



RURAL REPORT

2023

LIFE 
in SCOTLAND
for LGBT
YOUNG PEOPLE

 **LGBT** 
YOUTH 
SCOTLAND

CONTENTS

FOREWORD 3

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 4

INTRODUCTION 7

**HOW LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE LIVING
IN A RURAL AREA 9**

HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA 9

RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES 12

ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT 16

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF LGBTQ+

IDENTITIES AND ISSUES 18

REPUTATION 20

ISOLATION 22

LGBTQ+ NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES 24

RECOMMENDATIONS 26

DISCRIMINATION 27

COMMUNITY 28

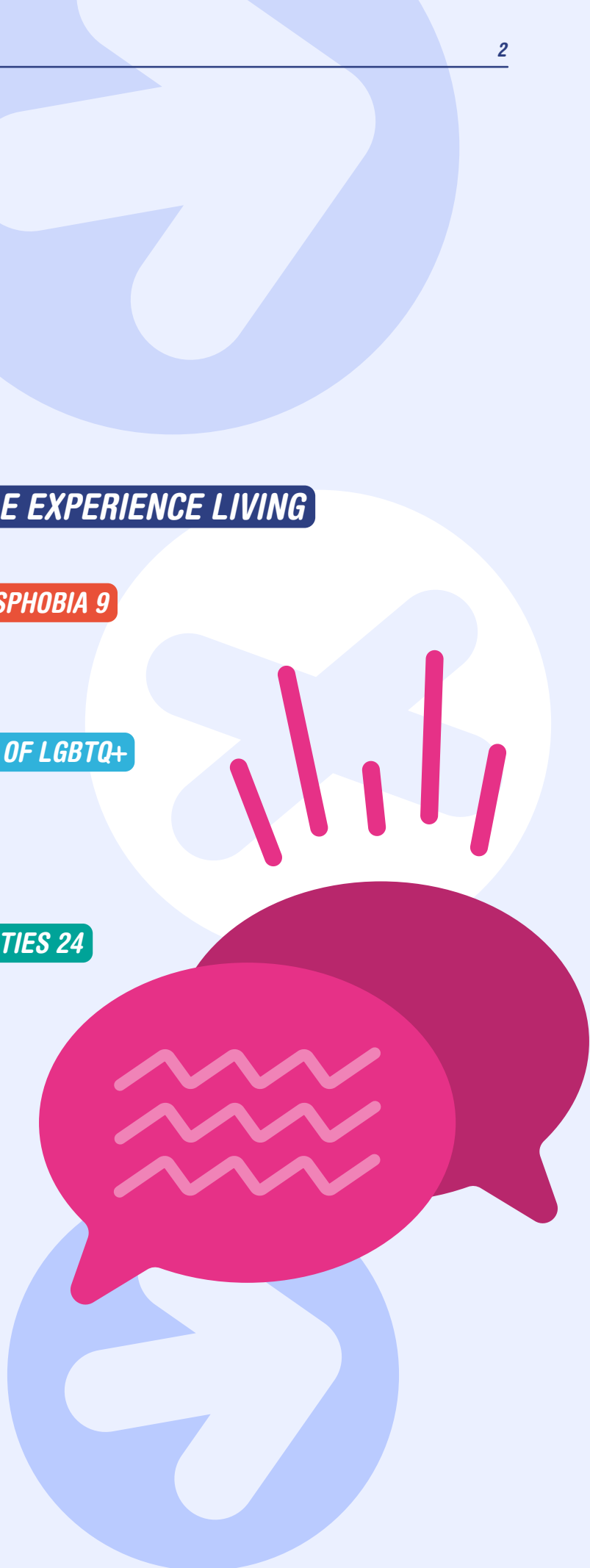
NETWORK AND RESOURCES 29

METHODOLOGY 30

TERMINOLOGY 32

REFERENCES 33

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 34



FOREWORD

This report seeks to explore issues being faced by rural-based LGBTQ+ young people in Scotland. It was developed as part of the *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* research project, a nationwide survey of LGBTQ+ young people between the ages of 13 and 25. A total of 1,279 young people participated, making this the largest piece of research involving LGBTQ+ young people in Scotland to date. This report is one of several thematic reports that focus on topics that are of significant importance to LGBTQ+ young people including areas such as education and health.

The experiences of LGBTQ+ young people are diverse and can vary depending on where you live. This is particularly evident for LGBTQ+ young people living in rural and remote areas across Scotland as we found that just **39%** of participants based in rural areas believe that their local area is a good place for LGBTQ+ young people to live; this compares to **59%** of non-rural-based participants. According to a recent report from the Scottish Government, rural Scotland accounts for **98%** of the land mass of Scotland and **17%** of the population are resident there (Scottish Government, 2021a). This means that a significant number of LGBTQ+ young people are likely to be living in rural and remote areas.

Unsurprisingly, the findings within this report indicate that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are a core part of LGBTQ+ young people's lives in rural areas, and in particular the growing prevalence of transphobia within their lives was described by many participants. This took place in educational settings, the workplace, when engaging with services, and even out and about in the community. Some young people felt that having any anonymity as an LGBTQ+ person can be additionally challenging in rural areas. This could mean that they found it harder to come out as LGBTQ+ and harder to find safe spaces where they can escape from bullying and prejudice. Young people also feared that due to perceptions of 'traditional' values, they may be disowned by family or shunned by colleagues and peers. Overall, this report shows that many LGBTQ+ young people living in rural areas are worryingly isolated, and this is exacerbated by a lack of specialist services. The solutions to this are multifaceted.

It is vital that the Scottish Government, local authorities and funders find ways to sustainably invest in youth work and services for LGBTQ+ young people in rural areas. Digital tools have been (and continue to be) a lifeline for many isolated LGBTQ+ young people, however it is also necessary to invest in delivery that brings young people physically together to reduce isolation and forge a sense of community. Creating inclusive services, workplaces and educational settings is also key in ensuring that LGBTQ+ young people feel safe and welcome within their own communities, and programmes such as the LGBT Charter can make this a reality.

LGBTQ+ young people deserve to flourish and thrive no matter where they live. To achieve this, decision makers and those delivering services should listen to the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ young people in rural areas and to local communities in order to co-create solutions.



Dr Mhairi Crawford
Chief Executive
LGBT Youth Scotland

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report aims to explore issues faced by rural-based LGBTQ+ young people in Scotland. It forms part of the LGBT Youth Scotland *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* research project which has been running for fifteen years, with surveys being undertaken every five years to find out what life is like in Scotland for LGBTQ+ young people. A full research report was published in April 2022 following analysis of **1,279** responses to our most recent survey, making this the biggest piece of research on this demographic to date. Following this, we produced supplementary topic-specific reports diving deeper into qualitative responses given by participants.

