Destination Assessment and Audit Program

Recommendation Report

Explorers' Edge

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CQCC

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About the CQCC & the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario

The Canadian Queer Chamber of Commerce (CQCC, formerly known as the CGLCC) fosters economic growth by supporting and nurturing 2SLGBTQI+ businesses, entrepreneurs, students, and allies, and by helping Canada's corporate world connect with the 2SLGBTQI+ business community. A leader in supplier diversity, CQCC is the certifying body in Canada for 2SLGBTQI+ businesses. The Rainbow Registered program was developed by CQCC and Tourism HR Canada with the aid of the federal government. The program is designed to recognize and support businesses and organisations that are 2SLGBTQI+ friendly, across Canada. The program helps gain visibility and credibility, while promoting inclusion and diversity in the Canadian marketplace.

This project is funded by the Government of Canada through the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario (FedNor), Destination Northern Ontario (DNO) and regional tourism organizations: Tourism Thunder Bay, Tourism Timmins, Tourism North Bay, Explorers' Edge, and Sudbury Tourism. This project funds key initiatives essential for advancing 2SLGBTQI+ inclusive tourism in Northern Ontario. Specifically, it supports activities such as destination audits to assess travel market readiness and inclusion workshops aimed at enhancing education and capacity building within the tourism industry. Additionally, the project offers Rainbow Registered accreditation to businesses demonstrating inclusive policies and practices, ensuring they meet established industry standards.

Introduction

In today's ever-changing travel climate, with unpredictable highs and lows, 2SLGBTQI+ travellers represent a major opportunity within the Canadian tourism industry for stable, long-term success. The latest research from the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) Foundation shows that 2SLGBTQI+ travellers are projected to spend US $600 billion by 2030. The community ranks as the third largest economic force globally with a spending impact of US$4.7 trillion, an economic power that surpasses the GDPs of countries like Japan, Germany and the UK.

This backs up findings from 2020 CQCC market research, showing that the 2SLGBTQI+ travel segment outspends non-2SLGBTQ+ segments, rebounds faster after industry shocks, and seeks many of the travel experiences your destination already offers. However, these visitors value their personal safety significantly more than heterosexual travellers. As a result, while a destination does not need to have "2SLGBTQI+ specific" attractions to attract queer visitors, it does need to have a

reputation of being 2SLGBTQI+ welcoming. Nobody wants to travel to a place where they do not feel welcome or safe.

Over the past few months, CQCC has conducted an audit and assessment of Explorers' Edge region to identify strengths and areas for improvement in your 2SLGBTQI+ market-readiness. In doing so, we've worked with Explorers' Edge, specifically James Murphy, CEO, to identify key local collaborators who could bring valuable insight and unique perspectives to a working group call and subsequent surveys that were completed by some participants. The data was analysed alongside two regional tourism organization (RTO) surveys and our independent research.

This report will categorize our recommendations within the Six Essential Elements of Successful 2SLGBTQI+ Tourism Strategies, as developed by the CQCC, and may serve as a benchmarking tool to help your organization continue to assess and elevate your 2SLGBTQI+ travel market strategy.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY: In choosing local collaborators for our community consultation call, we tried to represent the diversity of both the 2SLGBTQI+ community and the business community at large. There was a great deal of effort put forth to bring voices to the table that represent different genders, backgrounds, and sexual orientations. While we had some success, we operated within certain constraints and there is still opportunity for Explorers' Edge to seek out additional voices to this conversation to ensure that recommendations and actions encapsulate the diverse views of the community and industry members in the Explorers' Edge region.

Destination Overview

Explorers' Edge (RTO 12) is the regional tourism organization for Algonquin Park, the Almaguin Highlands, Loring-Restoule, Muskoka, Parry Sound and South Algonquin. Spanning a vast swath of Ontario's near north, the region stretches from the shores of Georgian Bay east to the forests surrounding Algonquin Park. Anchored by its largest and most recognizable centres including Gravenhurst, Bracebridge, Huntsville and Parry Sound, the region blends small urban hubs with expansive rural landscapes. Covering thousands of square kilometres of lakes, boreal forest and cottage country, Explorers' Edge is defined by open water, rugged terrain and interconnected communities. Positioned roughly two to three hours north of downtown Toronto by car,

and within a four-to-five-hour drive of Ottawa, Sudbury and North Bay, the region is both accessible and immersive — close enough for weekend travel, yet expansive enough to feel like a true departure into wilderness. Corridors including Highway 11 and Highway 400 provide direct access into Muskoka and Almaguin Highlands, with routes extending toward Parry Sound, Loring-Restoule and South Algonquin, making the region a natural gateway to Algonquin Park and Georgian Bay cruising experiences.

Often positioned as the “Great Canadian Wilderness,” Explorers’ Edge combines outdoor adventure with arts, culture and year-round programming. From canoe routes, wildlife viewing and backcountry camping in Algonquin Park (where Queer Lake is a popular photo spot for 2SLGBTQI+ visitors), to Georgian Bay small-ship cruising in Parry Sound, to the historic steamships and waterfront charm of Gravenhurst and Lake of Bays, visitors experience landscapes that are both iconic and welcoming. Muskoka’s resort heritage, the creative energy of downtown Bracebridge and Huntsville, ATV touring networks in Almaguin Highlands, paddling and learn-to-fish programs, eco-tourism pilots and live music events such as the Tall Pines Music Festival and the Black Fly Festival in South Algonquin reflect the breadth of experiences available across the region. The area is especially popular with Ontario-based travellers, particularly from the Greater Toronto Area, drawn by lakeside escapes, hiking, wildlife, culinary offerings and cultural programming that extends beyond peak summer months.

Within this expansive landscape, a visible and evolving 2SLGBTQI+ presence contributes to the region's cultural fabric. The region's larger centres, along with Pride celebrations, the Muskoka Queer Film Festival and year-round programming such as drag events at Sawdust City Brewing Co. demonstrate growing visibility and allyship within the visitor economy. During the local collaborators working group call, Autumn Smith, Artistic and Executive Director of Timber Beast Productions and co-host of the Lesbi-Honest podcast, observed that "the people in this area are really remarkable for the amount of time they give," speaking to the volunteer-driven community energy that underlies much of this progress. These more urban nodes often benefit from stronger event infrastructure, active municipal participation and established arts communities that help normalize inclusive messaging and public celebration.

At the same time, Explorers' Edge encompasses deeply rural communities throughout Almaguin Highlands, Loring-Restoule and South Algonquin, where tourism is strongly nature-driven and population density is low. In these areas, inclusive practices may be less visible and advancing 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness can require sustained relationship-building and confidence among small, independently operated businesses and tourism representatives. In their surveys, local collaborators acknowledged that while progress is evident in key hubs, extending that welcoming culture consistently across the region's more remote destinations presents both an opportunity and a

meaningful next step. Tara Ratcliff, Outreach Coordinator at the Almaguin Pride Network, noted that "as supportive visibility increases, so does the comfort level," a sentiment that speaks directly to the incremental but meaningful work underway in communities like her own. By continuing to foster collaboration, embed diversity and inclusion training, and support community-led initiatives, Explorers' Edge is well positioned to strengthen its identity as a welcoming destination for 2SLGBTQI+ travelers, ensuring that inclusivity is experienced not only in its downtown cores, but across its lakes, lodges and wilderness experiences as well.

Disclaimer

This audit has been prepared in good faith based on information provided by Explorers' Edge and its local collaborators, together with publicly available sources identified through online research. If relevant information was not disclosed to us by the region or was not reasonably accessible through publicly available sources, we would not have been aware of it and, therefore, it could not be incorporated into this review.

This report is intended to serve as a roadmap for Explorers' Edge as it builds on its existing 2SLGBTQI+ tourism efforts and will require a sustained, long-term organizational commitment. It is unlikely that all recommendations can be implemented immediately; however, this should not prevent continued progress toward becoming an even more welcoming region for 2SLGBTQI+ visitors across both urban and rural communities. Not all of the content in this report will be new to Explorers' Edge, and this is intentional: several recommendations reinforce existing knowledge, recognizing that consistency and follow-through are just as important as introducing new initiatives. Progress can be made at a pace aligned with available capacity and resources, while maintaining forward momentum. Throughout the document, recommendations are identified as *Need to do*, *Nice to do*, and *Minimal investment* to help guide prioritization.

It should also be noted that CQCC uses the acronym '2SLGBTQI+' when referring to the community, pertaining collectively to people who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, Two-Spirit, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, along with people with gender expressions outside traditional norms, other queer people, and their allies.

2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion Resource Toolkit

To support Explorers' Edge and its regional partners in advancing 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion, the CQCC has developed a suite of practical tools and guides. These resources are designed to provide clear, actionable guidance across a range of areas, including policy development, staff training, marketing, product development, and community engagement.

Explorers' Edge and member destinations are encouraged to explore and use these resources at a pace that aligns with their individual capacity and readiness. Whether just beginning this work or looking to build on existing efforts, these tools can help support meaningful, sustainable progress across the region.

- 2SLGBTQI+ Business Case for Inclusion
  Provides data and insights to help organizations understand the economic and strategic value of investing in 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion.
- 2SLGBTQI+ Travel Market Guide & Tourism Development Toolkit
  Offers an overview of the 2SLGBTQI+ travel market, including traveller expectations and opportunities for product and experience development.
- Community Engagement Guide
  Supports organizations in building authentic, respectful relationships with local 2SLGBTQI+ communities.
- 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion Guide
  A foundational resource outlining key principles and approaches to building inclusive organizations.
- 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusive Policies and Practices Guide
  Provides guidance on creating inclusive workplace policies and operational practices.
- Trans and Non-Binary Inclusion Resource Guide
  Offers specific guidance on supporting trans and non-binary individuals in both workplace and visitor-facing environments.
- Inclusive Procurement Guide
  Supports organizations in integrating inclusion into purchasing and supplier relationships.
- Starting an Employee Resource Group
  Provides direction for creating internal networks that support 2SLGBTQI+ employees and allies.
- Allyship Resource Guide
  Helps individuals and organizations understand how to actively support 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion.
- 2SLGBTQI+ Products and Tours Guide
  Provides insights into developing tourism products and experiences that resonate with 2SLGBTQI+ travellers.
- Marketing to the 2SLGBTQI+ Community
  Offers best practices for authentic, inclusive, and effective marketing.
- Hosting 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusive Events
  Guides organizations in creating events that are welcoming, safe, and inclusive for all attendees.
- Glossary of Terminology
  A helpful reference guide to ensure consistent, respectful, and accurate language is used across communications and operations.

Getting Started

Explorers' Edge has taken steps toward becoming a more 2SLGBTQI+ welcoming destination, hosting the Diva Dialogues to spark community conversation, amplifying Pride events and inclusive storytelling across its marketing channels, and investing in inclusion-focused training for staff and partners. The organization has also taken steps to create relationships with local 2SLGBTQI+ community leaders, businesses and grassroots organizations, while embedding broader DEI commitments into its operational planning and participating in provincial and national initiatives such as Rainbow Registered training.

