



LGBT+ SOUTH WEST VOICES

The Impact of the Covid-19
Pandemic on our Communities

Intercom Trust

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans+ people in the South West
Registered Charity 1171828

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WE ARE INTERCOM TRUST

Supporting LGBT+ Communities for over 20 Years

Intercom Trust was founded in 1997 to address gaps in social health and wellbeing services for LGBT+ people in the South West. The founders identified social isolation as a key problem for the most vulnerable. The needs of LGBT+ minorities were not heard and there were no effective community voices campaigning locally. The founders mandated that Intercom must never lose sight of the principle that we are, and must remain, community-led.

The need for Intercom remains as critical today as it was in 1997. Despite advances in attitudes and legislation, our communities still face inequality, prejudice, and discrimination. Our charity continues to evolve to meet the changing needs of the communities we serve; for example, we are working with more trans+ and young people than ever before.

We want to live in a South West where people respect diverse sexual orientations and gender identities and LGBT+ communities live with real equality. Yet we know from years of research and our own case work that our communities have much higher than average prevalence in the following areas:

- Increased smoking, drug & alcohol use/abuse
- Poor sexual health
- Hidden domestic violence
- Poor physical and mental health & wellbeing
- More isolated as older people
- Experiences of discrimination in healthcare
- Crime –reported less often
- Increased risk of suicide and self-harm
- Greater risk of homelessness



STRONGER TOGETHER

Covid-19 has certainly had an impact on us as an organisation and a staff team. We had to rapidly adapt to remote working and find new, innovative ways of engaging with our clients and callers. I would like to thank our dedicated team who have all responded well to the huge changes and adapting to life and work in lockdown.

We know first-hand the detrimental impact of the pandemic on many of those people we support. In partnership with Manchester LGBT foundation and Stonewall, this survey has been put out by all to gain a picture of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on LGBT+ communities across the country.

This report contains the key findings and anonymised case studies and quotes from our South West respondents. We know that the effects of this pandemic will be felt for years to come by our communities.

A big thank you to everyone who took the time to fill in the survey!



Andy Hunt
Chief Executive Officer

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Sexual Orientation

27% identified as gay

26% identified as bisexual

24% identified as lesbian

14% identified in another way, including queer and pansexual

4% identified as straight

1% identified as asexual

Gender Identity

49% were women

36% were men

10% were non-binary

4% identified in another way

29% were trans

24% were disabled

15% were aged 50+

3% were BAME

2% were intersex

KEY FINDINGS

63% listed inability to see friends and family as their top concern at this time.

52% listed decreased mental wellbeing as the second highest concern at this time. This rises to **63%** of trans people, **64%** of bisexual people, **66%** of intersex people, and **75%** of non-binary people.

17% of people were living alone at this time. This rises to **38%** of LGBT+ people aged 50+.

54% of people living alone were concerned by increased isolation.

9% do not feel safe where they are currently staying. This figure rises to **11%** of BAME LGBT+ people, **13%** of disabled LGBT+ people, **18%** of trans people, and **21%** of LGBT+ people who also said they were concerned about substance misuse.

29% of people were concerned the situation would lead to substance or alcohol misuse or trigger a relapse. **23%** of BAME people were concerned about substance misuse, and a further **27%** of non-binary people were concerned about substance misuse.



KEY FINDINGS

13% of people were unable to access healthcare for non-covid related issues. This rises to **20%** of trans people.

33% of people had medical appointments cancelled. This rises to **34%** of trans people, **36%** of people under the age of 18, and **44%** of people aged 50+. **30%** of BAME LGBT+ people had medical appointments cancelled.

17% of people were unable to access medication, or were concerned about being able to access medication. This rises to **30%** of disabled LGBT+ people, and **32%** of trans people.

58% of people would prefer to receive support from an LGBT+ specific organisation. **52%** of BAME people would prefer to receive support from an LGBT+ specific organisation. This rises to **62%** of disabled LGBT+ people, **77%** of non-binary people, and **78%** of trans people.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, **49%** of people would prefer to access services remotely.

*Total number of valid responses: **407***

The Reality for Survey Respondents

"I live with my parents, I'm 30 and disabled. One of my parents isn't 100% comfortable with anything LGBT, I came out at 14, she cried about wedding dresses and we haven't spoken about [being LGBT+] since. Continual close contact with them at the moment, where I don't feel comfortable talking to them about the way I feel and sort of supressing that side of me to keep things good between us, is tiring."

"My gender and sexuality are a point of conflict at home; due to my gender identity being ignored it makes me feel so invalid and worthless."

"My neighbours already harassed me for being trans before this outbreak. I've been especially afraid to be seen leaving the house to shop and exercise. I know they post photos of people outside on Facebook. I haven't been outside for weeks now. I feel pretty bad."

"In the closet and stuck at home with people making homophobic comments; unable to access my usual support system and feeling extremely isolated/lots of self hate."

"I am spending more time online due to wanting to keep in contact with friends and have been getting a lot of homophobic comments and even threats with one guy I actually know in person telling me how much he wants to "punch my face in" and using homophobic slurs... my stepdad is also homophobic and transphobic."

