



HERe NI and The Rainbow Project joint submission to the consultation on the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027 'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'

Our Organisations

HERe NI, established informally in 2000 and formally constituted as a Company Limited by Guarantee in 2004, is a regional organisation that works across all areas of Northern Ireland (NI). HERe NI advocate for and support lesbian and bi-sexual women and their families to improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) women across NI. HERe NI is the only women focused organisation within the NI LGBTQIA+ sector.

The Rainbow Project (TRP) has been working for a better Northern Ireland for LGBTQIA+ people and their families since 1994. We **change lives** through our service provision which mitigates the impact of discrimination, and we **change society** through our training, campaigning and policy work, which seeks to eliminate the root causes of that discrimination and deliver full social and legal equality for LGBTQIA+ people.

Introduction

HERE NI and The Rainbow Project welcome the publication of the draft Programme for Government as a step forward in highlighting a number of pressing priorities to be delivered upon in this mandate. A Programme for Government is instrumental in framing the direction of the Executive and Assembly legislation over the next three years. We are, however, concerned and disappointed that LGBTQIA+ people are absent from the document, as are most of the priorities the LGBTQIA+ sector have been campaigning on for a number of years to improve the lives of LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland.

HERE NI and The Rainbow Project, and many other organisations across the community and voluntary sector, are keen to see a Programme for Government that is fully reflective of the diverse make-up of our society, addressing the needs of all communities.

The most recent census estimated that those with minority sexual orientations make up around 2.1% of the population in Northern Ireland.¹ However, due to wider factors within society and the omission of a question on gender identity, we believe this figure underrepresents the true number of LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland, with some research estimating that LGBTQIA+ individuals make up around 10% of the population in any given country.² It is imperative that this population is fully reflected in and supported by this new Programme for Government, particularly given the historic failings of the Executive and Assembly to progress the rights of LGBTQIA+ people.

To date, there has been very little domestic legislation passed in Northern Ireland that has progressed equality for LGBTQIA+ people. The advances in rights and equality that have been introduced in the region have largely passed through Westminster during periods of Executive collapse (e.g. civil partnerships and gender recognition, same-sex marriage, and access to reproductive healthcare). This clear reluctance within the institutions to engage with issues affecting LGBTQIA+ communities has stalled equality for LGBTQIA+ people in this region, and led to worsening living standards for those communities.

Indeed, the fact that the Executive has not been in place for a third of the past twenty-five years would help explain some of the stagnation when it comes to progressing LGBTQIA+ equality. The UN Independent Expert on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity observed on his visit to Northern Ireland that 'no new policy development could occur without a functioning devolved government' and 'the absence of an Executive has resulted in a failure to deliver on the ambitious LGBT human rights strategy'.³

¹ NISRA (March 2023) [Census 2021 Statistical bulletin: Sexual orientation](#)

² Ipsos (2021) [LGBT+ Pride 2021 Global Survey](#)

³ Victor Madrigal Borloz 'Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity' UN General Assembly Human Rights Council (2024), page 7.

Unfortunately, since the Assembly has been restored in February, there has been little movement on advancing LGBTQIA+ equality; the only action we have seen the Executive take directly concerning the LGBTQIA+ population in this mandate has been to sign off on an emergency ban on puberty blockers for trans young people, marking a further regression to the rights of LGBTQIA+ people in this region.

This Programme for Government must mark the start of a change in approach to LGBTQIA+ communities, issues and rights by the Executive, by fully recognising the issues faced by those communities and incorporating them into their shared work programme. The Executive must deliver on the myriad of outstanding issues facing LGBTQIA+ people across Northern Ireland, and should work across all areas to meaningfully consult with and include LGBTQIA+ communities in policy development relating to all areas of this Programme.

Progressing equality for LGBTQIA+ people requires a whole Executive approach, both seeking to mitigate the impact of existing discrimination and addressing its root causes. By taking on board the recommendations within this submission, we believe the Executive can begin to embed LGBTQIA+ equality through all areas of governance, and create a Northern Ireland where all LGBTQIA+ people can live, work and thrive.

What's Missing?

HERE NI and the Rainbow Project are clear that in order to see an advancement in equality in Northern Ireland, the needs of LGBTQIA+ people must be visible in any Programme for Government. Particularly in the context of years of invisibility, underrepresentation, and often outright hostility directed at LGBTQIA+ communities from within the Assembly and Executive, it is vital that our communities see themselves positively represented within governance structures, including the draft Programme.