Building on this foundation, the next phase presents an opportunity to bring these efforts together in an even more coordinated and intentional way. Before further developing a comprehensive 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy, however, it is important to reconfirm that all internal local collaborators are aligned and engaged. Given that Explorers' Edge is a regional tourism organization with a lean team, these collaborators include staff, the volunteer Board of Directors, and key tourism partners across the region. Ensuring shared understanding, commitment, and capacity across this group will help support the continued success of this work at a regional scale.

a) Identify Internal Champions

As outlined in the *CQCC Community Engagement Resource Guide,* the initial step is to find and appoint ideally one or more internal 2SLGBTQI+ tourism leaders to champion your destination's goals. In this case it would be Explorers' Edge CEO James Murphy, supported by Partnership Manager, Jennifer Montpetit.

Jennifer's presence is valuable as we recommend at least one other staff member be informed and involved in all 2SLGBTQI+ efforts to ensure they can step in if needed. Having broader team awareness of this program also provides continuity in case a team leader is no longer available for this project. In some destinations we've seen cases where an individual in the organization takes ownership of the 2SLGBTQI+ program, but when they leave the organization, the initiative falls apart. It's important to create an environment where the long-term success of this program doesn't depend upon the presence of a single person. You may also choose to bring in a partner from a member destination such as Gravenhurst to see all of the steps you're taking in this effort, which would allow them to learn from your experience while also taking that information back to their destination.

If your internal champions are not themselves members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community, identify one or two local 2SLGBTQI+ community leaders who can support your efforts. They can help suggest collaborators for an external working group and strengthen your organization's connection to the broader community. Ideally, one champion would come from an urban area and another from a more rural part of the Explorers' Edge region, where building those connections can be more challenging. The roles of the internal and community champions don't have to be onerous, so long as they have an hour or two per month to spare and can attend any working group meetings. Consider these external champions to be your sounding board for any questions you may have as you move forward in your efforts.

In its final RTO Destination Survey, Explorers' Edge identified several potential external champions who are already playing meaningful roles in advancing 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion across the region. With those RTO insights and based on local collaborator survey responses, Tara Ratcliff of Almaguin Pride Network stands out as a strong community-based leader, with a focus on grassroots outreach, municipal engagement, and year-round programming that supports visibility and inclusion in rural communities. Michelle Emson of Theatre Muskoka also represents a valuable champion, bringing both lived experience and professional expertise in trans inclusion training, cultural programming, and community leadership, including her work with the Muskoka Queer Film Festival. Both demonstrate a clear commitment to fostering welcoming environments and have indicated an openness to continued involvement, making them well-positioned to support Explorers' Edge in shaping and advancing its 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy.

Establishing external champions in this way does not preclude broader participation; Explorers' Edge can continue to engage additional community leaders, businesses, and organizations as it sees most beneficial. At the same time, experience has shown CQCC that having identified champions who have agreed to support the work on a consistent basis can be especially valuable in maintaining momentum, providing ongoing insight, and helping to guide efforts through periods where capacity or focus may fluctuate.

b) Building a Business Case

To engage key internal and external collaborators, developing a clear and relevant business case for 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion across the Explorers' Edge region will be important. As noted in the *CQCC Business Case for 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion Resource Guide*, the importance of understanding this market extends beyond the segment itself and reflects broader shifts in traveller expectations. For example, millennials and Gen Z are the fastest-growing travel demographics

and they have different expectations around diversity and inclusion. They expect, appreciate and are more tolerant of diverse experiences, and to remain competitive for this demographic, destinations need to reflect these expectations to support long-term visitor growth.

Explorers' Edge is well positioned to advance this business case across its partner destinations. Communities such as Huntsville, Bracebridge, Gravenhurst, and Parry Sound, where tourism functions are more established within municipal structures, are already demonstrating strong momentum, including active Pride events, growing visibility of inclusive programming, and increased engagement from local operators and community leaders. At the same time, smaller and more rural communities across Almaguin Highlands and the Georgian Bay area, as well as destinations such as Algonquin Park, may have fewer visible signals of inclusion or more limited capacity and engagement in this space to date, despite being generally welcoming and safe environments.

As a regional tourism organization, Explorers' Edge is working across communities that are at different stages of readiness, and it is natural that engagement and implementation will progress at different paces. In some of the more rural areas, building awareness and participation will take additional time, ongoing dialogue, and tailored outreach. It's these smaller destinations that also need your support most. This is a gradual, relationship-driven process, and continued progress, however incremental, will be key. By sharing tools, training, and success stories, and by reinforcing the economic and community value of 2SLGBTQI+ inclusive tourism, Explorers' Edge can help ensure all partner destinations are supported in moving forward in ways that feel achievable and locally relevant. The reality is that many other smaller Canadian destinations are already making efforts to improve their 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness. This is becoming an industry standard in Canada and not embracing this effort could leave parts of Explorers' Edge trailing behind your competitors.

Geopolitical uncertainty and the growing impacts of climate change are increasingly shaping how, where, and why people travel. While travel remains a priority for many market segments, there is a clear shift toward destinations that offer a strong sense of safety, inclusion, and alignment with traveller values. Recent global research reinforces this trend. According to 2025 findings presented at ITB Berlin, Canada ranks among the top destinations globally perceived as safe and welcoming for 2SLGBTQI+ travellers, while perceptions of inconsistency in other major markets are influencing decision-making. At the same time, 2SLGBTQI+ travellers are highly engaged and experience-driven, spending approximately 20% more on tours and activities and participating in a greater number of experiences overall, according to Arival. Together, these

insights highlight both the opportunity and the expectation for destinations to deliver high-quality, inclusive, and experience-rich offerings.

This evolving landscape is particularly evident in shifting travel patterns related to the United States. Ongoing political tensions, evolving policies, and concerns around safety and legal clarity, especially for transgender travellers, are prompting some international visitors to reconsider U.S. travel in favour of destinations that offer greater stability and certainty. This shift is also reflected domestically, with many Canadians, including 2SLGBTQI+ travellers, increasingly choosing to explore destinations within Canada where there is a strong sense of safety and legal clarity. As a result, destinations such as Explorers' Edge are well positioned to capture both domestic and international demand. This presents a timely opportunity to attract travellers who are actively seeking destinations that align with their values, particularly when the region can clearly communicate its commitment to being welcoming, inclusive, and safe.

As destinations shift from a "heads in beds" mindset toward regenerative and community-based travel, the value of the 2SLGBTQI+ market becomes even clearer.

In September 2022, the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA) released the study Going Further: How to Make LGBTQ+ Travel Transformational for Travelers, Communities and the Planet. In this document, survey results show that 2SLGBTQI+ consumers are willing to adopt practices that reduce their environmental footprint and contribute to the wellbeing of communities in the destinations that they visit, a priority for tourism development in Canada:

- These results strongly suggest that the 2SLGBTQI+ traveller respondents are open to embracing sustainable practices, for example by reducing their impact on the environment, which is supported by 64% of respondents. 2SLGBTQI+ travellers also show a strong desire to support their destination's local 2SLGBTQI+ community, for example by contributing to 2SLGBTQI+ community projects (69%) and supporting 2SLGBTQI+ owned businesses (72%).
- 2SLGBTQI+ travellers also have the potential to help destinations reduce the effects of seasonality and spread visits more evenly throughout the year, as 62% of respondents said they'd like to visit out of peak season. Members of the 2SLGBTQI+ community typically have fewer children living with them at home which could indicate higher levels of disposable income. along with the ability to travel during winter and shoulder seasons.

- Supporting small businesses in general - many of which were hit hard by pandemic lockdowns - is also a popular choice among 66% of respondents.
- A major takeaway from these results is that 2SLGBTQI+ travellers are strongly aware of major social causes, and conscious of their impact on the environment.
- They also care deeply about supporting the 2SLGBTQI+ community in different ways in the places they visit. If travel businesses give 2SLGBTQI+ travellers the opportunity to do just that, it can create a win-win situation for both travellers and the local community.

c) *Buy-in from Local Collaborators*

Preparing a business case and presenting it to local collaborators will help create buy-in and ensure 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion is a core pillar of your overall tourism strategy as you move forward. Internal local collaborators must include not only your team at Explorers' Edge Region (who are already on board), but also your destination partners as they will be playing an outsized role in this effort as they're the actual hosts on-site. As an RTO you can lead by example, while also educating, encouraging and supporting the efforts of your partner destinations, but they will be responsible for how certain parts of this program are executed in their destinations.

Consistent internal and external communication of the strategy and expectations for staff, partners, and members is essential. It is also critical to ensure they understand, support, and align with diversity and inclusion requirements and accountabilities, and there should be clear timing communicated to all parties involved directly and indirectly to ensure consistency, clarity, and alignment with organizational goals. Explorers' Edge Region is already ahead on this path through its diversity training, Rainbow Registered accreditation and 2SLGBTQI+ focused initiatives. The Board of Directors is aware of the need for diversity and inclusion, both within the organization itself, and in its plans and future goals. Explorers' Edge region has the foundational blocks for this initiative, but it will still take work to get buy-in across the board from all your partners.

The *CQCC 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusive Policies and Practices Guide* outlines the necessary steps to implement inclusion on an organizational level. As noted in the resource guides, the voice of the customer (internal and external) needs to be considered and addressed. We already know that some resistance will likely occur amongst your regional partners, especially in your more rural areas, and should not be ignored. Your region must be prepared to have potentially difficult conversations with members of your wider team, suppliers, and sometimes even customers, about why you are choosing this inclusion strategy. Be clear that

being inclusive is the right thing to do and everyone benefits from diversity, as outlined in the *CQCC Business Case for 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion Resource Guide.* It also makes for good business. Canadian RTOs, DMOs and tourism companies need to reflect the global demographics of their customers. To be truly inclusive means organizations cannot partially exclude anyone, especially since the 2SLGBTQI+ community has so much diversity within it.

d) Stay Up to Date

The 2SLGBTQI+ community continues to evolve, so messaging and communications should be regularly reviewed to ensure they remain current and appropriate. As an example, for many years the segment was referred to as the gay market, then gay and lesbian, then GLBT, and more commonly now is LGBTQ+, 2SLGBTQI+ or queer, depending on geographic location and age of the intended client.

Meeting the needs of BIPOC, Indigenous, transgender and non-binary communities is another shift. Major cities and pioneering destinations such as Fort Lauderdale have actively started courting trans travellers. Gender-neutral washrooms are growing in popularity and are now being viewed as essential to attracting transgender and non-binary visitors, and signals acceptance to 2SLGBTQI+ people and their allies generally.

Watching the *CQCC Travel Market Ready Seminar* and participating in CQCC's *Diversity & Inclusion Workshops* are a great way to stay up to date with the most appropriate language and best practices. With staff turnover and constantly changing norms, regular and ongoing diversity and inclusion training is essential. Constantly engaging with your 2SLGBTQI+ local collaborators is another way to avoid falling behind.

Six Elements to Help Explorers' Edge Create a Successful 2SLGBTQI+ Tourism Strategy

There are six elements for destinations and tourism businesses to become 2SLGBTQI+ travel market-ready, which have been identified through best-practice case studies of destinations and tourism businesses that have successfully entered and served the 2SLGBTQI+ travel market. Below we present our analysis of Explorers' Edge through the lens of these six elements. We generally approach these elements from a specific destination perspective, so we've slightly adapted when needed for your regional reality. For some elements there are direct steps you can take. In other areas,

Explorers' Edge will act more as an educator, supporter and champion of work that must be done within your individual partner destinations.