At best, only **39%** of participants based in rural areas reported that they believe that their local area is a good place to live. This is **20%** lower than participants who live in urban and suburban areas. Further analysis of quantitative and qualitative responses relating to LGBTQ+ young people's experiences within rural areas produced seven themes. Below is a summary of findings related to these thematic areas:

HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA

Homophobia, biphobia and/or transphobia were reported as forming a core part of LGBTQ+ young people's experience in rural areas. Some young people experienced bullying, hate crime and/or direct violence. Participants reported this taking place in educational settings, in the workplace, when engaging with services and out and about in the community. In particular, the growing prevalence of transphobia within their area/lives was described by many participants.

RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES

Living openly as an LGBTQ+ person was described as potentially risky, and some felt unsafe or fearful going about their day-to-day lives. To protect themselves, some participants were careful about who they came out to, and this meant hiding their authentic self from many of the people they are close to. Some found that being LGBTQ+ was risky in terms of experiencing bullying; others described the effects of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on their education with direct impacts on their confidence and ability to learn.

- **48%** of those based in non-rural areas reported having safe spaces in their community, as compared to just **37%** of those in rural areas.

ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT

Whilst many participants told us about the difficulties they faced living as an LGBTQ+ person in a rural area, others also told us that they felt Scotland is a generally accepting place. The extent to which they felt safe and that they could trust people around them had an impact on their experience of their local area. Young people also identified various ways in which people showed acceptance and support; one of the most affirming demonstrations of acceptance was that their LGBTQ+ status didn't come up that often and when it did, it wasn't viewed as a 'big deal'.

- **59%** of non-rural-based participants believed that their local area was a good place for LGBTQ+ young people, as compared to **39%** of rural-based participants.

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF LGBTQ+

IDENTITIES AND ISSUES

Many participants felt that people around them lacked an understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, and this made it difficult for them to come out and live authentically. Trans identities and issues were mentioned as being poorly understood, and therefore often invalidated or discriminated against. Asexuality and being non-binary were also highlighted by participants as being misunderstood by many. Some young people had to spend a lot of energy explaining their identity to others or were asked intrusive questions, and this could put young people off coming out to others.

The introduction of LGBT education in schools was mentioned by many participants as a step in the right direction. However, not everyone had experienced the benefit of greater LGBTQ+ education, with some young people reporting poor responses in schools to prejudice or bullying incidents.

REPUTATION

There were concerns about reputation, and how this might be affected by participants being open about their LGBTQ+ identity. Some were concerned that if they came out to others they would be treated differently. Others had concerns that their relationships with family, friends or partners would change, or that they'd be seen differently. Some participants felt that in areas where people were more likely to know each other, it was not possible to remain anonymous. A lack of anonymity could also mean that they would not be able to escape from the consequences of coming out such as bullying.

ISOLATION

Feeling isolated was an experience common to many rural-based participants. For some, their location felt isolating, leaving them physically far from an easily accessible LGBTQ+ community. Others felt that the attitudes of local people towards the LGBTQ+ community made them an outsider, isolating them socially from those around them. A few participants mentioned feeling excluded from their religious community, or a fear that this could happen. However, those that felt accepted in their religious community told us this offered them a real source of support and affirmation.

LGBT NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES

For some participants, feelings of isolation were exacerbated by a lack of access to services, resources and/or groups designed for LGBTQ+ people. Many told us that there are more services, resources and/or groups in cities than in rural areas and that cities were perceived to be more 'queer-friendly' than rural areas. One proposed solution to this sense of isolation from the LGBTQ+ community was the use of online platforms. Although young people also noted that there could be barriers with internet access, and that there may be risks with online abuse or entering unsafe relationships with those they meet online.

Building on these themes, we created overarching categories of Discrimination, Community and Networks and Resources. To address discrimination we have recommendations for Police Scotland, Scottish Government and public services who can all do more to be inclusive, safe and welcoming environments for LGBTQ+ young people. In particular we recognise that hate crime continues to be significant concern and have recommendations for Police Scotland to make reporting easier.

Our recommendations for Community focus initially on education where LGBTQ+ young people spend a significant amount of time, we ask Scottish Government to help raise awareness of diversity across rural Scotland and the value inherent within. We also address the impact of faith-based organisations on the experiences of LGBTQ+ young people and how this can be improved upon.

Finally we have recommendations for Networks and Resources – starting with a recommendation for Scottish Government and local authorities to invest in high quality youth work – specifically in Highland for the creation of a new post. We recommend LGBTQ+ groups within all schools being established, and Pride celebrations being visible across rural Scotland.

INTRODUCTION

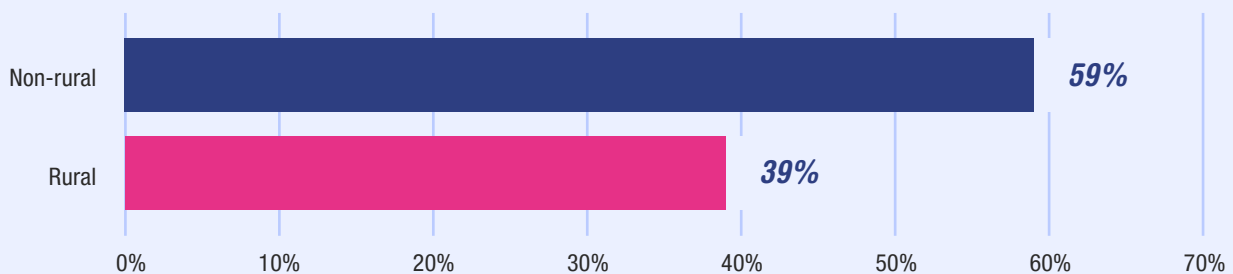
This report has been developed as part of the LGBT Youth Scotland *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* research project (Cronie, 2022), a nationwide survey of LGBT young people between the ages of 13 and 25. This research has been running for over fifteen years, with surveys carried out every five years, with the number of young people participating almost doubling each time surveys have been conducted.

This time, 1,279 young people participated, making this the largest piece of research involving LGBTQ+ young people in Scotland to date. The *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* research has had a huge impact already, being quoted in the Scottish Parliament and referenced in academic papers, and the findings are being used to influence policy and decisions which improve the experience of accessing public services and education for young people.

Following its launch, we are developing a set of reports which explore key topics from the *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* research in more depth. This report is the third in a set of 'deep dives' into topics that were of significant importance to young people. The first of these focused on LGBTQ+ young people's experiences of education and was launched in February 2023. Following this, our Health Report focused on participants' experiences of accessing healthcare, exploring good practice, barriers to inclusion, and ways in which young people believe the experience could be improved to make them feel safer and more supported.

This report was then commissioned to explore issues being faced by rural-based LGBTQ+ young people in Scotland. When looking at responses from participants regarding their experience in the local community, we found that just **39%** of participants based in rural areas believe that their local area is a good place for LGBTQ+ young people to live. As shown below in Fig. 1, when we compared this to the figure for non-rural-based participants, there was a clear difference as **59%** of non-rural-based participants believed that their local area is a good place for LGBTQ+ young people to live.¹

Figure 1: Percentage of participants who believe their local area is a good place for LGBTQ+ young people to live



1. n = 907

We therefore decided to explore the experience for LGBTQ+ young people in rural areas by responding to two research questions:

- 1. What is it like to be an LGBTQ+ young person living in a rural area of Scotland?**
- 2. What action can be taken to improve experiences for this group of people?**

In response to our first question, this report explores seven key themes developed in the research which describe how LGBTQ+ young people experience life living in a rural area of Scotland. The key themes are:

HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA

RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES

ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES AND ISSUES

REPUTATION

ISOLATION

LGBTQ+ NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES

Qualitative findings will be supported by illustrative quotes from participants and relevant quantitative results.