Further, the 'wellbeing framework', against which the success of this Programme for Government will be evaluated, contains a variety of indicators which often do not fully encompass LGBTQIA+ communities. Despite some (but not all) of these indicators being disaggregated by Section 75 characteristics, they all fail to measure trans and gender diverse communities, and within some - including homelessness, where we see a disproportionate representation of LGBTQIA+ communities - even sexual orientation data is not gathered. To truly measure the impact and effectiveness of this Programme for Government, LGBTQIA+ communities must be included at all stages: within the Programme, within the wellbeing framework, and within any data collection and interpretation that contributes to these.

The draft Programme for Government states that 'after consultation is complete and a final Programme for Government is put in place, the budget process will prioritise commitments made in the Programme for Government.' If budgetary decisions prioritise commitments in the draft Programme for Government as it is currently written, that would result in another three years of LGBTQIA+ communities being placed on the margins, particularly where the success of particular actions are measured by indicators which do not include data from LGBTQIA+ communities.

In 2020, the Executive parties signed up to the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) agreement, ending the collapse of the institutions. Commitments made within this agreement, affecting both LGBTQIA+ communities and other marginalised communities in Northern Ireland, have been neglected. This forms part of a long legacy of political agreements not being adhered to, a key example of which has been the failure to develop and incorporate a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland - a key piece of legislation which again does not feature in the Programme for Government.

The NDNA Agreement committed to the development of an LGBTQIA+ Strategy is part of the suite of four Social Inclusion Strategies. There is no direct mention of the LGBTQIA+ strategy in this Programme for Government. While the Programme does give a small reference to the Social Inclusion Strategies broadly⁴, the vague

⁴ The Executive Office (2024) [Draft Programme for Government: 'Our Plan: doing what matter most'](#), page 67

wording of this reference provides no assurance of delivery or a timeline for completion, reducing our agency as a sector to be able to plan ahead for the development of such a Strategy and our ability to ensure it meets the needs of LGBTQIA+ communities.

Moreover, the sector received written correspondence from the Minister for Communities on 11th October which stated that he decided to 'move forward' on the Anti-Poverty and Disability Strategies and the 'next steps' for the Gender Equality and Sexual Orientation Strategies will 'follow in the coming months'. The co-design groups sitting alongside these strategies, providing a key avenue for input from civic society, have been dissolved. This is in spite of the Department of Communities and our sector reiterating that the strategies will be most effective if developed together and in-collaboration. This decision reinforces that LGBTQIA+ people, particularly LGBTQIA+ women and gender minorities, are seen as low-down on the list of Executive priorities.

While we understand that this Programme is a framework, and is not necessarily a document for drawing out policy commitments, it is clear that the issues facing LGBTQIA+ people have been left out and forgotten, including pre-existing commitments such as the provision of evidence-based relationships and sexuality education and the LGBTQIA+ Strategy. Other key issues we are keen to see represented include but are not limited to:

- Delivering a comprehensive and inclusive **ban on conversion practices**, which the Department for Communities had been working on prior to the collapse of the Assembly;
- Ensuring **inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people in healthcare**, including supporting specific services such as fertility, gender affirming care, mental health and sexual health services which are relied upon disproportionately by LGBTQIA+ communities;
- Reforming and **improving inclusion within education**, including reviewing LGBTQIA+ representation within the curriculum, providing inclusive relationships and sexuality education, and tackling homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying;
- Taking concrete **STEPS to Zero** new HIV transmissions by 2030: increasing **Support** for those living with HIV, delivering more **Testing** services across the region, **Educating** the community to reduce stigma, and **Preventing** new transmissions by increasing awareness and accessibility of PrEP and PEP;
- **Tackling violence and discrimination** experienced by LGBTQIA+ communities through public awareness campaigns, improved hate crime and hate speech legislation, and addressing the root causes of anti-LGBTQIA+ violence;
- As mentioned above, delivering and adequately resourcing **all social inclusion strategies** in conjunction with each other, including the **LGBTQIA+ and Gender Equality Strategies**.

Programme for Government Pillars

Every pillar in the Programme for Government contains issues which affect LGBTQIA+ communities to a greater or lesser extent. We are keen to see LGBTQIA+ communities represented in actions to address these pillars, and wish to stress the importance of including marginalised communities in any and all policies to improve services and governance in Northern Ireland.