We've also included potential actions and sample goals for your organization to consider, adapt, or build on. While these elements do not need to be approached in this specific order, where possible, community engagement and strategic planning should be your first priorities.



To learn more about the 2SLGBTQI+ market, case studies that were part of the creation of the six essential elements, and more, read the *CQCC 2SLGBTQI+ Travel Market Guide & Tourism Development Toolkit.*

#1 Engage with the Local Community

Destinations that have seen the greatest success in 2SLGBTQI+ tourism have one thing in common: genuine community involvement. Engaging your local 2SLGBTQI+ community ensures your language and imagery are appropriate, your strategy draws on real knowledge and experience, and you remain aware of challenges as they arise.

a) Learn about Your Local 2SLGBTQI+ Community

Continue to build a stronger understanding of the 2SLGBTQI+ community across Explorers' Edge by identifying additional queer-owned businesses, organizations, and community leaders whose voices can help inform strategy, storytelling, and future marketing efforts. While this work has already begun

through initiatives such as the Diva Dialogues, there is an opportunity to expand it more consistently and intentionally across the wider region.

This process can be supported through a combination of independent research and ongoing collaboration with partner destinations. In some areas, organizations such as Muskoka Pride maintain an active presence on platforms like Facebook, offering insight into local events, community priorities, and emerging voices. Almaguin Pride Network also highlights activities and individuals on their Facebook and Instagram pages, as does Parry Sound Pride, Muskoka Queer Film Festival and the Les-bi Honest Podcast. Ensure your Great Canadian Wilderness Facebook page and Instagram page are following all of these pages to ensure visibility and awareness to their activities and participation (at this moment, only Muskoka Pride is being followed on Facebook, for example, but more accounts are being followed on Instagram), while also showing support for their efforts by the simple act of a follow.

In other parts of the region, particularly in more rural areas, there is little visible online infrastructure, requiring a more proactive, relationship-based approach. As this work evolves, there is a strong opportunity to build on existing relationships while welcoming new voices and perspectives into the process. While current connections remain valuable, the next phase of your work should focus on expanding beyond existing networks to include a broader and more diverse range of voices. This includes younger community members, Two-Spirit individuals, and 2SLGBTQI+ people from BIPOC communities, whose perspectives and experiences may not yet be fully reflected in current engagement efforts.

In these cases, building direct, personal connections becomes essential. Engaging with local partners, small business owners, Pride organizers, and community advocates will help surface a more complete and nuanced understanding of the region's 2SLGBTQI+ landscape. This includes identifying community elders, cultural leaders, and grassroots organizers whose lived experiences can provide valuable context around the region's history, challenges, and progress.

Over time, these relationships will not only strengthen the authenticity of Explorers' Edge's approach but also help uncover meaningful stories that can be shared through content, product development, and broader destination positioning.

Engage with the Local Community	
NICE TO DO - Learn about your local 2SLGBTQI+ history.	**NEED TO DO** - Meet 2SLGBTQI+ leaders in your region who you are less familiar with. - Follow all local 2SLGBTQI+ Prides, partners and businesses on your organization's social media accounts.
MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Feature local 2SLGBTQI+ community leaders or organizations in future 2SLGBTQI+ storytelling content.	**SAMPLE GOALS** - Meet 3 local 2SLGBTQI+ community leaders. - Include at least one in a blog post within a year of beginning your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy.

b) Invite the Community to Be Part of a Working Group

With the momentum created through the Diva Dialogues and the audit call with local collaborators, Explorers' Edge has taken an important first step in opening up meaningful, community-led conversations around 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion. These early discussions provided valuable insight into lived experiences across the region and demonstrated both a willingness and an appetite within the community to be part of this work. The next step is to formalize this engagement through the creation of a dedicated working group that can help guide and inform ongoing efforts.

Explorers' Edge is encouraged to invite a group of local collaborators to participate in a 2SLGBTQI+ community working group that will support the development, implementation, and ongoing evaluation of inclusive tourism initiatives across the region. This group can include individuals and organizations already engaged through this audit process and earlier conversations, as well as representatives from partner destinations and others who bring relevant experience or perspectives. Creating space for both established leaders and those newer to this work will foster shared learning and help build confidence across the region, particularly in more rural areas where this work may feel less familiar.

To remain effective and manageable, the working group should ideally consist of no more than 10–12 members and reflect a mix of sectors, including tourism operators, cultural organizations, community groups, and municipal or regional representatives. It will be important to ensure the group reflects a diversity of lived experiences across race, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, geography, and age. Particular attention should be paid to including voices that may not yet be fully represented in existing engagement efforts, including Two-Spirit individuals, additional transgender community members, and 2SLGBTQI+ people from BIPOC and younger communities.

At the same time, consideration should be given to including key allies and industry influencers who shape the visitor experience, such as accommodation providers, chambers of commerce, or business associations. Their participation can help bridge gaps between community insight and industry implementation, ensuring that learnings translate into meaningful action on the ground.

This working group should be made up of individuals who are genuinely interested in contributing to and advancing this work, recognizing that the level of engagement required may be more than some community members wish or are able to take on. Establishing this smaller, committed group will help maintain momentum and ensure the work remains focused and productive.

At the same time, the creation of this group should not replace broader community engagement. There remains a clear opportunity—and need—to continue connecting with a wider range of voices through ongoing conversations, events, and outreach. While many members of the local community have expressed interest in being part of this initiative, experience has shown that trying to include too many participants at once can make it more challenging to move the work forward effectively. This group is primarily a way for invested partners to support development as compared to a group that is mainly interested in learning more.

This working group must be positioned as a space for open, honest, and ongoing dialogue. Participants should feel empowered to share their perspectives candidly, with a clear understanding that their lived experiences are central to shaping the region's approach. This will help ensure the group is seen as a meaningful and trusted forum, rather than a symbolic gesture.
The following chart represents local collaborators who participated in the community working group call and fully completed the collaborator survey.

While the initial call itself generated strong discussion and engagement, participation in the follow-up survey was more limited. As Explorers' Edge preferred to lead all direct outreach with the collaborators, there weren't opportunities for the kind of personalized follow-up by the auditor that typically supports higher response rates in this process. As a result, the chart includes a smaller number of contributors for consideration. Moving forward, the establishment of a working group presents an opportunity to deepen engagement in a more sustained and relational way, allowing for ongoing input rather than reliance on one-time feedback mechanisms.

Name/Title	Are you/your organization interested in participating in an 2SLGBTQI+ tourism development and marketing initiative with your destination/RTO?	Are you interested in participating in a working group? If so, what is your maximum time commitment per month?
Tara Ratcliff (She/Her), Almaguin Pride Network	Yes	3 hours
Michelle Emson (She/Her), Theatre Muskoka/Muskoka Queer Film Festival	Maybe	2 hours
Kieren Day (He/Him), Manager of Muskoka Beerspa and Bala Bay Inn	Yes	4-8
Kate Hood (She/Her), General Manager, Northridge Inn	Yes	A few hours

We recommend you invite the following individuals and/or organizations to your working group based on our interaction with local collaborators during the audit and assessment:

Current Local Collaborators Recommended for Working Group

Tara Ratcliff. As Outreach Coordinator for Almaguin Pride Network, Tara represents one of the more rural and resource-constrained parts of Explorers' Edge Region. Her work is deeply rooted in collaboration, noting during the working group call that her organization is made up of just five people and relies heavily on partnerships to build visibility and support. Tara spoke candidly about the realities of operating in a smaller community, where misinformation and occasional resistance still exist, but where she is equally encouraged by the number of residents and businesses who actively step in to support and defend the 2SLGBTQI+ community. Her perspective highlights both the challenges and the quiet resilience of rural queer life, making her an essential voice in ensuring this initiative reflects the full regional experience.

Michelle Emson. Michelle brings a uniquely layered perspective that bridges arts, culture, and advocacy. As Executive and Technical Director of Theatre Muskoka, as well as Technical Director of the Muskoka Queer Film Festival, she is directly involved in shaping how queer stories are presented and experienced in the region. Beyond her local work, Michelle is also an international speaker and workshop facilitator on trans inclusion, with experience across Canada, Europe, and Ukraine. This combination of global expertise and local engagement positions her as a particularly valuable contributor to a working group, especially as Explorers' Edge continues to think about how inclusion can

be reflected not only in policy and visitor experience, but also through cultural programming and storytelling.

Kieren Day / Aria Reddy. In his role with Muskoka Beerspa and Bala Bay Inn, Kieren offers a strong tourism operator perspective, alongside lived experience as a drag performer. He has helped grow the Bala Bay Divas drag series into a successful and expanding offering, while also navigating the realities of both strong in-person support and online backlash. Kieren's experience provides valuable insight into how inclusive programming can be developed and sustained within the region.

Kate Hood. As General Manager of Northridge Inn, Kate brings a strong understanding of both the visitor experience and the local community. The Inn is owned by life and business partners David Clemmer and Stéphane Aubin, who have created a space that openly welcomes the 2SLGBTQI+ community and have hosted Pride events in partnership with local organizations. Northridge Inn regularly works with groups like Almaguin Pride and is actively involved in hosting events that bring people together. If Kate is unable to participate, one of the owners would be a valuable addition to the working group given their direct connection to and investment in this work.

Additional Working Group Considerations

We recognize that the above list doesn't have enough people or diversity to build out a representative working group for Explorers' Edge. Additional names are required, potentially including some who had strong viewpoints during the local collaborators working group call but did not fill out a survey, or other Pride, destination or business association representatives. We recommend considering any of the following individuals and organizations:

Glen Yacula (or another representative from Muskoka Pride, such as Chair, Steph Taylor). Muskoka Pride is one of the primary organizers of 2SLGBTQI+ events in the region, including Pride programming, the Muskoka Queer Film Festival, and partnerships with local businesses and venues. The organization plays a central role in connecting community members across Muskoka, while also creating visible, public-facing events that draw both locals and visitors.

A representative from Parry Sound Pride. Having all three Prides from the Explorers' Edge Region participate in your working group conversation would allow you to have the greatest connection to insights and experience from your local queer community, especially in a smaller part of the region.

A representative from A Queer Camp. This community organization has been organizing an annual queer camping weekend since 2023 at Sparrow Lake Camp in Severn Bridge, Muskoka. More than 130 campers join the event each year. They also host the annual Algonquin Opeongo, an Algonquin paddling adventure. This year's event in August, 2026 is already sold out. As Explorers' Edge representatives have indicated that promoting queer travel in Algonquin Park is more challenging, perhaps A Queer Camp can provide useful insights from their own on-site experiences.

Other participants from the audit call. Everybody had strong opinions to share during our conversation, and it's unfortunate we didn't hear from more participants in the follow-up survey. When individuals don't fill out the survey, it's often representative of them not being willing to fully invest in the working group. If you choose to bring in any other participants to your working group, have a conversation about expectations to ensure their presence will be a value add.

Someone from Away We Go. Away We Go Trips has already demonstrated what 2SLGBTQI+ product development can look like at a regional scale through the creation of the Muskoka Pride road tour in partnership with Muskoka Pride (which has even been written about in the queer media outlet Pink Ticket Travel). Their experience working with local operators and building multi-stop itineraries across the region would bring valuable insight into what resonates with visitors, where partnerships are working well, and where there is room to strengthen inclusive tourism experiences across Explorers' Edge.

