



Building Sustainable LGBT Communities

Key Findings Report

LGBT Parents in Ireland

Report from a study into the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in Ireland who are parents or who are planning parenthood.

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Report Commissioned by LGBT Diversity

Acknowledgements:

This research has been carried out at a time of significant change in the landscape of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender rights in Ireland and in the light of greater public awareness about the rights, recognition and visibility of LGBT parents. In documenting the lives and experiences of LGBT parents and LGBT people planning parenthood, we hope that this research will provide an important evidence base for progressing the rights of, and services for, LGBT parents. We would like to sincerely thank all of the LGBT parents and LGBT people planning parenthood for their participation in the online survey and in the detailed interviews. Their rich experiences and perspectives have been invaluable in providing the evidence base for this research report. We would also like to thank the members of the LGBT Parenthood Research Steering Group, established by LGBT Diversity, for their active involvement in steering the research and in providing many detailed suggestions for the development of the survey. Finally, we would like to thank Fionnuala Boyle for her excellent work in assisting us with the database, data analysis and the online survey.

Jane Pillinger and Paula Fagan

Preface and Acknowledgements:

In November 2012, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, Mr Alan Shatter ,TD, in a speech where he outlined comprehensive family law reforms that he intends to implement for children being parented by LGBT couples, asserted that ‘it is not in the best interests of either parents or children, that we deny the reality of the complexity of the diverse family relationships that factually exist in the Ireland of 2012.’¹

We welcome this report as a vital contribution to our understanding of the ‘diverse family relationships’ that exist in modern Ireland. We hope and believe that it will provide policy makers and service planners, as well as groups that support parents and families and LGBT communities, with a sound basis to promote greater inclusion.

I would like to thank Jane and Paula for their exceptional work and the many people who supported them through the Steering Group over the last few years. Thanks also go to the staff at LGBT Diversity, Berni Smyth, Hayley Fox-Roberts, Poul Walsh Olesen and Sarah O’Sullivan, as well as Vanessa Lacey at Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI), for promoting the survey across the country. In the final stages of the project, Sandra Irwin-Gowran at Gay & Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN), Moninne Griffiths of Marriage Equality, Ailbhe Smyth of the National Lesbian & Gay Federation(NLGF) and Margot Doherty of Treoir (The Information & Referral Service for Unmarried Parents) gave invaluable contributions and advice; particular thanks to Sandra for also drafting the key findings.

Patrick Stoakes (LGBT Diversity)

¹ Speech delivered by Mr Alan Shatter, TD, Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence at meeting of Fine Gael LGBT Group. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/SP12000321>

Key Findings from the LGBT Parenthood Research:

1. Introduction:

The LGBT Parenthood Study is the first survey of its kind in Ireland to date. The study profiles a sample of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people who are parents and LGBT people planning to become parents; it documents their roles as parents, their experiences of becoming parents and accessing services. The study was commissioned by LGBT Diversity (a collective of 12 national and regional LGBT organisations in Ireland), and carried out by independent researchers, Dr Jane Pillinger and Paula Fagan.

This Key Findings Document was compiled by LGBT Diversity, and outlines some of the findings of the survey which have been extracted from the full research report. (The full report can be accessed at www.lgbtdiversity.com.)

2. Methodology:

The survey was conducted over a four-month period in the third quarter of 2011. Individuals were invited to opt into an anonymous survey, which could be completed online or in hard copy. In order to reach the target group, the survey was promoted by local and national LGBT organisations and on relevant media, including local radio. Survey respondents were also invited to participate in in-depth interviews. The researchers sought to ensure that a balance was achieved between parents and prospective parents in each of the sub-categories, according to sexual orientation and gender identity.

In total, 323 people responded to the online survey, and a further 25 people participated in in-depth interviews. 47% of the online survey respondents (153 people) were already parents, as were 72% of those who participated in an interview. The survey documents their experiences in parenting 272 children.

The survey also highlights the aspirations of many LGBT people who are planning to become parents. 170 people who were planning to become parents, participated in the research. (68% female / 28% male / 4% other answers)

A. LGBT People who are Already Parents:

The kids - and this is something they have said to me, it is not just something I have imagined - are very happy with a rainbow family. They feel it has enabled them to be more open and more respectful of difference, and to be more understanding of difference. They have very little truck with people that don't. (Gay man, father)

Profile of LGBT Parents:

