

Diversity Powering Success:
The Building Sustainable
Change Programme

An action programme to deliver equality and inclusion for lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

OVERVIEW APRIL 2006



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1 INTRODUCTION

The present is a different country

It used to be true to say that the future was a different country. But in Ireland in 2006, so is the present. Ireland is now ranked, in one recent UN report, as the second richest country in the world. The Deutsche Bank predicts that from this year until 2020, Ireland will be one of the three fastest-growing economies out of the 34 developed economies it surveyed. We're attracting 4% of the brightest and best mobile labour from EU accession states – a full 3% more than the rest of the EU.

Ireland's lesbian, gay and bisexual community (LGB) has both contributed to, and benefited from, this extraordinary success. In fact, there is growing evidence that cities and societies that embrace and resource diversity, minorities and difference are also more successful economically than those that don't. And they are also more comfortable, exciting and safer places to live.

The future is a different challenge

It's clear that if the present is indeed a different country, the future could easily become an unrecognisable and unsustainable place. It will need new, robust and enlightened economic and social policies to protect long-term prosperity. Ireland has made groundbreaking progress in terms of equality and tolerance. But serious problems remain. Diversity is both embraced and shunned. Exclusion and poverty are still embedded in some areas and social classes. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people do not have full equality. Ireland's future economic health and social cohesion depends on how Government, and Irish society in general, plans for diversity and how we nurture and attract human talent and creativity. High ambitions, as noted by the National Economic and Social Council lead to quality outcomes. Ireland has demonstrated its capacity to nurture success and accommodate change and there is no reason why we cannot do so in the future.

The need to integrate diversity.

In framing policies and resourcing new initiatives, it must be emphasised that people – especially people of diverse backgrounds - are not just economic units but human beings who need to feel welcome, protected, supported and celebrated. Economic and social progress, as noted by An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern T.D., are inherently interlinked and associated policies should complement and reinforce each other. Ireland now has the ambition and the capacity to move to the next level in facilitating and legislating for this kind of positive integration on a national level.

Building Sustainable Change

Prospects for social and economic progress for lesbian, gay and bisexual people can be equally ambitious. GLEN have developed a 5-year strategic programme called 'Building Sustainable Change' which reflects this ambition, setting out feasible actions based on high expectations of what can be achieved. Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Irish Government, Building Sustainable Change describes a strategic programme of coherent actions which will deliver greater equality and participation for lesbian, gay and bisexual people so that they can continue to benefit and contribute to a future which we hope will be a different, but even more equal, empathetic and exciting country.

2 A PROFILE OF GLEN

A leadership organisation driving positive change

The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (GLEN) is a non-governmental organisation that has been in existence since 1988. GLEN works to ensure that Ireland can become a place where all lesbian, gay and bisexual people can feel safe, confident and open about their sexual orientation at home, in work and within the wider community: where relationships and love between LGB people are seen as no different to relationships and love between heterosexual people.

GLEN has been a highly effective campaigning organisation and has played a key role in winning some landmark successes for the gay, lesbian and bisexual community most notably in the area of equality and decriminalisation. However problems and barriers still exist for LGB people and GLEN plays a leadership role finding solutions to these.

GLEN is a “change-delivery” organisation that seeks to challenge all forms of discrimination and eradicate experiences of exclusion, deprivation and poverty.

A short sample of progress made

- Decriminalisation of homosexuality on the basis of equality.
- Enactment of broad ranging equality legislation such as the Employment Equality Act and the Equal Status Acts. which include sexual orientation as a protected ground.
- Bringing about changes to the Unfair Dismissals Act, the Domestic Violence Act, the Powers of Attorney Act and the Refugee Act.
- Successfully lobbying the Irish Presidency of the EU to include sexual orientation in Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty.
- Working with the Equality Authority to set up an advisory group which led to the Equality report ‘Implementing Equality for Lesbians, Gays and Bisexuals’.
- Participating on the project team established by the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) to look at the implementation of the recommendations of the Equality Authority report.
- Producing a range of research documents and position papers. For example the report ‘Poverty, Lesbians and Gay Men, the Economic and Social Effects of Discrimination’ published by the Combat Poverty Agency.
- The establishment of Gay HIV Strategies (GHS) in 1997, funded by the Department of Health and Children, to develop strategic responses to HIV for gay and bisexual men.
- Progress on education with research carried out and a report published with funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies.
- Development of a strategy to promote mental health and well-being among the lesbian and gay population, funded by the Health Services Executive.
- Initiation of partnership with An Garda Síochána which has resulted in significant steps taken by the Gardaí to address anti-gay violence and harassment and to make the policing service more accessible to lesbian, gay and bisexual people.
- Successfully lobbied for the extension of workplace ‘Force Majeure’ leave for urgent family reasons to include lesbian and gay partners.
- Establishment and funding of a liaison role with the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform on the implementation of the recommendations of the National Economic and Social Forum report (Report No. 27) on equality for LGB people.