Explorers' Edge Region destination partners. While representation from the local 2SLGBTQI+ community is essential, much of this work will need to be supported and implemented by local destination partners, including municipalities with dedicated tourism capacity such as Huntsville, Bracebridge, Gravenhurst, Lake of Bays, Parry Sound, and Seguin Township. Their participation will be key to embedding inclusion into local tourism planning and ensuring the strategy is carried through into on-the-ground action across the region.

Muskoka Lakes Chamber of Commerce or another regional chamber of commerce/business association voice. This type of presence would help strengthen connections between this initiative and the broader business community across Explorers' Edge. Chambers work closely with a wide range of local operators and regularly provide training, networking opportunities, and business support, making them well positioned to share information about the 2SLGBTQI+ market and encourage participation from tourism and non-tourism businesses alike. Their involvement can help ensure that inclusion efforts reach

beyond the tourism sector and support more consistent, community-wide engagement with this work.

A Two-Spirit representative. Including a Two-Spirit voice in this working group is essential to ensure Indigenous perspectives are meaningfully reflected in this work. Consulting with Muskoka Pride, Almaguin Pride, and Parry Sound Pride may help identify individuals who are already connected to both queer and Indigenous communities in the region. This approach allows for a more thoughtful and respectful inclusion, grounded in existing relationships, while also strengthening opportunities to better understand how tourism, community, and Indigenous identity intersect across Explorers' Edge Region.

Other culturally diverse and BIPOC voices. Engage with your local collaborators to create a list of culturally diverse members of your local 2SLGBTQI+ community who may be interested in participating in this program. This will help ensure that this group reflects the full diversity of 2SLGBTQI+ experiences across the Explorers' Edge region. Travellers increasingly seek destinations that demonstrate inclusion across multiple identities, and local insight from BIPOC community members can help strengthen how welcoming environments are understood, communicated, and experienced. Their participation can also support more inclusive storytelling, partnerships, and programming that better reflect the region's communities while helping ensure that future tourism development is responsive to a wider range of lived experiences.

Invite the Community to Be Part of a Working Group	
NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT	**SAMPLE GOALS**
- Ensure 2SLGBTQI+ and cultural diversity within your working group. - Seek out allied organizations and businesses that have a wide reach in the tourism industry.	- Ensure Two-Spirit, BIPOC representation. - Have at least ¼ of the group represent rural communities - Add at least two people who you do not already know to the working group -Prioritize a Rainbow Registered business to ensure nationally recognized standards and encourage others achieve this accreditation status - Meet twice per year.

#2 Establish Clear Values, a Vision and Plan

To move forward with your 2SLGBTQI+ market strategy, you must establish clear values as they pertain to the 2SLGBTQI+ community, communicate a concrete vision

of what you'd like to achieve, and create a formal action plan with a detailed timeline and measurable key performance indicators (KPIs).

a) Establish Clear Values & Communicate a Vision

As mentioned earlier, authenticity is fundamental when developing an 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy and must not appear as "pinkwashing" for financial benefit alone (appearing to support the 2SLGBTQI+ community through symbols and marketing without genuine commitment or action). Think about what you'd like to accomplish in the coming years, how your 2SLGBTQI+ community will be involved, and how they will benefit. Then, consult with your working group so you can communicate a vision of what you'd like to achieve, and better understand what the 2SLGBTQI+ community would like to see from your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy, ensuring this is a two-way conversation. You may learn about concerns they have, along with any upcoming initiatives that may be of interest to 2SLGBTQI+ visitors.

It is important to understand that your strategy and annual plan for the 2SLGBTQI+ market must be approached from a long-term perspective. You may not see results within a few months, or even a year, but don't give up. Eventually your efforts will bear fruit through steadfast commitment.

Establish Clear Values & Communicate a Vision	
NICE TO DO - Build a 1-year action plan and a 3- to 5-year strategic plan.	**NEED TO DO** - Clearly communicate your goals for the first year. - Record working group meetings or have detailed notes taken, then follow up to clearly outline takeaways and establish an action plan.
MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Focus on expanding 2SLGBTQI+ tourism awareness by dedicating a portion of marketing budgets to this market and being inclusive in your efforts, rather than exclusive.	**SAMPLE GOALS** - Create a plan of incremental efforts for this market, year over year. - Receive input from a minimum of three 2SLGBTQI+ community/working group members.

b) Create an Action Plan & Goals

Once you've had a chance to determine key takeaways from your working group, you can then consult internally with your Explorers' Edge colleagues about the development of a realistic annual action plan. This will help ensure priorities are aligned with available staff capacity, existing partnerships, and current program commitments, while also identifying opportunities where

regional coordination can support local destination efforts before committing to an initial strategic plan.

As indicated in your surveys, Explorers' Edge already has several important intentions that can help shape the early stages of this plan. In particular, there is interest in expanding inclusive marketing assets, strengthening visible welcome messaging, and supporting partner destinations through training, product development, and regional coordination. Explorers' Edge has also identified the importance of continuing to amplify Pride-related programming, inclusive storytelling, and partnerships with local community collaborators while moving toward a more formalized approach to segment development through this audit process.

In the first year of a newly developed 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy, Explorers' Edge has identified several realistic and achievable priorities, including:

- Delivering additional inclusion training opportunities for staff and tourism partners.
- Establishing a regional advisory or working group to support implementation.
- Expending inclusive imagery and visible welcome messaging across regional channels.
- Continuing to amplify Pride events and inclusive programming already taking place across the region.

For longer-term goals, Explorers' Edge has expressed interest in supporting the development of multi-destination inclusive experiences, increasing off-season visitation, and strengthening the region's recognition as a welcoming rural destination for 2SLGBTQI+ travellers.

You also have several measurable KPIs already identified through your survey responses that can support the development of an action plan. These include:

- Increased participation from partner destinations and tourism operators.
- Growth in training participation across the region.
- Increased engagement with inclusive websites and social media content.
- Earned media placements highlighting inclusive experiences.
- Attendance growth at events and community programming.
- Improved visitor sentiment and perception of the region as welcoming and safe.

Seeing as Explorers' Edge has already supported inclusion training initiatives, inclusive imagery development, some types of Pride event amplification, and community engagement activities, these existing foundations provide a nice

starting point for building a more structured and coordinated regional strategy moving forward.

After completing this audit process and continuing conversations with your working group and partner destinations, these goals and KPIs will likely evolve and become more specific. This is expected and encouraged. As regional priorities become clearer and additional partners become more engaged, the strategy can continue to adapt to reflect both opportunity and capacity.

Once a first draft is complete, present it to your entire Explorers' Edge team, followed by partner destinations, working group members, and community collaborators. These conversations will help confirm what is realistic from a human resources, cost, and time perspective. The longer-term the plan, the easier it becomes to justify early first steps that align with current resources while still moving toward broader regional impact.

Aim to develop a 1-year action plan with measurable KPIs alongside a 3- to 5-year strategic framework that reflects both the role Explorers' Edge can play as a regional support for partner destinations as well as what you can do exclusively for your organization. This plan should also highlight the support needed from local 2SLGBTQI+ community partners and municipalities, along with the reciprocal support Explorers' Edge can provide through training, marketing amplification, partnership funding opportunities, and product development coordination.

Finally, make sure to communicate your intention to integrate your 2SLGBTQI+ plan within Explorers' Edge's broader operational and strategic planning processes. As noted in your survey responses, inclusion and diversity are already part of your organizational priorities, and this strategy represents an important opportunity to formalize that commitment to a 2SLGBTQI+ strategy within a clear regional framework moving forward.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Create an Action Plan & Goals</th></tr>
<tr><td>NICE TO DO
- Allocate exclusive resources for your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy.
-Ensure working group members' commitment to Rainbow Registered accreditation</td><td>NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT
Include 2SLGBTQI+ content in all facets of your overall strategic plan, including:
-marketing
- internal diversity and inclusion training
- the audit of forms and policies.</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">SAMPLE GOALS
- Finalize your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy and plan within 3 months of initial meeting and consultation with your 2SLGBTQI+ working group.
- Receive buy-in from a minimum of 75% of your 2SLGBTQI+ working group.</td></tr>
</table>

#3 Build Collaborative Local, Regional and Broader Partnerships

All destinations that have found success in the 2SLGBTQI+ travel market created strong and lasting partnerships. Coming from a regional perspective, you're already well versed in this need for collaboration, but with this updated focus on a 2SLGBTQI+ strategy, it will demand revised approaches to working with your destinations and partners. At the same time, much of this collaboration will need to be done locally by your destination partners. A small 2SLGBTQI+ business owner in a destination such as Bracebridge, for example, will have a natural instinct to collaborate with their local tourism representative or city council rather than Explorers' Edge.

a) Present to RTO Partners

Now that the audit process is complete, the next step is to either newly connect, or reconnect, with a broader group of partners beyond those who participated directly in the Diva Dialogues event, the audit call and other discussions. This should include hotel concierges/managers, business groups, partner destinations that weren't part of the call, major local tour operators, major tourism organizations and your bigger events and festivals.

Sharing the findings of the audit will help partners better understand the opportunities identified through this process, while reinforcing the business case for 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion and outlining how destinations can participate in the next phase of implementation. This is also an appropriate time to share CQCC toolkit resources and potentially even the Superior County and Visit Thunder Bay 2SLGBTQI+ Tips Booklet to help businesses and communities welcome 2SLGBTQIA+ visitors to your region (Superior County and Visit Thunder Bay have offered this booklet as a resource to all Northern Ontario destination partners to adapt for their own markets). Invite partners to contribute existing experiences, media assets, newsletters, partnerships, or local initiatives that could support the regional plan.

Explorers' Edge has already begun laying the groundwork for these conversations. Building on that momentum will help position this next phase of engagement as a continuation of work that partners are already familiar with, while creating space to broaden participation across the region.

These conversations will help Explorers' Edge better understand how partner destinations—particularly those in more rural areas—perceive this work, where there is readiness to move forward, and where additional support or training may

be helpful. It's also in these more challenging areas where you may need extra support from local partners or community members who are already committed to this program to promote these efforts with local government and tourism representatives.

From there, partner destinations can be encouraged to share this information with their local tourism working group participants, including accommodations, tour operators, visitor centres, Chambers of Commerce, and major events and festivals. Expanding awareness at the local level will help ensure that this initiative is understood as a coordinated regional effort, while still being shaped by the strengths and priorities of individual destinations across Explorers' Edge.

Present to RTO Members & Partners	
NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Present to relevant members and partners.	**SAMPLE GOAL** - Create your attendance list for presentation and set a target for actual attendance, with regular follow ups to bolster attendance - Send a post-presentation survey with a completion goal of 75%

b) Build Wider Partnerships

Explorers' Edge's key organizational partners in advancing 2SLGBTQI+ tourism development include DNO, Destination Ontario (DO) and Destination Canada**,** along with peer Northern Ontario destinations currently participating in the CQCC audit process, including Sudbury, North Bay, Thunder Bay, and Timmins**.** As the only regional tourism organization participating in this Northern Ontario cohort, Explorers' Edge is uniquely positioned to help demonstrate how a regional approach can support multiple communities at different stages of readiness while strengthening coordination across both more urban and more rural destinations.

