

Civil Conversations on Marriage Equality



Paula
Keenan

Marie
Quiery

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Paula Marie
Keenan Quiery

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Contents

1.	Introduction	3
1.1	Countries that have legislated for Marriage Equality	3
1.2	Participant engagement	4
1.3	Methodology	5
2.	The Importance and relevance of Marriage Equality to the LGBT+ community	7
2.1	Family and community support	7
2.2	Marriage Equality	9
2.3	Starting a family	11
2.4	Getting older	12
3.	The conversations	13
3.1	Young People	13
3.2	Faith groups	16
3.3	Sports organisations	21
3.4	Women	24
3.5	People with disabilities	26
3.6	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people	29
3.7	Trade unions	30
3.8	The business community	31
3.9	Older people	35
4.	Summary of Issues	40
4.1	Religious beliefs	40
4.2	Separation of church and state	40
4.3	Distinction between civil and religious marriage	41
4.4	Fear of change	41
4.5	Accommodating Difference	42
4.6	Generational differences and diversity	43
4.7	Impact of knowing LGBT people	44
4.8	Increased visibility	45
4.9	Political influence	46
4.10	Image of Northern Ireland in the wider world	48
4.11	End notes	48

Appendix 1 List of participants



1. Introduction

In December 2016 the Minister for Finance, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, commissioned this piece of work, the Civil Conversations Project, to promote discussion around the issue of Marriage Equality. The aim of this work was:

“To promote conversations within civil society in relation to Marriage Equality and sexual orientation in order to afford people the opportunity to explore the issue and identify resistances and benefits, with a view to developing a more supportive attitude to this aspect of equality.”

Same sex marriage has been the subject of considerable debate in Northern Ireland since the introduction of Civil Partnership in 2006. Civil Law is a devolved matter and in November 2015 the Northern Ireland Assembly voted in favour of the introduction of Marriage Equality. That vote was overturned by the use of the Petition of Concern, lodged by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Same-sex marriages, conducted in other jurisdictions, revert to the status of Civil Partnerships in Northern Ireland. The term Marriage Equality places the issue in a human rights context where lesbian and gay couples have the same legal right to marry as heterosexual couples. In recent years a number of countries have introduced legislation making civil marriage available to same sex couples, as set out below.

1.1 Countries that have legislated for Marriage Equality

Argentina (2010)	Germany (2017)	Republic of Ireland (2015)
Belgium (2003)	Greenland (2015)	Scotland (2014)
Brazil (2013)	Iceland (2010)	Slovenia (2017)
Canada (2005)	Luxembourg (2014)	South Africa (2006)
Colombia (2016)	Malta (2017)	Spain (2005)
Denmark (2012)	Netherlands (2000)	Sweden (2009)
England / Wales (2013)	New Zealand (2013)	Taiwan (2017)
Finland (2015)	Norway (2009)	United States (2015)
France (2013)	Portugal (2010)	Uruguay (2013)

Among our nearest neighbours, Northern Ireland stands as the only country where equality in relation to civil marriage has yet to be introduced.

Changing aspects of civil law in Northern Ireland is the responsibility of the Civil Law Reform Division (CLRD), which sits within the Department of Finance.

The Civil Conversations Project aimed to encourage discussion, deliberation and the exchange of views and opinions on the issue of Marriage Equality. It was neither a consultation on specific proposals nor a poll of current opinion,



but rather, an open ended conversation. It was hoped, in particular to hear what the resistances to this area of equality might be. The experience in the Republic of Ireland's referendum in 2015 identified that the process of conversations held on doorsteps and in community halls enabled the general population to explore and embrace a more inclusive and equal society. Thus, the process involved in the conversations was an end in itself. The term Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender+ (LGBT+) is used throughout the report. The North of Ireland has experienced major social and political change over the past 20 years, creating unease in some sectors of the community. Resistance to change is often based on fear and the Project hoped to explore what these fears might be and how best to support a community at a time of major social transition. It was therefore important to create a safe, non-judgemental space within which to conduct conversations and to emphasise that the range of views, some deeply held, on this issue would be listened to and recorded in the following report. The report of the conversations is a summary of those views but is not fully able to convey the inherent generosity of spirit and the openness engendered during the process of the Project. In particular, in almost all of the groups, individuals took the opportunity to 'come out' as LGBT+ themselves or as the relative of an LGBT+ person. Very often, this was the first time they had revealed this personal information and, in all cases, were met with a warm and supportive response from others in the group conversation.

1.2 Participant engagement

In order to maximise inclusivity a wide range of groups and organisations were contacted. These included young people; older people; people with disabilities; women; business people; members of Trade Unions; people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities; people involved in sports and those involved in churches and faith groups.

Organisations and key individuals were asked to host meetings that would give a wide variety of people the opportunity to meet and join in the conversation about Marriage Equality. In the majority of cases the Project engaged with existing groups, where people were familiar with each other and already had a purpose in coming together. This helped to maximise attendance.

Some individual conversations with community or organisational leaders were also held, sometimes to get their views on the impact of Marriage Equality, but most particularly when the leader was unable to provide access to a group. There were a number of reasons offered as to why a group meeting might not be appropriate. In some cases it was felt that the community / organisation would be resistant to the subject matter or would not appreciate the relevance of Marriage Equality. Others felt that the community / organisation might not be ready to explore LGBT+ issues and that, while a conversation would be useful, it would ideally take place as part of a longer-term internal process. Some feared that raising what might prove to be a controversial topic could create division within their community or organisation. This was particularly



true within communities and organisations where LGBT+ people and issues remain largely invisible.

A number of sessions were also held within the LGBT+ sector. These were designed to explore the impact of the absence of Marriage Equality on the family and community life of LGBT+ people here. These conversations involved a Civilly Partnered couple, groups within Here NI, Queerspace, the Rainbow Project (in Belfast and Derry) and the Same Sex Family Support Project.

Transgender issues were not directly addressed in the Civil Conversations Project as this is a much broader issue involving additional legislation. However, discussion of Transgender issues were regarded as important and emerged in many of the conversations – most particularly among young people. Many young people used additional terms such as Non-Binary, Gender Fluid or GenderQueer when referring to their sexual orientation and gender identity. One bisexual partner of a trans women expressed concern that to avail of same sex civil marriage may involve the dissolution of an existing marriage when her partner has her gender designation changed in law.

In all, 33 group discussions were facilitated, and over 500 individuals from across Northern Ireland were involved in conversations (please see Appendix 1 for full list of participants).

1.3 Methodology

The format of the conversation was tailored to each group and their particular interests and issues. For example, sessions with young people began with a focus on LGBT+ celebrities and included quizzes based on statistics about LGBT+ young people in NI and values spectrum activity where young people placed themselves along a continuum of views about Marriage Equality.

Generally sessions involved:

- Group members reflecting on where they first heard about LGBT+ people;
- Input on what it's like to be LGBT+ in Northern Ireland and the impact of homophobia (Research statistics);
- Factual information on Marriage Equality in Northern Ireland e.g. Ipsos and MORI surveys, NI Executive debates, the Petition of Concern;
- Open discussion on views of Marriage Equality and local resistance to its introduction.

A primary aim of the sessions was to encourage on-going debate in the wider community. To this end, participants were asked to continue the discussions within their families, friendship circles, clubs, business networks, workplaces, churches and communities. Many people attending meetings were happy to make a commitment to continuing the conversation.

People were assured that the conversation was confidential and that any comments would be rendered anonymous in the final report. The views,



opinions and comments aired during the conversations, conducted across Northern Ireland, are summarised in Section 3 of this report.



2. The Importance and relevance of Marriage Equality to the LGBT+ community

There is increasing evidence that inequality and, in particular, the absence of legislation around marriage equality, impacts on the personal, family and community life of LGBT people. Individual and group sessions were held with a range of LGBT+ groups and organisations in both Derry and Belfast to gain qualitative data on the degree and extent of this impact.

Local and international research reveals that the absence of full equality impacts negatively on the emotional and mental health of LGBT+ people. One of the most compelling pieces of recent research in the United States indicates that the introduction of Marriage Equality reduced the sexual minorities' adolescent suicide rate by 14%¹ within the first six months of the legislation. The research set out to evaluate the association between state same-sex marriage policies and adolescent suicide attempts. They used data collected from 762,678 adolescents from 47 different states between 1999 and 2015.

Interviewees recognised that emotional and mental health are important issues within the LGBT+ community. Many commented on their resilience despite facing prejudice and discrimination.

“There’s still such a stigma around mental health in our community and it’s become such an issue. It still surprises me that LGBT people are treated like that. Our laws are still draconian when compared to the rest of Europe”

“Statistics show a lot of negativity but we amongst ourselves see a lot of positivity. In the face of enormous negativity we have carved out a safe space for ourselves”

2.1 Family and community support

Undoubtedly, family support is as important to LGBT+ people as it is to their heterosexual counterparts. Family recognition and acknowledgement of the personal and emotional life of LGBT+ people forms an important building block in creating confidence and self-esteem. Family ties, in the North of Ireland, are strong and featured largely in the conversations with LGBT+ people. In some instances, interviewees reported that they were reluctant to reveal their sexual orientation to their families due to fears of rejection or of causing hurt to their families.