3 THE PROGRAMME SUMMARY

Context

The economy is not the only indicator of major change in Ireland. The enactment of equality legislation propelled Ireland to the forefront internationally in legal protections combating discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. There is considerable national goodwill for delivering on the principle of equality for the lesbian, gay and bisexual population. Increasing numbers of Irish people are beginning to see lesbian and gay people as part of the mainstream. Polls show there is a growing consensus across the population that LGB partnerships should be recognised. But progress is slower than it should be.

We believe that progress for the LGB population benefits wider society by promoting equality and human rights and by building a more self-confident and dynamic country. A diverse, cohesive Ireland is a prosperous, friendly and exciting Ireland. However a great deal remains to be done – if full and proper equality is to be achieved – to create circumstances where all lesbian, gay and bisexual people can be open and feel safe at home, at work and within the wider community.

The Action Programme

The strategies and actions in the programme are therefore about delivering greater equality and participation for LGB people in Irish society. The goal of the programme is not about managing our marginalisation, but abolishing it, and therefore making GLEN redundant in the shortest possible time.

The Building Sustainable Change programme is ambitious for Ireland and ambitious for our communities. It aims towards a society where being gay is unremarkable; where people can aspire to be openly gay as Taoiseach, CEO, teacher, nurse, construction worker or any occupation they choose. It works towards a society where a young gay or lesbian person can come to terms with their sexuality, confident of support from their family, friends, school and society at large. It seeks to ensure that LGB people can form their own relationships and families and have these recognised on an equal basis with others.

The key strands of the Programme are concerned with:

- reforming legislation and policy,
- making public services more responsive to the particular needs of lesbian and gay people, especially in education,
- promoting equality in the workplace and
- strengthening the capacity of LGB organisations.

Reforming legislation and improving policy

Lesbian and gay people are not entitled to marry in Ireland, nor is there any alternative forms of legal recognition such as civil partnership. This disadvantages gay people across a whole range of areas such as: rights and responsibilities of families, including children; immigration; next of kin issues; taxation; pensions and inheritance. Exclusion from civil marriage also sends out a powerful signal of fundamental inequality.

GLEN are seeking legislative change on the firm basis of equality. This includes equal access to civil marriage, equality in legal recognition of de facto relationships (as recommended by the Law Reform Commission) and equality in other proposed models of legal recognition such as civil partnership. The Programme will also seek to identify and act on opportunities to address issues

of immediate concern to LGB people, couples and their families. Key issues in this respect include immigration, where opportunities exist to address the difficulties experienced by lesbian and gay couples, such as the threat of separation where one partner is from outside the EU.

Examples of actions proposed include:

- Participate on the Working Group on Domestic Partnership established by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform, to examine models of legal recognition of same sex partnership.
- Liaison with the Dept. of Justice, Equality and Law Reform on the implementation of the recommendations in NESF Report No. 27.
- Develop and implement strategies to achieve equality in civil marriage
- Develop and implement strategies to change the immigration and residency procedures and laws to protect LGB relationships.
- Monitor changes in other legislative and policy areas to ensure that LGB people and issues are appropriately included, on the basis of equality.
- Work with Equality Authority, Human Rights Commission and other bodies to achieve further progress towards full equality for LGB people
- Work with Human Rights Commissions North and South, the Equality Authority and the Equality Commission of Northern Ireland, and lesbian and gay organisations in Northern Ireland to implement the equivalence provisions of the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement in relation to human rights for LGB people.
- Work in partnership with ILGA Europe on European laws and directives that impact on LGB people.

