

# LGBT Health and Wellbeing Annual Report 2020-21



# Promoting the health, wellbeing and equality of LGBT+ people in Scotland

www.lgbthealth.org.uk

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# Foreword

This reporting period has been a year like no other. Covid-19 has had a huge impact on us as an organisation and as a team. We had to rapidly adapt to remote working and find new, innovative ways of engaging with community members, and we are proud of the extraordinary response of our staff and volunteers to such adverse circumstances.

We have seen first-hand the detrimental impact of the pandemic on many of those people we support, and it's clear our services have never been more needed.

Everyone at LGBT Health and Wellbeing responded to the unprecedented challenge of lockdown with speed, creativity and resourcefulness and we have been working incredibly hard since the very beginning of the pandemic to ensure robust and accessible support programmes have been available for Scotland's LGBT+ community. No-one was furloughed; instead we transformed what we do, at no notice, and have taken on additional staff to enable us to extend and developed our support services to help our community through these tough times.

We would like to thank our dedicated staff, trustees and volunteer team who have adapted so amazingly well to the huge changes in their work and home life. Their tremendous commitment and dedication has ensured we have continued to be there for the LGBT+ community throughout lockdown. As this report illustrates, we have good reason to be extremely proud of everything we have collectively achieved over the last year.



Maruska Greenwood Chief Executive



Yorath Turner Chair

# Our Work over 2020-21

Over the April 2020 to March 2021 period, our work with LGBT community members included:



# Introduction

LGBT Health and Wellbeing promotes the health, wellbeing and equality of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people in Scotland. Originally established in Edinburgh in 2003, the organisation continues to grow and develop and now delivers services in both Glasgow and Edinburgh – albeit delivered remotely over 2020-21 - as well as a number of Scotland-wide initiatives.

#### The organisation's key objectives are to:

- Provide a programme of activities which tackle the life circumstances that contribute to the ill-health of LGBT people
- Reduce levels of isolation and social exclusion experienced by LGBT people
- Strengthen the capacity of the LGBT community to promote the health of individuals
- Support individuals to adopt and sustain healthy lifestyles
- Ensure that LGBT people have equity of access to mainstream health services and information responsive to their needs.

# **Our Programmes and Services**

Our (normally) Glasgow and Edinburgh-based teams deliver a range of services, projects and activities for the LGBT community in both cities, as well as a national Helpline. Over 2020-21 all our services have been delivered remotely, either online or by phone and email.





In the 'Real Life' and 'Our Volunteers' sections of this report you'll find stories from community members relating to each of these programmes.

# **Our Response to Covid-19**

It is clear Covid has impacted hugely on the mental and emotional wellbeing of LGBT people, increasing the sense of isolation and loneliness many community members already felt, causing financial worries, and making many individuals feel disconnected from their peers and the wider LGBT community. The pandemic has also put a spotlight on the issue of digital exclusion within the LGBT community, particularly for older people, asylum seekers and refugees.

Over the course of the pandemic it's been abundantly clear our services have been more needed than ever. And we've worked hard to continue to support community members. However, since March 2020, as we've quickly moved our programmes online and adapted our delivery models, much of that support has looked quite different.



### **Growing our services**

Through the expansion of our **LGBT Helpline Scotland** service, which we increased from 2 to 4 days per week from March/April 2020, we've been able to meet the growing demand for support, information and a listening ear. Early on in the pandemic we saw helpline engagements (by phone, email and online) nearly double, and 18 months on, demand for support remains high, leading us to continue our increased opening hours.

Concerns around the level of isolation and digital exclusion experienced by many of the older LGBT community members linked into our LGBT Age programme led to us to set up the **LGBT Age Telefriending Service** in April 2020. We mainly promoted this outreach phone service through the Helpline, but self referrals to the service also grew rapidly. It's clear people really appreciated the way this friendly, LGBT–affirmative service kept them connected to their community.



Telefriending A regular phone call for LGBT+ people aged 50 and over in Scotland

# © 0131 564 3972

tele@lgbthealth.org.uk

"Thank you so much for your call today, I don't have anyone to talk about the things we've been talking about and it feels so refreshing to hear a friendly voice that does not judge me. Really lovely way to start my Sunday, thank you so much."

