.

5.3 The main sources of information for the LGBT community are provided by the LGBT community itself (see below) which is often under-funded.

SERVICES CURRENTLY AVAILABLE IN THE HIGHLANDS

1. REACH OUT HIGHLAND

Reach Out Highland is the first sexual health charity for the Highlands, established in 1995 and funded by the Highland Health Board. Their aim is to promote sexual health and well-being, without discrimination, to all sections of the Highland community, providing information and support and referrals to the appropriate agencies on the subject of

sexual health. They offer a sexual health clinic (including HIV counselling and testing) and sexual health counselling and also provides support for other groups for members of the Highland LGBT community, i.e. Highland Gay Men's Group, Highland GLB Youth Group and Lesbian Mothers Highland.

2. HIGHLAND GAY MEN'S GROUP

The Highland Gay Men's Group was established in 1993 for gay and bisexual men living in the Highlands. The group aims to provide a focus for gay and bisexual men regardless of age, occupation or cultural background to make friends, explore issues around their sexuality and find support and information on safer sex and sexual health matters.

3. HIGHLAND GLB YOUTH GROUP

The Highland GLB Youth Group is open to anyone under 26 regardless of gender and offers mutual support, social events and information on sexual health and other issues.

4. HIGHLAND LESBIAN GROUP

The Highland LGBT Committee are not authorised to make any response on behalf of the Highland Lesbian Group. It should therefore be noted that the information contained herein does not necessarily reflect all or any of the views of the Highland Lesbian Group who may be contacted separately at High_Les@bigfoot.com

5. LESBIAN MOTHERS HIGHLAND

Lesbian Mothers Highland is a new group (affiliated to Lesbian Mothers Scotland) which aims to provide a support and information service for lesbian and bisexual mothers and their partners, co-parents and children in the Highland area and also for lesbian couples thinking about becoming parents.

The group is open to all women identifying as lesbian or bisexual (or questioning their sexual orientation) whether married, separated, divorced, single or living with a partner (male or female).

THE WORK OF THE HIGHLAND LGBT COMMITTEE

1. Raise awareness, locally and nationally, about the LGBT community in the Highlands and the various constituent groups;
2. Identify the needs of the LGBT community throughout the Highland area and the specific needs of the various constituent groups within the community;
3. Promote a positive image of the LGBT community in the Highlands;

4. Work with Scottish Executive, Highland Council, Highland Health Board and Northern Constabulary in the creation of policies and guidelines on all LGBT issues;
5. Work with the Equality Network, Beyond Barriers and other agencies in achieving the above aims.

THE FUTURE

Rural LGBT Conference

The Highland LGBT committee (in conjunction with Beyond Barriers) plan to hold a conference in Inverness in Spring 2003 to raise awareness of the existence of the LGBT community in the Highlands and other rural areas.

Highland Pride 2003

Following the success of Pride 2002 in Inverness, the Highland LGBT committee will be organising Highland Pride 2003 with events at various venues throughout the Highlands.

CONCLUSION

The Highland LGBT committee welcome the current consultation and the efforts being made to identify and deal with the issues raised.

The LGBT community in the Highlands exists but is largely invisible. Prejudice and discrimination, supported by the churches and the press, create an atmosphere of fear and oppression.

These are things we can only change with support from outside as well as within.

We urge the LGBT community throughout Scotland to work together towards equality for all – throughout the WHOLE of Scotland and in ALL areas of our lives.

Highland LGBT Committee
September 2002