



SWIMMING IN GLASGOW FOR THE TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY

2015 Community Consultation

LEAP
sports
SCOTLAND

Background

In 2015, LEAP Sports Scotland were approached by community activists who wanted to create opportunities for transgender people to participate in swimming in Glasgow. Following discussions and some planning meetings with Glasgow Life, a community consultation was launched in late August with a view to:

- > Considering the experiences of trans people swimming in Glasgow
- > Establishing if there was a need for trans specific swimming spaces in Glasgow
- > Looking at the best delivery model for swimming participation

This consultation reports on the responses received.

Key Statistics

- > 68 people in total answered the survey.
- > 60 people were interested in participating in regular swimming opportunities.
- > 42 of these people were interested in joining a swimming club.
- > 33 people hadn't been swimming for over a year.
- > 15 people hadn't been swimming in 6 years or more.

Key Findings

Many transgender people enjoy recreational swimming prior to their transition whilst many are on pathways to training, coaching and competing prior to their transition. Most people have reported that this participation is put on hold for a period through transition, and for many people this lasts a long time post transition. For many people this can be years long, with many never returning to the pool. Around half of those surveyed here, hadn't been swimming in over a year.

Most barriers to transgender people's lack of participation in swimming were specific transgender related issues (56%). Gender dysphoria¹ is cited as the most common barrier, closely followed by issues related to swimwear and binding, with many others mentioning changing rooms.

Some of the specific issues discussed included feeling concerned about people staring, about being less able to 'pass' or maintain identity within a swimming environment, and having to make a choice between wearing swimwear associated with one's previous gender or having bodies or body parts on show.

Other barriers to participation (29%) were common sources of concern for transgender people which include issues such as anxiety around body image.

Of those who are not currently swimming, almost 60% felt that they would be interested in a transgender specific swimming initiative with almost 90% overall expressing an interest.

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The main reasons discussed for a transgender specific swimming initiative were about accessing safe, comfortable and non-judgmental environments.

The findings demonstrate a clear need and a desire for swimming participation opportunities for transgender people. Furthermore, there was a clearly expressed appetite for a regular membership based swimming club. A number of participants pointed to the need for good training for pool staff, which is in line with the learning from other clubs and initiatives considered.

Conclusions

There is a clear need for swimming participation opportunities for transgender people. This need comes from a mixture of actual experiences and barriers, and perceived barriers and concerns. In addition, there is an appetite for a regular membership based swimming club.

Who took part in the survey?

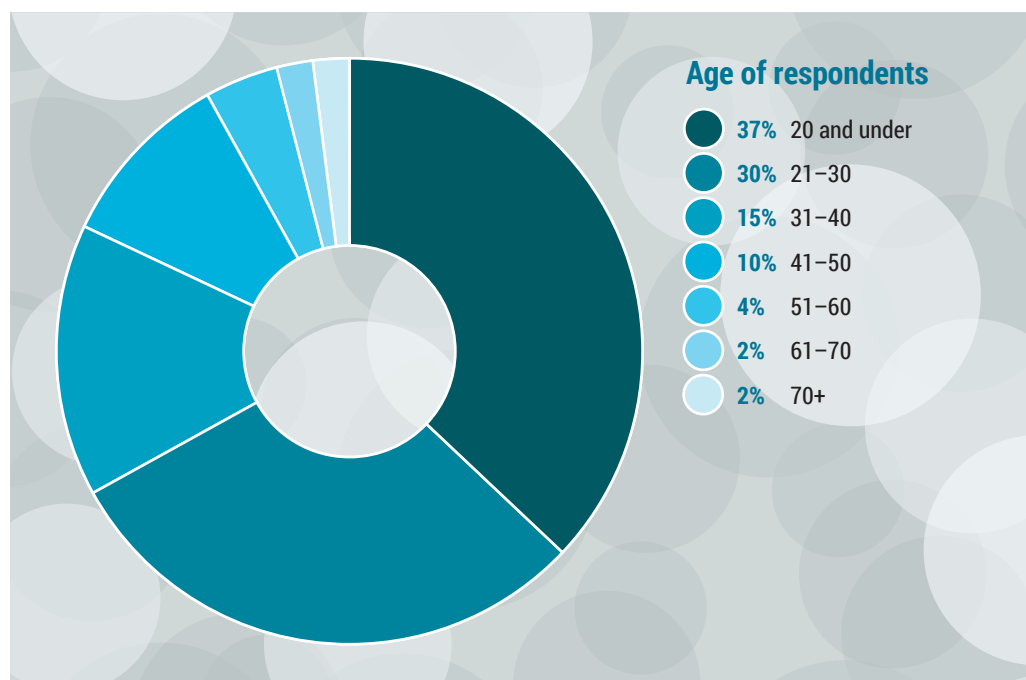
Overall, there were 68 respondents to the survey.