This audit is the result of DNO's interest in expanding its presence in the 2SLGBTQ+ market and there are opportunities to continue working with organization: explore the potential for additional support through co-operative marketing partnerships, editorial content, media and familiarization trip development, training resources, research, and product development alignment. As several Northern Ontario destinations have gone through this audit process at the same time, there may also be opportunities to collaborate on shared storytelling that highlights queer life and travel experiences across the North as part of a coordinated regional narrative.

The 2SLGBTQI+ market is a priority for DNO and their consumer website includes several blog stories related to the community. At the same time, there is no dedicated section on the DNO website presenting Northern Ontario as a cohesive 2SLGBTQI+ welcoming travel region in the way the site highlights other niche experiences such as Indigenous culture, paddling, ATVing, fishing, and cycling. As more Northern Ontario destinations—including Explorers' Edge—advance their work through this audit process, there may be an opportunity to collaborate with DNO on strengthening visibility of queer travel experiences across the region through a more clearly defined presence on their platform.

There are also opportunities to work with DO to ensure that the province's 2SLGBTQI+ travel content more fully reflects experiences available across the Explorers' Edge region. DO currently maintains a 2SLGBTQI+ resource page; however, representation of experiences from Muskoka, Parry Sound, Almaguin Highlands, and surrounding communities remains limited:

- They also link to an Ontario Pride page. Muskoka Pride is included, but Almaguin Pride and Parry Sound Pride aren't.
- There's also a list of queer film festivals, but Muskoka Queer Film Festival isn't listed.
    - Ask DO if they have plans to update and improve their 2SLGBTQI+ page and offer specific content and imagery from Explorers' Edge to support this effort.
    - If you create an 2SLGBTQI+ specific webpage on the Explorers' Edge website, you could also ask to have it linked on the DO 2SLGBTQI+ page.

DO also has a general "Things to do" page with options for Indigenous experiences, Francophone experiences, casinos, beaches, foodie destinations and more, but nothing for 2SLGBTQI+ experiences. Ask if 2SLGBTQI+ travel could be an additional offering.

Other collaboration opportunities may also exist through continued dialogue with peer Northern Ontario destinations that participated in this audit process. Maintaining regular communication with Sudbury, North Bay, Thunder Bay, and Timmins will help create opportunities to share lessons learned, coordinate approaches where appropriate, and better understand what strategies are working across different community contexts. This type of collaboration can help strengthen the visibility across Northern Ontario as a whole as a welcoming destination for 2SLGBTQI+ travellers while supporting individual communities in advancing their own locally grounded initiatives.

Build Regional Partnerships	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Seek out opportunities with other regional DMOs and DO - Share 2SLGBTQI+ written content with DO to provide further exposure to 2SLGBTQI+ events and efforts in Explorers' Edge Region through their social media channels.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Request the addition of Explorers' Edge Region 2SLGBTQI+ content on all relevant DO web pages and event calendars.
SAMPLE GOALS - List all Prides taking place in Explorers' Edge Region on DO 2SLGBTQI+ webpage.	

c) Collaborate with Marquee Events

Explorers' Edge already plays a role supporting festivals and events that attract visitors to the region through its Partnership Program, which provides co-investment support for event development, marketing, and visitor experience initiatives across your region. While the program does not currently include eligibility criteria specific to 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion, Pride events, arts programming, and community-led initiatives that contribute to inclusive visitor experiences are eligible for support through this structure, alongside other regional tourism priorities.

As the region continues to develop its 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy, there is an opportunity to consider how inclusive practices could be more intentionally reflected within the Partnership Program funding framework over time. For example, Explorers' Edge could explore introducing simple inclusion-related expectations as part of eligibility or evaluation criteria for all types of supported events, from arts festivals to music weekends and anything in between.

Requirements such as encouraging access to gender-neutral washrooms where feasible, ensuring frontline staff receive basic inclusion awareness training, or demonstrating visible signals of welcome in event communications and on-site environments are simple asks that could then become part of an overall approach to welcoming visitors. The importance of visible allyship and practical steps helps visitors feel confident they will be welcomed and respected when attending events across the region.

This type of practice can also be encouraged in your partner destinations that may also offer funding support to events. Share your updated funding guidelines with destinations so they can learn how to incorporate them into their own application process.

Explorers' Edge can also support partner destinations in identifying opportunities within existing marquee events to highlight 2SLGBTQI+ artists, performers, storytellers, and programming already taking place across the region. In many cases, inclusive content already exists within broader arts, cultural, and community events but is not always prominently identified or shared through tourism channels.

This includes both dedicated 2SLGBTQI+ programming—such as the region's three Prides, the Muskoka Queer Film Festival, drag performances and entertainment events hosted at venues such as Bala Bay Inn, and queer programming taking place at breweries and community spaces across Muskoka—as well as opportunities within larger regional festivals such as the Tall Pines Music Festival, Northern Lights Comedy Festival, Winter in the Wild and events presented through the Huntsville Festival of the Arts and Muskoka Arts & Crafts network. In these cases, partner destinations can work with organizers to help make existing inclusive programming more visible or explore opportunities to incorporate additional representation over time.

Collaborate with Marquee Events	
NICE TO DO -Update parameters for receiving funding through the Explorers' Edge Partnership Funding Program -Encourage partner destinations to support events and festivals to highlight any 2SLGBTQI+ content, or to create such content in the future.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Support 2SLGBTQI+ events that apply for Explorers' Edge Partnership Program funding
SAMPLE GOALS - Increase diversity and inclusion requirements for Explorers' Edge Region funded events year over year. I.e., in the first year of the program require events to commit to diversity and inclusion training, second year require they have diversity and inclusion training complete, third year require they have diversity and inclusion components to their event including gender neutral washrooms.	

d) Foster Links between 2SLGBTQI+ and Allied Tourism Businesses and Organizations

As a regional tourism organization, Explorers' Edge's role in fostering direct partnerships between 2SLGBTQI+ community organizations and mainstream tourism businesses will often be supportive rather than operational. However, Explorers' Edge is well positioned to help create the conditions that encourage these connections to develop across the region, particularly through its relationships with Muskoka Pride, Parry Sound Pride, Almaguin Pride, the

Muskoka Queer Film Festival, and other community partners already contributing to inclusive programming.

One way to continue supporting collaboration between these organizations and tourism operators is through activities such as inclusion training sessions, education opportunities for businesses (such as during an annual general meeting), participation in the regional 2SLGBTQI+ working group, and joint conversations about how inclusive visitor experiences can be strengthened across destinations. Ensure your Pride events and the Queer Film Festival are invited to these kinds of meetings so they can introduce themselves personally to other businesses and relationships can blossom.

Explorers' Edge can also encourage partner destinations to foster similar relationships locally by connecting business associations, hotels, restaurants, tour operators, arts organizations, and event producers with 2SLGBTQI+ community groups and organizers in their own municipalities. These types of partnerships can support the development of inclusive visitor experiences while strengthening relationships between tourism operators and local communities.

- Some potential ideas that partner destinations may wish to explore with their local collaborators include:
    - Local business associations hosting a "meet your local 2SLGBTQI+ community" mixers to bring together Prides and queer owned businesses with the wider business community
    - Working with accommodations to develop Pride-related visitor packages or weekend experiences connected to regional Pride celebrations
    - Encouraging breweries, restaurants, and attractions to collaborate with local Pride organizations on special programming or fundraising initiatives during Pride season (make sure that funds are always donated back to a queer organization to avoid pinkwashing)
    - Supporting opportunities for tourism operators to participate in Pride events through sponsorship, volunteer involvement, or visible welcome initiatives

From a regional perspective, Explorers' Edge may also wish to explore opportunities to strengthen connections between Pride organizations across the territory by highlighting the calendar of Pride celebrations that take place throughout the region. Over time, presenting these events together as part of a coordinated regional Pride season could help encourage visitation across multiple communities while reinforcing the message that inclusive experiences are available throughout Explorers' Edge.

Foster Links between 2SLGBTQI+ and Allied Tourism Businesses and Organizations	
NICE TO DO - Encourage your destination partners to create a list of 2SLGBTQI+ welcoming businesses and establishments that could potentially be connected to their local Prides -Cross promote other Rainbow Registered business and organisations & support/recommend business and organisations from the CQCC diverse supplier list .	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Ask working group members to brainstorm potential links that can be made between 2SLGBTQI+ events/festivals and the allied community to enhance 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness efforts and increase 2SLGBTQI+ visitors to Explorers' Edge Region
SAMPLE GOALS - List 3 experiences on the Explorers' Edge Region website that feature various 2SLGBTQI+ and allied partners.	

#4 Provide Dedicated Investment and Support

Your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy will require dedicated investment and support to succeed. Look at your overall marketing budget as a starting point and think long term. Where can you start, and what are your goals in one, three, and five years?

a) Internal Diversity & Inclusion Training/HR Policy

Explorers' Edge has already participated in inclusion training through the Rainbow Registered program delivered by CQCC, as well as broader workforce and service excellence training initiatives delivered in partnership with organizations such as OTEC. Through these efforts, you're setting a good example for your partners around diversity and inclusion. *CQCC's 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusive Policies and Practices Guide*, *Trans and Non-Binary Inclusion Guide* and *Diversity & Inclusion Workshops* are excellent resources to share with your team and partners for additional insights. As well, local organizations, such as Safer Spaces, offer 2SLGBTQI+ diversity training in Gravenhurst, Huntsville and Bracebridge.

Because language, expectations, and best practices related to inclusion continue to evolve, it is recommended that inclusion-focused training opportunities be revisited periodically as part of ongoing professional development. Offering refresher sessions every two to three years and ensuring that new staff members have access to inclusion training early in their onboarding process, will help maintain consistency across the organization. Including partner destinations in appropriate training opportunities can also support alignment across the region.

Explorers' Edge has already delivered workforce development sessions to tourism operators across the region, including Inclusive Service Excellence workshops and related training that support awareness of bias, accessibility, and inclusive guest experiences. As this work continues, there may be opportunities to incorporate additional 2SLGBTQI+ inclusion content into future sessions so that tourism operators across the region can continue building confidence in serving diverse visitors. This is a message that will need to be shared many times before it becomes second nature for many of your destinations.

Over time, however, 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness will increasingly become integrated across areas such as content development, communications, partnership programming, and destination development initiatives. Ensuring that staff share a common understanding of language, visitor expectations, and respectful engagement with the 2SLGBTQI+ community will support consistency in how the region presents itself as a welcoming destination.

As part of this process, Explorers' Edge may also wish to work with partner destinations to confirm consistent use of terminology when referring to the 2SLGBTQI+ community across regional communications. Right now, your partner destinations rarely, if ever, mention the 2SLGBTQI+ community on their websites, even if their destinations host a Pride event. This means they aren't fixed about how they would refer to the community in the future (does everybody use 2SLGBTQI+, for example, or do they stick with LGBTQ+ or something else?) Establishing alignment around language helps create clarity for visitors and local collaborators while supporting a coordinated regional approach.

Finally, it's important to review internal HR-related materials and forms periodically to ensure they reflect inclusive practices where appropriate. This can include confirming that pronoun usage is supported in internal communications and that gender identifiers are requested only where necessary. These types of updates help ensure that inclusion is reflected not only in external messaging, but also within internal workplace practices.