¹ Raifman et al (2017) *Difference-in-Differences: Analysis of the Association Between State Same-Sex Marriage Policies and Adolescent Suicide Attempts*. *JAMA. Pediatr.* 171(4):350-356.



“When I was younger, I was 15 and I didn’t tell anybody I was gay until my Mum passed away 10 years ago. Years ago it was very common people saying, I can’t come out until my parents are dead.”

“I’ve only come out since last year – I knew I was gay since I was 16 and I fought it up until last year. The mother and father I had were very strict, very religious, church going. They died and I’m still living at home with the brother. He’s the same, very old school and I sort of had a breakdown 4 or 5 weeks ago and he had to be told. He took it ok but I know there’s that wee bit of a difference there in the house, I can sense it. He’s not the same, there’s something missing.”

Some, who married in other jurisdictions, felt that the availability of marriage had made a difference to their parents and supported their families in accepting their different sexuality:

“I literally come from the back end of nowhere, there’s fields surrounding our house. I didn’t come out until my mid-twenties. When I said that X and I were getting married there was no push back – no negative reaction to that at all but I suppose in my head I expected it because of my background and where I’m from. I was expecting much more negativity in coming out – strangely I’ve been surprised how good people are, how positive the reaction has been.”

Many related that civil partnership had increased the visibility of the LGBT+ community and that civil marriage would increase this further. Many LGBT+ people reported the stress of trying to conceal their sexual orientation in the past. They felt that the introduction of Civil Marriage would demonstrate that their rights are being recognised. Such public recognition would also make it easier for young LGBT+ people to be open about their sexuality and therefore access support.

“It’s not the gayness that’s the problem it’s the hiding of it.”

“I feel enormous responsibility to the generation below us to show that normalisation and to move away from this preoccupation that gay is just about sex. We go for dinner, we go the cinema, we have friends – we just live a normal life. I think the likes of the visibility and refusing to hide are important. There were very few role models for me coming out.”



Others reported that they have created an alternative family structure, with LGBT+ friends and groups playing an important part in terms of emotional support.

“I wouldn’t be out to my family. In terms of the gay people I’m out to, they would be my family. There’s things I can talk to them about that I can’t talk to my family about. Both of my parents are pretty old and there’s no conceivable way I would bring that into their lives – there’s just no way I could do that.”

“After my parents’ death we’ve become really disconnected. Not from my point of view, I’ve tried to be really open and engaged. But I’ve learnt the problem isn’t really with myself. I’ve tried to be open and proud of who I am – but there’s actually no engagement at all – so my friends are my family, my queer family”

“I came out late in life. I was married with 4 children – they’re all grown up now. My parents were very ill – it was a very stressful time. I eventually left my marriage and came out as gay. I’m very happy as a gay person. I regard this group as a wider family and I can say things that I can’t say to my kids. Now I’m a grandfather. We’re redefining family all the time.”

2.2 Marriage Equality

Interviewees regarded civil marriage as societal recognition of their emotional and family life. Civil Partnership was welcomed as a first step towards full equality and many felt that it had supported a shift in societal attitudes:

“I’ve no doubt that it (introduction of Civil Partnership) has made a difference, a lot of legislation has made a difference. The employment legislation for example.....It sets down standards for how the public should behave.”

“When Civil Partnership was introduced a new language appeared – for example, married and civilly partnered and that felt good because you were visible for the first time.”

However, there was general consensus amongst interviewees that civil partnership represented a form of second-class citizenship:

“The massive thing about Civil Partnership is you’re the same but different and the ‘but different’ will always be there, that we are different, until we’re the same without the wee addendum at the end.”



"I was married previously to a man and why would I now choose something less because she's (my partner) not less. A Civil Partnership isn't the same – it's less."

Some interviewees acknowledged that the institution of marriage is an important part of their extended family life and that they were no different to their heterosexual peers in this respect:

"For me it's not about wanting to be celebrated at all I have to say – the way I view it is I have respect for the institution of marriage. We both come from families with parents who have been married to one partner for all their lives. I have a lot of respect for the institution – I don't want to ruin it, I don't want to be better than it I just want to be part of it. I just want to be accepted into it, it's not I'm looking to be celebrated as something different – I just want to be the same as and that's all I'm asking for, nothing more, nothing less."

"People expect us to be different but when it comes to the crunch we're just as boring as everybody else."

A number of interviewees had gone elsewhere to get married and resented that they couldn't have the ceremony closer to home.

"Why would I spend my money, all that time, all that effort here where it's not accepted and I'll go and do it somewhere where I am free to be who I am and love who I want to love. Our families totally respected that – the only thing is they wanted to come to New York for the wedding!"

Many also felt that there was a wider issue in the way in which Northern Ireland is viewed internationally. They thought that the introduction of Marriage Equality would redress the balance and would also have an impact on societal attitudes and behaviour:

"It would send a very strong message to people in the community, particularly the more conservative, more reactionary that things are changing. It would give the general message that society has changed and reinforce confidence in the LGBT community."

"It would add to our national standing because currently we're the only place in Western Europe that still has it as illegal. Gay marriage has been in Spain for 10 years now. So we're a long way behind the rest of Europe."



“In terms of outcomes it would be nice if the North would be seen to be progressive in something. I think it would be nice if we could step forward and say we’ve got equal marriage.”

2.3 Starting a family

Many interviewees saw the institution of marriage as a crucial context within which to have children and rear their family. They considered family structures in the 21st Century to be more diverse for both heterosexual and LGBT+ people.

“We want to have children and that whole process, when you’re gay, isn’t straightforward. It was the main reason we got married.”

“We would be very vocal about the fact we want kids. It’s not that straightforward, it’s expensive. I’ve been told to go out and sleep with someone. You can’t think very much of my marriage if you think I would just go out and cheat on my wife. I find it’s very disrespectful. If a straight couple had a fertility problem they wouldn’t be told go out and sleep with somebody.”

Although most interviewees reported positive experiences with the health and public services, some found difficulties in the lack of recognition of alternative family structures:

“If marriage equality was introduced it would give us a wee bit more rights and more of a leg to stand on with regards to schooling and education.”

“We haven’t come across any negative experiences so far. I will say that any forms we come across say Mother and Father. We did have problems registering the birth in our local council. They kept saying we couldn’t register 2 mothers.....in the end we went to the City Hall and had no bother.”

“We might be tolerated but there’s those opinions that it’s not quite right, it’s not quite normal, it’s okay but it’s not quite right to be having a child in that situation – that there’s going to be bullying.”

The absence of civil marriage legislation in the North of Ireland has raised particular problems, as civil partnerships do not always carry the same legal recognition in other jurisdictions:



“We went to get a passport down South and at that time they hadn’t done the legislation then. When we filled it out we sent their birth certificates. They said we can’t process this because it’s two females on the birth certificates. Where’s the father’s name? I said I can’t give you those details as there is no legal father. They said “We need a father’s name” which struck me as quite ridiculous but they couldn’t cope because, in law, there is no legal father. We had to get an affidavit to say we’d used sperm donation and that we didn’t have the name of the person. It was a nightmare and it cost money to get an affidavit.”

Most same sex couples with children recognised that they were breaking new ground in both the heterosexual and the LGBT+ community. They felt that Marriage Equality would support them to secure greater recognition in their role as parents:

“We just march on, we just get on with it. I suppose it’s slightly tiring at times when we don’t feel like being the first doing everything.”

2.4 Getting older

Older interviewees indicated that the introduction of Marriage Equality could have a positive impact on their visibility and that this would have implications for their care in later life. There was some concern that the religious ethos of many care institutions would prevent them from accessing appropriate care facilities:

“A lot of social provision is provided by churches for both young people and older people. There will come a stage in our lives where we will be vulnerable and where will be then if we’re going to be moving into a religious ethos system? We’ve been tax payers all our lives it’s going to expose us – I’m scared about that.”

“I’m 71 and I’m thinking about later, later life. There’s choppy water in my family. My partner’s not out so that restricts our care. If marriage equality was there I feel it would give us, as a couple, more recognition and more rights.”

“God forbid, if I went into a nursing home like I’d take a pill because basically your gay life is over – it’s not recognised. They don’t even regard it as being a problem because as far as they’re concerned it doesn’t exist.”



3. The conversations

3.1 Young People

From the outset it was important to reach and include as many young people from across Northern Ireland as possible. All too often young people's voices are not heard in public policy debates. That they are interested in putting their views across is highlighted by the fact that more than 250 young people took part in our conversations.

In engaging with young people we followed the NI Executive's "ASK FIRST" standards². These guidelines for effective engagement between young people and policy makers were developed by Children in Northern Ireland and OFMdfM.

We worked in partnership with Youth Action, Northern Ireland's foremost regional voluntary youth organisation, which has worked with young people here for over 70 years. They are located in Belfast and have regional offices in Armagh, Ballygawley, Enniskillen, Newry and the North West. Alongside delivering an impressive array of youth programmes, the organisation plays a significant role in youth work development through research, conferences and publications.