Growing a Globally Competitive and Sustainable Economy

While we support efforts to grow and build a more resilient economy, we remain concerned that this growth may come at the expense of both workers' rights and the environment.

The number of individuals who are in work and remain in poverty is increasing across the UK, including in Northern Ireland. We are concerned that, despite raising economic growth as the first pillar in the Programme for Government, tackling the cost-of-living and poverty is not similarly granted the status of a key pillar of the Executive's work programme, which raises concerns around the Government's commitment to raising people out of poverty and enabling them to live comfortably.

One of the key drivers of increasing productivity is inclusive and equal workplaces. Greater protection against discrimination, positive actions to promote LGBTQIA+ equality within the workplace, and increasing representation in positions of leadership are all key drivers to successful organisations.

More than a third of LGBTQIA+ workers in Britain have hidden their sexual orientation or gender identity in work for fear of discrimination; almost one in five LGBTQIA+ employees have been the subject of derogatory comments by colleagues within the past year; and around one in eight trans employees have been physically attacked by colleagues or customers within the past year due to their trans identity.⁵

It is also abundantly clear that the Executive and wider society must reconsider and re-evaluate how different kinds of work and different kinds of economic activity are valued. Many individuals who are deemed 'economically inactive' - including those who are not employed but carry out caring responsibilities, those who volunteer in the community, and some in non-traditional arts and creative careers - contribute immeasurably to the economy in ways which are not adequately recognised.

Many LGBTQIA+ people who are deemed 'economically inactive' may have had negative experiences in previous workplaces, facing violence or discrimination from colleagues or members of the public. Some may also be unable to work due to mental health issues which have gone unsupported due to lack of capacity in

⁵ Stonewall (2018) [LGBT in Britain - Work Report](#)

statutory services. For trans people in public facing industries, lack of access to gender affirming care can lead to situations where they cannot work due to experiences of gender dysphoria, misgendering and transphobia within their workplace.

The work of building a resilient and sustainable economy must start with ensuring that the needs of all communities are met. Addressing the underlying factors for economic inactivity, including lack of access to childcare (see below), poor mental health, workplace discrimination, and lack of access to gender affirming care, are key pillars in increasing productivity and growing the economy sustainably.

Deliver More Affordable Childcare

HERe NI and the Rainbow Project support the delivery of more affordable childcare. We welcomed the Department of Education's £25 million package of measures to support children, parents and providers with early learning and childcare in 2024/25. However, whilst this may provide relief to childcare bills, we have concerns that it will do little to resolve unaffordable childcare costs to lower income families. As most childcare providers are private, even with a 15% or 20% government subsidy scheme, if childcare providers put up their costs year-to-year this will do little to solve the problem of unaffordable childcare.

Northern Ireland has the highest rates of so-called 'economic inactivity' in the UK. As of December 2023, the headline rate in Northern Ireland was 26.8% relative to 20.8% in the UK.⁶ Women also experience higher levels of economic inactivity than men in this region. Women are more likely to fulfil childcare duties and be unpaid carers; in Northern Ireland, 1 in 3 women with unpaid caring roles have given up employment to care.⁷ Carers NI found that inadequacies in wider support services, including social services, healthcare, education and childcare, are stopping women with unpaid caring roles from staying in employment altogether or limiting the amount of work they can do.⁸ Therefore, in any development of a childcare strategy, steps need to be taken to provide significant support for women, including childcare subsidies that are sufficient to enable women to stay in employment.

Under-investment in this area is part of a broader picture of the under-valuing of childcare and childcare staff in this region. According to Gov.UK, the average rate of pay for experienced childcare staff is £23,000 for 37-40 hours a week,⁹ despite the UK average income being £34,963.¹⁰ Placing higher value on childcare careers through increased pay for workers should be a key priority for the Executive,

⁶ Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (March 2024) [Northern Ireland economic overview](#)

⁷ Carers UK (February 2024) [Women, unpaid caring and employment in Northern Ireland](#)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ UK Government [National Careers Service: Nursery Worker](#)

¹⁰ Statista (July 2024) [Median annual earnings for full-time employees in the United Kingdom in 2023, by region](#)

particularly recognising the economic benefit provided by childcare services and those working within them.