Internal Diversity & Inclusion Training/HR Policy	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Share news of Explorers' Edge diversity and inclusion training efforts with the general public.	**NEED TO DO** - Ensure all new staff at Explorers' Edge Region undergo 2SLGBTQI+ diversity training. - Do an internal audit of forms and policies prior to asking partners to do the same. - Determine the acronym Explorers' Edge Region and your destination partners will use when referring to the 2SLGBTQI+ community.
SAMPLE GOALS - Audit all internal forms and HR materials. - Ensure onboarding includes diversity and inclusion training within six months of your initial working group meeting.	

b) External Diversity & Inclusion Training

Encouraging tourism operators and partner destinations to participate in diversity and inclusion training will be an important step in strengthening regional readiness for the 2SLGBTQI+ travel market. Explorers' Edge has already supported inclusion-related workforce training through partnerships with organizations such as OTEC and through participation in the Rainbow Registered program delivered by CQCC. These initiatives provide a strong foundation that can be expanded over time.

As noted in the working group engagement process, businesses across the region are interested in practical guidance on how to create welcoming environments for visitors and residents. This is also an opportunity to offer a specific 2SLGBTQI+ presentation with a recording that is permanently hosted on the Explorers' Edge Region website that partners can return to.

Explorers' Edge should also encourage (or support) your partners to offer this kind of training for their staff and members. When your regional partners offer this training, remind them to include front line workers at visitor centres that are run by, or supported by, their tourism organization. Your partners should also work with local hotels, tour operators and organizations to see how their members can be encouraged to execute training for their staff, putting an emphasis on those that are customer facing.

Over time, you may also wish to explore opportunities to recognize businesses that participate in inclusion training through regional amplification or inclusion-focused business listings. Highlighting operators who have taken steps to strengthen inclusive practices can help increase confidence among visitors while encouraging broader participation from local tourism collaborators across the region.

One other type of training you may want to consider is specifically for front line workers at visitor information centres in your region. Consider hosting a virtual call with all employees of these centres at the beginning of the summer season, inviting your Prides to also participate. Inform employees about your region's Pride activities so they are fully aware and can easily reply to any queries they may receive from visitors. You could even have a small sign in the centres with a message saying something like "Do you have any questions about Pride? We've got the answers!"

External Diversity & Inclusion Training	
NICE TO DO -Share the *CQCC Business Case for 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion Resource Guide* with partners, offering an incentive for tourism businesses that undergo training such as CQCC and Rainbow Registered training - Educate front line visitor centre workers about Pride and your local queer community	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Encourage above mentioned partners to take part in CQCC Diversity & Inclusion Workshops (or other available diversity and inclusion workshops offered by other local partners) - Incorporate this training information into recorded presentations on the Explorers' Edge website
SAMPLE GOALS - Highlight five businesses that participated in inclusion training on a blog post on the Great Canadian Wilderness website - At least one new recorded presentation should include 2SLGBTQI+ diversity content	

c) Support Local 2SLGBTQI+ Festivals & Events

2SLGBTQI+ festivals and events are often short on resources and staff, and even modest support can make a meaningful difference in helping them grow and succeed. Pride events in the Explorers' Edge region are eligible to apply for support through the Explorers' Edge Partnership Program, which has supported some 2SLGBTQI+ initiatives in the past. Maintaining this funding pathway and proactively encouraging Pride organizers to access it should remain part of your annual budget planning.

From there, work with your local Prides and other 2SLGBTQI+ events to increase awareness of this funding opportunity and support them through the application process. If Explorers' Edge Region (or any of your industry partners) are worried about how those funds are going to be used by the organization, you could potentially specify that a percent of your sponsorship must go towards marketing efforts aimed at outside visitors to ensure the value of your investment.

If your partner destinations are not yet supporting their local Prides, encourage them to consider doing so, highlighting how it can help tourism growth, while also bolstering their overall 2SLGBTQI+ efforts. This is also an excellent way to build relationships with the community. Again, you may encounter pushback from some of your local partners, but do not give up in your efforts. Change takes time and does not come easy for all.

That said, support goes beyond financial contributions. One of the most important things you (and your partner destinations) can do is show up in person. Attend Prides in the Explorers' Edge region, be visible, march in the parade (either as Explorers' Edge Region, with your destination partner or even supporting a local 2SLGBTQI+ owned business), and attend 2SLGBTQI+ galas and opening events. Also consider ways you can promote Pride or other 2SLGBTQI+ events through your owned media (see section #6, Implement Inclusive Marketing Strategies and Promotional Activities, for more on this).

Support Local 2SLGBTQI+ Festivals & Events	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Continue offering financial support to Prides in Explorers' Edge region	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** • -Show up and be visible at local 2SLGBTQI+ community events.
SAMPLE GOALS - Sponsor partner destination Prides, conditional upon a percentage of funding being used towards marketing/increasing out of town attendance, and the collection of data through event surveys.	

d) 2SLGBTQI+ Chambers & Regional/International Organizations

You're already a member of CQCC and in future years you could consider a membership with the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA). For any of these organizations, as a member, make sure to use their resources, participate in their webinars and get as much as you can out of that membership. Simply being a member, but not participating, will not provide a return on your investment.

Other tourism associations such as the Tourism Industry Association of Canada (TIAC), DO and Destinations International occasionally offer 2SLGBTQI+ and/or diversity education segments during their annual conferences. Make sure to attend and connect with other partners in the room who are likely on the same learning curve as Explorers' Edge in the 2SLGBTQI+ welcoming journey.

Join 2SLGBTQI+ Chambers & Regional/International Organizations	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Join IGLTA and attend IGLTA in-person events. *Note, two out of three IGLTA annual conventions are held in North America which makes them more affordable to attend. We encourage you to review the agenda before registering to ensure the educational content will provide a strong ROI for your organization.*	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Continue your membership of CQCC
SAMPLE GOALS - Attend an IGLTA annual convention within five years of launching your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy and present your learnings to your working group. *Note, the key takeaway for many IGLTA attendees is the opportunity for meaningful networking.*	

e) Earmark a Dedicated Budget

While Explorers' Edge has supported some 2SLGBTQI+ initiatives through its Partnership Program and indicated in your audit surveys that resources can be drawn from existing marketing and partnership budgets, the organization does not currently maintain a dedicated budget for this market. Establishing even a modest annual allocation would help signal long-term commitment and create greater certainty for staff and community partners alike.

A dedicated budget could support initiatives such as Pride partnerships, inclusive product development, targeted media or influencer visits, and expanded training opportunities for regional operators. Other niche segments (culinary, outdoor, etc.) within the region already benefit from more defined funding pathways, suggesting a similar approach could be successfully adapted for 2SLGBTQI+ tourism over time.

Explorers' Edge has begun laying groundwork in this area through inclusion training, engagement with local Pride organizations, and participation in provincial and FedNor-supported 2SLGBTQI+ tourism initiatives. The next step is to formalize how this work is resourced.

Identifying realistic priorities for one-, three-, and five-year horizons such as supporting Pride organizers through partnership funding streams, hosting additional 2SLGBTQI+ media visits, strengthening operator training opportunities, or participating in sector events such as IGLTA will help ensure progress remains consistent and measurable. As with other developing tourism segments, sustained impact will depend on setting clear funding expectations and maintaining momentum over multiple years.

Earmark a Dedicated Budget	
NICE TO DO - Increase your dedicated budget towards your 2SLGBTQI+ market-readiness efforts.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Include additional 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness efforts within other budgets.
SAMPLE GOALS - Incrementally increase the amount your organization spends on the 2SLGBTQI+ market each year.	

#5 Offer Unique Products & Experiences

Explorers' Edge Region does not need a gay village or 2SLGBTQI+ nightlife to implement a successful 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy. Look at your destination's unique offerings and build on those assets.

a) Showcase Authentic Tourism Product Offerings

Every destination has offerings that will appeal to the 2SLGBTQI+ travel market, even if they're not specifically developed with 2SLGBTQI+ tourism in mind. Remember, the 2SLGBTQI+ segment is a diverse group of people with a variety of interests and travel motivations. The *CQCC Guide for Developing 2SLGBTQI+ Products and Tours* outlines various archetypes identified by recent CQCC research such as Safety Conscious Travellers, Frequent Travellers and Cultural Explorers. Look at offerings that are unique to your destination and which archetype they would appeal to most.

Explorers' Edge, with its unique blend of stunning Georgian Bay landscapes, world-class paddling and hiking, Muskoka cottage country charm, and rich Indigenous and artistic heritage, holds broad appeal for any visitor, including 2SLGBTQI+ visitors. Industry research shows that 2SLGBTQI+ visitors generally have the same interests as non-2SLGBTQI+ visitors, but they want to feel safe and comfortable while experiencing these offerings. From backcountry canoe tripping through Algonquin Park to exploring the Group of Seven's iconic Georgian Bay painting grounds, from discovering the quirky outdoor art of the Screaming Heads in the Almaguin Highlands to relaxing at a lakeside Muskoka resort, Explorers' Edge has tremendous potential with the 2SLGBTQI+ market, so long as visitors feel safe and welcome throughout the region.

Showcasing these offerings to potential 2SLGBTQI+ visitors through your 2SLGBTQI+ or regular tourism promotional strategies (see section #6 Implement Inclusive Marketing Strategies and Promotional Activities) will help position Explorers' Edge as a welcoming destination, in both its cities and rural areas, for this market.

Showcase Authentic Tourism Product Offerings	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Match unique offerings to the CQCC archetypes in order to build into both your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism or general strategies.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Choose three unique product offerings to showcase within the first year of launching your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy.

b) *Liaise with Tourism Providers to Ensure Inclusivity*

Every effort should be made to work with major tourism operators and businesses across the Explorers' Edge region to ensure the products and services they offer are welcoming to 2SLGBTQI+ travellers. Explorers' Edge has already begun supporting this program through workforce development sessions and inclusion-focused training opportunities delivered in partnership with organizations such as OTEC, but it was not clear through survey results as to how many tour operators participated in these training opportunities. As this work continues, it will be important to expand participation and ensure that more accommodations, attractions, festivals, and experience providers across the region are equipped to welcome 2SLGBTQI+ visitors.

Encouraging operators to develop products and services that are inclusive to 2SLGBTQI+ travellers does not necessarily mean creating experiences specifically for this market. In many cases, it means supporting operators in taking practical steps such as participating in inclusion training, adopting welcoming service practices, using gender-inclusive language in guest communications, and ensuring marketing materials reflect diverse visitors. Reference the *CQCC Guide for Developing 2SLGBTQI+ Products and Tours* for additional guidance on adapting existing offerings. Businesses that take steps towards inclusivity can add attributes like "2SLGBTQI+ Welcoming" and "Transgender Safe Space" to their Google listings or by pursuing Rainbow Registered accreditation.

One of the ongoing challenges from an RTO perspective is ensuring that partner destinations participate in these efforts and seeing if training leads to sustained changes in visitor experience. Providing inclusion workshops is an important starting point, but continued follow-up is essential to understand how operators are applying what they have learned. Explorers' Edge can work with its destination partners to identify practical ways to measure progress, such as checking in with participating operators several months after training sessions, tracking participation in inclusion initiatives, or identifying businesses interested in deeper engagement. This work is most effective when approached as an

ongoing process rather than a single intervention, helping ensure that inclusive practices become embedded across the region's tourism sector over time.