In collaboration with Youth Action we delivered Marriage Equality training to 7 youth work staff and 19 youth work certificate students, placed within the agency. The training offered background information on Marriage Equality, alongside research data on the experience of LGBT+ people in Northern Ireland and exercises designed to promote discussion on the topic. Each of these participants were then given specifically designed training materials and invited to conduct conversations with groups of young people they were working with.

Following the facilitation of the young people's groups we organised a "Let's Talk Marriage Equality event" at Youth Action, to which all young people who had taken part in the conversations were invited. This was an opportunity for young people to share their views directly with the main political parties here. Three parties accepted the invitation to meet the young people and on the day representatives of the Green Party, Sinn Féin and the SDLP came along to listen to the lively debate. Two senior civil servants from the Department of Finance were also in attendance.

Younger people are generally presumed to be more liberal than preceding generations. In relation to attitudes towards Marriage Equality, this has been

² "ASK FIRST" - Northern Ireland Standards for Children and Young People's Participation in Public Decision Making – OFMdfM / Children in Northern Ireland 2012



borne out by the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (ARK) in 2013³. That report shows that 72% of those under 24 agreed that same sex marriages should be as legally valid as traditional marriage, while the same view was held by only 32% of those aged 65 and over.

What they said

It is not, therefore, surprising to report that the young people engaged in the conversations, who ranged in age from 8 to 25 years, were overwhelmingly in favour of Marriage Equality.

“If men and women are allowed to get married why not same sex couples?”

“It’s disgusting that it’s not legal in this country.”

“Everyone should be allowed to fall in love with who they want.”

Many of the young people struggled with the idea that the issue was still up for debate at all. A number highlighted generational resistance.

“I can’t believe we are still even talking about it – people should have equal rights – if I can get married why can’t gay people, end of story.”

“This isn’t a problem for us – it’s older people that are stuck in the past.”

“Older people’s opinions tend to be more negative. The illegality of the issue has influenced older people.”

A lot of young people highlighted the role of the church in leading opposition to Marriage Equality.

“I’m for it – but the bible says God is against it - why are some people not allowed the right to love.”

“The church should have no say in it.”

“Being gay wasn’t encouraged in my Christian run school.”

“I don’t think it’s very Christian to discriminate against people.”

³ http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2013/LGBT_Issues/SSEXMARR.html



Others were clear that politicians were the main block to the introduction of Marriage Equality here, and while this was most often specific, for some it translated into a degree of general disillusionment with politics.

“If our politicians voted for it why is it not in? The DUP, that’s why, - they stopped it.”

“You couldn’t trust politicians here to do anything right.”

Some young people were of the view that Marriage Equality was almost a given and that more effort was needed to highlight Transgender issues.

“A lot of people are fine with gay people but not Transgender. Trans issues are not given as much attention as LGB.”

“More young people are Trans or non-binary now than actually gay.”

The vast majority of young people were enthusiastic in discussing the issue with a very few individuals showing a degree of apathy.

“I don’t really care either way – it doesn’t affect me.”

A small number of individuals expressed the view that too much attention was placed on LGBT+ issues and that there was a fear of expressing this.

“I’m sick of hearing the word LGBT – why does it have to be rammed down your throat?”

“I don’t really care about this stuff but I’m scared to say so in case someone says I’m homophobic.”

Group leaders, commenting on the discussions felt that these were very positive experiences for the young people taking part. One felt that the discussion had “opened their eyes up to politics”. Another reported that initially many young people in the group were awkward in the discussion and merely echoed their parents’ prejudicial views. However, as the discussion developed and they were challenged they began to explore their own beliefs and ended up agreeing that gay people should be treated equally.

Young people working together at the “Let’s Talk Marriage Equality event” generated a statement for politicians.

“Being a member of the LGBT community is not a problem – it isn’t causing any harm. Guns, drugs and crime are a problem



and shouldn't be allowed. Gay marriage isn't hurting anyone. THIS IS DISCRIMINATION!"

In order to ensure that the conversation continued, those attending the event wrote a letter to themselves outlining their commitment to raise the topic of Marriage Equality for discussion in particular areas of their lives. These letters were posted out to them 3 months later so they could assess how well they had delivered on their commitment.

3.2 Faith groups

The attitudes and doctrinal positions of faith groups were often cited by other participants as the main obstacle to the introduction of Marriage Equality in Northern Ireland. It was important, therefore, to meet with and support conversations within the range of faith groups in the North of Ireland. To that end individual and group conversations were held with representatives of the Muslim faith, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Non-Subscribing Presbyterians, LGBT Irish Presbyterians, evangelical Christians and the Living Church (Catholic). In addition to this Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and atheists were present in the range of groups who hosted conversations. Conversations were also held with those who had established groups that are supportive of LGBT people. For example, Spectrum was established in January 2017 and has supportive heterosexual people alongside LGBT+ Christians involved in worship.

The current doctrinal position of faith institutions has been well documented although it is useful to summarise some recent developments. There is considerable disparity in relation to the views held on the introduction of civil marriage for same sex couples. For example, the Lutheran churches in Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland all solemnise same sex marriages. In Britain also, the Unitarian church, the Quakers and the liberal Jewish faith council have all strongly supported the extension of civil marriage to same sex couples. In 2017 the Scottish Episcopal Church amended their canon law to allow same-sex couples to marry in the church. The Theological Forum of the Church of Ireland delivered a report *An Approach to the Theology of Same-Sex Marriage* to the General Assembly in May 2017. This invited the Church to:

"take stock of its history of discrimination at different levels and in different ways against gay people and to apologise individually and corporately to do better"

However, the General Assembly stopped short of support for same sex marriage within the church.



The Catholic Church in 2016⁴ stated:

“Every person, regardless of sexual orientation, ought to be respected in his or her dignity and treated with consideration, while ‘every sign of unjust discrimination’ is to be carefully avoided particularly any form of aggression or violence..... as for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family”.

However, Pope Francis has revealed a more nuanced position in relation to same sex civil unions⁵ in 2017:

“‘Matrimony’ is a historical word. Always, in humanity, and not just in the Church, it was a man and a woman. It’s not possible to change it just like that It’s not possible to change it. It is part of nature. That’s how it is. Let us call it, then, ‘civil unions’. Let us not play with truths.”

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, following the referendum in the Republic of Ireland, introduced an amendment in 2016 to their Code to reassert their doctrinal position and state that:

“Since the beginning of creation God, in his gracious purpose, provided marriage as the accepted way in which a man and a woman may come together as husband and wife. This is the only basis on which marriage can take place within the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.”

In recent years, a number of Christian organisations have been established to support equal rights for LGBT+ people and they have sought to influence the established churches:

“Equality should not be ambiguous. Rosa Parks, the black civil rights heroine, wasn’t satisfied by being told that she must settle for simply being on the bus but could only sit at the back of the bus, not the front. Similarly, same sex couples should not have to settle for a cold and legally defined contract, civil partnership weaker than marriage, while the full equality of civil marriage, with its rights and responsibilities, is denied to them.”

⁴Francis, Pope. (2016) *Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican City

⁵ Francis & Wolton, D. *Politics and Society*. Editions de L’Observatoire. Paris



Changing Attitude Ireland (2013)

What they said

The conversations demonstrated the strength of the doctrinal and social views held by different faith groups. However, many of the leaders acknowledged the increased visibility of LGBT+ people within their communities and congregations and they are aware of their pastoral obligation to them.

The doctrinal issues in relation to same-sex marriage often reflect a literal translation of the Koran or Bible and for many faith leaders this position is non-negotiable. However, the ways in which these doctrinal positions are interpreted and how they relate to congregations raised many questions. For example, how differences within Christianity in relation to marriage equality are discussed and handled is an important issue.

“We’ve made it a salvation issue in Northern Ireland. I can understand that it’s a theological issue and that’s normal and healthy – where we’ve overstepped the line is we’ve made it a salvation issue. So we’re saying to people who are LGBT+ you cannot be Christian and be LGBT+. When people say you cannot know God and be gay – it’s very arrogant.”

Ordained evangelical female pastor

“What needs to happen is people to say I know you disagree with me on this but you’re also a brother or sister in Christ and you’re part of the same family. If you have a disagreement with your brother you’re not going to leave and join another family. We need to learn to get on with each other in spite of this. What needs to happen is that people will say ‘I’ll take you seriously as a fellow Christian’. Can we not still come together and worship – that’s what’s missing! That’s what needs to happen instead of everyone saying that gay marriage is okay

Spectrum member

There was general recognition that the language used in public debate around the LGBT+ issues has often been derogatory and destructive.

“When I was growing up it was in the context of homosexuality being a criminal act – any time it was talked about it was in those absolutely derogatory terms – it was horribly talked about.”

Presbyterian minister

“It’s not just about the theological position, it’s about the tone of the discussion. People feel quite hurt the issue has been talked about in very un-Christian ways in the past.”

Presbyterian minister



“Bullying is horrendous and to some extent I’m hearing that the church has been at the very forefront of that. On behalf of the church I would want to apologise that we would bully people because of something they can’t help. I am sorry.”

Presbyterian Minister

Others felt that they had, unjustly, been accused of homophobia:

“I would try to honour and accept every individual that I meet, whatever path they take – but I know that other people, because I think what I think, will think that I’m homophobic – there seems to be such virulence and attack within the hard line of the discussion that I would want to back away from that.”