"My family is all heterosexual and they often look down when I'm "too proud" also I've had struggles keeping friendships due to my sexuality so it's pretty lonely. I also live in a small town and when I go on a daily walk certain houses feel extremely unsafe to walk past as I know their views on people such as me."

"I know this is another delay to my accessing GIC (it's been 2.5 years waiting already) which is hard. My dysphoria is bad, and I can't see queer friends to talk things out."

"Worry about how the Government will use the distraction of COVID to undermine rights of marginalised people"

"My mental health was suffering before the lockdown, but since that time it's got considerably worse, to the point where it's now significantly debilitating."

THE IMPACT OF THE VIRUS

1. Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic is causing unprecedented suffering and difficulty to the general population. From the strict months of lockdown, to loss, isolation, and increasing financial insecurity, the coronavirus crisis is having a profound impact on our mental health and emotional wellbeing. The World Health Organisation has warned of a global mental health crisis and stated that mental health is a 'priority to be addressed urgently',¹ with 43% of psychiatrists anticipating a 'tsunami' of referrals [to mental health services] on the horizon.²

It is likely that the mental health of LGBT+ communities will be particularly affected at this time. There is extensive research to show that LGBT+ people are more likely to experience poor mental health in general, due to homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, prejudice and discrimination, among a multitude of other factors.

52% of survey respondents stated that decreased mental wellbeing was one of their top three concerns at this time. This rises to **63%** of trans people, **64%** of bisexual people, **66%** of intersex people, and **75%** of non-binary people.

"I have already relapsed once and was the worst out of them all. It was a very harsh depressive cycle and was feeling suicidal. It didn't help that there was a bit of an alcoholic influence towards the mood swing" – survey respondent

"I feel that negative and self-critical thoughts seem more prevalent during the lockdown. Probably because I have more time to think. On the one hand, I have found that I have been able to re-evaluate important things in my life and recognise what I am grateful for. On the other, when I over analyse my contributions at work, I find I can slip into a loop of being over critical about myself" – survey respondent

"My mental health was suffering before the lockdown, but since that time it's got considerably worse, to the point where it's now significantly debilitating." – survey respondent

Self Harm

Although the survey did not ask specifically about self-harm, the question about mental health elicited several responses around self-harm. LGBT+ people are at considerable risk of self-harm, as Stonewall's LGBT+ Health Report 2018 clearly cites that 48% of LGBT+ people had deliberately harmed themselves.³ As stress and isolation impacts our community, survey respondents revealed they had been struggling with self-harm:

"I've been having breakdowns and huge anxiety and self-harm tendencies as a result of the lockdown" – survey respondent

"A self-harm relapse has been tough to avoid" – survey respondent



Many people across the South West will be unable to seek mental health support at this time. They may be unable to access confidential support due to their living situation, or because they feel unable to reach out.

Some may not feel that phone or video call support will be helpful, and therefore may be waiting until they can access face to face support. While some mental health services have moved online, many survey respondents have had treatment for poor mental health delayed or cancelled.

The anticipated increase in demand for mental health services will mean that many LGBT+ people are waiting months to receive the urgent care they need.

Intercom Case Study

T is awaiting input from a mental health team, this is on hold due to covid. The isolation has exacerbated a tendency to withdraw so they are not engaging in online spaces as much as they might have done. The strain on relationships, and phobia from their partner's family is hard to alleviate.



THE IMPACT OF THE VIRUS

2. Isolation

Isolation is not new to the rural and sparsely urbanised communities across the South West. Public Health England's 2017 Study on Health and Wellbeing in Rural Areas suggested that social exclusion is an already existing issue for South West populations, as "rural social networks are breaking down, with a consequent increase in social isolation and loneliness."⁴

This is compounded for LGBT+ people who live across the South West, who prior to lockdown were already facing difficulties locating adequate support for LGBT+ specific issues, finding affirming community in rural spaces and having reduced opportunities to feel seen in their gender and/or sexual orientation.

Social distancing measures have meant that the LGBT+ community is feeling more isolation than ever before, and this is true for a significant number of survey respondents.

63% were concerned about being unable to see friends and family.

17% of people were living alone at this time. This rises to 38% of LGBT+ people aged 50+.

54% of people living alone were concerned by increased isolation.

"The lockdown privileges people who live in traditional relationships...and disadvantages queer person who live alone and rely on close friendships or have one or more partners who don't necessarily live nearby. Most of the advice given online on how to survive lockdown totally ignores the experiences of queer people who have chosen not to live with a partner or with children, and this makes you feel even more isolated and overlooked." – survey respondent

"as a 73 year old gay man with no gay contacts locally and few friends it is a bit lonely. I have 4 fairly regular contacts apart from that Facebook and TV for company" – survey respondent

"Already feel isolated as it is a rural area, not being able to meet with like minded people is now even harder." – survey respondent

Chosen Families

While isolation will be affecting most people, LGBT+ people are specifically affected in different ways. LGBT+ people are more likely to have a 'chosen family', which describes people viewing their close friends and loved ones as their family, often because of family rejection. While most survey responders (**59%**) were still living with family, some described difficulties with isolation due to separation from those closest with them.