We didn't ask respondents to identify their gender nor to identify their location within the survey.

Identifying gender felt unnecessary as we targeted respondents already who are transgender and we are asking individuals if they might be likely to opt in to a transgender specific swimming group.

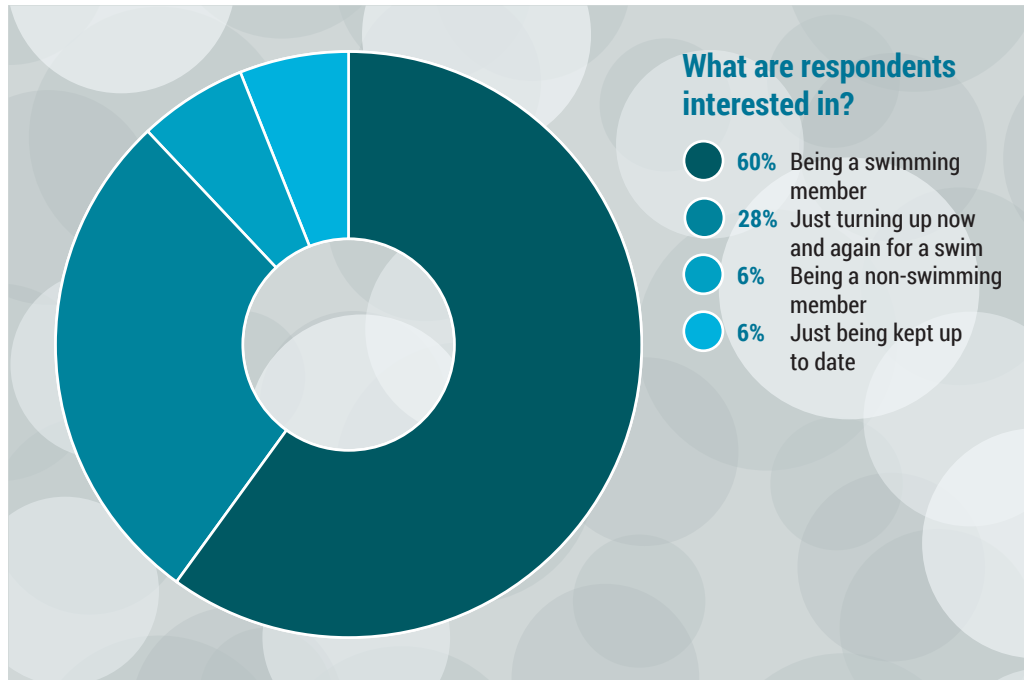
Identifying location would be to presuppose other information which we couldn't necessarily foresee such as likelihood of travelling or how to get to the venue. We do know through the narrative which some people entered that there are a number of respondents living in the authority areas surrounding Glasgow and willing to travel to a group.

We did ask respondents their age and over two thirds of respondents were aged 30 or under: 37% being 20 or under with a further 30% being aged 21-30.



What interest did respondents have in becoming involved in a swimming initiative?

We proposed that in the event of a new group or club being set up that there would be options including the possibility of becoming members or just taking part on a more occasional basis.