Presbyterian minister

Many faith leaders also recognised that the emotional and mental well-being of the LGBT+ community was important in their ministry and had changed their attitudes on this issue.

“Seeing the impact that homophobia was having on young people – through working on suicide – was the start of my journey towards acceptance and affirmation of the LGBT community. Leaving aside theology, for me it was a human reaction, I parked any reservations I had from a scriptural viewpoint. I started to hear stories, usually tragically after a suicide – my exposure to folk within the LGBT community and hearing those stories started me on the journey out of homophobia”

Presbyterian minister

“I’ve witnessed people who have ended up severely mentally ill because they cannot bring it out because of their parents. I watched them being taken to Christian counsellors and they’ve ended up in hospital. I’ve seen other people being set free by coming out and being true to them selves and by having other people around them who will cheer them on and who will love them.”

Evangelical Conservative Christian

There was also considerable evidence that the relatives and friends of LGBT+ people were requesting support and guidance from their clergy and faith leaders.

“I haven’t had any conversations with parishioners revealing they are gay – but I have had conversations with parents of gay children and these have been in the main conversations of great



pain. They feel, as a parent, they can't talk about it in the church and they don't feel supported by the church."

Presbyterian minister

Although religious groups will be exempt from any legislation, concern was expressed that pressure will be brought to bear, from within the various churches, to revise their position in relation to officiating at same-sex marriages:

"If I have problems with the whole lesbian and gay thing I will let you know. But I do think that people should be treated with dignity and equality therefore I would be pro civil marriage for the lesbian gay community. But I think the church has the question, how long will it be before Ministers are going to be forced into doing, against their conscience, marriages within the church."

Presbyterian minister

"I think the big anxiety with regards to the church is if gay marriage is legislated for then the issue would be about a married gay couple coming to church, say the Presbyterian church, there is no framework for accepting or dealing with that."

Presbyterian minister

Other faith leaders felt that a commitment to justice and fairness was important:

"It seems to me that the just and right thing to do is to say there should be equality and that gay couples should be able to get married – by the state. Sometimes I think that in modern thinking, if you have a disagreement with someone you're not being just or fair or whatever or you're not loving or respecting them. Disagreeing with people is not to say we don't love them or care for them. But you have to ask what is just? – what is right?, in this situation."

Presbyterian minister

There was general agreement that the Civil Conversations Project had provided a useful opportunity to discuss these issues in a non-confrontational setting. It was the first time for many faith leaders to have a conversation that wasn't adversarial.

"I don't want to be part of theological debates that aren't respectful but I do think that conversations need to be had – for me there needs to be a re-education even at the level of our



young people as well. If I hadn't stayed in a bubble all the time things might have changed earlier. One on one conversations are the way forward."

Spectrum member

3.3 Sports organisations

Conversations were held at individual and group level with representatives of the governing bodies of rugby, soccer and Gaelic sports. None of these organisations have focused specifically on LGBT+ experience in their sport. Ulster Rugby have, in the past, supported a gay rugby team for the Gay Rugby World Cup and the team affiliated to the RFU (Rugby Football Union). All the sporting organisations have, in recent years, paid more attention to the importance of promoting emotional and mental health as well as physical health amongst their players. The GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) have Health and Well-Being Committees in each local club and have a Respect campaign promoting diversity at all levels of the Association. Ulster Rugby has developed a Health and Well-Being Strategy and has partnered with Action Mental Health to run sessions on Resilience and Mental Health for the under 18 age group, coaches and parents. The IFA (Irish Football Association) has a Football for All social responsibility programme.

Homophobia in sport has been subject to more scrutiny and research in recent years. A study⁶ in 2015 reported that 77% of all participants in sport had witnessed or experienced homophobia in sport and 85% believed that an openly gay person would not be safe at a sporting event. Football was perceived as the sport where homophobic comments were most likely to be heard at events⁷ with 81% of respondents reporting homophobic incidents as opposed to 9% in rugby.

Both rugby and GAA have experience of male players being open about their sexual orientation. However, there is only one soccer official who has 'come out' in Britain and Ireland.

"Homophobia is still a problem, but things are improving all the time. You can change the game and culture when you change your mind – and those who do need education generally change their ways once they've been made aware that their behaviour is unacceptable in society."

Ryan Atkin 2017 (first football referee /official to 'come out' as gay)

What they said

⁶ *outonthefields.com* (2015)

⁷ ICMUnlimited survey (2017)



The conversations revealed that there is still some ambivalence about the impact of homophobic or heterosexist comments on players:

“You’d hear on the hurling pitch, get up you gay boy – but there’s no badness in it”

“You know that sort of stick, it’s not very deep. People can be very fair-minded, it’s quite light and doesn’t reflect what they feel deep down”

“There’s no hurt in it – when you’re from a rural background you’re more battle hardened – young people from a city environment they’re not as battle-hardened”

Sports officials

Each organisation reported in their conversation that there is a visible and ‘out’ lesbian presence in their sport and they commented that it is harder for gay men to be open about their sexual orientation.

“Right across Europe there’s not that many openly gay male footballers. There’s quite a few openly gay female footballers, here in NI as well. It’s probably one of the biggest issues that hasn’t really been tackled in football because obviously there’s people out there who are afraid to come out, for fear of whatever! “

Sports official

“There is a perception – sport is more physical – that it’s easier for girls to come out than it is for boys. Being sporty and being lesbian is an easier mix. Sport is seen as a masculine thing whereas men who are gay in sport will find it harder to come out because it challenges their masculinity. There’s still plenty of gay men who play sport, who excel at their sport but there’s still that perception”

Sports official

A number of obstacles to change were identified, both internal and external to the organisations. Sport is often identified as a ‘macho male’ culture with shame attached to an expression of emotions:

“Often in that male macho environment where everybody is acting so tough – they don’t easily share their femininity, their softer side or whatever. They said it’s often suppressed, they found that a lot of people prosecuted for hate crime have that in their make-up”

Sports official



The traditional and often male management structure within some sports organisations was also identified as a barrier to progress:

“At Committee level it’s all blokes, too many committees and boards are all blokes and so they don’t have a balanced discussion”

Sports official

Marriage equality was general viewed as a societal rather than a sporting issue although most of the individuals involved supported its introduction, even those with deeply held religious views:

“When you’re born, I’m sure, it’s not something you can choose – in the end of the day it’s the man above. It’s not something you can prevent – you can’t prevent being gay, you can’t prevent being straight either. You can’t prevent the way that you feel – that’s the way we’re born. Everybody has to accept it. And a church cannot stop any marriage. Years ago when there was less media, the box wasn’t in the corner (the television). Maybe when we were growing up the gay word wasn’t mentioned. All you thought about was male and female, boy and girl. It’s a lot easier for me to accept now and I believe that no matter what church it is - any couple should be able to get married.”

Sports official

Others felt that the moral stance of political representatives should be respected.

“The representatives have to stay true to their own morals – whatever your morals are you can’t abandon them. You have to stay true to your morals and we all have to understand that – at the end of the day they are people and have to use their hearts and minds. I wouldn’t vote for someone who just swayed with the people and went after the popular vote every time. You can’t abandon your moral beliefs.”

Sports official

3.4 Women

To ensure the representation of women’s perspective, conversations were held with over 70 women from 6 different groups in both an urban and rural context. The women also represented a broad spectrum of socio-economic background, race and marital status.



What they said

Many women acknowledged that attitudes have changed over the years and they were aware of and readily accepted the problems faced by LGBT+ people in their community, in the past:

“They were all labelled and were treated really as outcasts – looking back now it was awful. I’d never heard the word lesbian – men seemed to be more obviously gay.”

Rural women’s group

“There’s always been gay people and isn’t it funny now nearly everybody now knows somebody who’s gay or lesbian – they used to go to London to be gay.”

Rural women’s group

There was also an acknowledgement that women found different sexualities easier to accept.

“It’s ok being heterosexual nobody asks you, nobody is telling you you’re not normal. Nobody is asking you questions if you’re heterosexual. Why should we be asking gay people the same thing. Your sexuality is your own business and you should be able to be who you are in a society where everybody is allegedly equal.”

Urban women’s group

“It’s more acceptable for girls than for men. Women are more accepting. Men are more threatened.”

Urban women’s group

When asked for an explanation of this difference in attitude, some expressed the view that it was the prevalence of a ‘macho attitude’ in society:

“There’s a toxic masculinity here that needs to be overcome. Even with young men, who may just be more sensitive and they’re not gay or if they choose a career that’s not masculine they get a hard time. We need to combat those attitudes – what’s a man, what’s a woman and why do you have to be in a box with a certain career, a certain lifestyle just because you’re male or female.”

Urban women’s group

Others thought that women were influenced by their children’s attitudes and experiences. Every group agreed that young people meet LGBT+ people at their schools and clubs and that this is not unusual for them:



“We all have more awareness of gay issues through our children, not because our children are gay but because of the society they’re in.”

Rural women’s group

“I think the young people could actually teach us not just about gay and sexuality but also about cross-community friendships. They could teach us if they’re allowed to.”

Urban women’s group

As mothers, many stated that they felt protective of their children and often, of children in their communities.

