

LGBT SWIMMING PROJECT

Impact Report 2014



Edinburgh Leisure

Introduction

LGBT Health and Wellbeing, in partnership with Edinburgh Leisure, provided 8 exclusive swimming sessions for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people living in or travelling to Edinburgh. Delivered fortnightly between February and May 2014, these vital sessions provided a safe, accessible and supportive space for LGBT people to engage in physical activity and socialise without fear of discrimination, abuse or discomfort. The 2014 LGBT Swimming sessions highlighted in this report illustrate how effective this gradual and thorough approach to partnership work can be, in providing life-changing projects for often disadvantaged individuals.



Key Objectives

LGBT people feel more connected to their community

LGBT people feel more confident about their body

LGBT people are more active and feel more confident accessing Edinburgh Leisure services

The physical health of LGBT people has improved

LGBT people feel less isolated

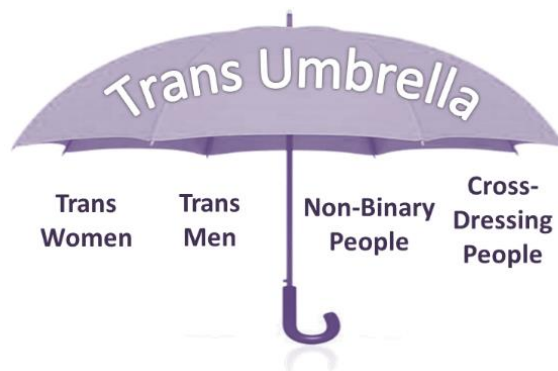
“Getting in the pool again has been life changing. I now have the confidence to wear a costume that’s right for me and would not have without the safety and encouragement of my community.”

– Participant

Background

Transgender, or trans, is an umbrella term used to describe the range of ways in which a person's gender identity can differ from the assumptions and expectations of the society in which they live. The transgender population experiences severe health inequalities, largely as a result of prejudice and discrimination from wider society. Research by the Scottish Transgender Alliance (STA) has found that 88% of trans people have experienced depression, one in three has attempted suicide and over half are afraid to use gyms or public toilets.

In January 2010, LGBT Health and Wellbeing (LGBT Health) facilitated a consultation workshop with 19 trans people in partnership with the STA, the purpose of which was to identify support needs and gaps in service provision. One of the outcomes of the consultation was that trans people told us that they wanted to be able to swim in a safe environment where they have the opportunity to express their gender identity.



In a public swimming setting, there are expectations around the type of swimwear a person should wear, based upon their perceived binary gender identity. For example, a trans male may have what are understood to be female body parts. They therefore may feel pressured to wear swimwear that is expected of them by society to avoid experiencing prejudice. If they were to simply wear swimming trunks, they might reveal female-associated body parts which they may normally choose to keep hidden. Creating an exclusive space for trans people to publically wear the clothing they feel comfortable with, can be hugely beneficial to peoples' self-confidence and self-esteem.

"Being transgender I have avoided swimming for many years. Through these sessions I hope to regain confidence going in and out of a pool and using changing rooms. Hopefully I will be able to rebuild my passion for swimming. I know the exercise will benefit both my physical and mental health."

– Participant

In addition to the barriers created by expectations, both the reported experiences of transphobia and anticipation of discrimination in a public setting indicate strongly that there is a need for exclusive pool access for trans people to help build faith in public services and their confidence in being who they are in such an intimate environment.

It was in light of this request that LGBT Health first approached Edinburgh Leisure with the view to launch the first trans-inclusive 'Different Strokes' initiative at Glenogle Swim Centre. Training was provided to Glenogle Swim Centre staff that was designed to break down barriers, dispel misconceptions, raise awareness of issues faced by trans people and provide a forum to ask questions. The sessions had an overwhelmingly positive response from participants and together with the strength of the newly established working relationship with Edinburgh Leisure, the project paved the way for future initiatives that would continue to increase access and participation in areas where acute barriers exist for transgender people.

After consultation with Different Strokes participants, and in response to demand from within the wider LGBT community to increase physical activity opportunities, LGBT Health piloted the first LGBT Swimming sessions at Glenogle Swim Centre in 2011. The intention of LGBT Health was that this would extend the opportunity for safe and affirming access to swimming for the whole of the LGBT community. Care was taken not to compromise the trust and confidence of the existing trans swimming participants and, positively, feedback from the original participants of Different Strokes strongly indicated that people appreciated the wider inclusion of LGB people. This reaffirmed the notion that trans people may also identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. Feedback from evaluation of the first LGBT Swimming sessions was that trans people greatly benefited from the broader opportunity to socialise with, feel accepted by and connect to a wider LGBT community.

Ethos

LGBT Health promotes and facilitates opportunities to improve and equalise the social, emotional, physical and mental wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Scotland. Having built a solid understanding of the complex issues facing LGBT people when participating in physical activities such as swimming, we knew that the project needed to be handled sensitively and boldly in order to help break down some of the barriers and stigma faced by individuals. This included monitoring the participation of trans people closely, as a group who are even more likely to be disadvantaged and experience acute access barriers.



"I am hoping to restore my confidence a bit having received a stupid comment from another kid about me swimming "like a gay" that soured the experience and put me off returning."

