Lesbian Community in Southampton: Summary of Findings

Over the course of 5 months we've spoken to lesbian people aged between 22 and 58, at 3 discussion events. We've also spoken with business owners and social group organisers in the city. Drawing on the huge amount of data we collected from more than 20 participants, we have prepared the following summary of findings.

This summary includes recommendations and suggestions for venues and community organisers who are looking for ways to promote community, make their spaces and events welcoming, and support lesbian peoples' safety and wellbeing.

Community

> "if you can just meet one person that you get on with or feel comfortable with it will change your life...I feel like you need someone to hang out with or to talk with, you know to feel like you're part of something...part of a community"

Everyone we spoke to was either looking for, or working on building or facilitating community. However, community quite a slippery concept: people weren't sure exactly where to find it or how to know when they were part of one.

Lots of people talked about how 'lesbian' was a label they used to find groups of people who might share similar values, interests, or to find events and activities to join. Most people did this by searching online on *Facebook* or *MeetUp* for lesbian groups or events.

People also routinely used *Google Maps* to navigate around the city and used locations tagged by Google's community of "local guides" to find lesbian-friendly venues.

Place

Southampton was a significant place for participants to be – either because they lived here or they visited the city as a hub for diverse social life. Despite this, not all participants felt their needs for community, safety, and inclusion were being met by the current options in the city.

For some people, Southampton was a metropolitan hub which offered opportunities to meet more lesbian people compared to their hometowns and villages. People suggested the urban environment sometimes offered a protective kind of anonymity by allowing them to be 'out' without everyone knowing their business.

For others, moving to the UK from abroad allowed greater safety from homophobia and explicit legal protection from hate crime and discrimination. Southampton was described as more like a "village" than a city. Certain venues acted as hubs for community-building: their static location and the consistency of people working there were central to achieving this.

Inclusion and Recognition

Being recognised – as a regular customer or attendee – was part of how people sensed 'belonging' and felt part of a community. A common concern for people was of being turned away or not welcomed if they didn't 'fit':

> "I get asked quite a lot of questions before someone starts to join, so they'll *Facebook* message me and say 'I'm this and that and whatever that is I identify with, can I join the group?"

Organisers of events worked hard to reassure people they were welcoming and that they could join without any special knowledge. To ensure accessibility, organisers and owners considered and shared information about level access, accessible toilets, and made explicit statements of who venues and events were open to.

Speaking about seeing events advertised as 'for lesbians', one participant said they often find they are no clearer if they are welcome, asking "what does that word ['lesbian'] mean to the person who is using it?"

Transphobia and trans-exclusion

Participants shared implicit experiences of transphobia – including use of language, feelings of discomfort, people making assumptions about gender – and they were conscious there may not be specific policies and protections in place if transphobia becomes explicit or violent. There were a lot of different views on how a venue or event can make clear it is inclusive to trans women and non-binary lesbians, but generally it was agreed that a clear statement of who is welcome was most straightforward, rather than use of flags or other symbols.

Action:

- Do you have an online presence? Does it give potential members or customers a way to identify what you do and whether they are welcome? Is your venue or event easily located via *Google Maps*?
- Do you have different types of events or links with different groups to network different kinds of activities?
- Do you have a policy on how to ensure you are a safe space? Are your staff or organisers being briefed on their responsibilities for protecting the space in this way?
- Are your events and spaces welcoming of trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming lesbian people: have you made this clear? Do you use non-gendered language when appropriate?

Activities and Spaces in Southampton

A diversity of activities and locations helped people meet their social needs. One off events in novel locations were less appealing than regular events organised by a named group. Being able to socialise with people with whom participants shared some kind of connection or identity was central in fostering feelings of belonging.

Online

Online platforms were vital for organisers and owners to advertise and grow their network but also to stay in touch with lesbian people. During the pandemic, online networking and events offered a lifeline of social contact. People repeatedly noted the risk of social isolation

and loneliness and spoke about the ways in which online events and tools mitigated this:

> 'whatever we do, we have to keep talking online because we don't want people to feel like it's come to nothing, that it doesn't exist, that there's no one there, so the online events worked very well'

During the pandemic, local businesses found that their online outreach engaged people locally and abroad. One barrier to offering online engagement was the cost of technology needed, such as cameras to film events and the time spent familiarising staff with the technology and functions of online platforms.

Face-to-face

While online events and social media were valuable, they were no substitute for face-to-face socialising. Seeing other lesbians and experiencing shared recognition, culture and identity were important for feeling part of a community distinct from heterosexual society.

Face-to-face activities and lesbian-friendly venues also contributed to this sense of belonging which was tied to place and made community feel more tangible. Recognising and being recognised, making connections with people which can be renewed at subsequent events, and having space for unstructured conversation and quiet or silent co-presence (such as on walks, games nights, or at sports events) were vital for meeting people's need for belonging, community, and social contact. These were simply not possible in online spaces or events.

Post-covid and social momentum

For many, covid lockdowns had caused their social life to stagnate or lose momentum. Most organisers and owners explained that their customer numbers declined and are still not back at pre-pandemic levels:

> "I feel like [we're] almost having to try twice as hard to encourage people to come out, where it was hard at the beginning trying to say 'why don't you come out on your own to meet a bunch of strangers you've never met before?' it's now like, 'we'll do that but with added anxiety attached'"

Building a social life and crafting a sense of community is incremental, active, and longitudinal.