Liaise with Tourism Providers to Ensure Inclusivity	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Encourage tourism businesses to review the CQCC resource guides, including the *Business Case for 2SLGBTQI+ Inclusion* and offer an incentive for those that undergo training.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Encourage tourism providers to take part in *CQCC Diversity & Inclusion Workshops.* Encourage partners and providers to select ethical and diverse vendors and suppliers.
SAMPLE GOALS - Have 5% of Explorers' Edge providers complete some form of diversity and inclusion training within the first year of your 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness efforts. -Send a follow-up survey to operators who participated in inclusion training six months afterwards	

c) Seek Out Existing 2SLGBTQI+ Community Events and Festivals

While dedicated 2SLGBTQI+ festivals are not required to attract this visitor segment, they play an important role in demonstrating that a destination is welcoming and inclusive. Explorers' Edge benefits from having three Pride organizations active across the region. Together, these groups create visible opportunities for residents and visitors to engage with 2SLGBTQI+ community life across both larger centres and smaller rural communities.

Importantly, these organizations operate primarily through small volunteer teams with limited capacity. As Tara Ratcliff, Outreach Coordinator with Almaguin Pride Network, noted during the local collaborators working group discussion, "there's only actually five of us in the Almaguin Pride group, so partnering with other organizations is making us stronger and just making our community a safer, more welcoming spot." Similarly, Glen Yacula, Treasurer with Muskoka Pride, described Muskoka Pride's work as supporting regional inclusion through grant-supported initiatives and volunteer-led awareness efforts across the community.

Local collaborator input from the audit call conversation suggests that Pride organizations across Explorers' Edge are primarily focused on strengthening inclusion for local residents and building community visibility. While they are not currently positioned as tourism drivers, examples of repeat visitation to queer-friendly events and strong support from local businesses indicate opportunities to grow the visitor role of Pride programming over time through coordinated marketing visibility, partnerships, and awareness of funding opportunities. This is where Explorers' Edge and your partner destinations can offer support.

Beyond direct funding opportunities available through Explorers' Edge, encourage your Pride events to take advantage of any potential funding opportunities through their local destinations as well as the Ontario Culture and the Arts Fund (OCAF) and the Ontario Tourism Development Fund (TDF).

Seek Out Existing 2SLGBTQI+ Community Events and Festivals	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Support any other local event that includes 2SLGBTQI+ content to help them access additional event funding.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Support Prides in Explorers' Edge region to help them access additional event funding.
SAMPLE GOAL - Support two Prides in Explorers' Edge region in their funding applications	

d) Mentor and Assist the Community in Developing New 2SLGBTQI+ Product

Creating new exclusive 2SLGBTQI+ products will be most successful when it happens organically with involvement from the local community, such as the Away We Go Muskoka Pride tour or the A Queer Camp Algonquin and Sparrow Lake getaways. It would be useful for Explorers' Edge to connect with these specific providers to have a conversation about the development of their products, challenges and opportunities they've experienced and how best to build awareness of these offerings to potential clients so you can share that learning with others.

At the same time, providing mentorship and assistance to local 2SLGBTQI+ organizations, tourism businesses, and allied partners can help support the development of additional programs, experiences, and packages that reflect the character of the Explorers' Edge region. Your expertise, regional connections, and ability to convene partners can play an important role in helping these ideas move from concept to implementation.

Funding for new tourism experiences is often a barrier for community-led initiatives. The Explorers' Edge Partnership Program can support collaborative projects that package accommodations, events, and activities into bookable visitor experiences, particularly when multiple operators work together across communities. Continued awareness of complementary provincial opportunities, such as Ontario Tourism Innovation Lab programming, when available, can also help local organizations and operators explore additional pathways for developing new inclusive experiences.

Examples of future opportunities could include coordinated Pride-weekend visitor packages across multiple communities, expanded arts and performance programming connected to existing Pride activity, or partnerships between

accommodations and cultural organizations to create themed stays tied to events such as the Muskoka Queer Film Festival.

Explorers' Edge has already begun moving in this direction through the introduction of new bookable travel experiences within the region, creating a strong foundation for packaging future 2SLGBTQI+ visitor offerings. Supporting operators in adapting existing experiences so they are more visible and accessible to 2SLGBTQI+ visitors can be just as effective as developing entirely new offerings. Explorers' Edge can also encourage operators to package experiences through established booking platforms and regional collaborations, helping ensure new products are easy for visitors to discover and access.
Creating and marketing new 2SLGBTQI+ products and services doesn't have to be onerous. Your destination partners can show the local community other mainstream efforts that have worked, such as adding products and experiences to sites like Tours By Locals or Airbnb Experiences.

Mentor and Assist the Community in Developing New 2SLGBTQI+ Product	
NICE TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT - Liaise with tourism providers outside of your working group to brainstorm ideas for new 2SLGBTQI+ tourism products.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Brainstorm ideas with your working group, utilizing the skills and services offered within the group, thus keeping most of the work and responsibilities outside of Explorers' Edge purview
SAMPLE GOALS - Support a local partner in the creation of one new 2SLGBTQI+ experience and feature it on the Explorers' Edge website	

#6 Implement Inclusive Marketing Strategies and Promotional Activities

There are three ways to approach inclusive marketing strategies and promotional activities: through owned media, earned media and paid media. It's best to start by analyzing how you are promoting, or will promote, 2SLGBTQI+ travel and the 2SLGBTQI+ community through your owned channels such as your website(s), social media, or blog. By developing authentic and inclusive content there, you'll be better prepared to start earned media efforts or paid marketing campaigns. In addition, beginning with your owned media is more affordable and you have full control of the content.

a) Owned Media

Start by doing an inventory of what owned media you can work with, such as:

- Website/Blog – Explorers' Edge has both consumer and industry websites

    - https://thegreatcanadianwilderness.com (consumer) and
        - When doing a search of the Great Canadian Wilderness website using “LGBT” or “LGBTQ” or “2SLGBTQI+” no content comes up
        - A search using the word “queer” has a single event listing from 2025
        - With “Pride” as the search term, lots of listings come up, but most have nothing to do with the 2SLGBTQI+ community
        - No obvious 2SLGBTQI+ imagery from a casual visit to the website as a regular visitor would do
    - https://explorersedge.ca (industry)
        - There doesn’t appear to be a search tool on the website to quickly see any 2SLGBTQI+ content
        - Using the web address and then “LGBT” into a general Google search brings up a number of posts about work that has been done by Explorers’ Edge from an industry/B2B perspective
- Social media – Explorers’ Edge has an active Instagram account as well as Instagram and Facebook pages for the Great Canadian Wilderness:
    - https://www.instagram.com/greatcanadianwilderness
        - Did not see any obvious Pride or 2SLGBTQI+ imagery or content going back two years on the grid
    - https://www.facebook.com/GreatCanadianWilderness
        - Using search terms such as “LGBT” “LGBTQ” “2SLGBTQI+” and “queer” didn’t show results, but “Pride” showed many, with a mix of queer posts and others that celebrate pride of place, Canadian pride etc.
    - https://www.instagram.com/explorersedgetourism/
        - Post about Diva Dialogues and the event announcement
- Media image library
    - There does not appear to be a media image library on your website, but when I did a Google search for a media library for Explorers’ Edge, a Flickr page came up.
        - There are about a dozen Pride photos, but nothing comes up when searching the terms “LGBT” “LGBTQ” “2SLGBTQI+” and “queer”
        - Explorers’ Edge Region may consider making this library easily visible to media/travel trade on the

Explorers' Edge website so they can know what you have available.

- Newsletters
    - Explorers' Edge has a consumer newsletter that people can subscribe to
        - It isn't possible to search past newsletters and in surveys no information was provided about 2SLGBTQI+ content here.

To continue creating authentic and inclusive 2SLGBTQI+ content for your owned channels, ask for help from your local 2SLGBTQI+ community. If possible:

- Do photo and/or video shoots using local 2SLGBTQI+ photographers and people, or at minimum include 2SLGBTQI+ people in other photo and video shoots. Avoid using non-2SLGBTQI+ individuals who are pretending they are 2SLGBTQIA+.
    - While you may not be able to pay the models for their time, see if you can offer them a gift card to a local business or take them all out to dinner after the photo shoot to show your appreciation.
    - Ask your local Prides or your destination partners if they may have any images/video that you can use or add to your media library.
- Highlight local 2SLGBTQI+ retail business owners and managers in your content plan and feature them on your website and social media when possible
    - There's no listing of all of the Prides in Explorers' Edge Region on the website. This is an easy blog post or event calendar that could be built out
    - Note that you may need to seek out greater transgender, gender nonconforming, and culturally diverse representation, which may be achieved by inquiring with your partner destinations or their local Prides

As you move forward, think about where you are not including 2SLGBTQI+ representation in your organization's promotional content and make a conscious decision to include it. Across its owned channels, Explorers' Edge has an opportunity to make existing 2SLGBTQI+ content more visible and discoverable without significant additional investment. For an easy start, hire a writer from your local queer community to write a blog post about queer life in the Great Canadian Wilderness. Some queer-related content exists through your owned

channels — Pride listings, Diva Dialogues posts, industry-facing work — but is not consistently tagged or easy to find.

Ensuring that any content referencing Pride, drag, queer culture, or 2SLGBTQI+ experiences is searchable using the correct terminology, including the acronym 2SLGBTQI+, is a practical and immediate priority. Similarly, a casual review of imagery across the consumer website and social channels can identify where the addition of a small number of well-chosen images would meaningfully signal inclusion to 2SLGBTQI+ visitors.

The 2SLGBTQI+ community likes to be represented in all your regular marketing efforts, be it integrated into your blog or your section on outdoor adventures. It's important to use inclusive and non-gendered language, such as spouse (instead of husband and wife) and parents (instead of mother and father).

If you have the resources to do so, you should also consider developing a specific page on your consumer website that is dedicated to the 2SLGBTQI+ community linked from your homepage in the "Do" section where people can presently find information on arts and culture, fishing, music and more. In addition, if your promotional content includes the rainbow flag, or you intend on using one, you should consider the inclusive rainbow/progress flag, but only if your other efforts truly represent the trans and BIPOC 2SLGBTQI+ community.

Remember though, 2SLGBTQI+ specific content needs to be interesting, useful, and current. All too often destinations create 2SLGBTQI+ webpages with information about 2SLGBTQI+ events and businesses, but once the page is created, they never go back to review and update it. As a result, a visitor to the page will likely encounter links to defunct businesses or past events, which is worse than having no page at all.

As a regional leader, encourage your partner destinations to also add content, when appropriate, that relates to the 2SLGBTQI+ community on their tourism websites or social media. This is especially important if their destination hosts events, such as Pride:

- Discover Muskoka only mentions Pride a couple of times over the years on wider blog posts. In those mentions, they don't actually refer to the 2SLGBTQI+ community, but instead highlight diversity
- Explore Huntsville has no 2SLGBTQI+ content on their websites
- Parry Sound Tourism doesn't even mention Pride on its website
- The Explore Almaguin website doesn't appear to show their local Pride (but they don't have a search tool, so it may have been missed when reviewing their site)

- Visit the Bridge, Bracebridge's tourism website, also has no mention of the 2SLGBTQI+ community.

Canada's cities tend to have stronger 2SLGBTQI+ content on their websites than our regions or provinces. *Tourisme Montreal's 2SLGBTQI+ page* is a good example of how to include specific content for the 2SLGBTQI+ community on a website. As a regional destination, your page doesn't have to be this detailed, but it provides ideas about what is possible.