Our new LGBT Refugee Project ended up launching at the start of lockdown, which meant none of our engagement with asylum seekers and refugees were able to happen in person. However, the phone and online support provided through the new project, which has included practical support to address the severe hardship and digital exclusion experienced by many asylum seekers, has quickly proved itself to be invaluable in providing New Scots with information, signposting, emotional support and opportunities for connecting with peers.

"It has been a stressful year for a reason we are all aware of, however has also come with a lot of positive actions, I can honestly say LGBT Health and Wellbeing has been one of the kindest. Has supported me and my family with top up, vouchers, just the thought of paying my bill at the end of the month is a big release that you cannot even imagine and if I am being honest with you it has removed worry and stress. So, I can only be grateful to be one of the vou are persons supporting and cannot thank you enough."

### **Extending our reach**

Online delivery and digital exclusion have created barriers for many community members. However, there is no doubt that moving our delivery online has also enabled us to extend our reach to some LGBT people who experience barriers engaging with our in-person programmes in Edinburgh and Glasgow due to issues of rurality, mobility, or mental or physical health.

# THE RAINBOW LOUNGE

1.1

"In physically distanced times, these online events are so vital to still feel part of the Queer community. Someone mentioned that one benefit of lockdown has been that in ways we have more access to information and community sharing and this really struck with me. Not living in the main cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, I don't always have the option to attend events. While I can't wait to one day attend events again in person, hopefully the future of Queer events will be a blend of in-person and online events."

Ronnie's story about their engagement with our LGBT Community Programme, which is found elsewhere in this report, also describes the impact for them of increased access.

#### Support across the life course

LGBT Health and Wellbeing supports the entire diversity of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community, including non-binary, queer, intersex and asexual people.

And we engage with individuals right across the life course, from supporting parents and their children through Rainbow Families to older community members via LGBT Age, and everyone in between.

Rainbou *Lebt* Families Age However, over 2020-21 we've had to be extra creative and adaptable to ensure we continue to engage with all sections of the community. For example, whilst Rainbow Families online events did not work particularly well for many – particularly in early lockdown when many parents were home schooling - specially tailored rainbow activity packs enabled us to stay connected and were very much welcomed by families.

Often for individuals their engagement will, over time, span a number of the different programmes and services we offer. This continued to be the case over the last year, with community members often signposted to our other programmes.

We encourage LGBT community members and allies to get involved in their community and support us in shaping and delivering our many programmes, including as volunteers. Again, volunteer involvement remained strong, with 45 new volunteers engaging with the organisation over the year. Rainbow Ranifies Activity Pack

"I could barely get through the welcome note without crying – thank you so much for the pack, they love the paper and crayons and I love what it represents."

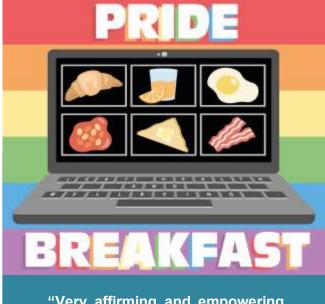
The quotes and case studies in this report illustrate the impact of our work by through the engagement and journeys of some of our community members and volunteers.

# **Our Impact**

Our community is at the heart of everything LGBT Health and Wellbeing does. Feedback from community members and volunteers has always been important in shaping our programmes. In this very unusual year, listening to what the community wants and needs has proved more vital than ever. It has helped us shape our service response in the face of the many restrictions and challenges thrown up by Covid.

We wanted to share some of the feedback we received this year from participants and volunteers across our many services. Below are some of the things people told us about what they gained from their engagement with the organisation.

#### Acceptance, belonging and community



"Very affirming and empowering to get together with other queer folks. So happy to have this virtual community for Pride." "I really appreciate everything you have done for me. LGBT Health and Wellbeing have really helped me in diverse ways, especially towards my protection, they accepted me for who I am and what I am. I am grateful."

"Everyone was so nice and welcoming. It has made me more confident, and a bit more open and not so wary of all the new people that I meet."

"The event was the best fun I had in ages; it helped me forget about the lockdown for an hour and feel part of the community again."

#### **Confidence and pride**



"I came to this workshop with zero confidence in my own writing abilities, but it was very low pressure and really supportive and left me inspired and willing to have a go." "The Virtual Hug newsletters, strangely, have been good for rebuilding my confidence, looking forward again. I felt myself looking forward to newsletters and your phone calls. I started to feel that people care about me, remember my name, remember my address and go to the bother of printing out and posting stories to me, just for my enjoyment. Humanised me again other than feeling alienated."