We found that many of the actions that can be taken cut across the themes and grouped actions into the following topics:

DISCRIMINATION

COMMUNITY

NETWORKS AND RESOURCES

The report ends with a set of recommendations for policymakers, local authorities and service providers to suggest ways in which the experiences for LGBTQ+ young people living in rural communities in Scotland could be improved.

HOW LGBTQ+ YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE LIVING IN A RURAL AREA

HOMOPHOBIA, BIPHOBIA AND TRANSPHOBIA

What do we already know?

- ➔ The Rural Report (Equality Network, 2020) reports that in rural areas, local communities were perceived by LGBTQ+ participants to be ‘socially conservative’ with polarised views on what is considered acceptable or not acceptable. These views meant that the atmosphere for those perceived as different, including LGBTQ+ people, was stressful.
- ➔ There is a belief that homophobia and biphobia are “a bit of a problem” in Scotland. This is exacerbated in relation to transphobia, where it was believed to be “a big problem” by over two thirds of participants (69%). Furthermore, 58% of participants in rural areas thought that transphobia is “a big problem” in their local area (Cronie, 2022).

For many rural participants, homophobia, biphobia and/or transphobia form a core part of their experience as an LGBTQ+ person. This affects participants in a variety of ways. Some people experience bullying, hate crime and/or direct violence. Participants reported this taking place in educational settings, at work and out and about in the community.

“Living as who I am is sometimes a very lonely and painful place. Often slurs and bashing in more rural or suburban areas are still wildly under-addressed.”

The types of incidents described ranged from one-off name calling, to preplanned physical attacks. One participant noted that living in a rural area left them unable to hide from their aggressors:

“I do get a few comments from some people who genuinely want to hurt me, and then also some things that are meant to be friendly banter, but aren’t perceived as such. It puts me in a position where I don’t want to attend staff nights out, etc. Being in a rural community means that I can easily be targeted by people at school, outside of school.”

Others have experienced anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination when engaging with services, in education or in the workplace. Participants told us about being denied promotions, feeling pressured to alter their appearance or not being offered the same support as others due to their LGBTQ+ status.

“I have reported hate crimes to the police in the past, when I was younger and dealing with them I was often not believed or they didn’t think it was that big of a deal. I was told several times that if I “didn’t shove it in people’s faces” then I’d be fine; I was a young teenager who didn’t talk to people or go out, the most “flaunting” I did was wear a badge and host a lunch group when I was in school.”

Within participants' descriptions, there was a sense that they are unable to challenge or change the bullying or discrimination they face in their area. Participant descriptions of this experience suggested a sense of powerlessness in the face of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in their day-to-day lives.

“A lot of young folk are very open with their hate of LGBT+, almost as if they are proud of it. It is somewhat institutionalised here, employers and landlords, etc. demanding to know if you are transgender when they have no business asking such a thing.”

These experiences have led to some participants missing out on opportunities that they otherwise would have been offered. Some found that people were less likely to hire them after finding out about their LGBTQ+ identity, whereas others reported a more general worry that disclosing their LGBTQ+ status would result in being treated unfairly. Some participants had been explicitly told that expressing their LGBTQ+ identity would negatively affect the way people treat them.

“I have also been told that being out in the workplace would limit my opportunities. As a freelancer I find I have had a lot less work opportunities during periods of time where I was open about my trans identity.”

“When I was able-bodied I had been refused several training opportunities and jobs due to being visibly and openly trans as they said it would upset potential customers and confuse staff.”

Related to this, some participants reported leaving education prematurely or obtaining fewer qualifications than they'd hoped to as a result of coming out to their teachers and peers.

“[Anti-LGBTQ+ bullying] made me have to walk out of high school for good. Therefore I missed out on all the opportunities “normal” students received, and lost the latter half of my education leaving me with absolutely no qualifications.”

In some rural communities, participants sensed that those around them are closed-minded and unwilling to engage with LGBTQ+ issues, instead falling back on old-fashioned stereotypes or holding to traditional values. Some felt that this type of thinking was more common among the older generations in their community, though not all participants believe this, with others reporting that they more often heard homophobic comments from peers.

“Growing up in a rural area, I am surrounded by older people who assume I’m straight, and I feel like if people were to know I was lesbian, I would be treated very differently and wouldn’t get the same opportunities.”

“The area I grew up is drenched with negative attitudes towards LGBT people, with the local council even going so far as to vote against LGBT issues being taught in schools as recently as last year. My secondary school also allowed for homophobic jokes in the year book as recently as 2017.”

Many participants reported that they encounter most homophobia, biphobia and transphobia out and about in their community, overhearing comments made by people in the street, by co-workers, or by other students or pupils at school, college or university.

“Customers misgender me all the time. The joy of it being a small community is everybody knows me, so if it’s misgendering or deadnaming then it’s usually deliberate.”

“It’s usually random people passing by – which makes it feel unsafe to be walking around alone.”

In particular, the growing prevalence of transphobia was described by many participants, with comments suggesting that the risk of encountering these views was a source of stress for some participants.

“I was perfectly fine and happy with my treatment as a bisexual man but from observing how other transgender men, women and enbies are treated in the community it makes me feel scared and worried to come out and be myself, many people I personally know are treated in prejudiced ways and the fear of how many extended members of my family will react e.g. my grandparents causes a lot of stress and sadness.”



X!#*!

RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES

What do we already know?

- ➔ A primary concern for LGBTQ+ people experiencing hate crime was a fear of their LGBTQ+ status being revealed to others without their permission during the reporting process. Victims of hate crime also did not trust the police to respond adequately and were not confident that information relating to their identity would be handled securely (Hardy and Chakraborti, 2014).
- ➔ Young people are concerned that they will be outed before they are ready to come out to others. In educational settings young people stated that they are worried teachers will out them to their family at home; among their peers they fear bullying and being outed to hostile peers (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2023a).

Living openly as an LGBTQ+ person was described by participants as potentially risky, and some told us about feeling unsafe or fearful going about their day-to-day lives. Some found that being around peers in education meant risking bullying, whilst others found that interacting with support services and people in the wider community was a hit-and-miss experience, and meant risking being attacked or discriminated against.

“The amount of transphobia makes me feel unsafe to go anywhere despite not being trans. I don’t think I will ever feel safe enough to come out or to go to pride events in case I am attacked or someone says something horrible.”

“You don’t know if a police officer has their own prejudices. There are likely many homophobic police officers, so they may not take it seriously.”

