



Stuart Duffy
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Our Reference: 202000117910

Your Reference: REPORT: The impact of COVID on LGBT+ people in Scotland

13 January 2021

Dear Stuart Duffy,

Thank you for your email of 25 November 2020 to the First Minister and the Minister for Older People and Equalities, highlighting your recent report *The Impact of COVID on LGBT+ People in Scotland*. I have been asked to respond.

The Scottish Government remains strongly committed to advancing LGBTI equality, and to realising, promoting, and protecting the rights of every LGBTI person in Scotland. We are also acutely aware that the impacts of COVID-19 have been, and will continue to be, experienced disproportionately by different groups, including LGBTI people as well as women, minority ethnic communities, older people and disabled people.

It was helpful for officials to meet with you and your team on 17 October 2020 to hear more about the report, and we undertook to provide further information in relation to some of the key themes raised. At the meeting, officials highlighted briefly concerns they had heard from other stakeholders regarding what they considered to be a lack of collaboration in developing this project. Stakeholders have also expressed concerns that that the report misrepresents the roles of organisations working in this area and serious concerns that the report potentially undermines the positive work happening across the LGBTI sector as a whole. You indicated on the call that you had faced challenges in engaging with the wider sector, and we offered to try and assist in facilitating engagement if this would be helpful to all concerned. It would be helpful if you could consider this point further and let us know if further support on this point would be useful.

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Your subsequent email and the accompanying report made a number of points, and put forward recommendations across a range of areas. I have tried to group these into common themes, and have responded to each in turn.

Local and Regional COVID-19 Response, Funding, and Resources, including Physical Assets and Community Spaces

Financial support throughout the COVID-19 crisis has been a key focus for the Scottish Government, and its importance is rightly highlighted in your report. Through a range of funding streams, significant funding has been made available throughout the pandemic to councils, charities, businesses and community groups. This has been designed to be flexible, cutting down on red tape to enable organisations to respond swiftly and according to local need for people impacted economically or through reduced contact with society, including anyone struggling to access food.

Organisations have been encouraged throughout the pandemic to think about what additional support and resource would be useful to them in order to quickly and effectively meet the needs of communities. A number of LGBTI organisations have received funding to address these needs, with a total funding package of £64,191.82 delivered to LGBTI-specific projects, detailed at the relevant sections below.

Your report notes the importance of community links and spaces to the wellbeing of LGBTI people and communities. A number of LGBTI-focussed organisations have worked throughout the pandemic to ensure that community links are able to be maintained despite ongoing restrictions on physical meetings, and have been supported to do so by Scottish Government funding. This includes the Equality Network's provision of Zoom accounts to local community LGBTI organisations across Scotland, as well as LGBT Health and Wellbeing's increased provision of the LGBT Helpline, and LGBT Youth Scotland's work in continuing to support LGBTI young people to stay connected and have access to online youth workers. These projects were initially funded in the amounts of £3,932.82, £10,000 and £41,500 respectively, from the Immediate Priorities Fund. The Equality Network and LGBT Health and Wellbeing received additional Equality and Human Rights Funding to the amount of £1,259 and £7,500 to extend the time period of the projects until December 2020.

You may be aware that a consortium of LGBTI organisations (the Equality Network, LGBT Youth Scotland, LGBT Health and Wellbeing and LEAP Sport Scotland) have also been granted £87,700 from the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund, via The National Lottery Community Fund, to support local LGBTI communities. This work includes the creation of a dedicated LGBTI micro-site to support Pride organisers to put on virtual events, support LGBTI groups to provide social and COVID-19 services, and provide LGBTI digital care packages to up to 50 isolated LGBTI people through local LGBTI community groups.

LEAP Sports Scotland, who work to ensure greater LGBTI equality and inclusion within sports, will offer funding to sports and physical activity clubs to help them run with reduced membership fees or to cover venue costs for a fixed period, and they will also distribute a £5,000 hardship fund to groups as welfare fund which will allow those most impacted by COVID-19 to retain their own sport and physical activity routines and memberships.

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Signposting to Services

Your report raises that, particularly at this time, people need to be made aware of the resources and services in place to help them. The Scottish Government supports a range of work designed to support LGBTI people and communities, both in the context of the pandemic and in ordinary times, and we are in agreement that it is vital for people to be aware of the services and support available to them, which is why www.mygov.scot provides information and advice on access to public services in Scotland.

In addition to this, on 12 May 2020, a blog was published [by the Minister for Older People and Equalities](#) which highlighted the support that has been made available to LGBTI people during the pandemic. As well as focusing on the work being undertaken by LGBTI stakeholders, the piece also signposted to the new national helpline – 0800 111 4000 – that has been set up to provide essential assistance to those who do not have a network of support but who are at high risk of contracting COVID-19.

Further information on this support can be found online at [Ready Scotland](#).

The Scottish Government has also worked with stakeholders across a range of areas throughout the pandemic to help ensure that information about advice, services and support is reaching those who need it.