Within childcare services, LGBTQIA+ organisations would also like to see a more holistic approach to childcare that recognises diverse families. Research released earlier this month by charity Just Like Us revealed that the vast majority - 78 percent - of primary school children in the UK said that they had heard homophobic language.¹¹ Increasing visibility and representation of diverse families from a young age, including in nursery and into primary schools, would go a long way in promoting acceptance of and tackling the bullying and isolation that young LGBTQIA+ pupils experience throughout their school life.¹²

Organisations across the LGBTQIA+ sector are keen to work with childcare providers, statutory and private, to ensure that children from LGBTQIA+ families - whether they have parents, siblings or other family members who may be LGBTQIA+ - are properly represented within these settings, and can deliver training to this effect.

Cut Health Waiting Times

While the Programme for Government is scant on the detail of how health waiting times will be cut, we are encouraged by the commitment to addressing rampant and painful waits for basic care within our health service. LGBTQIA+ people, similarly to everyone in society, are waiting months, often years, for healthcare such as counselling or mental health intervention, and access to GP services are in a dire state. In addition to this, once individuals navigate the mammoth waits for services, they may be faced by a clinician or a service that is not competent in meeting the needs of LGBTQIA+ individuals. The job of health transformation, while naturally focused on waiting lists, must look more broadly at how marginalised communities are treated within the health service.

Trans communities in Northern Ireland are in a particularly challenging situation, and have been for the past 7-8 years.¹³ Our only adult service, the Knockbracken Clinic, stopped seeing new patients between 2018 to 2020, bringing the waiting list to a halt. At present, there is one member of staff working 0.6 FTE within the adults' service while the waiting list is stretching towards 1000, with some individuals waiting over 7 years for a first appointment.¹⁴

As a result of this crisis, the vast majority of individuals - young and old - who are accessing gender affirming care are doing so through private routes. Recent research by BelongTo in the Republic of Ireland, a region which has experienced a

¹¹ The Independent (October 2024) '[Homophobia rife in schools as three-quarters of primary age children report hearing derogatory comments](#)'

¹² Education Authority (2017) [Post-primary school experiences of 16-21 year old people who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgender](#)

¹³ Vice News (2021), [Transgender Healthcare is at Breaking Point in this Corner of Europe](#)

¹⁴ Belfast Live (2024) [Northern Ireland's only NHS gender identity clinic now has waiting list up to seven years](#)

similar if slightly delayed service collapse as that in Northern Ireland, demonstrated this over-reliance on private care, finding that among research participants who were seeking access to gender affirming care, 90% indicated that they have or would pursue alternative access to care, either through private services or sourcing their own access to medication.¹⁵

Particularly in the context of the Executive progressing a ban on certain elements of gender affirming care, namely puberty blockers, trans communities need to see that this Government is working for them, rather than targeting and restricting their care.

There are also broader health inequalities for the LGBTQIA+ population. For LGBTQIA+ women who want to start a family, they currently have to self-fund four rounds of intrauterine insemination (IUI), on average costing £3,000 per round, before they can be considered for further treatment on the NHS. Furthermore, access to in vitro fertilisation (IVF) treatment in this region is not on par with other parts of the UK, where women are entitled to three free rounds of IVF, in comparison to one round in Northern Ireland. Health inequalities for LGBTQIA+ people should be addressed within the Programme and within the Executive's broader plan for health transformation.

It is worth noting that, due to existing social inequalities, actual or perceived discrimination, and a general lack of support for LGBTQIA+ communities, LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to experience mental ill health and suicidal ideation than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts.¹⁶ Northern Ireland is a particularly difficult place to be LGBTQIA+ and young people here suffer disproportionately from mental health issues and suicidality, with around 80% of LGBTQIA+ youth aged 11 - 18 having contemplated suicide within the past 12 months - the highest rate across the UK.¹⁷

On the whole, everyone in Northern Ireland is being poorly served by our health service. We recognise that, and understand that a whole-service approach is required to address it. However, the Department and Executive must recognise that this poor care is compounded if you are LGBTQIA+ - both due to a historic and contemporary lack of prioritisation given to services for LGBTQIA+ communities, and from a lack of cultural competence amongst staff in generalist healthcare services. Recognising these issues and taking measures to address them for specific communities is key to improving care for marginalised communities, and particularly for reducing the overall cost to the health service of poor and untreated health needs.