Of the 68 respondents, 41 (or 60%) expressed that they would be interested in becoming a member of a trans swimming group. A further 19 said that they would be interested in just turning up now and again for a swim. Another 4 said that they would be interested in becoming a non-swimming member of a group (with examples such as committee, fundraising etc being given as possible routes). Most people ticked the box to ask to be kept up to date with developments but only 4 did so without having chosen any other possibility.





Over and above this, 17 people expressed an interest in training up to be a lifeguard for the group with a few expressing a particular desire for this route within the survey.

Experience of swimming

We asked respondents to tell us about what experiences they'd had of swimming. The overwhelming majority had at least some experience with only 6 telling us that they had no or very little experience, and 5 identifying as strong or ex-competitive.

There were 12 respondents who specifically referred to having had lessons or learnt to swim in their past (some at school), mostly pre-transitioning, and none since.

Some examples of experiences:

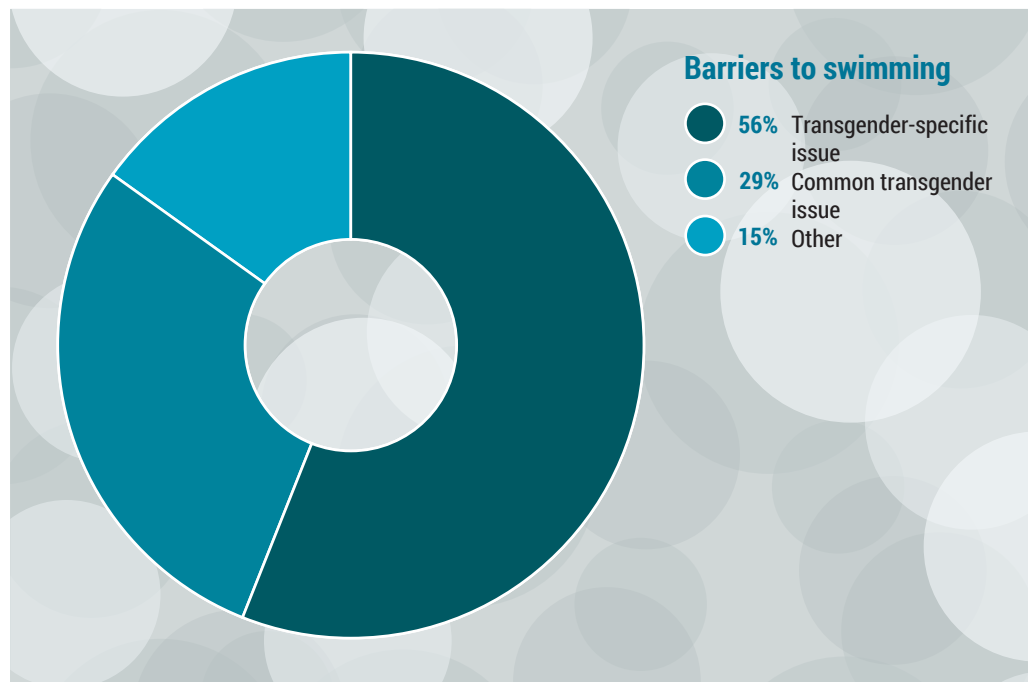
-  *"Yes, although it was stressful, I continued to swim intermittently throughout my transition. I would be happy to help guide trans men and FAAB non-binary people on how to bind and pack effectively and safely for swimming. In my early teens (before my gender dysphoria got too severe) I used to take part in lifesaving and swimming competitions. However, I'm in need of refreshing my technique as I've only been swimming very irregularly over the last 20 years."*
-  *"I used to be part of the East Kilbride team when I was younger but then dysphoria got in the way :("*
-  *"Lots of experience before transition but out of shape now."*
-  *"Yes. I've swam all my life. It is my favourite sport. It helps me with my pain and is a way I connect to my Turkish heritage as my dede (grandpa) also adores swimming."*

Respondents also told us about how long it had been since they had last been swimming. We didn't give options to complete on this one, but have categorised the data we got as follows:

How long since you were last swimming?	Number of people	
Regularly or within the past month	9	Some mentioned today, yesterday or last week, whilst others gave dates.
Within the past year	12	
1-5 years ago	18	
6-9 years ago	7	
10 years ago or more	8	One person said 30 years ago, another said 22 years whilst another said they thought it was maybe about 16 years.
Unspecified	4	One person said they had recently started without saying how long their absence had been, whilst a few just said 'Years ago' or 'ages ago'.