Mental Health

Your report makes a range of recommendations in relation to mental health provision for LGBTI people. The Scottish Government recognises the importance of people's mental health and wellbeing, which has been an issue of particular concern during the COVID-19 outbreak. We want to make sure anyone who needs support can get access to appropriate services.

Our [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): mental health - transition and recovery plan](#), which was published on 8 October 2020, outlines the Scottish Government's response to the mental health impacts of COVID-19. It addresses the challenges that the pandemic has had, and will continue to have, on the population's mental health. The report sets out key areas of mental health need that have arisen as a result of COVID-19 and lockdown, and the actions that the Scottish Government will take to respond to those needs. Some of the work outlined here had been started before the pandemic, but it is included within the report because it continues to be relevant to our ongoing response.

You may also wish to be aware of the [Clear Your Head campaign](#), which has been run across television, radio, and online, and is part of a package of measures to help people look after their mental health during and after the coronavirus crisis. Along with a range of tips on how to stay positive and maintain wellbeing, the campaign website signposts sources of help and advice including NHS Inform, and helplines including NHS24, Breathing Space, SAMH and the Samaritans. The website also links to LGBT Health and Wellbeing, for the provision of LGBT-specific mental health support and resources.

In terms of mental health support focussed specifically on LGBTI communities, funding has been

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provided to LGBT Health and Wellbeing to provide additional cover for the National LGBT Helpline, for an additional 2 days a week (which brings coverage from 2 to 4 days a week overall) to provide LGBT people across Scotland with a single point of contact for information, signposting and support on issues around sexual orientation, gender identity, hate crime, equality and human rights, employment and health – the line is open Tuesday and Wednesday 12:00 – 18:00 and Thursday and Sunday 13:00 – 18:00.

The organisation has also developed a Telefriending Service, with a small team providing structured phone support to those who are particularly socially isolated and/or experiencing digital exclusion.

In respect of young people's mental health needs, LGBT Youth Scotland have developed a digital youth work platform to deliver a safe community space for LGBTI young people online, Pride and Pixels, as well as a learning hub where content can be delivered digitally in groups or in young people's own time. The initial work delivered through this platform focused on mental health and resilience.

Asylum Seekers and Refugees

Under current constitutional arrangements in the UK, asylum and immigration are matters reserved to the UK Government and handled by the Home Office. This includes the design and operation of the UK asylum system, provision of asylum support and accommodation, and decisions on applications for asylum made in the UK.

Scotland's approach to supporting refugees and people seeking asylum from the day they arrive is set out in the New Scots refugee integration strategy. The strategy is designed to be welcoming and inclusive and led in partnership by the Scottish Government, COSLA and the Scottish Refugee Council. The strategy is available on the Scottish Government website: <https://www.gov.scot/newscotsstrategy> and seeks to ensure the challenges faced are understood and people are able to participate in society. We also recognise that people seeking safety on the basis of their LGBTI identity can face particular challenges within the asylum process, accessing services and finding support.

In addition to this, it may also interest you that LGBT Health & Wellbeing work to support LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees through their service to give people access a variety of confidential and free individual, social, digital and practical support. More information on this can be found on their website at: <https://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/services-support/lgbt-refugee-project/>

Specific Needs of Island and Rural LGBTI People

Your report is clear on the specific challenges that may be faced by LGBTI people living in Scotland's many island and rural communities. The Scottish Government is conscious of the need to better understand and support these communities, which is why we have recently undertaken qualitative research with stakeholders representing ethnic minorities, disabled people, carers and the LGBTI community to understand the barriers these groups face in participating in decision making in rural Scotland. This is part of the wider work around support a Rural Movement and voice that is targeted at inclusion.

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The National Rural Mental Health Forum is currently delivering the project *Mental health impact of COVID-19 in rural communities - exploring the experiences of marginalised groups in rural areas to improve their outcomes*, courtesy of Scottish Rural Network funding. This project is carrying out research on the impact of COVID-19 on marginalised rural communities, specifically Refugees and Asylum Seekers, LGBTI people and Young Carers. The research will give a voice to vulnerable communities about the impacts of COVID-19 on their mental health and wellbeing, and identify possible solutions and policy recommendations as a key outcome.

The aims from the research were to evidence how the pandemic has affected rural mental health in these three communities, highlight barriers encountered, explore what has helped wellbeing, and identify what needs to change in rural Scotland to improve mental health and wellbeing support and services.

The results of this research were collated in December 2020 and will be made available shortly. Consultations with organisations representing the target respondents have been carried out and partnerships for future activity have been established.

The project will take forward identified actions from the research and contribute to improving mental health outcomes for the specified groups. The project has already given a voice to marginalised rural communities through the initial research and it is vital that voice is listened to and acted upon through the next three months of activity.

I'd like to thank you for taking the time to share the findings of your report with us and I hope you have found the information provided here helpful. It is vital that the Scottish Government is able to draw from the expertise of key stakeholders and ensure that the voices of those with lived experience can help to shape policy and practice to improve outcomes for their communities. Research such as this is a key part of that.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions about the information above.

Yours sincerely



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