

Feedback from

Transforming LGBT Lives Conference

Count Me In Too

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In consultation with:
The Count Me In Too research team

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And everyone who attended the conference.

Feedback on Transforming LGBT Lives

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The conference

The Count Me In Too Research Project has been exploring LGBT lives in Brighton & Hove since 2005, working in partnership with LGBT people, LGBT groups, and service providers to identify issues for local LGBT people. The project has produced 10 detailed reports with local service providers on a range of themes. These include recommendations on how to address issues and needs identified from the 819 questionnaires completed by respondents and testimonies of 69 people who took part in 19 focus groups.

On April 1st 2009, the Count Me In Too project held a Community Consultation event at the Friends Meeting House in Brighton. One of the goals of this event was to show what the project had done so far, and another was to think about potential future plans. The various Count Me In Too exhibitions were one of the key recommendations made by people attending the Community Consultation, but another popular idea was an inclusive conference in Brighton & Hove that would provide a space for local LGBT people to discuss issues such as those raised by Count Me In Too. However it was also strongly recommended that this conference have national and possibly international appeal.

To enable this conference, a working group of local LGBT activists, academics and community members formed, and a partnership was made with the Brighton & Sussex Sexualities Network (BSSN) in order to marshal wider resources, to utilise BSSN members' conference-planning experience, and to make further links with academics interested in LGBT research.

The conference working group planned the conference over the space of around 9 months. The venue selected was the Jurys Inn Hotel in Brighton, as this was agreed to be accessible thanks to its central location and proximity to the train station. Working group members had also attended other conferences at the Jurys Inn and recommended it for the helpfulness of its staff, wheelchair accessibility and space of rooms. A sliding scale of attendance fees was agreed upon, with a maximum of £80 for those attending with institutional support, and a minimum of £10 for students or those unwaged. The working group also agreed to provide a small bursary to ensure that even those unable to pay this could still attend – this bursary was provided by Count Me In Too thanks to the project's success at the University of Brighton's 2010 BeePurple Research Innovation Awards, at which the project won the first prize for university staff.

This report outlines details of the conference, who attended, and their feedback about the day. Further details can be found at www.countmeintoo.co.uk/conference/.

The sessions

One of the key features of the Transforming LGBT Lives conference was the desire to be inclusive and to have speakers from a wide variety of backgrounds and interests. To this end, the conference working group actively solicited a variety of presentation styles, and devised three different calls for speakers for those from different backgrounds:

- [Academic speakers](#)
- [Speakers from statutory services](#)
- [Activist speakers and speakers from LGBT communities](#)

On the Count Me In Too website you can find copies of these three calls for speakers, or follow the links above. The working group also published an explicit statement of inclusivity and a lengthy (but not exhaustive) list of potential topics to cover at the conference, in the hope that those who may have never presented at a conference before, or who may have been unsure whether their subject would be suitable, would feel not only accepted but welcomed.

Although individual conference speakers inevitably fit into two if not three of these backgrounds, given the wide variety of conference sessions and styles of presentation (from round-table discussions to individual lectures, open-room discussions and workshops) this method appears to have been successful.

There were 4 rooms available for conference sessions, ranging from a large main room to smaller, more intimate rooms. The working group attempted to match the size and feel of each room with the predicted size and feel of each session. This was in some part successful, but some sessions – for example those on bisexuality and polyamory – proved much more popular than anticipated and the small rooms they were assigned were quickly filled to capacity.

The conference working group also attempted to organise the submitted sessions so that in each time-bracket there would be very different sessions on, so as to appeal to as wide a variety of people as possible and to minimise the chance of attendees having to miss out on a desired session. However, one of the key pieces of feedback received about the conference was that there were simply too many sessions and that attendees could not see all of the sessions that they were interested in.

You can find a copy of the [conference timetable](#) on the Count Me In Too website, or follow the previous link.

Takeaway resources and feedback mechanisms

As with all Count Me In Too events, there was a variety of resources available for people to find out more about Count Me In Too and to allow people to feed back to the project. Additionally, space was made available for all attendees to distribute information about their own projects or organisations.

Regarding Count Me In Too, conference attendees were invited take away Community Summary sheets which outlined key findings and issues, and eye-catching flyers which detailed 'tasters' of the project. They were also invited to write comments about the conference on feedback forms provided by the BSSN.

Finally, attendees could write down what they wish for on tags and hang it on a 'wish tree' where the wishes were displayed. This provided space for framing and sharing of aspirations not linked to aspects of the project or conference. The wish tree was first used at the April 1st community consultation event and has been a popular feature of Count Me In Too events since then.

The contributions to the wish tree will be presented as an on line display linked to the Count Me In Too website (www.countmeintoo.co.uk).



Who attended?

As previously mentioned, the conference appears to have successfully attracted attendees from a wide variety of interests and backgrounds. Attendees ranged from interested individuals local to Brighton & Hove to Members of Parliament; from Brighton & Hove community groups to national LGBT lobbying bodies; from independent scholars to academics of international renown. While it was primarily the former, respectively, that the working group was eager to attract, the attendance of the latter was appreciated.

The conference working group expected a total of around 70 attendees including staff and speakers, and budgeted for around 100 attendees. In fact 110 attendees made it to the conference, suggesting both a large appetite for this kind of event. However this may have compounded the feeling of the conference being 'too busy' as noted by a number of attendees.

Feedback

Feedback about the conference was primarily verbal, through interaction with the volunteers and working group members. The most common criticism of the conference, though generally framed in a positive manner, was that the conference was overwhelmingly busy. As stated earlier more people than expected attended, and additionally a large number of sessions were planned in order to maximise the diversity of speakers and topics. These two factors likely created the feeling of business and that there was 'too much to see' that many attendees reported. One particular recommendation made several times was for an open space run throughout the day, where people could go to sit and continue discussions that began in sessions.

Additionally, attendees did pick up on notable absences at the conference – such as the lack of any session dedicated to Trans people. Though the conference working group tried hard to find speakers around Trans issues these sessions did not come to pass. The single session which focused on gender identity issues had to be cancelled on the morning of the conference, compounding this unintentional exclusion. Attendees also noted that there was a lack of younger people, and that most people appeared to be middle class.

Some attendees also took the time to feed back via forms which the BSSN use to collect information about events. These comments generally mirrored those of the verbal feedback, focusing on identity categories who were excluded by way of their absence or through the nature of the conference. Younger people and working class people were particularly noted – although the conference used a sliding scale based on income for attendance fees (with a minimum of £10) and while it offered a bursary in special cases to allow more people to attend, it was still felt that not all could muster the resources to attend.

Conclusions

- **In general, conference was a great success**

Attendees spoke in overwhelmingly positive terms about the conference, agreed that its goals of inclusion were at least partly achieved, and overall interest was extremely high.

- **Attendee numbers were much higher than expected**

There appears to be an appetite for this kind of conference or event, and in future it may be advisable to cap registration numbers in advance to prevent overcrowding. However, this would have to be done carefully so as not to conflict with the goals of inclusion and diversity.

- **Attendees felt that they could not see everything they wanted.**

Although the conference working group tried to maximise the number of sessions, in future a reduced number may be necessary. However, as with the previous point, this would need to be carefully done.

- **An open 'discussion space' was desired**

Several attendees found that they could not continue fruitful discussions for as long as they would have liked, and recommended a space be set aside for discussions throughout the day.