



January 22, 2024

In the absence of a Minister for Communities at Stormont –  
TO:

- (1) The Chief Administrator and the Funding Managers and Human Subjects Ethics Advisors, Department for Communities (DFC), Northern Ireland
- (2) Professor Fidelma Ashe, University of Ulster, Belfast.
- (3) Dr Danielle Mackle, Queens University, Belfast.

## INTRODUCTION

I am Dr Mike Davidson, PhD formerly employed by the Universities of Ulster, Surrey and Nottingham in a range of Researcher Development and Professional Development roles. I write to introduce you to the International Foundation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice, itself a project of Core Issues Trust which in turn is a registered Charity in Northern Ireland. I am currently Chairman of the IFTCC, and CEO of Core Issues Trust. I am resident in County Down, where I have been for almost 20 years. I am writing on behalf of the IFTCC, both to introduce myself and to raise some concerns about the Call to Participants with respect to the recently published Department for Communities' investigation into conversion practices. We would be very grateful for an explanation to the issues raised below.

## RESEARCH INTO 'CONVERSION PRACTICES' IN NI

We note the Call to Participants<sup>i</sup> in a human subject research initiative investigating 'conversion practices' in Northern Ireland, funded by the Department for Communities. We seek clarification on matters arising from the promotional material advertising this initiative, hosted by the Rainbow Project:

### (1) Representative Sampling?

Please confirm that this research will only survey 'LGBTQAI+' persons, and that those formerly so identified, that is those having left these identities, are thereby excluded from this study. If that is not the case, and the study intends to survey both those presently and formerly identified as LGBTQAI+, please would you request that the promotional material is adjusted to make clear that those who no longer identify as 'LGBTQAI+' may participate in this study? Lastly, if it is the intention that the research funded by the Department for Communities focuses only on 'LGBTQAI+' persons, please may you explain how this inquiry can possibly extrapolate contributions which have a positive experience of pastoral and professional practices relating to sexual and gender identities and practices, after which new identities and practices were adopted?

### (2) Promoting 'LGBTQAI+' Ascendancy?

Would you agree that the Call to Participants currently displayed on the Rainbow Project website unapologetically represents Advocacy Research (in this case promoting 'LGBTQAI+' ascendancy) and not Inquiry Research (vested more equitably in exploring the practices of those affected by sexuality and gender issues and the variety of help they seek to manage these identities across the population of Northern Ireland)? Please may you explain why the approach currently outlined in the call to Participants is not discriminatory and how the need to listen to those formerly identified as LGBTQAI+ following positive professional or pastoral interventions will be facilitated in this research – unless there clearly is no intention to do so.

### (3) Recruitment by Rainbow Project Using "Signposting" and role of the Steering Group

Please may the Department for Communities explain why there appears to be no ideological diversity on this steering group, representation on which is only possible for those opposing choice in the matter of seeking change-exploring interventions? Where there is no ideological diversity would it be agreed there can be no true inquiry, only advocacy of a pre-existing consensus between the group members? Using highly emotive language<sup>ii</sup> the Call to Participants clearly instructs potential participants in the type of response researchers are interested in. That is, any confident renouncement of 'conversion practices' is to be welcomed; anything that is under-confident, questioning or around which there is uncertainty, will be eliminated and participants de-selected to receive (affirmative and corrective) "support" from the Rainbow Project.

The International Foundation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice (IFTCC) welcomes research inquiry that is cognisant of the dangers of confirmation bias, and which seeks to minimise ideological monocultures in research, by incorporating ideological diversity in research teams. We wish to express our concern that as it currently presents itself, the Department for Communities' "Research on Conversion Practices in NI" Call to Participants may be failing to avoid confirmation bias.

We would highly value an explanation as to how bias will be eliminated from this initiative and the means by which your department intends to ensure that viewpoint discrimination is eliminated from this research initiative.

#### **IN SUMMARY**

I have raised issues in this document that relate to the danger we see in eliminating the experience of individuals who have left LGBTQAI+ identities and practices, who have sought professional and or pastoral counselling, mentoring or association, and found this helpful in maintaining their identities and choices. In addition to the above queries, please may I ask:

- (1) Will members of the IFTCC and Core Issues Trust for example, who have personal experience in receiving what you call 'conversion practices', be welcomed to participate in your survey?
- (2) Is your survey open to those outside of Northern Ireland, and/or to those outside of the UK?
- (3) Please may you name which human subjects ethics committee has given approval for this research, with relevant contact details?
- (4) Would you consider sharing the research proposal that has been submitted to the ethics committee above, so that we can understand the scope and limitations of the research?
- (5) Please would you make explicit the criteria that will be applied to those who may be "signposted for future support"?
- (6) Please would you explain how you intend to guard against ideological bias and a conflict of interest between a Government Ministry acting on behalf of the population of Northern Ireland (The DFC and DFC LGBT Policy Unit,) and the fact that all partners in the Steering Group (The Rainbow Project, Cara-Friend, HEReNI and Transgender NI), appear to share LGBT affirming ideological perspectives?

If our organisations can be of assistance to you in the examination of this topic, I should like to make our officers and myself available to you. I can be reached on +44 (0) 7833098998 or at the email address: [mike.davidson@iftcc.org](mailto:mike.davidson@iftcc.org).

I would be happy to meet with officials from the Department for Communities if that would be a helpful way of processing this request.

With thanks for your attention,



**Dr Mike Davidson PhD**

CEO: Core Issues Trust | <https://core-issues.org>

Chairman: International Foundation for Therapeutic and Counselling Choice | <https://iftcc.org>

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.rainbow-project.org/research-participants-required-for-department-for-communities-research-on-conversion-therapy/>

<sup>ii</sup> "The questioning may be upsetting or may trigger thoughts or feelings that people haven't felt or remembered in a long time. If participants feel that talking about these issues or conversion therapy may be too upsetting, then we recommend that they should not take part in the interview and they will be signposted for future support".