Making Services Responsive to the Particular Needs of LGB People

GLEN will work towards making services more responsive to the particular needs of lesbian and gay people.

In the area of education for example, a safe learning environment, based on respect for all students and teachers, results in quality education outcomes. However, it is now widely accepted that anti-gay bullying and harassment is pervasive, which can severely limit opportunities for many LGB people to participate effectively in school and achieve quality and positive educational outcomes. Poor support structures and unclear policies serve to perpetuate such experiences. There is now a very real opportunity to change how schools and other educational institutions address sexual orientation in an informed, empathetic and equitable way.

GLEN will also work with providers across a whole range of service areas to ensure appropriate and responsive services for LGB people. These include: health and well being, employment support and training, social welfare, safety and culture and the arts. The particular needs and circumstances of disadvantaged lesbian and gay people also need to be more clearly and better understood by relevant services and agencies addressing social exclusion so that they can devise more responsive and effective programmes.

Examples of actions proposed include:

- Liaise with Department of Education and Science intra-departmental working group on sexual orientation and the education partners to ensure that bullying on the grounds of perceived or actual sexual orientation is appropriately addressed.
- Liaise with School Planning and Whole School Evaluation services to support schools in making schools safe and inclusive learning environments for their LGB pupils and for all pupils.
- Work with SPHE, RSE and CSPE providers to develop appropriate materials and supports on anti-discrimination and equality measures.
- Support youth service organisations to help them ensure environments are safe and relevant to young lesbian, gay and bisexual people

- Development of national baseline data on the circumstances and needs of the lesbian, gay and bisexual population of Ireland to inform policy makers and service providers.
- Work with the NESF, the office for Social Inclusion and the agencies of the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs to ensure that the needs of disadvantaged lesbian, gay and bisexual people are addressed in relevant services and programmes.
- Build on work to date with the Gardai to ensure appropriate and accessible policing for LGB people and communities

Promoting Equality in the Workplace

There has been very significant progress in Ireland in equality legislation for lesbian and gay men in the workplace, in particular the Employment Equality Act in 1998. This has been strengthened by the transposition of the EU Employment Directive into Irish equality legislation, which allows for positive action to promote employment equality. There is a need however, to embed the culture of equality in the workplace through the development of practical policies and procedures to promote and nurture diversity.

Examples of actions proposed include

- Develop a Workplace Equality Initiative which will award and accredit companies and other organisations that have adopted such approaches.
- Work with the Equality Authority to explore the barriers to take-up of Employment Equality Legislation protections by LGB people
- Continue to work with Social Partners, including the Congress of Trade Unions and IBEC to embed equality in the workplace

Strengthening lesbian, gay and bisexual organisations.

Community and voluntary organisations, as noted by the National Economic and Social Council, are critically important for social and economic development. This is especially true for the lesbian and gay communities where LGB groups have provided support and services for LGB people, often with little sustained state funding and limited support from or connections to mainstream programmes to address social exclusion. Consequently, the capacity of lesbian, gay and bisexual communities and/ organisations to engage with social reform and human rights issues is underdeveloped.

GLEN seeks to address the lack of resources, financial and human, which the LGB community sector is experiencing. Ensuring continued progress in equality will depend greatly on two key factors. The first is the capacity of organisations to sustain themselves and their vital services to into the future. Related to this is the capacity of the sector to work together and be strong advocates and quality service-providers for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The second critical factor is the ability of the sector to engage with the state and other private and public bodies. This is governed by the strength and capacity of LGB organisations individually and collectively. This has a direct correlation with how social policy and service planners and mainstream organisations interface with and accommodate their LGB communities. The stronger the capacity, the greater the outcomes for everyone.

Examples of actions proposed include

- Establish the extent of services currently provided by and to LGB communities and identify key gaps and opportunities
- Build the capacity of LGB organisations to engage with local, regional and national community development programmes, including programmes which proactively develop and support the establishment of new organisations

- Investigate the training needs of LGB organisations, including organisational development, communications and policy related training, and mechanisms to provide that training on a sustainable and ongoing basis
- Liaise with LGB organisations and statutory and other service providers to ensure effective linkages to service providers, the appropriate and accessible delivery of services, the mainstreaming of LGB people and issues, and ongoing support, including funding, of LGB organisations and services.