"The session helped me feel more comfortable with my body and more confident about my abilities."

"I found last night's session a light switch moment! It will provide me with a refreshing light structure to self-reflect, start self-care and hopefully provide me with the confidence and skills to self-affirm /accept and see me through to whom I really want to be."

#### Support and connections



"Helped me feel less alone, and cheered me up in these otherwise lonely Covid-19 times." "I really, really appreciate these evenings and the effort put in by the organisers. I have been so isolated during COVID and did not realize the extent until I attended these events. It has been so helpful and healing and joyful to be able to relax and laugh and joke with such a wonderful and diverse group of people. I look forward to these weekly events a great deal."

"Value feeling connected to my community in lockdown. This has massively helped me cope with living alone during lockdown."

"Good to get support to deal with the increased anxieties that lockdown has triggered."

#### Coping with COVID and lockdown



"Great event, much needed. It gave me a better understanding of the challenges to mental health during lockdown. It made me feel seen and understood, connected me to the community and offered some hope." "The Queerantine Nights have given meaning to Tuesdays. I come in order to have social contact and a good laugh. It helps improve my mental health, as I feel supported by like-minded people. I'm not sure how I would have coped during covid restrictions without the various events that have been hosted. Even when I have felt low I have made the effort to come along and join in. This has made a real difference during these difficult times."

"The one-to-one support has really helped me to cope during lockdown, I think I would have been a lot more anxious if I didn't have this, just to be able to talk about everything and think about things in a different way."

"I feel the events have been a lifeline during lockdown as they have allowed us to participate in a safe group of LGBT+ people who may never have met otherwise. I can come along and no matter how I am feeling, the events are fun and cheer me up. They have definitely helped me to maintain good mental health. There is a strong sense of community, which has helped reduce feelings of isolation. I hope to meet up with others when lockdown is over and we can return to some semblance of normality."

# **Real Life**

The people who know most about what our services do, and about the impact this has on health and wellbeing, are the people who use our services.

You can see our broad and varied programme of events and services online at <u>www.lgbthealth.org.uk</u>. Below, you can read in more detail some examples of what these mean to people's lives.

Names and details have been changed in some of the case studies to preserve anonymity.

### **LGBT Helpline Scotland**

#### Mariam's story

Mariam is a 42-year-old trans woman, and an asylum seeker from Sudan, who lives with her extended Muslim family in Glasgow. She has been in contact with the LGBT Helpline for about a year now. She first made contact with the service in the Summer of 2020, during lockdown. She speaks on the phone when she can, but also uses a mixture of email and Livechat, when she's not able to speak out loud in case her family overhears her. She has indicated that she likes email and Livechat because she can easily store and access the signposting information that we send; however written communication is a bit more challenging, as English is not her first language.

She's unable to come out for fear of family rejection, which would mean losing her home, financial support and family relationships. She wants to move away from her family, so that she can come out and medically transition.

The pandemic has made life much harder for Mariam, because she can no longer go out and meet other people that know her true identity or go to other areas and be out in public. She has only been able to wear the clothes and makeup that make her comfortable in her room, and was feeling very isolated.

When she first rang the Helpline, Mariam could barely speak, as she couldn't stop crying. However, over the course of those first few calls she was able to come out as trans to us, and start to share her story. As well as struggling with gender dysphoria, and the issues with her family, she had physical health problems and was going through the process of seeking asylum. She often shared suicidal feelings, self-harming and high-risk behaviours, including drink/drugs/rough sex with strangers that she didn't seem to really like.



At one point, we had to take the unusual step of sending local police to check on her for fear of her safety. This actually made her feel very cared for and increased her trust in us – though it was a difficult call to make for fear of outing her in the process.

As well as just providing space for her to be herself, discussing clothes and her having somebody to chat to, we have been able to share information and help her explore options in relation to her gender identity and medical transition, strategies for staying safe, including safer sex advice and check-up, emergency accommodation and online peer support. We have also been able to signpost Mariam to our LGBT Refugee Project for support around the asylum process and to our Glasgow LGBT Counselling Service.