One participant, however, noted that they felt safer in a rural area:

“[I am happy living in a] low population area with no streets (can’t get jumped by homophobes in the street if there isn’t a street).”

In order to protect themselves, some participants are careful about who they come out to and keep a tight control over who this information is shared with. For some, this means hiding their authentic self from many of the people they are close to, and interact with, on a day-to-day basis.

“As a young lesbian in the Borders I have to hide who I am or face bullying.”

“It’s not a known piece of information. I came out at work when I was 17 and was bullied so never made the same mistake again.”

Whilst some young people feel this is a necessary and protective measure they can take, others acknowledged that not being able to share who they are with those around them means that they miss out on valuable experiences and authentic relationships.

“Not being able to live as myself openly to some people, and not being able to experience my childhood/teen years as an openly queer person – resulting in a lack of experience with relationships and integration into queer culture.”

A few participants described 'passing', i.e. having those around them assume that they are straight and/or cisgender. These participants believe this affords them protection from discrimination and abuse. Those that described this were able to identify a contrast between their current situation and past experiences when they did not 'pass', telling us that before now they had been the victim of discrimination.

“I believe that it is due to me “passing” as a male that I do not face as much discrimination now as I did a few years ago. I cannot truly say if I have been treated fairly as a trans man or if it was because I was seen as a cis man. However, I do believe that it still shows how quickly people will change when you look how they want you to look (e.g. me looking like a cis man despite identifying as a trans man – if I was to mention being trans, demeanours would start to change).”

“I generally do not face discrimination as I am male-passing and straight-passing. Government Services, Healthcare Providers, Work – I rarely feel any discrimination as I pass as male and there are no discrepancies in my official documents (i.e. passport, driver’s licence). I used to, however, when I did not pass.”

Some participants have managed to find a safe space to openly be themselves in their community. Those that have found these spaces described the sense of relief they feel in these environments, where they do not need to worry about discrimination or homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

“I don’t face any discrimination with my social work and close friend group as well as some of my support teachers. It’s lovely because I don’t have to feel insecure or constantly have to worry about my visual appearance or saying the wrong thing.”

Finding a space to be yourself was a key theme for rural-based participants. The extent to which they can or cannot be themselves with those around them was a big concern. Those who felt they could relax and be themselves authentically felt comfortable and free, whereas those that must hide aspects of their identity and personality felt trapped and claustrophobic.

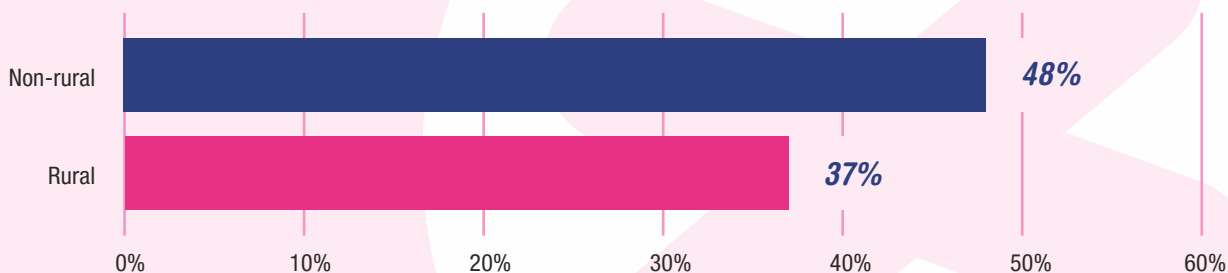
“I get a lot of hatred online and with older people in my area. I feel like I need to stay more to myself and can’t express my true inner feelings.”

“I grew up hearing people use homophobic slurs to mean bad things so I felt like I had to hide a part of me and I couldn’t be me.”

“Among my queer friends and people we consider allies – being around them is the only I feel truly comfortable to be myself in its entirety. I’ve definitely encountered kind strangers in situations that have surprised me, but it is always a surprise.”

We asked participants whether or not they thought there are enough places where they can be open about their identity and socialise safely. As shown in Fig. 2, **48%** of those based in non-rural areas have safe spaces in their community, as compared to just **37%** of those in rural areas.²

Figure 2: Percentage of participants who feel there are enough places to safely socialise and be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity



Existing in a community that doesn't make space for your identity was described as an experience that left many participants feeling out of place. Participants described feeling uncomfortable, uneasy and on edge. This feeling occurred both in situations where participants were 'out' and when they had not yet come out, and was more closely related to how they felt they fitted in than the way they are treated by others.

“People can sometimes tell that you’re “different” even if they don’t know how, and this has led to isolation in my case.”

“Everyone around me lives in a very amatonormative³ way and presumes that everyone’s life goal is to get together/settle down with someone and have children – I constantly feel different throughout the day, especially at lunchtime chats.”

“I feel uncomfortable in school, and I am afraid to express my gender identity because I am not sure how others will react.”

In addition to feeling out of place, participants described particular effects of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia on their experience of education. They felt that their confidence was affected, suffering stress and humiliation after incidents of prejudice occurred, and also found that their concentration is frequently disturbed by this sense of being constantly on edge. This makes it hard for them to engage in learning and affects the level of achievement they find possible in education.

“School it affects me cos it reminds me that I’m never gonna be “normal”.”

“Due to the external situation I have seen, stress about coming out has made focusing on education within classes hard at times.”

“School was shit man. I was weird and gay and anxious, literally the worst five years of my life.”

2. n = 1022

3. Amatonormativity is the set of societal assumptions that everyone prospers with an exclusive romantic relationship

On the other hand, some participants felt that they had found a place for themselves where they are supported and welcome, and do not have to hide aspects of their identity to be accepted. Many of these young people mentioned feeling 'lucky' or 'privileged' to not experience the same discrimination or forms of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic behaviour that other LGBTQ+ young people face. They suggested that they expect that queerphobia is a part of life for the majority of their LGBTQ+ peers and that they are fortunate to have avoided this.

“I feel lucky as I do feel surprisingly accepted in my area, which I was worried about when moving here. It’s quite rare for me to receive negative comments or homophobic/transphobic remarks.”

“Home – am lucky to have a safe home, where I do not have to hide things.”

“Church, community mutual aid organisations. I am lucky to have these communities where being queer is not treated as the be-all and end-all of my identity.”

“Healthcare is usually quite good for me, was lucky with my doctors in that I have heard it’s been bad for others though.”



ACCEPTANCE AND SUPPORT

What do we already know?

- ➔ The British public is four times more likely to feel positive about trans people as they are negative (Stonewall UK, 2022).
- ➔ Attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community and rights in UK society are such that:
 - 92% of participants would be 'totally' or 'fairly' comfortable with a gay/bisexual man or lesbian/bisexual woman being their neighbour, manager, GP or Prime Minister, whereas this figure was lower (82%) when participants considered trans people in these roles
 - 91% of parents participating in this survey with children aged 16 and under were 'fairly' or 'totally' comfortable with a gay/bisexual man or lesbian/bisexual woman as their child's teacher. Only 77% however would be comfortable with a transgender person being their child's teacher. (Kantar, 2020)

Whilst many participants told us about the difficulties they face living as an LGBTQ+ person in a rural area, many others also told us that they felt Scotland is a generally accepting place and that finding acceptance and support from those around them contributed to their sense of Scotland as a good place to live.