- 153 LGBT people who are parents, participated in the online survey, and 18 in the in-depth interviews. Of these, the ratio of females to males was more than 4 to 1. Three participants identified as transgender. (2 trans women and one trans man)²
- These participants are parents to 272 children of varying ages between infancy and adulthood.
- Six out of ten parents identified as lesbian, almost a quarter identified as bisexual, and 1 in 10 as a gay man.
- Nearly three quarters of parents were in a same-sex relationship, and of these, 10% were in a same-sex marriage or civil partnership.³
- 58% of parents were aged between 30 and 44 years; one third were over 45 years.
- Almost 9 out of 10 had a postgraduate / third-level education or professional qualification.
- 61% were employed outside the home, while 16% worked full-time as homemakers.
- Household incomes were in the high-to-medium categories: 36% were over €50k, and a further quarter were between €30k and €50k.
- Over a half lived in a city / suburb, 18% in a rural area, while the remainder lived in towns and villages. (28%)

² The research sought to include people who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. An intended outcome of this research is to provide data that can help to inform policy and both legislative and service provision. Every effort was made to present accurate categorisation of participants. However, it should be noted that a simple binary system of categorisation of sex and gender, would have resulted in incomplete and inaccurate results, as many people do not fall into this binary. Good practice recommends asking two questions instead of one, to both validate a person's present gender identity and also understand their history; this will lead to increased accuracy in sex and gender information about participants. Transgender people often face barriers to participating in research due to stigmatisation and discrimination, which can affect numbers of participants. While acknowledging the limitations of targeted approaches to identifying potential participants, the researchers made efforts to counteract some of the aforementioned barriers by targeted approaches to specific organisations working on transgender issues.

³ Note that same-sex couples could only avail of the Civil Partnership Act 2010, from April, 2011. This survey was carried out in the six months after this date. Same-sex couples are prohibited from entering into civil marriage in Ireland. Most same-sex civil marriages or civil partnerships from other countries, are recognised in Ireland as civil partnerships.

How did these LGBT People Become Parents?

That [birth] was fantastic. We had a fantastic consultant, and the two anaesthetists came out to me afterwards to congratulate me, as they would to any father. And the hospital was fantastic. We were a bit of a circus act for the time we were there, in that a lot of nurses came in to have a look, but we could live with that as we were treated very well. (Lesbian woman, parent)

- Over two thirds of participants who are parents,⁴ are biological parents.
- While over a half had become parents through a previous heterosexual relationship, the remainder (49%) had done so through other pathways, such as assisted human reproduction (AHR).
- All trans parents had become parents through a previous heterosexual relationship, and consequently, had a legal status as a biological parent.
- Over one third of all parents had become parents through AHR, either through a private medical clinic, or privately with a known donor.
- One quarter of all lesbian parents had become parents through AHR in a clinic, while 15% of lesbians are parents of a child conceived through private donation arrangements.
- Small numbers of LGBT people had become parents through fostering (7%), adoption (7%) and surrogacy (5%).

Numbers of Children and Living Arrangements:

The research revealed that LGBT people are parenting their children in a range of living arrangements and parenting configurations.

- The 153 parents in the study are parents to 272 children of varying ages from infancy to adulthood.
- 41% of respondents were a parent to one child; 29% were a parent to two children.
- A further 18% were a parent to either 3 or 4 children. (12% and 6% respectively)
- 41% of all parents lived with their children and partner; the majority of them were co-parenting, despite the partner not having a legal status as a parent.
- A further 20% were living alone with their children.
- 18% of participants were parenting alone, while the same number were parenting with an ex-partner.
- Diversity of parenting arrangements was also reflected in smaller numbers who did not live with their children, but parented part-time.

I was in a relationship when I applied to become a foster parent. When I was assessed... and being honest, I think it would have been easier if I had been single, because at the time they said that the process was exactly the same as it was for heterosexual couples, but it wasn't... Throughout the whole process, we were - and I am now - much more closely scrutinised than a 'straight' foster carer would be. (Lesbian woman, parent)

⁴ Parents were invited to participate regardless of whether they were biological or non-biological parents. A biological parent was defined as a birth mother or a biological father. Non-biological parent was defined as a person who is in a parenting role and considers themselves to be a parent, but who is not the child's birth mother nor biological father, e.g., the partner of a child's birth mother.

Legal Status of Parents and their Children:

- More than a half of all parents are legal guardians to the children they parent, and one third are sole legal guardians.
- One in ten share joint custody with either a biological or adoptive parent.
- 16% of parents have no legal status as parents, despite having an active parenting role; this represents 51 children who are being parented by an individual with whom they have no legal relationship.