"As a queer person, I rely on close friendships and non-traditional forms of kinship. I don't live with anyone, but would usually see my friends regularly and spend time with people I love...this is so much easier for people who live in conventional relationships or family bonds." – survey respondent

"I think a lot of LGBT+ people create their own families, support and community that is more important than for straight/cis people... Many are now separated from this support, especially younger people who often have support at school/outside groups that may not be possible at home. Additionally, for older LGBT+ people, there are triggers in a worldwide pandemic that many will associate with the challenges of HIV/AIDS and how a virus can impact on the potential for human connection, love. Many have fought for years to overcome stigma and fears to love and be loved in spite of a virus affecting the community." – survey respondent

THE IMPACT OF THE VIRUS

3. Substance Misuse

Isolation, boredom, and stress are among some of the biggest triggers for relapsing. With schedules disrupted, mental health care curtailed and support networks shut down, coronavirus has put the recovery of substance users in jeopardy.

If people have not faced difficulties with drug and alcohol use in the past, the pandemic has brewed the 'perfect storm' for substances to be used in order to self-medicate increasing feelings of helplessness and anxiety.

In addition to these pressures, LGBT+ people are more likely to use illicit drugs and drink alcohol every day, so they may be particularly affected. Furthermore, substance misuse is often linked to poor mental health – something that LGBT+ people are more likely to experience.⁵

29% of people were concerned the situation would lead to substance or alcohol misuse or trigger a relapse. **27%** of non-binary people were concerned about substance misuse. **23%** of BAME people were concerned about substance misuse.

31% of people aged 18-30 were concerned about misuse.

17% of people living alone were concerned about misuse.

“Change in routine and not having control are big triggers for me and this has affected every aspect of my life...” – survey respondent

“Both parents already drink a lot of alcohol and I find myself leaning more and more towards that and anything else I can get my hands on in order to go numb to everything for a bit.” – survey respondent

“I am drinking more alcohol and spending more money on drink though less on other things” – survey respondent

“I am a recovering alcoholic and I have been craving more than usual” – survey respondent

“I haven’t abused substances or alcohol in the past but the lockdown is making me want to” – survey respondent

“Initially I was concerned so I limited myself access to alcohol. But have come to realise that it is much less of a temptation than I anticipated.” – survey respondent

THE IMPACT OF THE VIRUS

4. Safety

This time has been difficult for many members of the LGBT+ community who have been experiencing more discrimination, stigma and abuse across the South West. Survey respondents have described an increasingly hostile environment, whether in their own homes, in online spaces, or in the communities in which they living.

9% of people do not feel safe where they are currently staying. This figure rises to **11%** of BAME LGBT+ people, **13%** of disabled LGBT+ people, **18%** of trans people, and **21%** of LGBT+ people who also said they were concerned about substance misuse.



The key areas where people are feeling unsafe are detailed below.

SAFETY

LGBTphobic Family

Our figures revealed that a large proportion of LGBT+ people have been isolating with family members. **55%** of all survey respondents have been isolated with members of their family, and **65%** of survey respondents aged 18-30 were living with family during this time.

Vast numbers of these respondents have reported hostile living situations, facing homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in their home environment. Unfortunately this is unsurprising, as a study from akt found that 11% of parents surveyed said they would feel uncomfortable living at home with an LGBT+ child.⁶

"While I don't feel completely unsafe I don't feel completely safe either, my parents are unsupportive of my gender which makes me feel extremely low as they use my birthname, which makes me want to just give up and I can't do anything about it because I have to stay at home." – survey respondent

"being constantly misgendered and dead named by my family who i have already informed that i am transgender" – survey respondent

"I have never felt so worthless due to my pronouns and name being ignored in my life, but because I'm stuck at home I cannot avoid my family and have to endure this daily.

It makes me feel horrible and I can't wait for it to end" – survey respondent

Many survey respondents across the South West do not feel safe enough to be out at home. This is consistent with the national picture, as The National LGBT Survey 2018 states that younger people were more likely not to be open with any of the family they lived with (42% of cisgender 16-17 year olds and 28% of 18-24 year olds).

However, it is widely held that young LGBT+ people living in the South West, especially in remote and rural areas, are less likely to be accepted by family members than in urbanised areas due to a lack of awareness and education on LGBT+ identities.

Many young people are facing a kind of 'double isolation' where they are physically isolated from friends and other affirming spaces, and psychologically isolated within the home due to concealing their identities.