“There’s four young adults on our estate and everybody knows they’re gay and we’re very protective of them. They’re our children and they go about in groups.”

Urban women’s group

Despite increased visibility and support, many mothers had hidden their children’s sexual orientation due to feelings of shame and fear of rejection by their community.

“I think the parents are the ones that try to hide it, that their son or their daughter is gay, they keep it quiet for years and years.”

Urban women’s group

When asked about the obstacles to Marriage Equality, most women cited political and religious opposition:

“The Petition of Concern makes me laugh because we have a party that’s using it, abusing it. That’s not what it was there for in the first place and what annoys me is that they called in the party whip. The fundamentalism that there is in Stormont is not mirrored in the community on the ground.”

Urban women’s group

“I personally don’t think that religion has any place in politics. There should be no votes - whether it’s marriage equality or any other thing. It should not be based on biblical teachings. That’s politics. If you want to learn about being a Christian, go to your church. It shouldn’t be in Stormont – that’s about decision making, the economy and wider societal issues not your faith.”

Urban women’s group



3.5 People with disabilities

Disability Action and the Rainbow Project, have undertaken some work examining the intersection between having a disability and belonging to the LGBT+ community⁸. Their report highlighted the difficulties of people with disabilities who were also LGBT+. Often they felt excluded in both communities.

“People who are gay and disabled then experience double-shaming - it's bad enough being gay, but being disabled and gay is much worse. It leaves you open to being ridiculed and the butt of jokes from others. It's extremely lonely - you are shunned because you are gay and when you finally get the courage to meet other people like yourself, they shun you too because you're not like them either.”⁹

In 2012 the Equality Commission undertook an equality awareness survey¹⁰. This reported that people with a Limiting Long Term Illness (LLTI – a term that includes many disabled people) were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards LGBT+ people than those without a LLTI. Figures show that only 13% of those with a LLTI regarded Sexual Orientation as an important equality issue compared to 20% of other people¹¹.

When asked the degree to which they might or might not mind having an LGB colleague, over 36% said that would mind a little or a lot. This was the second highest proportion among respondents categorised by background characteristics, the strongest resistance, 39%, was expressed by those aged 65 and over.

An important caveat in considering these figures is that people with disabilities are also more likely to have fewer qualifications, to have lower socio economic status and to be older. Those factors may have more bearing on attitudes than having a disability per se.

One experience shared between people with disabilities and people who are LGBT+ is that of being subjects of hate crimes. Statistics in Northern Ireland¹² show that during the ten years 2005 – 2015, hate crimes against the LGBT+ community rose by 35% and those against people with disabilities rose by 49%.

⁸ McClenahan, S. “Multiple identity; Multiple Exclusions and Human Rights: The experiences of people with disabilities who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people living in Northern Ireland. Disability Action and The Rainbow Project. 2012

⁹ ibid page 130 and 177

¹⁰ Do you mean me? Discrimination: attitudes and experience in Northern Ireland ECNI 2011

¹¹ ibid page 74

¹² Trends in Hate Motivated Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2015/16 Annual Bulletin published 24 November 2016 PSNI



What they said

We facilitated two conversations with groups of people with disabilities, in Derry and Belfast. People attending had a range of sensory, physical and intellectual disabilities. Both groups had been established and working together regularly for a number of years.

Many spoke eloquently and movingly of the discrimination and abuse they face on a daily basis. One of the most striking aspects of this was the extent to which they equated their experience with that of the LGBT+ community.

“Calling people names like ‘shirt-lifter’ – that’s classed now as a hate crime – I tie that in with my experience of being called ‘retard’, ‘handicapped’, ‘spastic’ and ‘dipstick’. It’s deeply offensive.”

“To be disabled in this society is to know marginalisation, is to know social isolation and exclusion – sometimes intentionally, sometimes not.”

“We have a similarity – LGB people and disabled people – because people think they can talk about us and dictate to us what we should be doing – they try to normalise people with disabilities and the same with gay people – so there is a similarity between the two.”

“Ultimately this all goes back to attitudes – be it about LGBTQ or be about disability.”

There was a sense of solidarity with the LGBT+ community.

“Disability doesn’t discriminate – it can happen to anyone – so maybe we can identify more with people who face prejudice – some people with disability are prejudiced themselves of course, but the majority are more inclined to be open.”

There was also a sense of certainty that Marriage Equality would eventually come about in Northern Ireland.

“If it came to a referendum here people from all backgrounds – unionist, nationalist – and even DUP supporters – would vote in favour.”

“Marriage Equality will happen – it has to happen – the politicians have turned away so it might be under direct rule again – but it will happen.”



It was clear in both groups that participants were well used to political debate and analysis and had a shared understanding of rights issues. When contemplating the obstacles to this equality measure the churches and politicians were identified.

“The problem is religion up to a point – if you genuinely believe that god created man in his own image then surely you have to accept that he created homosexuals in his image? But religion is used as a perversion and a corruption to further the aims of a very narrow section of the political elite.”

“The petition of concern is a flaw in our political system – the DUP aren’t meant to use it like that.”

“They wouldn’t let the Sexual Orientation strategy be produced, they blocked it and blocked it and it was never done.”

This analysis was accompanied by a deep sense of frustration that this aspect of rights was yet to be delivered.

“Here it’s like a closed-in society, not everybody, but those with closed minds feel they can dictate that this is the way it should be. It is the powers that be that are stopping gay people getting married - in the name of Christianity. All these assumptions that gay people don’t have faith – it’s pure ignorance.”

“It’s ridiculous that this is supposed to be part of the UK but gay people aren’t allowed to get married, and that Ireland is supposed to be run by the church but the people there said yes to gay marriage – why is it so different here?”

Overall the degree of empathy, expressed by the participants, towards the LGBT+ community was marked. In stark contrast to the findings of the ECNI attitudes survey members of both groups showed a high degree of awareness of rights issues pertaining to the LGBT+ community and their attitudes were manifestly supportive.

3.6 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people

In an effort to reach more marginalised individuals and groups, individual conversations were held with representatives of two Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups. The 2011 census reported that 1.8% of the Northern Ireland population were from a minority ethnic group. Research has demonstrated that BAME people in Northern Ireland experience high levels of racism:



“Many people from BME communities have been subjected to abuse, physical or verbal attacks or less favourable treatment at home, on the street, at work, in the shops or when accessing services, including from children. There is concern that the attitudes of indigenous Northern Ireland people are changing with some becoming less welcoming in their attitudes perhaps due to the recession and concern for jobs and opportunities. Negative media reporting or attitudes and behaviours from service providers add to this. Northern Ireland society needs to acknowledge and take seriously the fact that racism is a reality of many people’s daily lives.”¹³

The impact of racism cannot be underestimated as some LGBT+ people face the dual struggle of dealing with homophobia and racism. The representatives of both organisations who were interviewed acknowledged that they have LGBT+ members but were unaware of the numbers of people that may involve.

What they said

It was reported that there are generational differences for BAME communities. Many people can feel torn between, an often traditional, familial culture, which may not recognise or approve of different sexualities, and the society into which they have been born where these issues are becoming more visible:

“Cultural differences are hard for first and second generation immigrants, by the third generation it is gone”

The BAME groups felt they were not equipped or resourced to support their LGBT+ members and rely on the LGBT organisations to support LGBT asylum seekers and ethnic minority people.

“We have a few lesbian and gay asylum seekers. We can help them with food and accommodation but generally we send them to the gay organisations for support.”

3.7 Trade unions

Conversations were held with two branches of a trade union, which has policies addressing all aspects of LGBT+ equality including support for Marriage Equality. However, they recognised that it’s still difficult to come out as LGBT in the workplace.

¹³ Rogers & Scullion (2014) *Voices for change: Mapping the views of BAME people on integration in Northern Ireland*. NICEM



Local research¹⁴ reported that:

- Almost 1 in 4 (24.5%) respondents from the public sector conceal their sexual orientation in the workplace
- More than 1 in 4 (26.3%) LGB people working in the public sector believe that their sexual orientation will have a negative impact on their chances of progressing in work
- More than 1 in 4 (26.9%) respondents across all workplace sectors have had reason to make a complaint relating to their sexual orientation or perceived sexual orientation
- Of those that made a complaint working in the public sector, 32.2% said no action was taken

What they said

They affirmed that their union had a progressive history in relation to LGBT+ rights even though they acknowledged that it is still difficult to 'come out' at work. Many of them also have LGB relatives and friends who have hidden their sexual orientation and suffered poor health outcomes as a result. Others emphasised the importance of LGBT+ people being supported by their friends and relatives:

"I've a friend, we all grew up together, and every time we went out he was called a 'fag' or whatever. He was always put down but we were always with him and stood up for him."

"I've a cousin and he didn't come out until his 40's – I think it was at my grandmother's funeral. We said you're only coming out now as though we didn't already know. He hid that for all that length of time."

"I have a brother-in-law and he was gay. He got married and had kids and he took to the drink. Their marriage broke up. He thought he had to get married – he hid it and he hid it and he hid it for so long."

Some people felt that Civil Partnership was sufficient in terms of rights for LGBT+ people.

"I don't understand why people feel they have to be married."