¹⁵ Quilty, A & Belong To (2024) [Trans Healthcare in Ireland: Accessing Healthcare related to Gender Identity for Trans and Non-binary People](#)

¹⁶ Just Like Us (2021) [Growing Up LGBT+ - The impact of School, Home and Coronavirus on LGBT+ Young People](#)

¹⁷ Just Like Us (2021) [Northern Ireland's LGBT+ young people most likely to contemplate suicide, research finds](#)

Ending Violence Against Women & Girls

Ending Violence against Women and Girls is critical to ensuring the safety and livelihood of women in this region. Over a period of six weeks between September and August this year, four women were killed in Northern Ireland. We have an epidemic of gender-based violence in this region. Indeed, this should begin with the delivery and adequately resourced Violence Against Women and Girls Strategic Framework outlined in the Programme for Government.

The need for adequate resourcing cannot be under-stated; currently, there is £3 million ring-fenced funding to deliver the first ever VAWG strategy in this region. This is contrasted with the £55 million ring-fenced funding for service delivery to implement the third Violence against Women and Girls Strategy in the Republic of Ireland. Under-funding and under-resourcing of the Strategy will significantly impair the Community and Voluntary Sector's ability to be able to implement it effectively, and ultimately to see a reduction in violence.

It is important to clarify within the Programme for Government which groups will be supported by Executive funding. It is crucial that marginalised women, including LGBTQIA+ women are considered within any decisions to allocate funding for service provision. Department of Justice research shows that 1 in 4 Lesbian and Bi-Sexual Women have experienced domestic abuse in their lifetime, yet there is little research into the prevalence of gender-based violence for LGBTQIA+ communities.¹⁸ Increasing the visibility of women who are particularly exposed to gender-based violence within the Programme would help drive investment into those organisations who are supporting vulnerable people most in need.

We are also keen to see actions taken to tackle gender-based violence against trans and gender diverse communities, as well as improving the response of policing and justice to this violence. On the whole, rates of reported hate crimes against LGBTQIA+ communities have fallen in the most recent reporting cycle,¹⁹ which likely reflects a reduced confidence in reporting rather than a meaningful reduction in violence. However, looking specifically at transphobic hate crime, this figure has increased, demonstrating that despite this possible reduction in reporting that anti-trans violence continues to rise. It is vital that transgender women and girls are adequately included and reflected in any efforts to tackle violence against women and girls, and that anti-trans rhetoric and violence are meaningfully tackled through the existing VAWG Strategy and the delivery and resourcing of both the Gender Equality and LGBTQIA+ Social Inclusion Strategies.

Inclusive and comprehensive Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) has been recognised within the Gillen Review as a key tool to tackling gender-based violence.²⁰ However, this is not mentioned within the Programme for

¹⁸ Department of Justice (2024) [Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy](#)

¹⁹ Police Service of Northern Ireland (August 2024) [Hate Motivation Statistics](#)

²⁰ Department for Justice (2019) [Gillen Review](#)

Government. This Programme for Government could be strengthened by committing to the delivery of inclusive RSE, placing time-bound targets to improve transparency and accountability of the Executive around their plans to eradicate Violence against Women and Girls and adequately resourcing a strategy to have the best chance at tackling the epidemic in this region.

Better Support for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs

There is a desperate need for better support for young people with special educational needs. Our organisations advocate for a holistic approach to supporting special educational needs (SEN) pupils that is flexible to the needs of the individual, including those SEN pupils who identify as LGBTQIA+. We are clear that SEN schools should not avoid sensitive topics altogether but aim to approach conversations in a sensitive, age appropriate way that meets the needs of SEN young people, in particular through the teaching of RSE and in regards to sexual orientation, and gender identity more broadly. This is one key area within education which has reached a crisis point and requires direct, immediate action, and we're pleased to see that this specific community have been directly highlighted and actioned within the Programme for Government. We also know that there are many areas across education which require similar action, including LGBTQIA+ inclusion within the broader curriculum, and improving the delivery of relationships and sexuality education across the board.

Provide More Social, Affordable and Sustainable Housing

LGBTQIA+ communities experience higher rates of homelessness and housing precarity than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts²¹ - this is particularly prevalent within young LGBTQIA+ populations often due to homo-/bi-/trans-phobia from family, discrimination in the workplace, and/or poor mental health. According to recent research, two thirds of young LGBTQIA+ homeless individuals felt threatened by their family prior to becoming homeless, with around 50% of young people stating that they were afraid to be open about their identities for fear of being made homeless.²² On the whole, almost one in five (18%) of LGBTQIA+ people have been homeless at some point in their lives, with around one in four trans people experiencing this - much higher than the rate of homelessness within the wider population.²³

