

Dear Ms Wylie,

This collective letter is to discuss the importance of a feasibility and scoping study to support the development of an LGBTQ+ community, educational and cultural (LGBTQ+ Hub) for Belfast. We believe the successful development of the LGBTQ+ Hub will help promote Belfast as an inclusive, prosperous and vibrant city for all and support the creation of services, community infrastructure and capacity to the city's LGBTQ+ population.

The need for an LGBTQ+ Hub to support the LGBTQ+ community has been developed over many years. From its inception to now, the LGBTQ+ sector has received little government support or investment, with minimal resources to enhance its development, build capacity and to reach its full potential. Despite continued commitments by the Northern Ireland Assembly to develop a Sexual Orientation Strategy – such an approach to addressing the inequalities experienced by LGBTQ+ people has never been developed. Additionally, no central government funds have ever been dedicated to addressing the needs of, or inequalities experienced by, LGBTQ+ people in the last 20 years.

Despite this lack of investment or support, the Northern Ireland LGBTQ+ sector has developed a vibrant, strong and sustained community infrastructure. From the expert life saving services delivered by Cara-Friend, HERe NI, Transgender NI and the Rainbow Project to the award winning festivals delivered by Belfast Pride and OUTBurst – we believe it is a statement of fact that the LGBTQ+ sector and community have had a remarkable impact on both the City and its residents.

For many years LGBTQ+ organisations have rented buildings which quickly become not fit for purpose due to the continued increase in demand for our services and our limited capacity to cover rent and overheads as all organisations receive little or no core funding. In response to this Cara-Friend, HEReNI and The Rainbow Project has jointly rented spaces in the city to limit costs and to increase collaboration and sustainability for the sector – commonly referred to as the LGBT Centre. Other LGBTQ+ organisations located in Belfast have premises on a rented basis, or avail of the space in the LGBT Centre.

This situation presents an ongoing risk to our sector organisations who rely heavily on trust and foundation funding to pay ever increasing costs for premises. With the development of a fit for purpose LGBTQ+ Hub, the cost of rented premises could be invested in addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ people in the Belfast area. Additionally, securing a fit for purpose space which can be shared by organisations across our sector will increase collaboration and capacity, particularly with the ability to share spaces, infrastructure and facilities. There is a huge need for a long-term, sustainable building in the heart of Belfast to support the LGBTQ+ communities development and inclusion.

In order to identify a suitable space or building that can fulfil this vision, we are seeking support from council for the delivery of a feasibility and scoping study to measure the needs of the LGBTQ+ sector, support the development of a budget and scope opportunities for the development of an LGBTQ+ Hub.

A fit for purpose space for all LGBTQ+ organisations in Belfast will support the development and delivery of innovative services aimed at addressing the health and well-being inequalities experienced by our community. Organisations being under the one roof would increase productivity, develop relationships, and make our community and city's diversity more visible. In these difficult economic times, especially emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the LGBTQ+ Hub will provide security and

sustainability to volunteer led organisations working to address the inequalities experience by LGBTQ+ people in Belfast.

It is our belief that every single LGBTQ+ person should be able to access a safe and welcoming community space in Belfast. The Department of Trade and Investment estimates that around 6- 10% of the UK population identifies as LGBT. According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency the estimated population of Belfast Local Government District up to 30th June 2020 is 288,306; that may equate to anything between 17,300- 28,830 LGBTQ+ residents in Belfast Local Government District.

We believe that an LGBTQ+ Hub in the city will have a substantially positive impact on Belfast city and directly benefit tourism, city branding and international image, safety, inclusion, equality and promote Belfast as a city for all. This building will also act as a shared space for everyone in Belfast to celebrate, engage with and learn about the LGBTQ+ community. A dedicated LGBTQ+ space will be a landmark project relating to the ongoing regeneration of Belfast city centre and stand as a beacon of diversity in a city with a strong history of LGBTQ+ activism. This space will help further cement Belfast as a modern, vibrant city which celebrates diversity and aims to build bridges between all communities, in addition to supporting the economic development and sustainability of the city. This proposed LGBTQ+ Hub will provide a single point of contact for Local and Central government, statutory agencies, service providers and other community organisations wanting to engage with the community. The LGBTQ+ community are recognised as a hard to reach and vulnerable group and we need to ensure an infrastructure exists where this group can be engaged with and their needs identified.

Furthermore, we believe that a new LGBTQ+ Hub would link specifically into The Belfast Agenda and the vision for 2035 as follows:

1. Where everyone benefits from a thriving and prosperous economy
2. Welcoming, safe, fair and inclusive for all
3. Everyone fulfils their potential
4. Everyone experiences good health and wellbeing
5. That is vibrant, attractive, connected and environmentally sustainable

By 2035, we all want Belfast to be a place where everyone will continue to feel welcome and safe and will be treated fairly with equality and respect in a shared city that values diversity and encourages civic participation- the LGBTQ+ community has an important role to play in achieving this.

The ongoing support received from Belfast City Council over many years has helped shape our services to support the most vulnerable citizens of Belfast, but also shows the Council to be a forward thinking, progressive institution. In particular, we would like to specifically recognise the recent support from Council during the COVID-19 pandemic to many of our LGBTQ+ organisations. For countless years, we have had meaningful engagement and supportive intentions from successive Lord Mayors, mandates, Council staff and political parties. We are extremely keen to keep on building the positive relationships with Council.

To conclude and for the reasons we have outlined above, we are seeking support from Belfast City Council to deliver a feasibility and scoping study on developing an LGBTQ+ Hub in Belfast City. We recognise the support we have received to date from members and Council staff on this vision and believe that this approach will achieve an important milestone in making this vision a reality.

Kind Regards,

Cara McCann (Director, HRe NI)

John O Doherty (Director, The Rainbow Project)

Steve Williamson (Director, Cara-Friend)

Ellen Murray (Director, Transgender NI)