Although Mariam is still in an unstable situation, she now has weekly counselling sessions and somebody to regularly speak to about her situation. She has something of a safety plan for if things go wrong with her family and she has grown in her confidence and sense of self.

Mariam says: "Finally I feel that some people in the world understand me, support and see me. I'm so happy that you'll be there through the next steps."

### **Mental Wellbeing Programme**

#### Linda's story

Linda is in her late 40s and first came to LGBT Health after she and a friend had been victims of a homophobic attack.

We were able to offer Linda some oneto-one mental health support sessions in a safe space where she felt understood as a gay woman. Early sessions were focused on the attack Linda and the trauma was experiencing. Through exploring ways to deal with the psychological and physical effects of the trauma. Linda found ways to cope. Later, she started to talk about her past experiences as a gay woman in relation to her family. She realised that there were still things in her past that affected her she wanted to explore.

When the one-to-one support sessions came to an end Linda decided to attend a new therapy group being run by LGBT Health.

"My one-to-one sessions with LGBT Health were a gift from the gods. Because I found the environment to be a quite gentle place which provided me with a much-needed safe haven. It also gave me some breathing space following on from the events of the homophobic attack. The worker has been a beacon of positivity throughout my journey and beyond [...] providing warmth, wisdom, help and support. The occasional reality check, peppered with laughter and optimism, helped me get my sense of humour back."

She found the group difficult at first; but as she started to connect with the other participants and felt safe, she was able to voice her feelings. She realised how homophobia was threaded throughout her life and was still happening with her boss at

work. Through the course she discovered ways to build her self-resilience and self-care and to address what was happening at work.

"The group therapy sessions were like being on an emotional rollercoaster without a seatbelt. Actually, they proved to be a real game changer because it taught me to feel the fear and do it anyway. The outcome had a very positive effect on me and I found the experience rewarding and worthwhile; it got me to reconnect with myself and others."



Linda has stayed connected to other people who attended the therapy group. She also wanted to 'give something back', and has volunteered with LGBT Health using her professional skills.

### **Community Programme**

#### **Ronnie's story**

Ronnie is aged 47, and is exploring their trans identity. They live with a range of physical and mental health problems challenges which, alongside ongoing experience of isolation, prompted them to seek support from LGBT Health.

Ronnie has wanted to access LGBT Health social events in Edinburgh for a long time but due to these health challenges they have rarely been able to. After Covid restrictions began, Ronnie experienced even greater physical isolation and barriers preventing access to people, places and their community.



"Long Covid on top of everything else means l'm just not able to go anywhere far, even when we're allowed to."

Since April 2020, our Edinburgh Community Programme has been evolving digitally, with community members like Ronnie providing valuable feedback informing our work.

Through a range of events providing opportunities to socialise and connect via Zoom, the Community Programme was suddenly accessible in new ways. For the first time, Ronnie could take part in a range of LGBT+ community activities, from the comfort of home - and crucially, without the barriers related to their health issues being highlighted. The quick-to-access and quick-to-leave nature of the events also provided reassurance and comfort in a way that in-person events rarely could.



"This was such a brilliant thing for me tonight. I'm sorry I didn't have my camera on for long but it's all very new to me. I've hardly spoken to anyone in months. I can't tell you what it means to be able to talk to people who see me for who I really am."



Through Ronnie's presence at events and their willingness to share their experiences and express their needs, staff and volunteers have been enlightened and inspired to create a programme of events that are more accessible for those who have been long impacted by immobility and poor mental health. Looking ahead, Ronnie has highlighted the importance of continuing with a blended programme of in-person and digital events: **"I'll come to events online for as long as they are offered."** 

Importantly, these events are providing Ronnie with a '*way back in*' to their community, allowed them to tentatively explore using a more affirming name and pronouns and provided opportunities to make social connections.

"I simply wouldn't be part of this community without these online events. We all hate the Pandemic, but for some of us, it is our way back in to society."

# LGBT Age Programme

#### lan's story

Ian is in his late 60s and lives alone. He has no partner or children and no contact with his family, who rejected him when he came out in his twenties. He has experienced periods of poor mental health in the past, partly due to this.

Ian had already been feeling quite lonely, but since lockdown this has been exacerbated as he has not been seeing anyone or going out. Ian spoke with the LGBT Age worker about the impact on his mental health.