"In the closet and Stuck at home with people making homophobic comments; unable to access my usual support system and feeling extremely isolated/lots of self hate" –survey respondent

"Due to not being allowed to present as female as my parents don't want me "making any sudden changes" I am constantly feeling down and don't want to talk to them about it, so I have to hide it." – survey respondent

"I think theres a lot of kids my age at the moment who are at home with families who dont know about their sexuality or gender etc, and while I know that I dont have it particularly bad with my parents not strongly religious or homophobic, but I definitely feel the effects of not really being able to talk about it so openly anymore. It feels like I'm back in the closet and I'd forgotten how suffocating it is."
– survey respondent

62% of people living with family reported decreased mental wellbeing.



SAFETY

Domestic Abuse

Levels of domestic violence have skyrocketed since the implementation of lockdown measures in March. The UK's largest domestic abuse charity Refuge has reported a 700% increase in calls to its helpline in a single day, while a separate helpline for perpetrators of domestic abuse seeking help to change their behaviour received 25% more calls after the start of the Covid-19 lockdown. ⁷

While most information on domestic abuse relates to experiences of heterosexual women, domestic abuse in the lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender community is a serious issue. About 25% of LGBT+ people suffer through violent or threatening relationships with partners or ex-partners which is about the same rates as in as domestic abuse against heterosexual women.⁸

"My husband is too stressed to even reach out to me, he's angry about lots of things beyond his control and he's bringing it home. If I feel like a stranger in my life, it's now." – survey respondent

"Physically I know I am safe, so I want to answer yes. But covid-19 has put a stress on my relationship and so I don't feel emotionally safe." – survey respondent

"I feel better when he's at work and I don't need to think about what to say or do. I hate him being so tense." – survey respondent

"[I'm concerned about] The effect it's having on my partner, who's behaving badly towards me. Emotional abuse." – survey respondent

The lack of recognition of domestic abuse within LGBT+ communities has become more apparent during the pandemic, with only 1% of survey respondents saying they would like help accessing domestic abuse support. Furthermore, the absence of support services that are able to help LGBT+ victims is becoming evident, and currently, there is a lack of male refuges and refuges which will accept trans women.

The proposed national strategy to house victims of Domestic Abuse in hotels during the pandemic omits LGBT+ victims and focuses on cis straight women and their children. This has the result of not only increasing the risk to LGBT+ victims by denying them access to the provision, but also has a detrimental effect on how the victim sees themselves and also how the victim perceives the domestic abuse sector with the lack of acknowledgment and support around their abuse. It is likely that domestic abuse services will continue to see an increased demand as it can take time for victims to acknowledge that they need support and many victims may delay accessing support until they feel they are able to leave the house.

Intercom Trust Case Study

A is part of the LGBT+ community and called our helpline. A few weeks ago they left a domestic abusive household where their identity was not accepted. They had been managing to keep themselves safe since. They called us to talk things through and we gave them the space to discuss how they were feeling. Although they do not live in Devon or Cornwall we were still able to provide emotional support and signpost them to their local services.

SAFETY

Hate Crime

More of us have had to spend an unprecedented amount of time at home and within our local vicinity. During this time, LGBT+ people throughout the South West have been subjected to discrimination and hate crimes, both online and in their local communities.

While hate against the LGBT+ communities is widespread across the UK, LGBT+ people living in smaller villages and rural areas face particular difficulties with regards to local attitudes. In particular, these areas may place a heightened value on heteronormative relationships and ideals, as well as seeing a decreased tolerance for difference compared with metropolitan and urbanised areas.

“My neighbours already harassed me for being trans before this outbreak. I've been especially afraid to be seen leaving the house to shop and exercise. I know they [neighbours] post photos of people outside on Facebook. I haven't been outside for weeks now. I feel pretty bad.” – survey respondent

“I'm being isolated, along with homophobic neighbours. This compounds the issue with their continued hassle and intimidation, which they appear to enjoy even more.” – survey respondent

“[I] have been getting a lot of homophobic comments and even threats with one guy I actually know in person telling me how much he wants to “punch my face in” and using homophobic slurs.” – survey respondent

“Rise of vigilante attitudes in communities (ie about second home owners travelling to our region) is one step away from fistic vigilante attitudes to lgbt+ people” – survey respondent

Online Discrimination

Several survey respondents had also noted a rise in online hatred and discrimination aimed toward LGBT+ people at this time.

“Discrimination online makes me feel hopeless” – survey respondent

“Increased time online and in isolation means I see more hatred and bigotry” – survey respondent

LGBTphobic Backlash

Galop, the LGBT+ anti-violence charity, received a report of an incredibly concerning incident: The perpetrator aggressively stated words to the effect of ‘It’s your fault, you gays spread COVID19 just like you spread AIDS before’. The perpetrator approached him with his face almost touching the victim’s and said he was going to get his golf club and ‘beat the shit out of him.’⁹

Internationally there have been incidences of LGBT+ people being scapegoated for the spread of Covid-19, for example in South Korea new cases of Covid-19 have been linked to Seoul’s nightclub district, including some LGBT+ venues. This has led to a shocking homophobic backlash in newspapers and online. It is incredibly worrying that similar narratives may start to gain more traction in the UK. Additionally for many older LGBT+ people this may resurface traumatic memories of the HIV epidemic.