Losing more than a year has damaged both confidence and routine. Further: some participants didn't identify as lesbian until the pandemic so were moving into a post pandemic world as a lesbian for the first time. For these people there was a reshaping of not just social momentum, but place and orientation.

Action:

- Are your lesbian-friendly events held regularly?
- Do you still offer varied face-to-face events?
- Do you supplement any online events with in-person events or opportunities?

Safety

'Welcoming', 'open' and 'friendly' were frequently named as how spaces and places come to feel safe. People actively looked for places they could relax and enjoy time with others in all kinds of environments around the city.

> "what I continue to look for is that somewhere where you go where you know you will always feel safe, where you feel like you belong"

Accountability

Most significant for feeling safe was accountability and the importance of having named or identifiable people who are approachable before, during and after events, as well as people who are responsible for responding to issues and taking all possible steps to ensure safety. Participants noted which businesses had identifiably-LGBTQ people running them, or patronising them, feeling that this shared identification meant their safety was more likely to be assured.

Fear

Sadly, we learnt that many people had experienced violence, exclusion and discomfort in spaces and places around the city. Fear that this might happen again and knowledge of threats to safety informed where lesbian people decided to go, when, and with who. Strategies to manage safety fear included seeking spaces which exclusively for lesbian people (for example, events held in private venues or rooms in larger venues which are reserved for the use of a lesbian group), space away from (straight and gay) men, and spaces which are not associated with drinking culture.

However, it was important that social spaces and events remain integrated and there wasn't a policy of isolationism for lesbian people. In evaluating the safety of those places, participants sought venues who prioritised admission of LGBTQ patrons over others (for example, banning stag and hen parties from gay bars), and protected patrons from people outside the venue who may be targeting the area for "gay bashing".

Participants spoke about how significant it was to experience straight friends standing up for them and intervening on occasions they felt threatened: safety was something created through wide-range of people and not felt to just be the responsibility of lesbian people or a handful of business owners.

Covid safety

There was a huge diversity in how fearful people were of covid, and what people felt was an acceptable level of risk. Some local businesses went to great lengths to ensure covid safety, for instance by capping numbers, changing their layout and offering events online. But fear of covid was balanced against fear of social isolation:

> "To us, at the time, [it was important to make] sure that we still had a point of contact for everyone and everyone was able to attend something still, and that socialisation that was still available to queer people"

Organisers and owners work hard to balance people's need for social interaction with covid safety.

Action:

- Do your staff or organisers understand what it means to be a LGBTQ or lesbian -safe/friendly venue? How do your door policies support this? What action would you take if someone entered that space and threatened or abused lesbian people?
- Can patrons of your venue or event wait in an indoor or well-staffed area for taxis when leaving the venue?
- Do you have covid-safety statements which people can review before deciding to attend?

Care

Being able to share and experience care was at the core of what most people described as important in finding community. This included emotional and practical considerations, such as knowing where to find support from peers or community, feeling safe, and being able to build friendships.

> "we're a part of people's emotion journey…you are part of their life and they wanna share it…sometimes people might not have spoken to someone all day, we might be the first person they have a conversation with, so I think it's really important that we make an effort, and we take that time"

Friendship

People did not speak extensively about looking for romance, sex or relationships, but did speak about wanting friendships and places to spend time with friends (straight or gay).

Having lesbian-focused, or lesbian-only spaces made finding meeting new people who might have common interests and common attractions a lot easier:

> "If we all like red wine, and we're all around a dinner table and the topic of conversation is going to be red wine, we all know what we're talking about. You might like whiskey, yes it's an alcoholic drink too, but it's different so what we're talking about will be different"

Sharing (Lesbian) Knowledge

A key benefits of community, and something which created a sense of belonging was being able to share knowledge. For example, by sharing strategies for living in a hostile heterosexual culture, organising social or political mutual networks, or sharing where to find barbers and where to go out.

This project became a vector in the sharing of knowledge between those who had already established their lesbian community and those still searching. A list of venues participants talked about positively can be accessed on Google Maps by scanning the QR code to the left.

Transformation

Those who felt they had found a sense of community were near-universally the people organising events or running venues. They individually became community hubs and experienced significant transformation in their sense of place and belonging:

> "You know it's so naïve to think that's all we'd get involved with but actually what it turned out to be was a complete life changer for both of us. We never thought that our lives would change, we just thought we would meet some people, we both kind of were like 'wow this is amazing we've benefited so much out of this"

Finding (or building) a lesbian community can transform people's social lives and sense of community. It was this that many lesbian people were seeking.

Action:

- Have you considered what you might gain from making your venue or event explicitly inclusive of lesbian people? Do you realise how significant your venue and event can be to regulars and one-off visitors?
- Do you offer noticeboards or open discussion spaces where people can share resources or recommendations for lesbian-friendly services and businesses?

And finally...

Lesbian Community in Southampton was a pilot project, funded by the University of Southampton's Web Science Institute Stimulus Fund. As a pilot project, we worked on a relatively short time scale with a limited number of contributors.

This project engaged the Art House as external partners and sought to generate useful knowledge on ways they can plan for their future.

If you are interested in collaborating on future research and knowledge exchange on this, or related topics, please get in touch with Dr Lizzie Reed, the project lead, via email: e.h.reed@soton.ac.uk

Thank you to all our contributors and participants. We hope you will join us in continuing the conversation about community and Southampton.

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