I have had the situation where my partner wasn't allowed to collect them from school, and wasn't allowed to give them a sick note. Their mother's [opposite-sex] partner was not put in the same position when something similar happened. (Gay man, father)

LGBT Parents' Experiences in Accessing a Range of Services:

There were only two places [clinics] that would treat lesbian couples, and so we went to one of them. It was a very odd experience. We did declare [being lesbian], because it was very important that we - or I - would not be left out of the process. It was very, very stressful. We were made to feel quite unwelcome, and yet, we were paying enormous amounts of money. (Lesbian woman, parent)

- Of those who had used AHR services in Ireland (n = 30), just over a half (16 people) rated the service that they received either good or very good. However, a significant minority (30%) rated the service poor or very bad; the remaining 17% gave a neutral score (neither good nor bad). This compares negatively with those who had accessed AHR services overseas (n = 19), with over 70% (13 people) rating their experiences good / very good.
- A sizeable majority (71%) had positive experiences of maternity services. However, in-depth interviews revealed that respondents had actively sought out maternity services and consultants that they knew to be LGBT friendly in their practices.
- 65% of respondents indicated a positive experience in relation to primary and secondary schools; however, choosing an 'LGBT friendly' school was a significant issue for many. A number of interview respondents revealed dissatisfaction in relation to how their child's school addressed their partner's parenting role. While the level of bullying of children reported in the study was low, a number of interviewees reported homophobic incidents occurring at their children's schools involving other students and some staff members.
- 16% had a negative experience in accessing information-provider services.
- Support of LGBT groups and organisations, and of local community services, was rarely accessed by those who were already parents, with the majority not answering these questions, or stating that they were not relevant. However, interview participants highlighted the need for the establishment of LGBT support groups for both themselves and for peer support for their children.

B. Profile of LGBT People Planning to Become Parents:

I always wanted kids. I think that is why I am in the profession that I am in. I think from the youngest day ever ... everyone would always say, ' Ah ! You were born to be a dad.' I have a million nieces and nephews, and I love them all to bits. It is just ingrained in me. (Gay man planning parenthood)

In addition to people who are already parents, the survey sought to document the experiences of LGBT people who were planning to become parents. This cohort provides important data for both service providers and policy makers.

Profile of People Planning to Become Parents:

- 170 people who were planning to become parents participated in the online survey, and 7 took part in the in-depth interviews. Of these, there was a 2 to 3 male-to-female ratio. Three participants identified as transgender.(two trans women & one trans man)
- Over 50% identified as lesbian; one out of five identified as a gay man.
- Of the 67% who were in a same-sex relationship, 12% were in a same-sex marriage or civil partnership.
- Over one quarter of those planning to become parents were single.
- Two out of five were aged between 20 and 29 years, with the next biggest cohort (34%) in the 30-39 years age category.
- Almost 9 out of 10 had a postgraduate / third- level education or professional qualification.
- 64% were employed outside the home, while 23% were students.
- Household incomes were in the medium-to-high categories; 34% were over €50k, and a further 27% were between €30 and €50k per annum.
- Nearly 6 out of 10 lived in a city or suburb of a city.

How are they Planning to Become Parents?

Of the 170 participants who were planning to become parents:

- Almost three quarters (n = 125) plan to conceive through AHR. (85% of whom are women)
- Two thirds (n =62) of those who plan to conceive through AHR in a private clinic intend to avail of services in Ireland, while the remaining one third plan to avail of services overseas.
- 29% plan to conceive by means of AHR with a known donor.
- Two fifths plan to adopt – gay men (68%) represent the largest category within this planned pathway.
- 18% plan to foster – two times as many men indicated this route than women.
- 14% plan to become parents by means of surrogacy, the vast majority of whom are men.

Knowledge of Legal Status as Parents for those Planning Parenthood:

Just thinking about my own mum, too. She would have asked when my partner was pregnant, 'What are my grandparent's rights?' She got very upset one evening when I told her about it. And my brother, too. Up to that point, he didn't really think about it, but when it came to children, when he realised that we were going to have children and that I would have no rights, he couldn't believe it. (Lesbian woman planning parenthood)

The study revealed a gap in knowledge in relation to the anticipated legal status of those LGBT people who were planning to become parents. More than two out of five participants were not able to identify their anticipated legal status as parents. Additionally, despite no legal provision to do so, significant numbers of participants planned to become either joint legal guardians or joint adoptive parents⁵.

- 44% stated that they did not know what their anticipated legal status as a parent would be.
- One third planned to be joint legal guardians with their partner.
- 19% planned to become a joint adoptive parent with their partner.