Ian has anxiety about being around people right now. This is partly due to fear of Covid, although he is vaccinated, and because after so long alone his social confidence has deteriorated. He has not maintained much contact with friends and tends to avoid them because he doesn't want to feel like a burden.

Having all this time alone, Ian has been revisiting negative experiences of his childhood, and his abandonment by his family. His mental health is suffering because of this, and from not being around other LGBT+ people. Prior to lockdown, he would go to gay bars or events and meet people, but has lost the confidence.

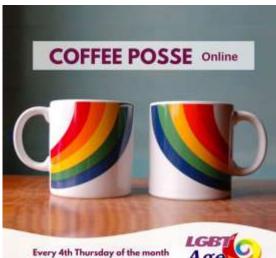
The LGBT Age worker helped Ian identify 'little wins' he has had: going to the shops, going out to a local outdoor café at one point, and going outside for short walks, despite feeling anxious. They discussed the benefits of being outdoors, and seeing other people, even from afar, and Ian will try going for longer walks.

The worker encouraged lan to reach out to his friends. They discussed his fear of being a burden, and the effect of his past on how hard he finds it to let people in. They also discussed lan contacting his GP about his mental health.

The worker told Ian about the LGBT Age Coffee Posse online social event for LGBT+ people over 50 and the LGBT Helpline Scotland.

At the end of a call lan said: "It has been really good to talk. Thank you. It's good to be able to talk about things openly and not feel judged."

Ian has now attended Coffee Posse. He really enjoyed hearing everyone's conversations, and looks forward to attending again. He also hopes to attend the next online Wellbeing Café. He has contacted his GP and is waiting to hear back from their mental health team.



Every 4th Thursday of the mor Online on Zoom



#### **Riley's story**

Riley first contacted us via our Helpline's Live Chat service. They suspected they may be transgender and were struggling to find local information or support. They haven't spoken to anyone about being non-binary and didn't know where to start making changes in their life.

We initially suggested a Zoom call to better assess Riley's situation and establish areas where we could help. They weren't too keen, so we continued via email instead. Over the course of our email exchange Riley expressed that they would love to meet other trans and non-binary people to chat to, but found it tricky to find practical ways to do it. "I was too anxious to attend live events and even if I wanted to, my housing situation is a barrier – I live with my partner and two children, so there are always 3 other people in the house. The online group [Trans Social Lounge] was a space I could be around folks with similar difficulties and experiences. I found lots of support there." Riley's knowledge of transitioning was very limited when they first spoke to us. Although they searched for information on the internet, they found it difficult to establish how reliable the online resources were, and rarely came across things that resonated with their experience. Having the ability to talk to trans and non-binary folks has been vital to getting a better understanding of the reality here in Scotland. After finding out more about the NHS process, Riley is now ready to speak with their GP and ask to be referred to the Gender Identity Clinic.

"I learnt so much from the other group members and emailing with the support worker gave me the right resources to start my medical journey. I know that the long waiting times mean I won't get to speak with a gender specialist for quite a while yet. For now, I'm trying to focus on telling my partner, my children and everyone else about who I am."



We have spent time discussing coming out to Riley's children, and put together a written resource for the whole family. Reading other community members' experiences with their own kids, joining suggested support groups and exploring some literature for children will all be helpful avenues in navigating this process, although Riley is aware that this is likely to require many difficult conversations going forward.

# **Our Volunteers**

Volunteers have continued to play an invaluable role in supporting the delivery of our programmes. Like our staff team, volunteers suddenly found themselves working remotely, and many saw the nature of their volunteering change significantly as our groups and events, and even individual support such as our Counselling Service, moved from being provided in-person to online.

Inevitably, the pandemic greatly impacted on peoples' ability to volunteer, with some people becoming more available due to furlough, whilst others became less so, due to their personal and/or work circumstances, or because they felt less able to support our remote delivery.

"I really enjoyed helping to design and run the LGBT+ Mental Wellbeing course. The opportunity to contribute built my confidence, increased my self-esteem, and gave me such a sense of fulfilment, to be able to help my fellow LGBT+ peers, especially during these trying times. Taking part in the course as a volunteer gave me something to look forward to every week, and also enabled me to reflect on my well-being and identity as an LGBT+ person. I appreciated feeling more connected to the LGBT+ community and found the supportive environment within the staff/volunteer team really helpful. Overall an immensely rewarding experience."