"There's a guy we work with and he's very religious. He says 'Why do they have to use the word marriage? – why can't they use their own word?'."

¹⁴ O'Hara, M. (2012) *Through Our Eyes – Experiences of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in the Workplace*. The Rainbow Project. Belfast.



There were some concerns as to how legislative changes may impact upon religious groups:

“Once you say that it’s okay in law to have a marriage then the churches are concerned that people would take a case against the church – either within the church - Why can’t I have it? They’re worried about a split in the church.”

Others thought that when people placed a higher priority on broader societal issues, religious values became less of a concern:

“In the south people voted Yes because they wanted their children to be happy. They didn’t necessarily change their religious habits.”

“People go back to it all the time man and woman, man and woman.... But times have changed.”

Generally the trade unionists thought the main obstacle to the change was a political one:

“It’s the Petition of Concern – we would have it if it wasn’t for the Petition of Concern.”

“Why don’t they take a party vote and see what the change is?”

3.8 The business community

The conversation with the business community was held before the NI Assembly elections in March 2017. The still incumbent Minister for Finance, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, invited a number of senior business figures, from multinational corporations, employers and trade organisations to attend and was present to hear their views, along with a Departmental official.

The relevance of Marriage Equality law reform to business and commerce might not be immediately apparent. However, campaigns to bring about Marriage Equality around the world have generally successfully engaged the interest, and often the support, of the business community. This is most evident in the USA where almost 400 businesses, including 40 of the Fortune 100 companies, signed an amicus brief submitted to the USA Supreme Court in support of the business case for marriage equality.¹⁵ These included a range of

¹⁵www.supremecourt.gov/ObergefellHodges/AmicusBriefs/14556_379_Employers_and_Organizations_Representing_Employers.pdf



companies as diverse as PricewaterhouseCoopers, Bank of America, Coca-Cola, Amazon, Colgate and Walt Disney.

Research in the USA points to a compelling business case for the introduction of Marriage Equality. For example, a 2013 study¹⁶ by the University of Michigan looked at almost 300 USA companies that had set up same-sex domestic partnership benefits for their employees between 1990 and 2006. The companies showed around a 10% increase in their average stock price over the sample period. They also demonstrated significant improvement in operating performance compared to companies that didn't introduce such policies.

The Chief Financial Officer of PricewaterhouseCoopers has also articulated the economic argument for Marriage Equality.¹⁷

"All told, marriage inequality is estimated to cost the private sector \$1.3 billion in 2015. That's \$3.5 million per day. As the CFO of PwC I see how laws that prohibit same-sex marriage cost my company money."

Closer to home, when the Republic of Ireland referendum was underway the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC) was moved to comment that

"Failure to support civil marriage equality may do untold damage to Ireland's international reputation."¹⁸

The Confederation argued that:

"The case for civil marriage equality is based on three key areas, it's good for Ireland, it's good for business and it's good for individuals."¹⁹

Referring to the companies supporting the USA Supreme Court amicus brief, IBEC pointed out,

"International organisations like these favour countries where their employees will be supported and treated equally, knowing it leads to greater productivity and a greater market reach for them."²⁰

¹⁶ Nadar, V., Lui, F. Management Science, Vol 59, Issue 3

¹⁷ Fortune.com/2015/04/28/the-business-case-for-same-sex-marriage/

¹⁸ <http://agenda.ibec.ie/1oqj6botzcx>

¹⁹ ibid

²⁰ ibid



What they said

It was clear in the conversation with the business community here that such lessons were not lost on participants.

“There’s a significant interrelationship between strong economic development and the issue of tolerance.”

The impact of social media in the current business climate was illustrated. One participant spoke of gay friends attending a wedding here and who stayed at an alternative hotel because social media reported the wedding venue was not LGBT friendly stating a clear preference for staying at a “gay-friendly” hotel. There was a concern that some hospitality outlets might lose custom because they weren’t aware of how to be welcoming to the gay community.

“Here there’s a resonance not be on the front foot about it, because of things like Asher’s, because you might offend a consumer. But the balance to that is that you’re not representing equality for someone who is gay.”

People felt that things here have changed in recent years and that the business community needs to take a position.

“We perceive there’s been a significant shift in the last few years on this issue – the same as the shift in the South, as reflected in the referendum.”

“There is a groundswell change in attitudes towards gay people here.”

“Business here needs to show leadership in this regard. Although there may be issues for some of our clients, in our company we had to take the decision that diversity is more important, equality is more important.”

“I think business has a massive role to play here in terms of advocating for Marriage Equality.”

However some were candid in setting out the difficulties in being seen to support change and clearly identified politics as a major obstacle.

“There are political parties in the former Government who are not for Marriage Equality – the thinking is always, are we going to annoy them? Are we going to burn a bridge? We think it’s right to support Marriage Equality, but there’s a hesitation.”



“The challenge for businesses is not about doing it ourselves – it’s about stepping out and taking a point of view, and businesses don’t do that in Northern Ireland. Historically – it’s because this is a difficult place to be in – these things are party political – don’t underestimate how difficult it is.”

There was a definite perception that standing up on issues like Marriage Equality, that have a party political dimension, carried some risk to business. Some participants said that even though their analysis suggested that Brexit would be damaging to Northern Ireland, they had taken a soft line on the issue because they were afraid of appearing to be party political. Interestingly there was a converse view that the business sector might be best placed to challenge the status quo.

“I think the only sector that politicians are a bit hesitant about pushing against is the business sector, because we have major employers here. They will play a bit of politics, but if the business sector comes out en masse and says ‘this is important’ – its very, very difficult for politicians to push back. You never heard the DUP, who were clearly pro leave, criticise the business community for some of the clear stances we took on Brexit.”

There was a view that, while acknowledging the hesitation of some to act, there was also a moral imperative

“When you say it’s the right thing to do but we have to be careful not to offend people – my push back to you would be – if it’s the right thing to do, then do it – people will get over being offended.”

There were clear arguments in relation to how the lack of Marriage Equality could impact directly on business here.

“You could have said there wasn’t a competitive differential while there was no Marriage Equality in the South – but now the law in the South has changed. We hire people who can go anywhere – they’re really talented people – so they will make choices and they’ll make it on the basis of tolerance.”

“A lot of the time when we build good companies here – from this entrepreneurial base – they end up being acquired for US companies. They operate from day one on a global stage – they’ve all opened businesses in Belfast, they’re all hiring. Those companies want to know about due diligence – you have to have equality policies.”



“From a business perspective this is a big deal for us. We have 1500 people, we want people to be themselves at work, it’s our belief that everyone will be most productive where they feel most comfortable and congruent in the environment they’re in.”

“Our business is people – how can we attract the brightest and best talent but say ‘your wife won’t be your wife if you come here – she will be your civil partner’ – it’s not acceptable.”

Some participants felt that the issue of Marriage Equality was not yet being discussed within businesses here. Points were made that the issue of sexist language in the workplace was yet to be fully addressed.

“It’s about the use of language. I had to say to someone this week ‘just because she’s young, blond and an intern – delectable, is not a suitable adjective.’ You can’t let that use of language go.”

However some felt that it was an issue that needed to be raised and there were clear commitments made to furthering the conversation and taking action.

“I’m going back to the Board and will say we need to have this conversation. It may sound odd but from a commercial point of view there are opportunities here.”

“I’m totally pro Marriage Equality – but now we need to find a line as to how, as a business community, we can be supportive.”

“I suspect there’s a lot of informal talk about this in business, we can make political parties aware that public opinion on this has shifted.”

3.9 Older people

It is well established that older people are, in general, inclined to be less liberal in their attitudes than their younger counterparts, particularly in relation to issues concerning sexuality. In 2016 the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey asked people here if they would respect people no matter what their sexual orientation was²¹. Overall 91% of those asked said that they would. Among those aged 24 or under, 96% said they would, the figure for those aged 65 or over was 82%.

²¹ <http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2016/Respect/RSSEXOR.html>



In 2013 the NILT survey²² asked about attitudes to same sex marriage, 72% of younger people were in favour but only 32% of older people agreed.

The latest IPSOS MORI²³ poll revealed a similar differential. While, on average, 70% of those surveyed supported Marriage Equality, support among younger people was higher (84%) but lower among older people (47%).

Of course, the issue of Marriage Equality has a direct impact on some older people. The Stonewall charity²⁴ estimates that between 871,045 and 1,219,470 of the LGBT+ population in the UK are over the age of 65. The group has highlighted that some older LGBT+ people are going back into the closet in order to be admitted to care homes, or are being denied admission to care homes because of their sexuality.

On a more positive note, amid reports that significant numbers of older LGB people in the UK have been getting married since the legislation was introduced in 2014, a Relate counsellor noted²⁵:

"Changes in legislation have really helped older people to feel legally safe to come out in today's society. For some of them, they were raised and grew up during a time where it just wasn't allowed, both socially and legally, for you to consider having a relationship about someone that is the same sex as you. The context has changed dramatically in recent years."

A great deal of research has shown a correlation between marriage and happiness for heterosexual couples. A recent USA study explored the potential benefits of marriage for LGB couples and concluded.

