This research project examined the experiences of Irish lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) people living in London. There is a long history of Irish migration to the UK, particularly London. This has coincided historically with many Irish LGBT people feeling compelled to emigrate in search of a more supportive social climate. The appeal of global cities to LGBT people has long been acknowledged. Metropolitan centres are associated with tolerance of sexual diversity and established queer communities. The Irish diaspora in one of the largest in the world, with over seventy million people worldwide claiming an Irish identity, of whom only four million live in Ireland. Although the literature on the Irish diaspora has provided invaluable insights about ethnicity, postcolonialism, whiteness, gender and place, the significance of sexual dissidence to Irish migration and diaspora has been relatively unexplored. The lives of Irish LGBT migrants therefore constitute a ‘hidden history’ within the wider field.

Integrating sexual diversity into migration research requires rethinking the connections between identity, citizenship and place. Heteronormativity and homophobia structure the migrant experience, in relation to marriage, employment and housing possibilities. Important changes to sexual citizenship possibilities have taken place in Britain in the past decade, for example the introduction of civil partnerships in 2003. Most of these changes were enacted after the majority of participants moved to London, although the shift in possibilities was significant in their more recent experiences of queer life in London.

This study explored Irish LGBT migrants' reasons for moving to London and experiences there. The research questions focused on notions of home, identity, belonging, familial relationships and subjectivity. Interviews were carried out with 40 Irish LGBT people living in London from a range of social backgrounds and age groups. There was also considerable diversity in terms of length of time spent living in London, although the minimum period was two years. Focus groups were also carried out and helped to generate interview questions for semi-structured individual interviews.

The interview narratives uncovered a wealth of original data about Irishness, sexual citizenship and intersections of sexuality and migration. Although sexuality was significant in the migration experience, particularly in relation to disadvantage and social exclusion upon arrival in London, sexual identity was only part of the motivation to leave Ireland. Far more significant were questions of economics and
employment prospects. This also reflected different moments in Irish history, from high levels of unemployment in the 1980s through to the rise of the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s. The changing context within Ireland in terms of sexual equality was also reflected in coming out experiences and family relationships. The experiences of younger participants reflected an Ireland that is becoming gradually more tolerant and diverse, despite instances of homophobia and exclusion.

The research also indicated changes in the context for Irishness within Britain. In particular, developments in the peace process in Northern Ireland appear to have had a positive impact on Irish experiences in London. The post 7/7 displacement of the ‘terrorist threat’ from Irish communities has also changed the context for Irishness in contemporary Britain. Although many participants had experienced instances of anti-Irishness, this was mediated by class, with participants from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds experiencing greater vulnerability to discrimination.

Interview narratives revealed discourses of kinship that contrasted with prevailing theoretical work in the field. Literature on lesbian and gay kinship has focused on the difficulties encountered in family relationships upon coming out. Homophobic reactions from wider family can lead to a distancing between lesbian and gay people and their families. They therefore create new ‘families we choose’ consisting of friends and lovers, where choice, rather than blood or legal ties are the basis of the relationship. While previous work has emphasized exclusionary experiences from families of origin, who may react negatively to the coming out of their LGBT child/sibling, participants demonstrated enormous commitment to their families in Ireland. This was evidenced by regular communication through phone, email and letter, as well as visits to Ireland and hosting of family members on trips to London. Participants demonstrated striking generosity of spirit and provided considerable ‘emotional labour’ in their efforts to maintain family relationships. These research findings suggest a reconsideration of queer kinship, to acknowledge the possibility of ongoing connections and the ways in which families of origin may be significant to identity, intimacy and care.

This exploration of the relationship between sexuality, ethnicity and diaspora contributes to greater understanding of the ways in which contemporary sexual citizenship, migration and queer imaginaries of the metropolis are mutually implicated in complex ways. In addition to generating new theoretical and empirical work on sexuality and migration, the research findings will be used to inform policy and debate regarding processes of social exclusion.