– Participant

Delivery Model

Provision of a safe space

When consulted ahead of taking part in the swimming sessions, many LGBT participants reported feeling anxious and “put off” accessing public pools due to negative experiences and feelings of exclusion and public harassment or embarrassment. They expressed their hope that the sessions would “improve their confidence” and “get rid of the paranoid feelings” they experienced before, when previously attempting to access facilities.

Opportunities to increase social networks

*“It was such a friendly atmosphere...
Hopping from pool to sauna and back.”*

– Participant

Others also expressed the hope that the sessions would give them the opportunity to “meet like-minded people” and “feel part of a community”, which became a strong driver for creating a social environment in and around the pool, as well as one

focused on physical activity. Edinburgh Leisure contributed to this considerably by providing access to the sauna, steam room and gym, alongside the pool facilities.

Accessibility

Close monitoring of the access needs of participants before the sessions began helped us ensure that there were adequate facilities to respond to their needs, and also informed staff from both organisations to provide a consistent welcome for all those taking part. There were accessible toilets, railings at the side of the pool steps and a lift to help people enter the pool. The building was also fully accessible.

“The atmosphere was very supportive and staff were always keen to help me get in and out the pool.”

– Participant

“Glenogle Swim Centre staff valued these sessions, which they demonstrated by either staying back after the normal finishing time of their shift, or if staff who had been on shift could not manage extra time, then other staff were always willing to come in to cover session.”

– Jonathon Elders, Supervisor, Glenogle Swim

Working in partnership

Close and open communication between LGBT Health and staff from Glenogle Swim Centre allowed the project to run effectively and efficiently. Glenogle staff were consistently receptive to sharing their ideas and any concerns with LGBT Health throughout. Where challenges arose, both Glenogle management and poolside staff were keen to increase their knowledge, understanding and awareness of the issues facing the LGBT community. This open and direct approach to partnership work has

allowed for issues to surface quickly and be resolved with positive outcomes, including increasing the awareness and confidence of Edinburgh Leisure staff.

Evaluation

Building on the foundation of the 2011 pilot, the 2014 sessions have involved in-depth evaluation at both the beginning, middle and end of the project. This has enabled LGBT Health to capture a range of data to demonstrate the impact and outcomes for both LGBT Health and Edinburgh Leisure.

Baseline Information

An introductory evaluation form was completed by 45 participants, to establish a baseline for measuring future outcomes. These initial questions included asking how physically active people were and how confident they felt using Edinburgh Leisure services. We established the following key facts:

- 80% reported being “not very active” or “not active at all”
- 80% reported feeling “not very confident” or “not confident at all” in using Edinburgh Leisure services

These concerning yet not surprising responses provided great motivation for working hard to making change and achieve the project’s objectives.

Regular feedback

Each of the 8 sessions was evaluated to ascertain whether participants benefited from the sessions and to request ideas for improvements. This regular channel for feedback allowed both Edinburgh Leisure and LGBT Health to monitor the sessions closely and respond quickly to any suggestions or concerns. It also enabled staff from both organisations to provide consistent information and guidance.

The fortnightly feedback also provided reassurance along the way, that objectives were being met and that the sessions were meeting people’s expectations.

Diversity and Demographics

There were **74** beneficiaries overall, 56 of whom completed full registration forms, with an average of **30** participants per session. Of the registered participants, a quarter identified as bisexual, just over a third as lesbian or gay, a third as ‘other’ and 3 people identified themselves as heterosexual.

One third of participants identified as transgender; trans male, trans female or non-binary/queer gender.

“Staff lovely as usual, very helpful on poolside. I feel very at home here!”

– Participant

Final evaluation

LGBT Health used a detailed feedback form to carry out the final evaluation, which was completed by 50 participants. To capture the impact of the sessions we compared the findings with the initial markers established in the introductory form. LGBT Health sought individual outcomes as well as capturing peoples' thoughts about LGBT Health staff and volunteers, and Edinburgh Leisure staff and facilities. This is reflected in the quotes used throughout this report, and the key outcomes below.

Next Steps

This project has demonstrated the clear need for exclusive swimming sessions for LGBT people in an accessible environment where they can feel safe, and there are opportunities for them to increase their social networks. The evaluation also highlighted the enormous benefits of such sessions in increasing LGBT people's level of physical activity, mental wellbeing, confidence in using public services, and feelings of social integration.

LGBT Health in partnership with Edinburgh Leisure have established a delivery model that works extremely effectively, based upon delivering training, getting buy-in from staff at all levels, and maintaining strong means of ongoing communication.

LGBT Health is keen to repeat this model in Edinburgh and to work with other swimming centres. For further information about the swimming sessions or this report please contact Jules Stapleton Barnes (Community Development Worker) at jules@lgbthealth.org.uk.

For more information about LGBT Health visit www.lgbthealth.org.uk.

Key Outcomes

94% of participants reported the sessions to be "very enjoyable" and **6%** reported them as "enjoyable"

79% of participants feel more connected to their community

76% of participants reported feeling better about themselves

68% of participants report feeling more confident about their body

80% said that they feel more confident in accessing Edinburgh Leisure facilities

74% of participants say their physical health has improved

50% of participants feel less isolated

"I think the sessions were very good, clearly people were making good use of them and enjoying them. Hopefully this has helped to ensure that people who might feel uncomfortable coming into swimming pool environment felt more comfortable and felt that health facilities were available to them. This ties in nicely with Edinburgh Leisure's 'purpose, vision and values'"

– Jonathon Elders, Supervisor, Glenogle Swim Centre