More specifically, we asked participants if they felt that their local area is a good place for LGBTQ+ young people to live. There was a clear difference of opinion between those in rural and non-rural areas: **59%** of non-rural-based participants believed that their local area was a good place for LGBTQ+ young people, as compared to **39%** of rural-based-participants.⁴

Supportive actions from those around them were pointed to by many participants as affirmation that they are valued and respected in their community. Some examples of these supportive actions included:

- **Using someone's correct name/pronouns when addressing them.**
- **Displaying visible signs of support such as LGBTQ+ flags and posters or taking part in LGBTQ+ fundraising events or cultural days such as Pride.**
- **Offering access to gender-neutral facilities.**
- **Altering paperwork/files to avoid displaying deadnames.**
- **Ensuring positive and accepting social spaces are available for LGBTQ+ people.**
- **Taking action when incidences of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are reported.**
- **Standing up for LGBTQ+ people either by correcting misconceptions or speaking up against homophobic, biphobic and transphobic speech.**
- **Engaging in training/learning about LGBTQ+ issues.**

4. n = 907

Participants who found acceptance and support in their community told us that they felt valued and respected by those around them.

“[My volunteering role with an LGBTQ+ charity] gives me a positive social space which is comfortable. A quiet space in which I feel valued and welcome. It’s what I look forward to every week.”

Many participants noted that one of the most affirming demonstrations of acceptance they noticed in their day-to-day lives was that their LGBTQ+ status just doesn't come up that often, and when it does, it is not a big deal.

“If it has ever arisen in conversation, it is just accepted as part of the conversation – it’s normal. I don’t think I’m the only LGBTI person at my current workplace.”

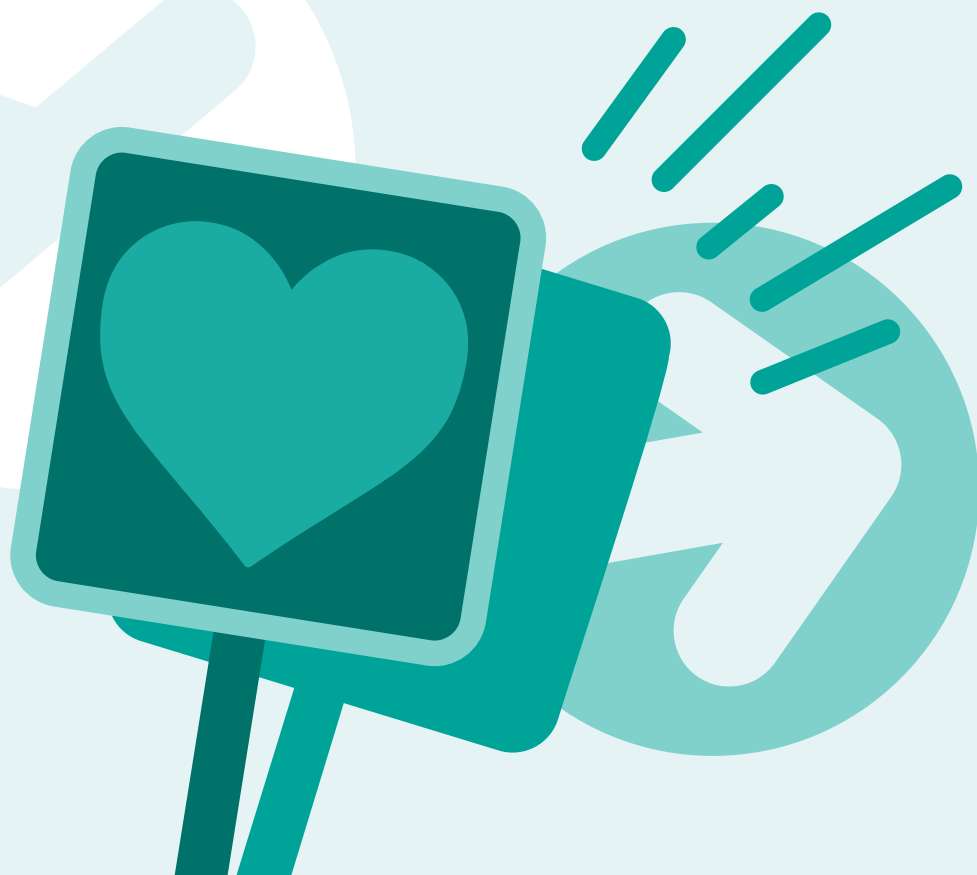
“I am lucky to have these communities where being queer is not treated as the be-all and end-all of my identity.”

For some participants, however, the extent to which they felt safe and that they could trust the people around them was a cause of deep concern. These participants felt that the level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in their area was low, and that this made them fearful and feel unsafe being open with those around them.

“[It] doesn’t always feel particularly safe to be out with my girlfriend in public, publicly showing affection as I don’t know who might take anger or hostility towards it.”

“I feel as though while there is a lot of help and supporting communities, it’s still a struggle with having to be fearful and cautious around other people because you don’t know who will and won’t accept you and people who’ll judge you and call you slurs along the street.”

Whilst acceptance in the community is something that many of our participants had found for themselves, many others did not feel they had this support from those around them, and this had a clear and detrimental effect on their experience in their local area.



KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES AND ISSUES

What do we already know?

- ➔ Scotland has the aspiration to be the first country in the world to embed LGBTI-inclusive education into the curriculum. This approach includes a website where staff, parents and carers, children and young people can access information on LGBTI inclusion, as well as a basic e-learning course for teachers and school staff (Scottish Government, 2018).
- ➔ LGBT Youth Scotland is working with schools in all thirty-two local authority areas, including schools in rural and remote areas. Statistics from April 2023 show that LGBT Youth Scotland have trained more than five thousand teachers since our online training was released in 2021 through the LGBT Charter for Education programme (LGBT Youth Scotland, 2023b). However, this is only just over 20% of the number of Scottish secondary teachers (Scottish Government, 2021b).

Many participants felt that people around them lack an understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, and that this makes it more difficult for them to come out and live authentically. Trans identities and issues were mentioned as being poorly understood, and therefore often invalidated or discriminated against. Asexuality and being non-binary were also highlighted by participants as being misunderstood by many.

“I love that I don’t have to hide who I am. However I would like to see more acceptance and less discrimination towards trans, intersex and people with less-known sexualities such as asexual, pansexual etc.”

Some of those who found that their identity was not well recognised or represented told us about feeling isolated or invalidated:

“I grew up feeling very broken and that there was something very wrong with me and not validated in any way. It’s incredibly difficult to be what you can’t see. And often the small bits of representation of asexuality are portrayed incorrectly or only focus on one very small area of the asexuality spectrum.”