"Across a wide range of socioeconomic, social, and health resources, those who were legally married were consistently advantaged relative to those who were unmarried partnered—suggesting that legal marriage is likely beneficial."²⁶

What they said

Three groups of older people were involved in conversations, two in Belfast and one in Cookstown. Lively discussions ensued and there was some debate as to whether older people were more conservative than their younger peers.

²² http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt/2013/LGBT_Issues/SSEXMARR.html

²³ www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/migrations/en-uk/files/Assets/Docs/Polls/same-sex-marriage-ni-2016-tables.pdf

²⁴ www.homecare.co.uk/news/article.cfm/id/1582279/Invisible-older-LGBT-community

²⁵ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/goodlife/living/same-sex-marriages-coming-out-in-later-life-is-a-growing-trend/>

²⁶ <http://age-pride.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Who-says-I-do-the-changing-context-of-marriage-and-health-and-quality-of-life-for-LGBT-older-adults.pdf>



All the groups had an awareness of LGBT+ people from their youth although few of these people were able to be open about their sexual orientation, often with painful and tragic outcomes.

“I knew a wee lad – lovely wee lad – way back when I was 16. He gassed himself because he was that way, it was very sad.”

“I know two young men who took their own lives – one lived across the road – he was just 25 and had only qualified as a teacher. He felt that, as a teacher, he couldn’t come out. I’ll never forget him in his coffin – such a waste”

“My wife’s cousin came out – everybody knew except his mother - when she found out all hell broke loose – he wasn’t abandoned by her but he left home.”

Within the groups of older people there was considerable divergence of opinion. Some felt strongly that they should support LGBT+ people especially members of their families:

“If your children or grandchildren turn out gay – so what? You’re not going to love them any less.”

“They have a right to be together – if they meet someone who is going to give them a life, make them happy – then fair dos – why can’t they get married?”

“At the end of the day they aren’t doing anybody any harm so it’s not for me to say they can’t get married.”

“I’ve no trouble with gays – if they want to get married to protect their interests that’s fair enough.”

Others had strong religious beliefs, which impacted on their opinions:

“The Lord instituted marriage at the feast of Cana – it was between a man and a woman.”

“Marriage is God given – it’s about a man and a woman, it’s in the bible – a man and a woman – nothing else.”

However, others were less persuaded by religious arguments

“What happens if a gay person dies – does the Minister not bury them? If a Minister says ‘I can’t bury her because she’s a lesbian’ – to me, he’s the abomination.”



“Even if you believe in God and listen to the bible – then women wouldn’t be in any positions of power as they’re supposed to be silent.”

“God doesn’t differentiate between sins – he doesn’t say one sin is bigger than another – and we’re all sinners.”

Some older people voiced concerns that clergy might be forced to conduct marriage ceremonies for lesbian and gay couples, and highlighted confusion.

“You need to make it clear that it’s not marriage in a church they’re asking for, a lot of people are against it because they think that churches would be forced to marry gay people.”

“People are talking about gay marriage but most people think marriage equals church wedding.”

“The majority of weddings take place in churches – that’s what makes people think gays are looking to get married in church – that’s why they don’t want gay marriage to happen.”

Some people clearly identified churches and religion as major obstacles to the introduction of Marriage Equality here.

“It’s an awful lot to do with religion in this society – you have to fit it. I think a lot of our religious attitudes are so negative – so, if you don’t fit in you’re out.”

“Looking at Ireland, the influence of the church has really gone down as society becomes much more secularised. In order to get into Europe and get the money, society had to change. Up here we think the rest of the UK is wrong and we’re right.”

“It’s a fear of uncertainty – even those who aren’t church goers or religious still fear it’s a sin and are afraid they’ll be damned for it.”

Many older people felt that politicians were responsible for the lack of progress in relation to Marriage Equality.

“It’s the DUP.”

“People are further ahead than the politicians.”



“I don’t think it’s up to politicians to tell people how to live their lives – you don’t judge people until you walk in their shoes.

“I think if the DUP want to hold on to their voters they need to change.”

Conversations with older people were perhaps the most fractured with clear divisions emerging. While some people certainly expressed a very strong antipathy towards the idea of Marriage Equality, a clear majority articulated a supportive position.



4. Summary of Issues

The Civil Conversations Project, which involved over 500 people, was not intended nor designed to be a consultation nor indeed a poll of public opinion. Rather it aimed to involve a wide section of society in a facilitated conversation that enabled a frank exchange of views in a safe and non-judgemental environment. Nonetheless, it is important to report that the vast majority of participants, in line with recent public opinion polls, were in favour of the introduction of Marriage Equality into this jurisdiction.

The following is a summary of the major issues raised and the perceived obstacles to the introduction of Marriage Equality legislation.

4.1 Religious beliefs

Deeply held religious and doctrinal beliefs in many Christian and Islamic faiths are unlikely to change in the near future. All of the faith groups recognised that the introduction of Marriage Equality legislation was inevitable and also acknowledged the pastoral needs of LGBT+ people within their congregations.

“I got a phone call late one Thursday night from a young person who had heard what was considered to be a very mild, bible loving, sermon on a Sunday about loving the sinner but not the sin. It was delivered by a person who would be considered to be very middle of the road, not in the least bit extreme. That sermon had such a detrimental effect on this young person that they were standing at a train station on a Thursday night waiting to throw themselves in front of a train. Thank God they phoned me - but that is the impact of a sermon from someone who would claim to love that young person.”

Faith leader

Fears were expressed about the potential for division within the faith groups with some conflict between various churches emerging already as some have adopted a more liberal approach to same sex couple’s blessings and marriage.

4.2 Separation of church and state

Many people, particularly those in community groups, felt strongly that there should be an absolute separation of church and state on the issue of Marriage Equality. This was often expressed in comments suggesting that the church should have no influence in relation to who should have access to civil marriage.

“The church shouldn’t have a say in whether people can get married”

Member of women’s group



“It’s the power of the churches that’s getting in the way of Marriage Equality here.”

Member of women’s group

“We’re a multi-cultural society and the state should be separate.”

Rural group member

4.3 Distinction between civil and religious marriage

Opposition to Marriage Equality was most often expressed in relation to deeply held religious conviction. However, it often became apparent that the negative comments were rooted in the notion that the Introduction of Marriage Equality would lead to clergy falling foul of the law if they refused to marry a gay or lesbian couple.

Particularly among older people, the resistance to Marriage Equality dissipated when the distinction between civil and religious marriage was drawn. This misunderstanding was encountered in several of the conversations.

“I’ve no problem with them living together or going to the City Hall to get married – but I would have a problem with them going to a church to get married which is what they are fighting for.”

Member of women’s group

“With the referendum in the south I was very surprised by my parents views – they really didn’t know the difference between civil partnership, religious marriage and civil marriage, I don’t think there’s a lot of conversation around. The religious community don’t seem to know that civil marriage won’t impact on their institutions – the conversation isn’t loud enough for people to understand.”

Business leader

4.4 Fear of change

It was generally acknowledged that one of the obstacles to the introduction of Marriage Equality is the fear of change. Some of this is based on the fear of judgement by family, neighbours and the community. Others suggested that, in a society which has experienced violent conflict, it is important to minimise the differences between and within communities to maintain a level of safety and security. To a great extent, the LGBT+ community remained largely invisible during the “Troubles” and it is only in recent years that communities were able to tolerate the experience of diversity and difference within society. This not only affected LGBT people but also their families. In almost every group, someone revealed for the first time that a close relative is LGBT+. In one group an elderly woman was warmly applauded when she disclosed that



her middle-aged son is gay. She had held on to that 'secret' for many years in fear of judgement or blame.

"There's a whole lot of fears – a human fear of something I don't understand, that's too difficult to engage with so just don't talk about it – there's fear about being faithful to the text, about being faithful to heritage and history – there are fears about uncovering things within me that I don't necessarily want to be uncovered."

Faith leader

"There's always fear with change.... there's a fear that people would be talking about you if you have a son or daughter who's gay – for older people there's embarrassment. Years ago it was all about the neighbours. There still is stigma. With certain people there's no doubt."

Member of women's group

4.5 Accommodating Difference

There was a widespread view among many of those involved in the conversations that people here are generally less accommodating of difference than in the south of Ireland or in the rest of the UK. Many identified an ingrained intolerance towards the LGBT+ community but also towards people with disabilities, and the Black and Asian Minority Ethnic and immigrant communities.

"Society allowed me to trumpet my straight children's marriages but not my son's to his husband."

Rural group member

"Society here is very intolerant – but that's mostly due to people not being educated."

Member of women's group

"The idea that gay people can be cured is a form of sexual fascism – here everybody has to be the same, everybody has to be heterosexual with 2.4 children."

Member of disability group

"We are really imprisoned by the social constructs we have and unless people can get out of that prison in their minds, it doesn't matter what actual framework you live in."

Older person

Some felt that this lack of tolerance stemmed from the conflict here and decades of entrenched sectarianism, which inculcated a fear of difference.



“During the Troubles fear drove you to stick together and be suspicious of anybody outside your community and I don’t think we’ve come out of that yet. Because of the conflict we aren’t even open to people in our own community never mind actually having people come in from outside.”

Older person

“I think we are bigoted – we are all in our groups, there’s the Catholics, the Protestants – the prejudices are there – we are in the dark ages.”