THE IMPACT OF THE VIRUS

5. Access to Healthcare

From inappropriate curiosity and invasive questioning, services not meeting their needs, to discrimination from healthcare professionals, the LGBT+ community often face a number of difficulties when accessing healthcare. The National LGBT+ Survey 2018 found that 18% of people had avoided treatment for fear of discrimination or intolerant reactions, and that 16% of LGB people and a further 40% of trans people had experienced at least one negative experience based on their identity when accessing healthcare.¹⁰

With confidence in healthcare already diminished, and at a time where our ability to access healthcare has changed dramatically, the LGBT+ community who already faced barriers prior to the crisis may be particularly impacted.

The survey revealed that LGBT+ people were facing difficulties in a number of areas, with access to mental health services drastically reduced, decreased access to sexual health services, and increased waiting times for already overstretched gender identity services in the South West.

17% of people said that they were unable to access medication or were worried that they might not be able to access medication, rising to **27%** of non-binary people, **30%** of disabled LGBT people, and **32%** of trans people.

14% of people over 50 were concerned about accessing medication.

33% of people had medical appointments cancelled. This rises to **34%** of trans people, **36%** of people under the age of 18, and **44%** of people aged 50+. **30%** of BAME LGBT+ people had medical appointments cancelled.

17% of people were unable to access medication, or were concerned about being able to access medication. This rises to **30%** of disabled LGBT+ people, and **32%** of trans people.

Managing Mental Health with Medication

A large number of survey respondents who were unable to access medication or were worried about accessing medication mentioned access to antidepressants or other medication to help manage poor mental health.

“My anti-depressant medication (sertraline) was facing a national shortage and it took a while to get. Visiting the pharmacy is stressful and makes me very anxious.”
– survey respondent

“I had to go without my antidepressants for 4 days as the amount of work the local pharmacy has means they took longer to get to my prescription.” – survey respondent

“I have ordered Citalopram (which has recently significantly increased in dose) but it will not arrive on time, meaning I will need to take a half dose for approximately one week and I fear a relapse and side effects, which will be most unpleasant. I have previously weened myself from a full dose to nearly half over a span of a over a year and sudden changes are very stressful and physically/mentally challenging.”
– survey respondent

Care Concerns

Survey respondents expressed concerns that healthcare providers would treat them differently compared with cisgender and straight patients if they were to be hospitalised.

“if I was to go to hospital there would be a bias as to how I’d be treated” – survey respondent

“Fearful of hospital admission if infected...if me and my spouse will be equally regarded in decisions about equipment allocation if there isn’t enough and possibility of homophobic decision maker” – survey respondent

Furthermore, it is important to note that based on risk factors for Covid-19 such as smoking and certain long term conditions, there are a number of reasons to suggest that LGBT+ people may be more likely to be severely affected if they catch Covid-19. LGBT+ people are more likely to smoke, and to experience long term health conditions (particularly with older LGBT+ people). Young people in the community are also at high risk of homelessness, and therefore more likely to be in poor health and unable to access healthcare.

As Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights states:

*"LGBTI people are among the most vulnerable and marginalised in many societies, and among those most at risk from COVID-19."*¹¹



ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Sexual Healthcare

During lockdown, Sexual Health services have remained open. However, LGBT Foundation's Sexual Health Programme found that there is limited knowledge that people can still access these services, meaning that many are not receiving treatment or services they urgently require.¹²

"if i want to go on the pill i don't know if i'll be able to get that" – survey respondent

"birth control has been more difficult to access" – survey respondent

"I'm in a sexless relationship, my libido has spiked and I can't trust my mental health with safe choices." – survey respondent

The British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) has found that sexual health clinics are working at a significantly reduced capacity – 20%. There are fears that sexual health clinics will be overwhelmed when normal business resumes.¹³

LGBT Foundation also found that the 'Stay at Home' messaging had been making people worried and confused about whether they were permitted to leave the house for the purpose of accessing PEP. This is permitted as PEP is an essential medication. Some survey respondents were unable to access medical treatment for HIV, and were unsure if they would be able to access both PrEP and PEP.¹⁴

"[I] can't access HIV meds" – survey respondent

"Will access to my PReP trial appointment be ok in June?" – survey respondent

"HIV check up cancelled" – survey respondent

ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Trans and Non-Binary Specific Healthcare

Before the pandemic, trans and non-binary specific healthcare provision in the South West was woefully inadequate. The legal NHS guidelines for waiting times for initial appointments is 18 weeks, and the current waiting time for the West of England Gender Identity Service (The Laurels) is a shocking average of 46 months minimum.¹⁵

These problems have worsened considerably during the coronavirus crisis, with services halting face-to-face appointments and in many cases freezing waiting lists. It is currently unknown if The Laurels are seeing new patients or recommending new prescriptions. Information on how to contact The Laurels is pending, and there has been no coronavirus update made available to the public.

It has also been reported that there is a lack of knowledge among GPs across the South West about what services are available and how to access them, as well as the serious consequences of not accessing these vital medical interventions. The waiting times and decreased access to Gender Identity Services is incredibly distressing.