Barriers to swimming

We asked respondents to tell us if they thought there was anything that stopped them from going swimming. There were many and varied answers. Some answers could be aligned to that which we know of the wider population such as motivation, finance, wider health issues and so on, whilst there were many answers which were clearly barriers related to transgender identity or experience specifically. Of responses to this question, 56% referenced transgender-specific issues, such as having to wear binders, explicitly, whilst a further 29% referenced issues that they did not specifically link to being transgender but which touch on factors which are common sources of concern for transgender people, such as anxiety around body image and feeling self-conscious.



Within the 56% of responses that referenced transgender issues explicitly, themes emerged. As a barrier to swimming, 33% cited dysphoria; 30% stated that swimwear/attire was a barrier; 19% felt that suitable changing rooms/facilities or a lack thereof prevented them from swimming. Some examples of experience include:

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"Dysphoria. I stopped going swimming when I started to transition. I hated people looking at me and judging me, and even if they weren't, I thought they were. When I first started to transition, I went a couple of times but I hated having to 'act' in my old gender and it wasn't working for me."
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"Being unsure of the response I will get if I am dressed masculinely and swimming, and the difficulty of choosing between being dysphoric or swimming with a binder on."
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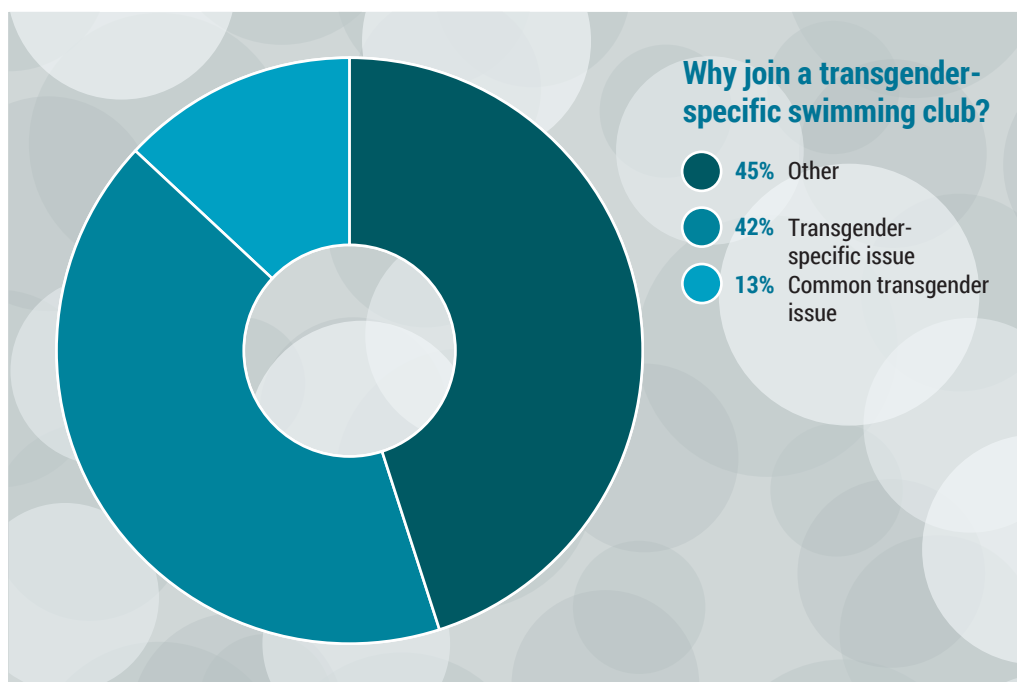
"There is no changing room I can safely go in."
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"Body image – in transition, worried about how to deal with swimwear when 'part way' through transition."


Amongst the 29% who did not refer explicitly to transgender issues, body image was the most frequently mentioned barrier to swimming.