For some people, this lack of understanding means that they have to expend a lot of energy explaining themselves to others. Some, however, told us that they were often asked to explain themselves further, and were asked intrusive questions by colleagues, friends and peers. Being asked to answer questions about personal, intimate topics by those around you was felt by many to be an overstep and something that they were uncomfortable with. In many cases this put participants off coming out to those around them.

“Since deciding to not disclose my identity at my new college I have faced less invasive questions and I have found people have treated me as an adult for the first time. In the past this was not the case.”

The introduction of LGBT education in schools was mentioned by many participants as a step in the right direction in improving understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and issues. For some this meant that they are more likely to come out to those around them.

“I am glad lgbt+ education is growing here and I have been in many environments where I felt comfortable being open about my identity.”

Not everyone, however, has experienced the benefit of greater LGBTQ+ education, and many participants felt that they had not seen any concrete advantages from this yet, reporting staff members bystanding when homophobic, biphobic or transphobic incidents occurred, or continued bullying from their peers. For these participants, simply improving awareness and understanding was not enough; supportive action was necessary for them to feel comfortable as themselves in their local area.



REPUTATION

What do we already know?

- ➔ There is limited information available in this area, however recent research on whether smaller rural communities cause greater concern for moral reputation found that members of small rural communities see their reputation as more vulnerable to harm than people who live in large cities. Across 65 countries a small negative relationship was observed between community size and concern for reputation (Danielson et al, 2023).

Responses from rural-based participants contained many references to concerns about their reputation, and how this might be affected by being open about their LGBTQ+ identity. A concern for many participants was that if they were to come out to others, they would be treated differently. For some this concern centred around a fear of bullying or discrimination. Others felt that although they didn't fear negative treatment, they were concerned that their relationship with others would change, that they'd be seen differently by others and that the image others held of them would be irreversibly changed. This could result in losing friends, missing out on opportunities or being treated differently due to assumptions being made about them.

“People deciding they don’t want to know me anymore.”

“Fear of discrimination or being v treated differently. People may make assumptions about me without knowing me.”

“I could lose jobs, get disowned, get raped, etc. People may start referring to me as a girl and spread it around my entire community when it’s none of their business.”

Living in a small community meant that for some participants, being the subject of gossip or rumours was a concern. Participants believed that in a small area gossip can spread quickly, and that attracting attention in this way can be dangerous, as altering others' perceptions of them could mean they are treated very differently as they go about their day-to-day lives.

“Small communities mean news spreads fast. I have never felt safe enough in Shetland to come out as gay. As it would spread like wildfire and the community is unknowingly homophobic due to a lack of LGBT representation.”

“I worry I won’t be accepted and people will talk about me behind my back.”

“If someone is openly homophobic to you then who knows what people are saying behind your back.”

For some, there was a sense that in such a small area everyone knows everyone, and it was not possible to remain anonymous. Exploring your identity was seen by some as difficult when everyone around you has a fixed sense of who you are, and others felt that it would be impossible to escape being bullied when those around you know who you are and where you're from.

“Nobody at my school was out as LGBT+, and I have left school, but the town I live in is basically populated by teachers and students at the school, so I keep away from almost everyone. I need to leave my town if I am to regain sanity.”

“I am often misgendered even if I correct someone on my pronouns. Because I live in a small town everyone knows everyone so my deadname is known to all but my true name isn't and my area is very transphobic so it's quite difficult.”

Many of those who described concerns around their reputation feared the judgement of others, and some described a sense of shame or humiliation. Many participants gave accounts of feeling unwelcome, shunned or excluded, and being seen as the odd one out in their social group. There was a sense for these participants that once their reputation had been tarnished in this way, it would not be possible to shift others' perception of them as an outsider.

“Losing friendships, people seeing me as a threat or as creepy, bullying.”

“Misunderstanding, bullying, being thought of as a freak or something that needs fixed – 99% media portrayals of asexuality is someone who is a psychopath or murderer!”

“I am not out as a lesbian or as non-binary, but when these topics have come up the attitudes towards the concept of being non-binary have been scathing at best, I feel if I were to come out I would only be ridiculed.”



ISOLATION

What do we already know?

- ➔ Just 1 in 5 (22%) people in the UK say they never feel lonely, and 1 in 10 feel lonely often (Mental Health Foundation, 2010).
- ➔ Younger people (aged 16 to 24 years old) and people in the LGBTI community are at increased risk of social isolation and loneliness (Mental Health Foundation, 2022).

Feeling isolated was an experience common to many rural-based participants. For some, their location feels isolating, leaving them physically far from an easily accessible LGBTQ+ community. Others felt that the attitudes of local people towards the LGBTQ+ community made them an outsider on account of their identity, isolating them socially from those around them.

“I feel very isolated in my rural area – I feel that coming out as bi or trans would alienate me, and also that nobody would respect my identity at best if I came out as trans, and that I would become a pariah and bring gossip about my family and fall out with them at worst, so I remain permanently in the closet for now, which is agonising and not sustainable. I am not planning to come out until I move to a city sometime soon.”

The fear of being excluded was a recurring theme for participants, with some fearing coming out and the potential for being disowned by family or shunned by colleagues and peers. Others had already experienced this, with people drifting away or actively avoiding them after learning that they are LGBTQ+.

“The people I thought I was civil with were suddenly transphobic, I ended up leaving because I was uncomfortable, meaning I was out of work for a year.”

“I am guaranteed to be disowned by my parents.”

“My prime worry would be potential shunning by friends and/or family, and even going as far as being kicked out of home, along with the threat of physical abuse.”

In particular, a few participants mentioned feeling excluded from their religious community or a fear that this could happen. The potential loss of this community support is an upsetting thought for these participants.

“Members of the church have told me that God would leave our church if we had any gay people at a service. Sitting there knowing I’m a Christian and gay which I never chose to be or wanted to be feels the worst. Being gay in church is like being an ice cube frozen in a warm room unable to thaw. The church is welcoming but not inclusive.”

On the other hand, those that felt accepted in their chosen religious community felt that this offered them a real source of support and affirmation.

“I am very glad that my church accepts me because it is one of my safe spaces. it makes me feel like I can be myself, although I am still cautious.”



LGBTQ+ NETWORKS AND COMMUNITIES

What do we already know?

- ➔ Research exploring experiences of LGBT people in rural areas of Scotland produced by Equality Network reported that many participants believe that the culture in rural Scotland ‘excludes LGBT voices’, and not seeing LGBT representation in these areas impacts negatively on how willing people are to live openly as LGBT people (Equality Network, 2020).
- ➔ 74% of young adults surveyed by Just Like Us who say they are not supportive of trans people don’t know a trans person in real life (Just Like Us, 2023).

For some participants, their feelings of isolation were exacerbated by a lack of access to services, resources and/or groups designed for LGBTQ+ people. Many told us that they believe there are more of these available in cities, but as a rural-based young person these were inaccessible to them.