32% of trans people were concerned about accessing trans and non-binary specific healthcare.

32% of survey respondents said they would like check in calls while waiting for treatment from gender identity services.

"I had made initial contact with my GP [with] regards [to] gender dysphoria and transition shortly prior to lock down and told I need to see them in person to get a referral to a GIC. There is now a telephone triage system in place to get a GP appointment and I don't feel comfortable going through that process to get an appointment" – survey respondent

"I was supposed to have my medic appt at the Laurels which was cancelled and I have been unable to speak to my named professional there. I also have been unable to meet my care co-ordinator since March" –survey respondent

"Uncertainty of waiting lists for adult gender services. Like not even an estimate. Like i don't know if I'll be wait 3 months for a transfer of care or 3 years.... An estimate of at least year's would be helpful" – survey respondent

"I'm a trans man on the waiting list for testosterone. I was told a couple months back that there were only 8 people in front of me on the list to start testosterone. I've been waiting for years to be this close and actually start my life but now with Covid I feel like I'm going to have to wait another year before I can start T [testosterone]" – survey respondent

"I've been waiting for years to be this close and actually start my life but now with Covid I feel like I'm going to have to wait another year before I can..."

Disruptions to Healthcare

The survey responses indicate that trans and non-binary people have been particularly impacted by disruptions to healthcare.

55% of trans people had said they were unable to access, or had concerns about accessing hormone therapy medications such as testosterone and oestrogen.

34% of trans people had had medical appointments cancelled. This rises to **35%** of non-binary people.

"I can get medication but have doubts if I would get more or be on the right doses to keep my levels at female ranges. I can't go for blood tests or injections due to restrictions on healthcare (i.e. not visiting the surgeries)." – survey respondent

"[worried about accessing] Feminising hormone therapy, have been on GIDS waiting list since Aug 2018 and it all seems to have gone on hold" – survey respondent

"I'm a trans woman taking estrogen, and I haven't been able to fulfil my prescription for a couple of months." – survey respondent

17% of all LGBT+ people were worried about being able to access medication compared to **55%** of trans people.

Intercom Case Study

B has been struggling to start physical intervention. They are trans and have been involved with the Gender Identity Clinic for a long period of time however they have been having issues with their GP. Just before lockdown, B signed up to a new GP surgery with the hope to get things started but the pandemic meant once again things were on hold. Their worker had weekly phone appointments with them so they were able to talk about how this affected them.

THE IMPACT OF THE VIRUS

6. The Need for LGBT+ Specific Support

As the South West emerges from lockdown, it is clear that the LGBT+ community will feel the effects of the pandemic for many months to come. It is absolutely vital that the community is able to access support and services that are appropriate to its specific needs so that we can mitigate the disproportionate impact of Covid-19.

For LGBT+ people that require healthcare or access to support services, the barriers are already stacked high. From undue questioning, to a lack of knowledge, negative assumptions and discrimination based around sexual orientation or trans status, it is difficult for members of the LGBT+ community to receive adequate care.

In addition to these struggles, lack of adequate transport links and clear, accessible information means that many LGBT+ people throughout the South West will not be able to find help for issues that have emerged or been exacerbated by the pandemic.

58% of people would rather access support from an LGBT+ specific organisation. **52%** of BAME people would prefer to receive support from an LGBT+ specific organisation. This rises to **62%** of disabled LGBT+ people, **77%** of non-binary people, and **78%** of trans people.

For LGBT+ people that require healthcare or access to support services, the barriers are already stacked high.

“if you need it [support] I don't think the provider needs to be LBGT+ specific, just needs to be inclusive (as one of their core values/ principles)” – survey respondent

“It depends - I'd rather seek advice about challenges as a person affected by cancer from LBGT+ organisation, but don't think they have the knowledge or skills so would go mainstream.” – survey respondent

“Since a lot of my issues revolve around my trans identity I'd rather speak to a lgbtq organisation as mainstream services are quite ignorant” – survey respondent

“It depends on the issue - my most pressing is around general mental health, health anxiety and historical OCD being triggered at this time. However, if I had concerns over my wellbeing relating to my sexual orientation, I wouldn't hesitate in accessing LBGT+ specific support” – survey respondent

The Need for Information

A number of survey respondents told us that they require specific information and support for experiences around their identity – many were unsure of where to go or how to access help.

“Ive recently realised I am genderqueer and not being able to talk/find a councillor has made the process of coming to terms harder” – survey respondent

“I cannot have normal conversations about how I'm questioning again and openly talk to people as there'll somehow be a way for my parents to know and they're homophobic – internal isolation/psychological isolation compounded by living situation” – survey respondent

When asked about support they would like to receive, **68%** of survey respondents would like to access online information.

Cancellation of Pride

Several survey respondents have felt impacted by the cancellation of Pride events. Pride events across the South West are extremely important to the LGBT+ community. They provide opportunities to reduce isolation, to connect with others, and to raise visibility in areas where people do not always feel safe to reveal their identity.