Experiences of Using Services by LGBT People Planning Parenthood:

I spoke to one clinic over there [outside Ireland], and they were really, really helpful and sound. They had no problem at all with us. They were also happy to treat us whenever we could get there. Whereas, when I started looking here in Ireland, they wouldn't even return my calls. (Lesbian woman planning parenthood)

- 60% of respondents planned to use AHR services in Ireland.
- 40% of those who had already used AHR services in Ireland, reported a positive experience; however, 60% had either a negative experience or some negative experiences in dealing with such services.
- While the numbers using adoption services in Ireland were low, over a half (n=9) stated that they had a negative experience. This compared unfavourably with those who had used adoption services abroad, the majority of whom had a positive experience of these services.
- There were mixed experiences of fostering services in Ireland, with almost a third of those who accessed these services to become parents, reporting a poor experience. Interviews revealed that participants found a lack of information and clear guidelines as a barrier to becoming a foster parent.

⁵ There is currently no means for anyone other than a biological parent to be granted guardianship, other than through testamentary means. Applications for joint adoption are only accepted from married heterosexual couples, despite it being possible for a single person, regardless of sexual orientation, to apply to adopt. In a speech in November, 2012, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Defence, Mr Alan Shatter, TD, outlined comprehensive family law reforms that he intends to implement for children being parented by LGBT couples. The Minister committed to secure 'equal citizenship for lesbian and gay parents in the best interests of their children'. <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/SP12000321>

- There was marginally higher support sought from LGBT groups and organisations, and from local community services, by those planning to become parents. More (62% compared to 55% of current parents) either did not answer, or stated that this was not relevant. However, the numbers who indicated that they had got some or a lot of support from these sources, had increased by approximately 10 points.

C. Profile of Trans Participants - Parents and those Planning to Become Parents:

The numbers of participants in the survey who identified as trans was small, reflecting the difficulties in accessing this much-marginalised group. The comparatively low number of trans parents to LGB parents results in trans parents becoming submerged in the overall 'LGBT experience'; despite this, trans parents often experience extreme discrimination, rejection and isolation due to a combination of societal and legal barriers. Consequently, a separate profile of trans parents is provided below.

...I miss my kids. I haven't seen them now for a year and a half, and I might not see them this Christmas again...and I just can't accept that. I would just not rather be here living then, to feel like this. (Trans parent)

- Seven transgender people participated in the online survey (three parents and three participants planning to become parents, and a further person who did not state whether they were a parent or planning to be a parent). This included four trans women and three trans men.
- In relation to sexual orientation, four indicated their sexual orientation to be 'something - else' other than the options given, one as questioning their sexual orientation, one bisexual and one lesbian.
- Three were single, two were in a same-sex relationship, one was married and one separated.
- The age range of trans parents was slightly older (30 – 45 years) than those trans participants who planned to become parents (19 -29 years).
- The majority had completed either postgraduate or graduate-level education. Two had completed postgraduate-level education, two had completed third -level education, one had completed some third -level, and one had completed secondary school education.
- Regarding employment status, two were in full-time employment, one was in part-time employment, two were full-time students, and one was a full-time parent / carer.
- In relation to household incomes, two indicated that they had household incomes of between €10,000-€29,999 p.a., one a household income of between €50,000-€69,999, and one a household income of €70,000 or more. Three preferred not to identify their household incomes.
- All trans parents had become parents through a previous heterosexual relationship, and consequently, had a legal status as a biological parent.

LGBT Parents' Experiences of Discrimination:

- 46% of participants had experienced discrimination as an LGBT parent within the past five years.
- There were differences regionally in terms of the experience of discrimination. Three quarters of participants from Ulster, over a half from Connaught, 43% from Leinster and 40% of participants from Munster, had experienced discrimination in the past five years.

... there are plenty of parents who won't let their kids come and play in my house. There is a lot of that, and I had a few funny incidents around that. Like one woman who couldn't quite put into words why she didn't want her kids to come to my house. 'Well! You're transsexual, you understand,' and I am supposed to go, 'Oh yeah!' (Trans parent)

- The overriding concern for all parents was in relation to legal vulnerability. Concern was shared equally between those parents with a legal status and those without a legal status, as a parent. Legal vulnerability was seen to be an issue affecting the whole family and not just the parent without a legal status.
- While the majority of participants had made provision for testamentary guardianship in the event of the legal parent dying, high levels of anxiety were expressed as to the possibility of this being contested.
- Concern was also expressed in relation to the inability of a parent - who is not a legal guardian - to give consent in the event of emergency medical treatment being required by their child.

We have gone into hospital with the children, and thankfully, my partner was there. I don't know what I would have done if she had been away, but we went in together when one of them [children] was very sick. (Lesbian parent)

- Trans parents experienced significant discrimination in terms of lack of acceptance, hostile reactions and sustained negative attitudes, primarily from family members. The interviews revealed that some trans parents were denied access to their children by family members.