“I live in a fairly rural area and whilst there are now groups for younger people, when you hit my age group, your only real option becomes travelling to Edinburgh for bars/clubs as there aren’t many sober options for young adult LGBTQ+ people. And even then, it’s still in Edinburgh.”

In general, cities were perceived to be more queer-friendly than rural Scotland. Participants told us that they believed it would be easier to meet other LGBTQ+ people and to form community bonds in a city than in their local area.

“I have a good support network, but they are mainly based in Glasgow which seems to kinda be the hub for queer people, but I often go there to be involved with the queer scene and to feel like part of the community, which I don’t get at home.”

Overall, participants felt that there are more openly LGBTQ+ people living in cities, and this visible community representation is something that they cannot find as easily in their local area.

“It’s a mostly accepting place, but I’ve found it hard to find/connect with other LGBTQ+ people my age.”

“Living in a rural conservative area means I hardly know any other LGBTQIA+ people.”

“Growing up in a rural area, I never felt there was anyone else like me, I have since moved to a more suburban area closer to Edinburgh and there are more choices and visibility here.”

Not only did participants feel that they are missing out on this community support, they also believed that non-LGBTQ+ people in cities are more likely to be allies than those in their local area.

“Scotland is a lot more progressive than many other countries. However, this doesn’t stop individuals from being homophobic/transphobic. Living in a small town I see this a lot more than I did when I lived in a city.”

One proposed solution to this sense of isolation from the LGBTQ+ community was the use of online platforms to form and find communities to participate in. Many participants spoke of finding people like them on social media and through the internet. Some discovered that simply finding LGBTQ+ representation was a source of reassurance, whilst others interacted with LGBTQ+ peers, and formed active communities and friendships with other queer people. These opportunities to interact with the LGBTQ+ community were noted as only being available digitally for some rural-based participants. It was also pointed out, however, that interacting online could be a risky choice for some young people, as they could face online abuse or could find themselves in unsafe friendships or romantic relationships with those they meet online.

“I feel as though an online presence is necessary for LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who live rurally, as it offers the chance to connect with other LGBTQ+ people across the world. This is important as they most likely don’t have many options for socialising in their local area. Therefore it is increasingly sad that these online platforms also inhabit trolls and those with hateful comments.”

“Using the internet to connect with other LGBTI+ people is essential for a lot of isolated people. They are also more at danger of being groomed, even within the community though. The internet has helped me massively with finding a community and being comfortable in my identity.”



RECOMMENDATIONS

Developing a set of recommendations covering the breadth of topics raised by LGBTQ+ young people is challenging. Partly this is due to some significant cultural and societal change being required. We have, however, identified that the themes generated in the qualitative analysis fall into three overarching categories:

DISCRIMINATION

Themes:
Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia
Risks and consequences

COMMUNITY

Themes:
Acceptance and support
Knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and issues
Reputation

NETWORKS AND RESOURCES

Themes:
Isolation
LGBTQ+ networks and communities

When considering the recommendations, it is important to recognise the role of young people in rural areas to champion change and LGBTQ+ equality. Our recommendations are based on analysis of responses from LGBTQ+ young people, however the community must also be included in the process of implementing these changes. The following steps must therefore be taken when implementing any of the recommendations below:

- Engage directly with LGBTQ+ young people to shape the development of services and the co-production of strategies, noting the need for using Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments⁵ where appropriate
- Develop opportunities for young people to engage directly with key decision makers; and decision makers must engage meaningfully and take action
- Engage young people who are LGBTQ+ allies, to address homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, when it's safe to do so
- Engage with young people with religious beliefs to create a shared understanding and to support change.

Targeted research in each locality must be carried out to identify local gaps in service provision and to identify and consider ways to address them including the role of religious groups, public bodies, the third sector and wider community in meeting their needs.

5. For example, see here: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-rights-wellbeing-impact-assessments-crwia-templates/>

DISCRIMINATION

Young people told us they experience homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in the form of bullying and harassment, and also in the form of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination when engaging with services, in education or in the workplace. We therefore recommend that:

- ➔ The Scottish Government, public bodies, public services (including health services, policing, education and leisure facilities), local businesses and the third sector within rural areas ensure that services are inclusive for LGBTQ+ young people by:
 - Investing in programmes to improve knowledge and understanding of LGBTQ+ identities including:
 - Ensuring training of staff on the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ inclusion
 - Using the correct names and pronouns when addressing trans young people
 - Ensuring paperwork is inclusive for trans people and files do not display deadnames⁶
 - Ensuring inclusive access to toilets and changing facilities
 - Once steps have been taken to improve practice, display visible signs of support for LGBTQ+ people such as posters or flags during Pride Month or LGBT History Month
 - Investing in the Scottish LGBTI+ Rainbow Mark,⁷ and the LGBT Charter for Workplaces.⁸
- ➔ Police Scotland to strengthen rural provision for support of LGBTQ+ young people and reporting of hate crimes through:
 - Ensuring that local Hate Crime Champions have completed the Hate Crime Advisor Specialism training, and that champions must be effectively trained in LGBTQ+ awareness to compassionately support LGBTQ+ young people who experience hate crime. This service should be widely promoted in digital settings, within schools and community hubs including local shops, post offices and leisure facilities in rural areas.
 - Developing stronger links with third party reporting centres, in recognition of the current lack of ongoing training and support. A proposal for building stronger local links would be to mirror the campus officers in G Division for all secondary schools and local communities in rural localities. This work could be supported by the third party reporting short life working group.

6. Deadnaming is the act of referring to a transgender or non-binary person by a name they used prior to transitioning, such as their birth name.

7. A partnership between Equality Network, Dumfries & Galloway LGBT+, Four Pillars, Highland Pride and Somewhere: For Us. For more information, see here: www.equality-network.org/our-work/scottish-lgbti-rainbow-mark/

8. A Programme from LGBT Youth Scotland. For more information, see here: www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/the-lgbt-charter/the-lgbt-charter-for-organisations/

COMMUNITY

LGBTQ+ young people in rural areas told us that they need acceptance and support from those around them, that their reputation and level of anonymity within the community is a source of concern for them, and that people within their community should have a greater understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and issues. We therefore recommend:

- ➔ Recognising the key role that education plays in influencing LGBTQ+ young people's lives, and educating all young people, their families and local communities about LGBTQ+ young people's lives. Scottish Government and local authorities must continue to invest in LGBTQ+ inclusive education within schools, universities, and colleges, extending this to a targeted approach within rural areas. This approach should:
 - Follow the national approach for Inclusive Education to ensure staff are trained and content is embedded in the curriculum which normalises LGBTQ+ identities, raises awareness and addresses prejudice towards LGBTQ+ people, and action is taken to address homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying
 - Invest in a whole school approach supported by LGBT Youth Scotland's LGBT Charter for Education with reduced or fully subsidised costs for rural schools
 - Develop opportunities to share practice in LGBTQ+ inclusive education, recognising that teachers/ educators in rural environments can also be isolated.
- ➔ The Scottish Government and public bodies to invest in public awareness campaigns in rural and remote areas that celebrate diversity and difference in local communities. This should specifically include LGBTQ+ young people and care should be given to ensure transphobia is addressed, as well as recognition of intersectional identities.
- ➔ Recognising the role of the church and denominational schools across rural areas, thought is needed on how to effectively support and include LGBTQ+ young people across formal and non-formal learning environments. This approach should:
 - Identify existing LGBTQ+ inclusive best practice
 - Create opportunities for LGBTQ+ young people and adults to share lived experiences safely, and engage with young people across denominations
 - Create opportunities for local and national dialogue, recognising regional expertise and differences.