Why might you join a transgender specific club?

We asked respondents to tell us why they might consider joining a transgender-specific swimming club; responses touched on a wide range of issues. Forty-two percent of responses were specific to being transgender, such as being able to avoid dysphoria-triggering situations, whilst another 13% mentioned issues that are commonly experienced by transgender people without making explicit reference to being transgender, such as taking part in activity in a non-judgemental atmosphere. Forty-five percent of respondents referred to something unrelated to being transgender, including a desire to exercise or simply to swim for swimming's sake.



Within the 42% of responses that cited transgender-specific issues, a range of closely-related motivating factors was identified. Thirty-two percent of respondents highlighted the idea that a transgender-specific club would provide a supportive/comfortable environment for them to swim in; 23% observed that such a club would be a non-judgemental environment and a space free from gender expectations; 18% stated that the safety of a transgender-specific club would encourage them to join (although none of those answers elaborate on whether it is matter of emotional or physical safety); another 18% referred to meeting other people from within, or gaining a better understanding of, the transgender community. Some examples of experience include:

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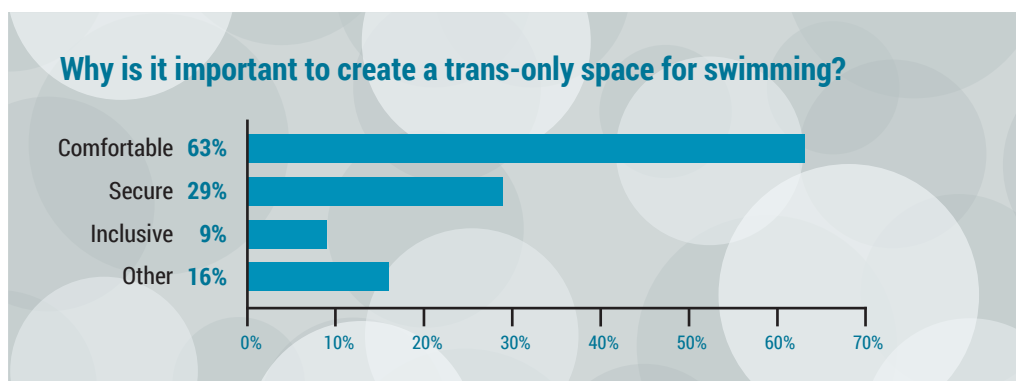
"I am not out, so when I do go swimming it's as female, which is dysphoric and uncomfortable; I would like to try out a trans swimming group to see if I feel better swimming as male. Also I believe that going in a group of people with similar problems will help me stay motivated."
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"Swimming space where my body shape won't cause people to automatically read me as female would make the whole experience a lot more comfortable."

- "I miss swimming, and if there was a safe space I could go to with other transgender people, I'd feel far less anxious and in fear of being harassed."*
- "To learn more, meet others from community."*
- "A place where I can try out how it might be and hopefully build up the confidence to use my local pool."*
- "So I can be a girl with manly face in pool."*
- "Because I haven't been in a pool for almost 30 years and I miss it so much. Actually I felt quite emotional when I saw this post on Facebook and realised how much I really miss the pool."*

We asked respondents to tell us why they felt it was important to create a trans only space for swimming

We asked respondents to tell us why they felt it was important to create a trans-only space for swimming; responses were varied but closely related. Sixty-two percent of respondents felt that it was important as it would provide a place where trans people could feel comfortable (physically and emotionally); 29% felt that a trans-only space for swimming would make participants feel safe/ secure; 9% cited the importance of having an inclusive environment in which to swim; 16% gave another reason (many of which were about swimming itself).²





Some examples of responses include:


- "Swimming is a really good form of exercise and relaxation. It can be very nerve-racking though as a trans person. Trans specific swimming sessions are vital to allow people to engage in swimming without fear of ridicule, harassment, misgendering or exclusion. Empowering trans people to have confidence to go swimming can help trans people to increase their body confidence and self-esteem."*
- "Gendered spaces can be dangerous and confusing for pre transition transgender people who don't fit a gender binary."*


^{2/} Please note: these percentages add up to more than 100 because some respondents gave more than one reason and as such could be counted more than once.