Well, I think that any negative experiences that I have had, have been totally through family. I didn't have any bad experiences through school. I didn't have a bad experience when I was getting a passport for the kids... so the only bad experience I have had was totally through family, unfortunately. It is a pity. And that comes up time and time again with other trans people that I know, the negativity is from family. (Trans parent)

D. Recommendations:

We have had a couple of incidents when we were walking along with the children. We have had people shout at us, in xxx and once in xxx, and also in a shop. Once, when we had the kids with us, we had an unpleasant situation, where a group of lads were saying things about us...And they weren't people we knew and we weren't holding hands or anything. But it is why the whole marriage equality thing is so important, as it gives people the rights and protections and the backup, to say that you can't actually treat me differently to anyone else. (Gay man, father)

1. Legal Changes for LGBT Parents:

- Legal changes include the introduction of legislation for civil marriage, the introduction of legislation to enable second-parent adoption, the right of a same-sex couple to be assessed for suitability to adopt, and the right to be eligible to apply to adopt a child who is fostered.

For us as a couple, marriage would solve a lot. I know that there are other things that need to happen, but it would mean that I could adopt them [the children], and I would be absolutely legally bound to them. (Lesbian mother)

- Recommendations are also made for legislation on guardianship / parental responsibility to be extended to *all* carers who have a *parental relationship* with the child / children.
- Further recommendations are for the right for same-sex partners to be on the birth certificate of their child, and the legal protection of trans parents in forthcoming legislation on gender recognition.

I think that children should be entitled to a legal relationship with the people who parent them on a daily basis, regardless of marital status or relationship. And that the child should legally have the right to demand that, and the parents should be legally entitled to have that. (Lesbian parent).

2. Government Policies to Reflect Family Diversity:

...forms are really hideous for a non-biological parent. There is no place for you to fill out. Even the census was a problem, like I put myself down as the children's mother, so let them figure that out. So even in the census, there is no official place for you, you are invisible, and that is quite particular. (Lesbian parent)

- Government policies and strategies on the family, children, education and healthcare should reflect family diversity.
- A government Commission on Family Diversity should be established to take into account LGBT parents and their families.
- The inclusion of children from LGBT families should be part of a 'child centered' approach in line with the National Children's Strategy.

3. Access to Services:

I think that when it comes to children born through donor situations, it should be the commissioning parents who have the legal relationship with the children, and the commissioning parents who have the duty to that child. And I think that we should be able to register as our children's parents, if we have them through AHR. (Lesbian mother)

So you might get a really good social worker who is not at all homophobic, or you might be unlucky, and end up with someone who is. I have been lucky. My own social worker is very, very inclusive. He is great, but his team leader is a different kettle of fish. She is an older woman, and still has great difficulty even saying the word gay. (Lesbian parent)

- Improve access to Assisted Human Reproduction, and for the full implementation of the recommendations from the Commission on Assisted Human Reproduction (2005), to ensure that AHR services are made available without discrimination.
- Implement inclusive school policies on family diversity, training and awareness-raising for school staff, and the full implementation of the Department of Education / GLEN Guidance for Principals and School Leaders.
- Implement inclusive healthcare policies, so that the needs of LGBT parents are integrated into all relevant policies and strategies of the Department of Health, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Health Services Executive, through guidance from medical, health and social care professional bodies, and by implementing training and practice guidelines for staff providing front-line services to families and children.
- Provide accessible legal and practical information for LGBT parents on accessing AHR, adoption, fostering and surrogacy, support services and access to services, through a partnership between LGBT organisations and the Citizens' Information Board.

3. Support for LGBT Parents and the Children of LGBT Parents:

I think LGBT people make themselves very self-sufficient, because they are used to not having support. So when I talk about supports, they are either ones that my close friends, or we ourselves, have set up. But outside of that, not really, no. We personally have quite a lot of support, because that is the way that we have structured our lives. But in terms of existing support, I would say no. (Lesbian mother)

- Provide LGBT parent-support groups and peer support for children of LGBT parents, and provide access to existing counselling services for LGBT parents and children of LGBT parents.
- Increase visibility and awareness of LGBT parenthood in the community amongst local service providers, building on the GLEN Code of Practice for Community Development Projects, Family Resource Centres, Urban Partnerships / Integrated Development Companies.
- As trans issues are often significantly different from LGB issues, specific awareness-raising in relation to transgender people and issues, is necessary.
- The Family Support Agency should facilitate mediation and counselling for families and children in relation to trans issues.