“[it is] More difficult to connect with community due to cancellation of many events” – survey respondent

“It is hard with all prides cancelled not being able to connect with new people” – survey respondent

“It’s silly but no pride this year has affected me more than I thought it would.” – survey respondent

“The cancellation of pride events is very disheartening.” – survey respondent

LGBT+ Specific Spaces

A number of free text responses also revealed that people are struggling as they are unable to access LGBT+ community spaces. Many survey respondents would like to access these spaces in person, but also added that remotely facilitated and online spaces would be helpful due to issues with transport.

“Remote is useful for LGBT services in our spread out rural community.” – survey respondent

“I experienced mobility issues which limits travel, and I am unemployed disabled meaning that I am poor. Most counselling services are in person, which is an issue because I a) can't guarantee I'll be able to travel, and b) can hardly afford counselling even before adding transport costs” – survey respondent

“I mean both options [online and in person] would be great and online options are good as it can be difficult to attend specific places and likely online would be better for anxious people in the closet” – survey respondent

53% of people would like to access online support groups. This rises to **54%** of single people, **62%** of trans people, and **63%** of people under 18.

34% of people would like a befriending service. **49%** of people over 50 would like phone and video chat support.

“a lot of my friends are straight and have children and they tend to mix with the same type of people so you can feel left out of teams or zoom gatherings” – survey respondent

“Being in the closet as a trans person, it has been very difficult to stay in touch with trans friends.” – survey respondent

“I'm trying to identify if I'm trans or not, and speaking/meeting people would be incredibly useful at this time” – survey respondent

“As a queer person, I rely on close friendships and non-traditional forms of kinship. I don't live with anyone, but would usually see my friends regularly and spend time with people I love. I think this is so much easier for people who live in conventional relationships or family bonds.” – survey respondent

Intercom Case Study

Intercom Trust has been able to facilitate its LGBT+ youth group YAY remotely. Prior to the pandemic these sessions were held in person. Being able to provide an affirmative and safe space for isolated and vulnerable LGBT+ young people during the crisis has proved beneficial.

A number of our young people from YAY, both age groups: school year 7,8,9,10 and school year 11+ have been struggling since lockdown. Either because of the isolation of missing friends and youth workers at YAY – which for them is a really safe space where they can be themselves, or because home life is hostile. Zoom groups go some way to helping those young people, as they are regular, safe and provide a space to talk and let off steam. All of which helps with their mental health and their sense of self-belief.

PROPOSED CHANGES TO THE GENDER RECOGNITION ACT

During lockdown, it was announced by Equalities Minister Liz Truss that the government's response to a consultation on reform of transgender rights legislation would be delivered by the summer. The proposed changes included 'new protections to safeguard female-only spaces' and 'abandoning' a self-determined procedure around GRA reform, which would allow trans, and for the first time, non-binary people legal recognition of their gender.

Further leaked documents suggested that the government would also tighten guidelines around gender neutral bathrooms and "quack" doctors approving applications for gender recognition certificates.

The proposed actions are of enormous concern to the LGBT+ community. For many years trans people have been accessing single-sex spaces that match their gender without issue. In addition, the ability to self-identify would make it easier for people to have their gender recognised. The current process for changing the legal gender on someone's birth certificate has been decried as 'expensive, intrusive and dehumanising' by Rob Cookson, Deputy Chief Executive of LGBT Foundation.¹⁶

Reform to the GRA has been long awaited by trans communities across the UK. The government's suggested actions portend an alarming rollback of trans rights. The announcements have stimulated a toxic conversation around trans identities, as well as perpetuating harmful stereotypes, which risks inciting hate crimes against trans people who deserve to enjoy their rights, free from discrimination. Many survey respondents were deeply concerned by the proposed government plans.

“the potential plans will see the government amend laws to make it more complicated for trans people to transition and access facilities such as toilets and changing rooms.” – survey respondent

“It feels like the Government is seizing the opportunity to roll back trans rights and introduce restrictions whilst we are all holed up stuck on infinite waiting lists dismissed as ‘not important right now’ and ‘non essential’” – survey respondent

“The government taking this opportunity to signal an attack on trans equality and gender recognition. Conservative MP's coming right out in support of anti-transgender organisations.” – survey respondent

“[concerned by] Government proposals to roll back rights for transgender people and lack of support and services from GICs and the NHS.” – survey respondent