In spite of the many challenges individuals faced, over the course of the year 138 people volunteered with the organisation and collectively contributed 6,313 hours of volunteering.

In 2020 our annual Volunteer Survey found:

- All volunteers reported feeling valued
- 96% of respondents would recommend volunteering with our organisation to a friend
- 87% felt they contributed to their community
- 82% felt they gained new skills
- 75% gained in confidence.

"[Through volunteering I have gained] skills growth, improved resilience, sense of belonging, feeling useful, shared laughs, building on understanding and empathy, feeling less alone, and much more."



### Ndubuisi, Volunteer with the LGBT Refugee Project

We caught up with one of the LGBT Refugee Project volunteers, Ndubuisi, to find out how he became involved with LGBT Health and what motivated him to become a volunteer.

"My name is Ndubuisi (he/him) and I am an asylum seeker here in Glasgow originally from Nigeria. I am a volunteer at LGBT Health and Wellbeing for the Refugee Project."



#### What was your journey to becoming a volunteer at LGBT Health?

"I find out about the organisation in March 2020 through my partner. I joined LGBT Health, not only because I'm a gay man but also because I was looking for support with my mental health. I contacted the LGBT Refugee Project and I joined online meetups like Queerantine Nights and many more. I then started to volunteer in January 2021 to provide one-to-one support to asylum seekers and refugees."

#### What is your role as a volunteer?

"The first person I supported was an asylum seeker who was mentally down and on a 6-month waiting list to get support so I made myself available to check on him every week during that time. I was a barber in Nigeria so I also offer free haircuts to asylum seekers and refugees, 3 times a week. And I help run the Refugee Project's Men's Group (there is also a Women's Group) which meets twice weekly (online for now), where we share information about support available for asylum seekers and refugees at LGBT Health (such as the counselling service, monthly phone top-ups, food vouchers) and information about the Home Office and the process of seeking asylum as an LGBT person. We also have a What's App group so we can all stay in touch and I make sure new people feel welcomed to the group."

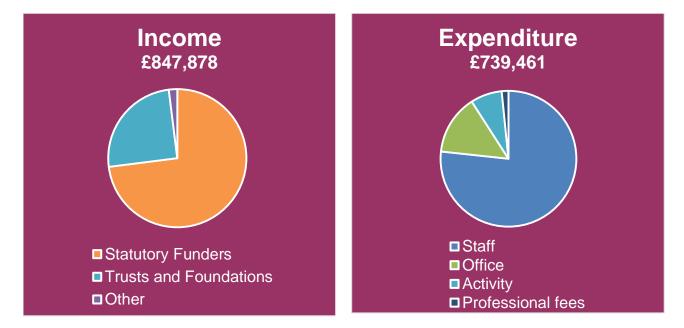
#### What are you the proudest of as a volunteer at LGBT Health?

"I am passionate about working with the most vulnerable in society and particularly asylum seekers and refugees like me to help them with their mental health. The asylum-seeking system in the UK is very hard and it has a big impact on people's wellbeing. I want to work towards setting up a charity to support asylum seekers and refugees with their mental health through digital support. Digital is my line of profession and I want to use this to help others cope when they need mental health support."

"I got a lot of support and love from charities in Scotland, they gave me life and hope as an asylum seeker and inspire me to do the same and support those less privileged. I am proud to be able to support this work now and to give back to my community."

# **Finance Summary**

Our organisation's income increased significantly (£725,376 in the previous year), alongside comparable expenditure, with lower than anticipated activity costs due to ongoing remote delivery. Income came from a much wider range of sources than over previous years, including a high number of small and short-term awards, largely linked to COVID-related work.



We are extremely grateful to our statutory partners, the many trusts and foundations, and the individual and corporate donors who fund our work. Together, these contributions enable us to deliver our key support services to Scotland's LGBT+ community.

Key funders over 2020-21 included:





#### **Registered Office**

LGBT Healthy Living Centre (operates as LGBT Health and Wellbeing)

Duncan Place Community Hub 4 Duncan Place Edinburgh EH6 8HW

Scottish Charity No. SC034216 | Company Limited by Guarantee No. SC246290

# www.lgbthealth.org.uk