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“So that I don't feel like I can't go swimming because of who I am as a person. I love swimming but in Scotland and in my town I feel uneasy going to the swimming pool or gym.”
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“So transgender [people] can feel the freedom swimming can bring.”
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“Swimming for trans people is at best dysphoric, at worst also terrifying of how people will treat you. For those who aren't out it's horrible having to wear clothes of the wrong gender, for those who are but are pre medical transition it can out them.”
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“Swimming basically has to occur in populated spaces (whereas cycling and running I can easily do outdoors at times with few others around), passing through gender segregated changing facilities.”

Do you have any ideas about what the new group/ club/initiative should be?

We asked respondents to tell us what a new trans-only swimming group/club/initiative should be: the responses were varied, with some respondents focussing on *what* the club or group should do, and others focussing on *how* it should do what it does. The responses that described what the club should do were varied; the most common response (40%) was training, followed by sports development (20%) and facilitating networking (20%). Of the respondents that described how the club should operate, 27% felt that the club should offer swimming in private for trans people; another 27% felt that the club should either be centrally located or should move from venue to venue to ensure that people from as wide a geographic area as possible could attend; and 18% stated that the club should focus on providing a safe environment.

Some examples of responses:

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“Lifeguards and staff would have to be fully educated on the subject to understand the issues that different trans people face. We'd be allowed to use the restrooms/changing rooms of the gender we identify as (along with private spaces for people to get changed who aren't comfortable doing so around other people) Staff should be prepared to tackle any complaints by members of the public swimming and take action against any perpetrators of harassment, violence, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, sexual assault and other inappropriate behaviour.”



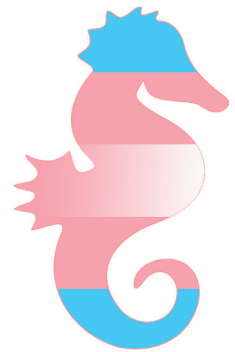
- "Instead of just having a trans-exclusive group, I think it's important to also help people gain the strength to stand up for themselves and not let teasing etc. get them down. For anyone who might be anxious around cisgender people in general because of years of bullying etc., I think helping them overcome such anxieties etc. is very important to their well-being and happiness. Perhaps having a group for anyone (not just trans) to teach about what harassment you can face because you're trans, and what we can all do to help. I think it'd be helpful as well to teach about harassment of other groups of people - the obese, for example, are also subject to bullying and even violence. I'd also love a swimming club that wasn't trans-exclusive but ensured that nobody would bully (goes without saying that not all cis people are transphobic!). I think the most important thing is self-empowerment and teaching/learning, because we can't change the world overnight and in the meantime can't let others' nastiness bring us down - I feel this approach is often overlooked/ignored even though it can be so helpful to people who are struggling."*
- "I think I'd be a bit nervous about coming along. I'm not that young anymore. I might wait until the club has been established a few sessions before coming along, but I'd love to keep up to date with it."*
- "I believe there was some sort of network over here in Edinburgh, but being facebook-based (and me, not), I've lost contact and don't know which group organised them."*

Acknowledgments

This work has been driven by community activists Charlotte McCarroll, Mat Wilkie and Kate Adair, working in partnership with LEAP Sports Scotland. Charlotte and Kate have gone on to be founders of the new Seahorses swimming club. We'd also like to thank Jules Stapleton-Barnes who took time to meet us and discuss the LGBT Centre for Health & Wellbeing's experiences of running a swimming project in Edinburgh. Thanks also to staff from Glasgow Life who met with us throughout the process.

Next steps

Since concluding this survey in November 2015, different models of delivery have been considered, and some research into previous initiatives in Edinburgh, Brighton, Birmingham and Manchester have been looked at. On the back of this, a new independent club, Seahorses, launched in Glasgow on the 31st January 2016. Check out Seahorses Swimming on Facebook for further details, or get on the mailing list by emailing info@leapsports.org



www.leapsports.org info@leapsports.org

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