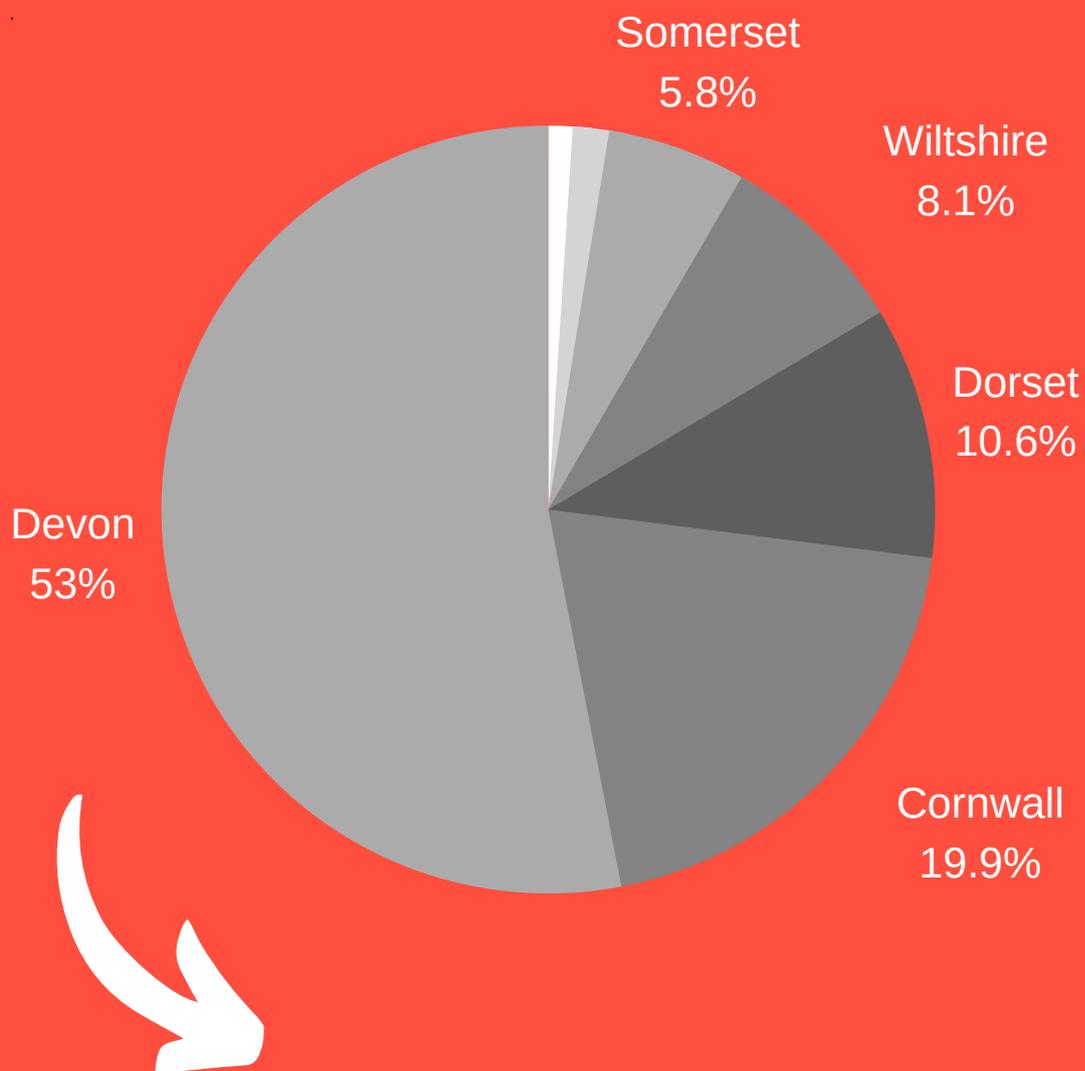
“[I] Worry about how the Government will use the distraction of COVID to undermine rights of marginalised people” – survey respondent

Intercom Case Study

A was turned away from a training programme run by a women's refuge after she informed them that she was trans (this was not a residential programme). This made A feel that she and other members of the refuge were still under the control of men who had abused them. She was informed that their policy excluded trans women until they were 2+ years post-surgery. During lockdown A has continued to work with Intercom meeting on Zoom every two weeks, one of the main focusing has been building confidence and challenging discrimination. As a result of direct and regular support she has now joined a local, virtual group which has sparked her interest in politics and activism. A is terrified about the implications of a reduction of trans rights in possible changes to the GRA. Being able to live entirely as a woman is vital to her mental health and overall wellbeing. A now has the confidence to return to the political party she was once involved with and is part of a working group looking at a trans inclusionary policy which will work around consensus not division...Had we not been able to continue working with A during lockdown her self-confidence would have spiralled downwards and she would be consumed by fear around changes to the GRA rather than having the strength to be part of making positive change.

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Respondents by County



Devon = **210** Survey Responders
Cornwall = **79** Survey Responders
Dorset = **42** Survey Responders
Wiltshire = **32** Survey Responders
Somerset = **23** Survey Responders
Bristol = **6** Survey Responders
Out of area = **4** Survey Responders
Undisclosed = **8** Survey Responders

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Closing Statement

Intercom Trust has been working hard during this time to ensure our community remains supported and our services continue to be accessible.

Whatever you're going through, Intercom is here to support LGBT+ people across the South West.

Access our free confidential helpline by calling **0800 612 3010**, or email **helpline@intercomtrust.org.uk**. If no one is available to take your call, please leave a message and we will get back to you shortly.

If you would like to access a large print copy, please contact:
office@intercomtrust.org.uk



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Registered Charity **no. 1171878**

Report published **July 2020**

Editor **Ellie Howell**