Homeless services are often inaccessible to trans and gender diverse individuals due to a fear of discrimination or, in many cases, actual instances of harassment, discrimination or exclusion from gendered services. Almost two thirds of individuals who have attempted to access homelessness support services have experienced harassment or intimidation in doing so.²⁴ This lack of support is

²¹ UK Government (September 2024) [Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people's experiences of homelessness](#)

²² AKT UK (2021) [The LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness Report](#)

²³ Stonewall (2018) [LGBT in Britain - Home and Communities Report](#)

²⁴ Ibid; AKT UK (2021) [The LGBTQ+ Youth Homelessness Report](#)

particularly the case for non-binary individuals who may feel trapped between gendered homelessness services which are tailored for men or women, leaving them without any access to support.

In this context, it is absolutely vital that LGBTQIA+ people, particularly young people, are able to access social housing when presenting as homeless; have options for accessing homelessness support agencies including shelters; and that there is an ample supply of affordable private rentals including in large population centres such as Belfast and Derry where many LGBTQIA+ people move to in order to be closer to support. Rapidly rising rents, combined with the issues many LGBTQIA+ people experience within the home, contribute to the precarity of housing security for many LGBTQIA+ people in Northern Ireland.

Higher-rates of homelessness, discrimination in private rented accommodation, and housing intimidation by paramilitaries are key areas of intervention to improve access to and sustainability of housing for LGBTQIA+ communities. As with most other pillars of this Programme for Government, we feel that clearly identifying the issues affecting specific communities and committing to tackling them is vital, while also recognising and supporting the overarching direction of travel.

Safer Communities

Creating safer communities is a high priority for the LGBTQIA+ sector. Our organisations are pleased to see its inclusion in the PfG but have some concerns that it does not mention the high prevalence of hate crime or marginalised groups that are particularly at risk of experiencing it. Over the summer the UK witnessed a wave of racist and Islamophobic attacks from the far-right, who incited hatred and intimidation against minoritised communities. Despite this, there is no mention of the Refugee Integration Strategy within the Programme for Government or an action plan for targeting hate crime across this region.

LGBTQIA+ people are nearly four times more likely than non-LGBTQIA+ people to be a victim of a violent crime.²⁵ Indeed, LGBTQIA+ refugee or asylum seekers are particularly at risk within communities, as they may experience both honour-based abuse and abuse within their new communities. According to the Law Centre NI/Rainbow Refugees report 'We Are Getting Hurt', 78% of respondents of LGBTQIA+ people who are seeking refuge in Northern Ireland had experienced some form of abuse or violence from other refugees and asylum seekers.²⁶ In addition to this, we know that there is little confidence in policing and justice within the LGBTQIA+ community. Official estimates indicate that 91 per cent of hate crimes against LGBT persons go unreported to the police.²⁷

²⁵ UCLA (October 2020) [LGBT people nearly four times more likely than non-LGBT people to be victims of violent crime](#)

²⁶ Law Centre NI & Rainbow Refugees (2024) [We Are Getting Hurt](#)

²⁷ Government Equalities Office, National LGBT Survey (Manchester, 2018), page 71.

We have also seen, over the past 20 years of data collection by the PSNI identifying hate motivation for violent crimes, a steady increase in hate crimes perpetrated against LGBTQIA+ communities, with the exception of the most recent reporting cycles.²⁸ Since records began in 2004, hate incidents targeting individuals based on sexual orientation every year have more than doubled, and transphobic hate incidents have more than tripled, with the majority of this increase taking place within the past 5 years.²⁹

It's clear that homophobic, biphobic and transphobic violence and hate are on the rise, and there has been little action from the justice system and from the wider Executive to tackle this violence. Indeed, the withdrawal of the Police Service from Belfast Pride in recent years has contributed to a feeling within LGBTQIA+ communities that they won't be supported if and when they do report hate crimes or incidents.

The Programme for Government therefore needs to include a pathway to building trust in policing and justice from this current low within the LGBTQIA+ community. Additionally, we must see the urgent delivery of both the Refugee Integration Strategy and the LGBTQIA+ Strategy to begin to tackle this problem of hatred and intimidation within our communities. It is also imperative that a clear action plan is included within the Programme for Government to tackle hate crime and intimidation, including through the reform of hate crime legislation and tackling anti-LGBTQIA+ bias which leads to hate crime. Without such, safer communities will not be possible.

Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment

Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment is crucial to ensuring healthy communities in Northern Ireland. Similarly to other marginalised communities, LGBTQIA+ people may have more exposure to climate change-related disasters, be more susceptible to the adverse impacts of these disasters, and have fewer resources to recover from climate harms.³⁰ This is because climate crises impact disproportionately on those who are more socially and economically vulnerable, with LGBTQIA+ communities being generally more susceptible to having lower socioeconomic status,³¹ at least in part due to many of the issues explored above within this response.

LGBTQIA+ communities often reside in more deprived areas of high-population-density cities, which are often the areas more vulnerable to natural disasters such as flooding. For example, in cities such as New York, historic

²⁸ Ibid; Police Service of Northern Ireland (August 2024) [Hate Motivation Statistics](#)

²⁹ Police Service of Northern Ireland (August 2024) [Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2022/23](#)

³⁰ Mann, McKay and Gonzales (February 2024) [Climate change-related disasters & the health of LGBTQ+ populations](#)

³¹ Hernandez, Halpern and Conron (October 2023) [Sexual orientation, gender expression and socioeconomic status in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health](#)

LGBTQIA+ enclaves (so-called ‘gaybourhoods’) are at higher risk of flooding from storm surges.³² In recent years, the impacts of climate change being felt in South Africa, and accompanying reactionary misinformation, contributed to a sharp increase in experiences of hate crime by LGBTQIA+ communities.³³

It is critical that the draft Programme for Government addresses the climate crisis, and particularly the crisis facing Lough Neagh, with the urgency it requires, and that the disproportionate impact of climate catastrophes on marginalised communities is adequately reflected in any actions taken.

Reform and Transformation of Public Services

We understand that, in order to deliver sustainability within our public services and reduce the cost of delivering basic services, some reform of service delivery is necessary and arguably long overdue. We are concerned that, in a similar way that ‘economic growth’ can be a synonym for deregulation, ‘reform’ can be a synonym for cuts to services and a reduction in the quality or scope of services being delivered. We are particularly conscious that, when cuts are considered, programmes such as equality and inclusion, as well as services which are specifically relied on by LGBTQIA+ communities, are first on the chopping block.

It is vital that, when considering reform of public services, we recognise that this reform is best delivered through increasing investment and tackling the root causes of poor outcomes. For instance, the failure to provide gender affirming care services at point of need is leading to downstream impacts on capacity within mental health services; failure to raise awareness and prevent transmission of HIV is creating additional costs in lifetime treatment for individuals who contract it; failure to tackle anti-LGBTQIA+ bias in education leads to increased violence against our communities, increasing demand on policing and justice.

It is also essential to work closely with community and voluntary sector partners in this reform agenda to ensure that the needs of underserved communities are represented and met through any reforms delivered. Community sector partners can be a key pillar of this work: the Rainbow Project and HereNI already carry out a significant amount of work in reducing health inequalities through our provision of counselling and sexual health services, social and peer support, violence prevention and support for victims.

We also have expertise in many areas where we don’t deliver services, yet are often faced with a reluctance to meaningfully engage with this expertise and take on board well-founded and evidenced proposals for reform which would deliver cost reduction in areas such as gender affirming care. Engaging with those already working in these areas or with relevant direct expertise is key to delivering the much needed change for our public services without bringing further harm to marginalised communities.

³² National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, [Coastal Flood Exposure Mapper](#)

³³ Greenpeace (2022) [How the climate crisis is perpetuating hate crimes in South Africa](#)

Conclusion

Overall, LGBTQIA+ people must be visible within the Programme for Government to advance equality in this region. While we welcome the publication of the Programme for Government, and are keen to see the Executive working together on a shared programme, we believe that this Programme for Government does not do justice to the diversity of our society, nor presents a cohesive vision for how we tackle the many pervasive problems facing our communities, our public services, and our living standards.

While it is difficult to disagree with any particular pillar of the Programme, each pillar is scant on detail, commitments, and concrete policies for achieving these broad goals. The exclusion of LGBTQIA+ communities, their needs and their experiences from this document is a real missed opportunity to show that this Executive is working for all communities, particularly in the context where the institutions have not delivered any meaningfully positive change to the lives and social equality of LGBTQIA+ communities in Northern Ireland.

We are keen to work with all Departments across the Executive to address the issues affecting LGBTQIA+ communities and create a society where LGBTQIA+ people are treated with fairness, equality and respect.