TRANSPRIDE SCOTLAND: WORKSHOP WRITEUP

Pink Saltire took part in Transpride Scotland's first virtual Trans Pride event on Saturday, 17th of October. We facilitated a workshop with eight participants. The session was split in two segments; the first was an open dialogue between participants about their experience of lockdown and accessing support during the pandemic. The second was led by a Rainbow Responder qualified in counselling who offered mindfulness advice and tips to reduce anxiety. The session lasted approximately two hours.

The experiences of participants varied between somewhat positive and vastly negative. A few participants felt they had a good support network in their home setting; either family, friends or neighbours. They felt comfortable to use social media and online platforms to socialise, and reported a positive experience of accessing healthcare services via their GP. They also mentioned that there was a variety of online events they could attend which helped with maintaining social interactions and a positive mental wellbeing.

However, other participants reported facing severe challenges during lockdown. Three participants expressed their mental health deteriorated significantly. Lockdown left them feeling lonely, isolated and unable to find support. For one of the participants who had recently had gender reaffirming surgery, the pause in healthcare was even more difficult as she was unable to get her post-surgery check-ups. The uncertainty about her physical and mental health caused her a lot of anxiety. Other healthcare avenues didn't offer a positive experience either. Because of her age and being disabled, she felt that she was treated by the various services as unimportant.

"After a point, you're on your own, so you need to
*find your own coping mechanisms."*

Other participants echoed those thoughts and expressed having a negative experience from their GPs or other public mental healthcare providers. Some participants tried to access support through national LGBT+ services, but were faced with waiting lists of over 6 months. Even those who did manage to access some support, it was limited.

"The telephone service is there, but you get a phone call
every few months from a volunteer. That's fine, but
sometimes you need a professional to get medical help from."

Two participants talked about having very little choice on their living situations. One of the participants fled an abusive from an abusive family home and found refuge at a women's shelter. Following this short-term solution, she was offered a flat in a neighbourhood that felt really unsafe.

"My choice was either to live in this rough area or go into a
care home for people with far more severe disabilities than my own".