For your social media, include 2SLGBTQI+ content among your regular social media posts, but also consider creating a specific destination 2SLGBTQI+ hashtag that you'll be able to track, such as #queerGreatCanadianWilderness or #GreatCanadianWilderness2SLGBTQI+.

Owned Media	
NICE TO DO - Create an 2SLGBTQI+ web page linked from your homepage.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Incorporate 2SLGBTQI+ stories and content into as many of your existing web pages and digital/print assets as possible. - Highlight your 2SLGBTQI+ efforts in your industry newsletters
SAMPLE GOALS - Audit all digital and print assets within one year of launching your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy. - Prioritize Rainbow Registered businesses in official 2SLGBTQI+ travel itineraries, ensuring the RTO is promoting businesses that have been verified as inclusive.	

b) Earned Media

When possible, incorporate 2SLGBTQI+ content into any of your earned media strategies:

- Develop 2SLGBTQIA+-specific pitches that highlight your local region and events.
    - Start small by sharing these kinds of pitches with outlets like Xtra Magazine, Canada's national 2SLGBTQI+ website
- If appropriate, include 2SLGBTQI+ content into your overall destination pitches to media
    - Note that more and more mainstream outlets, such as Conde Nast Traveler, Afar and Travel+Leisure are including 2SLGBTQI+ content in their outlets these days
- If it makes sense for the theme of your trip, host openly 2SLGBTQI+ travel writers on non-2SLGBTQI+ FAM trips
- Host an individual 2SLGBTQI+ FAM trip during one of your Pride events in partnership with the destination

- Let your PMO know you're open to hosting 2SLGBTQI+ writers on FAM trips, or ask if they are willing to develop a regional 2SLGBTQI+ group FAM with you

Earned Media	
NICE TO DO - Develop 2SLGBTQI+-specific media pitches.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Incorporate 2SLGBTQI+ writers and influencers in your already planned FAM trips.
SAMPLE GOALS - Host one 2SLGBTQI+ writers or influencer on a suitable FAM trip in 2026	

c) *Paid Media*

When influencers are invited simply as media, you won't have any say on the content produced. By paying online influencers, not only will they create content that you'll have more control over, but you will also have the ability to share that content through your own channels.

If you're ever in a financial situation where you could consider a paid marketing campaign on your own, or in partnership with DO, Destination Canada, or any other partner, consider what message you want to share and who you want to share it with. Note that 2SLGBTQI+ co-op marketing opportunities tend to be more affordable than other niches, or general campaigns.

For more insights into paid marketing to the 2SLGBTQI+ community, read *CQCC's Marketing to the 2SLGBTQI+ Community: A Planning Toolkit.*

Paid Media	
NICE TO DO -Engage an 2SLGBTQI+ writer or influencer for paid marketing opportunities.	**NEED TO DO/MINIMAL INVESTMENT** - Include 2SLGBTQI+ in your existing pay per click budget (but only if it's directed back to appropriate conten).
SAMPLE GOALS - Determine an appropriate maximum bounce rate for any 2SLGBTQI+ paid efforts.	

Measuring Success

Sample goals have been scattered throughout this document and should be treated as suggestions to inspire Explorers' Edge to develop your own destination-specific goals. These should be used to measure the success of your 2SLGBTQI+ market readiness efforts.

a) Set Goals & KPIs

Earlier in this document (Section 2B, Create an Action Plan & Goals) we presented an initial list of KPIs that Explorers' Edge Region was considering in 2026 for the 2SLGBTQI+ market:

- Increased participation from partner destinations and tourism operators.
- Growth in training participation across the region.
- Increased engagement with inclusive websites and social media content.
- Earned media placements highlighting inclusive experiences.
- Attendance growth at events and community programming.
- Improved visitor sentiment and perception of the region as welcoming and safe.

This is an excellent high-level approach but doesn't consider some of the nuts-and-bolts actions that are needed to bring this program to life. Throughout this document we have provided examples of specific initiatives you can undertake. Keep yourself accountable by quantifying what is realistic to achieve, such as having two meetings per year with your working group; hosting an 2SLGBTQI+ journalist on a familiarization trip; hosting a writer for an 2SLGBTQI+ publication; financially supporting at least two Explorers' Edge Pride events each year; having at least one social media post per year highlighting 2SLGBTQI+ content; and adding an 2SLGBTQI+ blog post to the destination blog each year.

Set the goals and KPIs that you want these initiatives to achieve, such as the number of stories published in 2SLGBTQI+ media and the number of unique visits to an 2SLGBTQI+ webpage.

b) Create a Schedule of Milestones

It is critical to create and monitor milestones to ensure your 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy stays on track. Before launching your 2SLGBTQI+ market-readiness efforts, you should consider setting targets and dates for your internal and partnership goals, such as completion of additional diversity and inclusion training and/or workshops, updating of internal policies, procedures, and forms,

and creating 2SLGBTQI+ tourism products or inclusive non-2SLGBTQI+ tourism products through local providers.

c) Evaluate Traveller Feedback

Explorers' Edge should aim to continuously collect feedback that is inclusive in nature, offering the opportunity for 2SLGBTQI+ travellers to self-identify and share their experience. If possible, Explorers' Edge Region should aim to collect feedback that is inclusive in nature, offering the opportunity for 2SLGBTQI+ travelers to self-identify and share their experience. This will provide more market-specific information to support your efforts and better understand your 2SLGBTQI+ visitor needs and expectations.

Should any issues arise because of these efforts, make sure they are addressed and act if necessary. It is recommended that you identify further training opportunities if there has been negative traveller feedback. Remember that all feedback obtained should be kept confidential and align with your privacy policy and federal data protection laws. It should also be noted that asking questions around sexual orientation is legal in Canada but should be treated in a sensitive manner. For tips, reference the *CQCC Guide for Developing 2SLGBTQI+ Products and Tours*.

d) Report on Goals

It is vital to report the status of your goals to your internal team and your 2SLGBTQI+ working group and/or local collaborators. By meeting at least twice a year you'll share your successes, stay accountable, and ensure efforts do not fall flat if your internal champion on the initiative departs the organization. Take the time to review and reassess your original goals or KPIs to determine if any areas need extra attention, and where important wins or progress can be celebrated. This could include how your organization is tracking goals or KPIs, and sharing community or traveller stories, good or bad. This information can be presented in the form of team meetings, town halls, in trade newsletters, and at working group meetings. This will not only show progress made but serve as a reminder of the importance of your 2SLGBTQI+ market-readiness efforts.

e) Adjust Your Goals

Regular reflection and adjustment of your goals will lead to the long-term success of your destination with the 2SLGBTQI+ travel market. Be honest about areas that have room for improvement and set more aggressive goals for those that have been accomplished with relative ease.

Summary

As an organization, Explorers' Edge has already begun the work of becoming more inclusive and welcoming to 2SLGBTQI+ travellers. From organizing the Diva Dialogues event and hosting local collaborator conversations, to completing Rainbow Registered training for all staff and engaging with FedNor-funded provincial initiatives, there is an understanding within the organization that welcoming 2SLGBTQI+ visitors is both the right thing to do and a meaningful business opportunity. That commitment is also good for the local queer community, particularly those in more rural and smaller communities across the region who can at times feel the challenges of being openly 2SLGBTQI+ where they live.

While Explorers' Edge can lead this initiative and undertake meaningful work in-house, the organization will also need to collaborate closely with its destination partners, who are directly involved in the business development and marketing of the region. At the same time, it is essential to lean on 2SLGBTQI+ community members to guarantee authenticity. This effort must never be perceived as "pinkwashing," and those genuine relationships with the 2SLGBTQI+ community will be what keeps it on the right path. That is why building and maintaining a diverse working group is so important.

Local collaborators who participated in this audit were clear-eyed about both the progress that has been made and the work that remains. As Kieren Day, creator of the Bala Bay Divas drag show at the Bala Bay Inn, put it: "Muskoka is a beautiful destination for tourism, and the old mind set is washing away as the crowd gets younger. Let's paint Muskoka with every colour of the rainbow." That sense of momentum is real, and it reflects what is happening on the ground across the region.

The opportunity for Explorers' Edge is to channel it into a cohesive, long-term strategy. Achieving greater cultural diversity within the working group and broader engagement process should be a long-term goal. It will be especially important to connect with BIPOC members of local queer communities to ensure their experiences are included in these efforts. This will not happen quickly, but every effort should be made to develop those relationships over time.

From there, Explorers' Edge should build its 2SLGBTQI+ tourism strategy into its long-term strategic plan, presenting updates and adjustments internally and externally at least once a year. In this plan, priority should be placed on partnerships, workload allocation, ongoing diversity and inclusion training, and a deliberate plan to grow 2SLGBTQI+ content and imagery across owned media channels. Leading by example and making the business case to destination partners and the broader business community will be key to their buy-in and participation, which is critical to sustained success in this market.

As Explorers' Edge and its destination partners make progress internally, they should strengthen relationships with the 2SLGBTQI+ community, especially those who will contribute to long-term efforts. Destination partners should be encouraged to forge their own partnerships, increase 2SLGBTQI+ inclusivity at non-2SLGBTQI+ festivals and events, and create 2SLGBTQI+ marketable experiences, digital assets, and queer content on their websites. Explorers' Edge can amplify that work through its own owned media channels to help tell the story of a welcoming and inclusive region. As Michelle Emson, Executive and Technical Director of Theatre Muskoka, reflected in the local collaborator working group survey: "If someone feels safe and welcome, they will come."

Explorers' Edge should also explore opportunities through DO and DNO to showcase these efforts on provincial platforms and consider including 2SLGBTQI+ media as part of mainstream FAMs, or on a dedicated 2SLGBTQI+ FAM highlighting the overall region. This will be key to telling the story of a welcoming Explorers' Edge to a market that might otherwise overlook a rural destination. It will also help allies—including business owners, municipal staff, and tourism operators who want to be supportive but are unsure how to communicate that—become more confident in their outreach over time.

As a regional organization, Explorers' Edge's biggest challenge comes from the thing it cannot fully control: the actions of partner destinations and their local businesses. Not all destinations are at the same stage of this journey. Some are already deeply engaged; others, particularly smaller and more rural ones, have yet to participate. And it is in some smaller destinations that members of local queer communities occasionally experience harassment or discomfort that could make visitors feel less safe. As Autumn Smith, Artistic and Executive Director of TimberBeast Productions, described the queer communities' experience across the region: "We're all in it together, but we're still separate." Closing that gap, between communities, between destinations, between intent and action, is at the heart of this work.

A compelling business case will be needed to bring along destinations and businesses that may not yet see the value in diversity, or that fear lost business or reputational risk by being a visible ally. Critical mass will be key: helping the business community feel comfortable standing up for diversity, ensuring the general public understands and supports its importance, and enabling the local 2SLGBTQI+ community to feel empowered to lend their voice, time, and energy. Progress will be made in incremental steps, but the direction should never change.

While Explorers' Edge has challenges ahead, the opportunity is much greater, and it has the potential to bring the region together around a shared commitment to inclusion. Through a concerted and collective effort, progress will be made, and local 2SLGBTQI+

communities will hopefully feel increasingly empowered to take on further leadership roles within the region's tourism strategy. The foundation has been laid. Now is the time to build on it.

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