Member of women’s group

“People here are too focussed on the past – the Troubles – even hundreds of years before that – they don’t see what’s happening now, what really matters to people now.”

Member of women’s group

“It’s supposed to be over but it’s not really – people still hate – gays, blacks, Catholics – all the same to some people”

Young person

4.6 Generational differences and diversity

Research indicates that demographic groups can hold widely differing attitudes. This was, to a degree, borne out in the conversations. It was very apparent that the vast majority of young people had very positive attitudes towards the LGBT+ community and were hugely in favour of the introduction of Marriage Equality. Indeed many young people struggled to understand why Marriage Equality was a contentious issue

Some young people felt that older people were much more conservative in their views and indeed a small number ‘blamed’ older people for the lack of progress in this area.

“Old people holding on to old fashioned views, how things were in the past – that stops any movement.”

Young person

Such views were, on occasion, reflected by adults

“If you talk to teenagers about gay marriage, they look at you as if you were a dinosaur to even bring the topic up – it isn’t a problem for them. Politics and businesses are run by older people – they need to get real, they are behind the times.”

Business leader



While it is true that greater numbers of older people expressed negative views, a substantial majority of those involved in conversations proved to be supportive of Marriage Equality.

“It’s ridiculous to suggest that gays and lesbians shouldn’t get married. That idea is from the dark ages”

Older person

Indeed some expressed a degree of frustration at the perception that older people were conservative.

“How do you make the views of older people who think differently more visible?”

Older person

Many participants linked conservative views on issues like Marriage Equality to a lack of diversity within societal structures. Attention was drawn to the absence of women’s representation on Boards of Directors, Government bodies and other decision-making bodies.

“I’ve noticed when we get a female founder, or a good representation of females on the Board – that seems to be the thin edge of the wedge in opening up the language of diversity – the conversations you can have.”

Business leader

“When we raise diversity issues with civil servants we are often looking at a bunch of white men, staring at us with incomprehension. Men generally don’t get it.”

Women’s group

“Most politicians are men – they think like men. They live in a man’s world – they haven’t the first idea what goes on in our communities – what it’s like to be a woman, have disabled kids, be a refugee – all of that.”

Women’s group

4.7 Impact of knowing LGBT people

Personal acquaintance with LGBT+ people undoubtedly promotes positive attitudes. It was evident from comments in many groups that having a LGBT+ person as a friend or family member is a key factor in determining attitudes towards Marriage Equality.

“There is a change in public opinion because people have become more aware who the discrimination is impacting –



people are understanding that it's their brother or sister, nephew or niece and it's become more personal."

Business leader

In particular the toll that discrimination and prejudice has taken on LGBT+ people is more widely acknowledged and has caused increasing concern in the community.

"I grew up thinking that homosexuality was way outside the norm, was something vaguely wrong. But I've learnt from my kids – their friends- meeting gay young people and hearing what they go through has turned me round."

Urban women's group

4.8 Increased visibility

A small number of participants expressed the view that the LGBT+ community was being highlighted too frequently in the media.

"Everybody has their own point of view but I feel at the moment, that we're getting lesbians and gays shoved down our throats."

Older person

"That's all you hear - it's all about the gays – do straights not have rights?"

Young person

"I'm not worried about it but I don't want it shoved down my throat."

Rural group member

Some worried that young people were being influenced to think they were gay and that this was problematic.

"At the moment they're getting far too much publicity and the young people coming up are being swayed by this and think it's glamorous."

Older person

"I worry it's being made trendy – I resent that. My daughter comes home from school saying this one or that one is bisexual – children are too psychologically immature to deal with this stuff."

Rural group member



Some felt silenced within the debate and feared the consequences of going against the popular view.

“When I’ve spoken out I’ve been told to keep it down. You feel sometimes if you speak out you’ll be ostracised.”

Older person

“I couldn’t care less about Marriage equality – but you wouldn’t say out loud because you get a hard time.”

Young person

Yet many young people talked enthusiastically about the increased profile of gay characters on television and the importance of so many celebrities being open about their sexuality or gender identity – they felt this would support young people to think about and question their sexuality and, if they were gay, help them to ‘come out’.

“How’re you supposed to work out who you are or what you want if you don’t see any options?”

Young person

“Thank god, it’s not so secret now – you see far more gay and trans people on TV – Facebook – more celebrities are coming out, nobody cares so you don’t have to care.”

Young person

“It’s good to know there’s not one box you have to go into – you see choices, like, everywhere.”

Young person

4.9 Political influence

In relation to identifying resistances to Marriage Equality, most people attributed the lack of Marriage Equality here to the DUP’s use of the petition of concern.

“The assembly voted for it but Peter Robinson stopped it going through – I don’t think they’ll be able to do that again.”

Member of women’s group

“70% want gay marriage – the block is one thing and that one thing is the DUP. A party that is driven by the faith that was established by the party leader. So, you’ve a man made faith and a man made party, in a sense.”

Member of disability group



While most people, referring to politicians, specifically referenced the DUP as being the key obstacle to Marriage Equality, some comments suggested a general disparagement of politicians here. This was most marked among young people.

“Politicians are the ones causing the problems here – people are sick of them.”

Young person

“They’re all mouthing off but they’re not saying nothing to me.”

Young person

Some business leaders felt there was a hesitation to take a stand on issues upon which the main parties were divided. There was also a view that parties should be confronted.

“In terms of Brexit – the reality is, economically and in every other regard, remaining was best for this region. But because we didn’t want to offend the DUP, because the UUP were a bit on the fence and we didn’t want to look like we were backing Sinn Féin and the SDLP – we took a moderate, middle of the road line. We didn’t want to offend anybody.”

Business leader

“We’re not very tolerant – the political parties don’t operate in a spirit of tolerance – so when, as an organisation taking a stand, you’re thrust into that space – you’re in a party political, highly vindictive, vitriolic, targeted, nasty, aggressive space. Don’t underestimate how difficult it is for a high profile business to be under attack politically in those spaces.”

Business Leader

“Hypocrisy in the political world is something to be contested – we know absolutely fine well that there are gay people in these parties, we know they support them, and that they have family members who are gay. There is something to be said about dealing with hypocrisy in our politics. Let Northern Ireland get a wee bit more adult about this.”

Business Leader

Politicians being out of step was another common theme.

“I don’t think it’s up to politicians to tell people how to live their lives – you don’t judge people until you walk in their shoes. The people are ahead of the politicians”



Older person

“Maybe the politicians should listen to us for a change – they’re dragging their heels – they’ll get left behind.”

Member of women’s group

4.10 Image of Northern Ireland in the wider world

A common theme expressed, by those involved in the conversations, was the impact of being the only part of these islands to not embrace Marriage Equality.

“People wrinkle their eyes when you say where you’re from – they say ‘what kind of country do you live in?’ There should be equality in everything.”

Rural group member

“It’s about the culture and the environment you want to live in it’s already been created by the restrictions placed on society. The air I breathe has been created by the laws and how we see ourselves and the bad press because we’re all seen as DUP.”

Older person

Young people in particular spoke of their embarrassment, for some it influenced their future plans.

“This place is an embarrassment – people elsewhere are staggered by the petty mindedness - I’m getting out of here as soon as I possibly can.”

Young person

Others felt our position in the global market place is compromised.

“You have a situation where you’re going out to the market and telling people – we don’t have Marriage Equality, in the developed world. They’re looking at us and saying – what? We are the only part of these islands that doesn’t.”

Business leader

4.11 End notes

The Civil Conversations Project aimed to listen to people’s opinions rather than attempt to change hearts and minds. However, many people revealed a shift in attitude during the conversations towards greater acceptance of LGBT+ people and their rights. This was partly assisted by access to relevant and local information on the subject. People also recognised that they themselves are part of a society in transition. On this journey of change the support they valued was the opportunity to explore their convictions without judgement and



to become aware of the diversity of opinion among their peers. Many commented that they had reached a greater appreciation of the range of experience and the diversity within their communities.



Appendix 1 List of participants

AGE NI Regional Forum
All Souls Church, Belfast
Amnesty International
Arthritis Care Support Group, Cookstown
Belfast Islamic Centre
Belfast Unemployed resource centre (Routes to Resilience)
Business / Employers meeting – 12 organisations represented
Bytes Youth Forum
Carnmoney Presbyterian Church
Carrickfergus Youth Group
Carrduff GAC
Disability Action Regional Forum
Families Beyond Conflict
Fóram Na n'Óg
Forthspring youth group
Girdwood youth group
Irish Football Association
Irvinestown Community Partnership
Living Church, Diocese of Down and Connor
Mallusk social group
Matt Talbot Youth Centre
North Belfast Women's Network
North West Forum on Disability
Northern Ireland Council for Refugees and Asylum Seekers
Presbyterian ministers (individuals)
Spectrum
South Armagh Rural Women's Network
Sports NI
Star Neighbourhood Centre
Ulster GAA
Ulster Rugby
Unison
Women's Resource and Development Agency
YMCA
Youth Action

LGBT+ groups
The Rainbow Project (Derry and Belfast)
HeReNI
LGBT Irish Presbyterians
Queerspace
Same Sex Family Project