NETWORK AND RESOURCES

Young people were clear that access to LGBTQ+ networks and resources to support them is important in combating isolation in rural areas. We therefore recommend:

- ➔ Scottish Government, local authorities and funding bodies must invest-in, and sustain, long term youth work interventions in rural areas, ensuring CLD values⁹ and the UNCRC¹⁰ are embedded into practice. This sustained investment in youth work must include specialist provision for LGBTQ+ young people and delivery should include:
 - Online support and groups, as well as face to face services specifically for LGBTQ+ young people
 - Youth work events that bring LGBTQ+ young people together, to forge a sense of community and reduce isolation
 - Consideration and investment in travel for LGBTQ+ young people in remote rural areas
 - Consideration of young people's anonymity when accessing services.
- ➔ Highland Council and wider funding bodies to invest an LGBTQ+ Youth and Community Worker in the Highlands, recognising the specific gap in service provision within this area, who can both engage directly with young people and work with communities to co-create solutions. This post should:
 - Be delivered in partnership with Youth Highland and LGBT Youth Scotland, recognising that both regional and specialist knowledge is required
 - Engage with the Voluntary Youth Network and Area Youth HUBs, as well as High Life Highland to reach out to LGBTQ+ young people and upskill mainstream youth services.
- ➔ Education holds a key role in many young people's lives, it is essential to create opportunities for young people to forge connections and reduce social isolation within schools. We are asking relevant local authorities to commit to every secondary school in the region hosting LGBTQ+ groups or equality groups.
- ➔ The Scottish Government, funding bodies and local businesses must invest in Pride celebrations in rural areas across Scotland, with specific consideration of the needs of LGBTQ+ young people. In addition, there should also be investment in travel and accommodation costs to support rurally isolated young people to attend, enabling rural young people to feel more connected to LGBTQ+ communities and less isolated.

9. CLD values are fundamental to the practice of Community Learning and Development across all settings, including youth work. Current values have been identified by the CLD Standards Council. For more information, see here: <https://cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/resources/values-of-cld/>

10. At the time of publication, the Scottish Government was working to incorporate the UNCRC within its capacity in Scotland which will have far reaching impact on service delivery. Regardless of legal status, it is recommended that public bodies adhere to the principles of the UNCRC.

METHODOLOGY

An outline of the methodology and ethical considerations for the *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People (2022)* research can be found in the full report. The methods used in preparing this supplementary report are broadly similar to those used in the main report, however some additional analysis was carried out to explore rural-based participants' experiences in more depth. We will therefore set out the analytical procedure used in preparing this report below.

QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Quantitative analysis was carried out initially using R & RStudio, and a dashboard was then created using Power BI for use in further analysis. When analysing data from survey questions where the options available included 'Don't know', responses selecting this option were excluded from the calculations for this report.

Participant responses were divided into two groups: rural-based and non-rural based. Those in the non-rural-based group indicated that they lived in urban or suburban areas. Responses from those who selected 'Prefer not to say' to the locality question were discarded. The underlying demographics of the rural and non-rural groups were compared and were found to be generally comparable. A small difference was noticed, however, in the median ages of the two groups. The median age for rural-based participants was 16 and for non-rural-based participants this was 17. This meant that the ratio of over- and under-18-year-old participants in the two areas differed: **72%** of rural-based participants were under 18 compared to **58%** of non-rural-based participants. The quantitative results in this report should be interpreted with this in mind, given that over-18s are more likely to have left home and/or be attending university/college, and under-18s are more likely to still be living at home and/or be attending school.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

In the initial survey, data was collected from participants from both rural and non-rural areas. In preparing this report, it was decided that to best answer the research question, it would be most appropriate to isolate responses from rural-based participants for analysis. Consideration was given to comparative qualitative analysis to contrast this with non-rural-based participants, however it was decided that this could detract focus from the experience of rural-based participants and was unnecessary to answer the research question. A decision was therefore taken to analyse the data from rural-based participants only, using a philosophically pragmatic Applied Thematic Analysis (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2012).

This process involved:

- Isolating responses given by rural-based participants.
- Selecting questions to be analysed based on topics of relevance to the research question.
- An initial read-through of the data set.
- A thematic analysis of the data set:
 1. Reading and rereading the data.
 2. Developing initial codes from shared patterns of meaning across data units.
 3. Coding the data set fully.
 4. Generating themes from the code list/coded data set.

The resulting themes are presented in the section headings within this report, supported by sets of representative quotes to illustrate the data contained within each. Quotes within this report appear in the participants' own words; the only amendments made have been to correct spelling or punctuation errors to increase legibility, or to remove additional punctuation which appeared in some quotes when downloading the data file from the survey software.



TERMINOLOGY

LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning, and the positive '+' aims to represent and respect everyone within the LGBTQ+ community. We have previously described our community as 'LGBT' and 'LGBTI', and both are still valued acronyms.

We want the term 'LGBTQ+' to be interpreted in the inclusive way it is meant. At LGBT Youth Scotland, we welcome the full diversity of the LGBTQ+ community and include intersex, asexual and non-binary people within this umbrella, whilst also being mindful that people can have multiple identities that intersect.

LGBT Youth Scotland is informed by the views of young people in consultation with young people. As part of a consultation to inform our 2023–2028 strategy, young people revealed that they feel 'LGBTQ+' is the best way to describe their community. In accordance with this, although the *Life in Scotland* survey used the acronym 'LGBTI', in this report we have replaced this with 'LGBTQ+'. More information on the terminology and the language used in the original survey can be found in the full report *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People* (2022).



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ABOUT LGBT YOUTH SCOTLAND

LGBT Youth Scotland is the national charity for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning (LGBTQ+) young people. LGBTQ+ young people face unique and additional barriers to realising their potential and that is why LGBT Youth Scotland exists. We believe Scotland can be a place where all young people can thrive and flourish, and we work alongside young people to remove those barriers, supporting young people individually and amplifying their collective voice to influence change. For further information, help or support, please visit our website at www.lgbtyouth.org.uk





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“I feel as though while there is a lot of help and supporting communities, it’s still a struggle with having to be fearful and cautious around other people because you don’t know who will and won’t accept you and people who’ll judge you and call you slurs along the street.”

“A lot of young folk are very open with their hate of LGBT+, almost as if they are proud of it. It is somewhat institutionalised here, employers and landlords, etc. demanding to know if you are transgender when they have no business asking such a thing.”

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