The other participant was faced with a similar situation. Previously living in a rural location, she had to relocate to Edinburgh to avoid being in a care home with people far older and more ill than her. However, she didn't have much say in her new living arrangement. She then found herself in an area that felt unsafe.
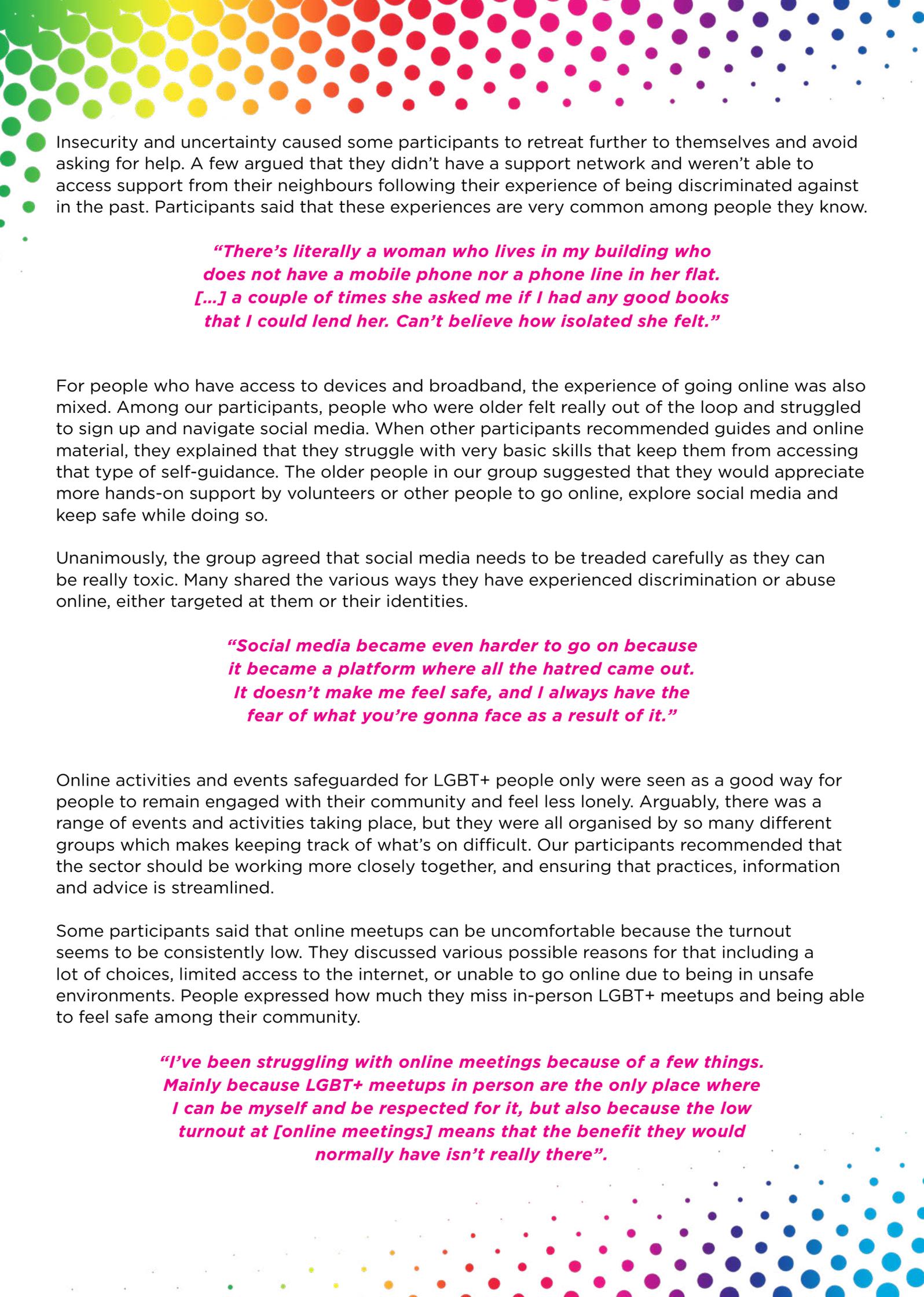
Insecurity and uncertainty caused some participants to retreat further to themselves and avoid asking for help. A few argued that they didn't have a support network and weren't able to access support from their neighbours following their experience of being discriminated against in the past. Participants said that these experiences are very common among people they know.

"There's literally a woman who lives in my building who does not have a mobile phone nor a phone line in her flat. […] a couple of times she asked me if I had any good books that I could lend her. Can't believe how isolated she felt."

For people who have access to devices and broadband, the experience of going online was also mixed. Among our participants, people who were older felt really out of the loop and struggled to sign up and navigate social media. When other participants recommended guides and online material, they explained that they struggle with very basic skills that keep them from accessing that type of self-guidance. The older people in our group suggested that they would appreciate more hands-on support by volunteers or other people to go online, explore social media and keep safe while doing so.

Unanimously, the group agreed that social media needs to be treaded carefully as they can be really toxic. Many shared the various ways they have experienced discrimination or abuse online, either targeted at them or their identities.

"Social media became even harder to go on because it became a platform where all the hatred came out. It doesn't make me feel safe, and I always have the fear of what you're gonna face as a result of it."

Online activities and events safeguarded for LGBT+ people only were seen as a good way for people to remain engaged with their community and feel less lonely. Arguably, there was a range of events and activities taking place, but they were all organised by so many different groups which makes keeping track of what's on difficult. Our participants recommended that the sector should be working more closely together, and ensuring that practices, information and advice is streamlined.

Some participants said that online meetups can be uncomfortable because the turnout seems to be consistently low. They discussed various possible reasons for that including a lot of choices, limited access to the internet, or unable to go online due to being in unsafe environments. People expressed how much they miss in-person LGBT+ meetups and being able to feel safe among their community.

"I've been struggling with online meetings because of a few things. Mainly because LGBT+ meetups in person are the only place where I can be myself and be respected for it, but also because the low turnout at [online meetings] means that the benefit they would normally have isn't really there".