

Sexual exclusion

issues and best practice in lesbian, gay
and bisexual housing and homelessness

by Deborah Gold

Shelter and Stonewall Housing: working
in partnership to promote good practice
in lesbian, gay and bisexual housing

stonewall housing

Shelter

Shelter and Stonewall Housing:
working in partnership to promote
good practice in lesbian, gay and
bisexual housing.

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To protect the identity of the people mentioned in this
report, models have been used in photographs and
some names have been changed.

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clients find safer spaces to live
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Introduction

This guidance was developed as part of a joint project between Shelter and Stonewall Housing. The partnership project aims to raise awareness of the significant housing and homelessness problems that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people experience. It brings together the experience and expertise of both organisations to promote best practice in lesbian, gay and bisexual housing in the housing and homelessness sector.

The following includes some of the key problems LGB people face related to housing:

- young people thrown out of home because of their sexuality
- young people suffer physical and verbal harassment inside and outside the home
- older people needing care or sheltered accommodation and finding themselves marginalised or ostracised
- all ages subjected to homophobic harassment and violence inside and outside the home
- people suffering same-sex domestic violence, with no appropriate emergency housing provision.

Most local authorities and housing providers do not monitor the sexuality of clients. Therefore they do not have a clear picture of how much of a problem there is nor how well they respond to client needs.

The Government quotes that between five and seven per cent of the population is lesbian, gay or bisexual.¹ A significant proportion of LGB people suffering housing problems slip through the net because providers are not trained to consider sexuality when assessing clients' needs.

One aim of the project is to encourage and support housing providers in recognising and responding to these specific needs of the LGB community, and to take a strategic approach to providing for these needs. A vital factor in taking this

approach will be to form a picture of the pattern and depth of need, and assess the resources currently available to deal with this need. Equalities monitoring has long been recognised as a method of gaining this information; however, equalities monitoring of sexuality, in particular, rarely takes place.

This guidance looks at the context for these issues, including previous reports and research. It goes on to set out the main housing problems that LGB people face. Some of these problems are age-related, while others affect all LGB people.

The guidance focuses on harassment and homophobic violence, and same-sex domestic violence. It includes suggestions on how to combat these problems, with details about why monitoring is important.

Language and definitions

People can often be uncomfortable about finding the right way to describe minority groups, as they wish to avoid offence. We suggest the following terms:

- lesbian
- gay man
- bisexual person
- LGB people (for a group)
- same-sex couple.

Avoid using the term homosexual because some LGB people find this offensive.

Homophobia is an irrational hatred, prejudice, or fear of lesbian, gay and

1. *Civil Partnership: A framework for the legal recognition of same-sex couples* [June 2003], Women and Equality Unit

bisexual people. These prejudicial feelings fuel the myths, stereotypes, discrimination, and violence, against LGB people.

LGB people in a homophobic society often internalise these negative stereotypes and can develop some degree of low self-esteem and self-hatred. This is known as **internalised homophobia**.

Heterosexism describes the tendency to view heterosexuality as the norm and all other forms of sexuality as deviations from the norm. It refers to a subtle, yet pervasive, bias in society, whereby institutions and individuals are conditioned to expect others to live and behave as if everyone were heterosexual.

Heterosexism, like sexism, is firmly entrenched in the prevailing customs, tradition and institutions of UK society. It serves to silence and erase the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, creating a lack of positive cultural images.

Where institutions operate in a heterosexist manner, by failing to take account of the particular needs of LGB people, this can be described as a kind of **institutional homophobia**.

Background

In 2002 the National Centre for Social Research published the results of a research project commissioned by Stonewall Housing, *Hidden in plain sight: homelessness amongst lesbian and gay youth*.² This research aimed to:

- investigate the causes of homelessness for young lesbians and gay men
- explore the nature of homelessness as experienced by lesbian and gay youth
- consider broad strategies for tackling the issue.

The research findings exposed important information about this minority group:

- being lesbian or gay can in itself cause some young people to become homeless
- even when not a direct cause of homelessness, a young person's sexuality can be one of the causal factors
- being lesbian or gay could add to the housing difficulties a young person experiences.
- young lesbians and gay men are completely invisible in most housing and homelessness services.

The research recommended that monitoring of client sexuality is an important step in challenging these problems.

These research findings are discussed in further detail in the section on young people (see page 8).

The joint Shelter and Stonewall Housing project has built on these research results by also considering the specific needs of other members of the LGB community, particularly older people.

Policy and legislation: recent changes

Many organisations now accept the need for equalities monitoring. However, few organisations or local authorities have included sexuality as a part of equalities monitoring. This may have been in part because, until recently, there was a lack of legislative protection for the LGB community. This meant organisations had little impetus to take proactive action on LGB equalities issues.

2. *Hidden in plain sight: homelessness amongst lesbian and gay youth*, William O'Connor and Donna Molloy, [2002], National Centre for Social Research, London

The situation has moved on significantly in the last year. In 2003 new regulations came into force that offer, for the first time, protection from discrimination in employment for LGB people.³ Two new pieces of legislation were passed, significantly challenging some of the legal barriers that LGB people face, including those within housing.⁴ Changes include the extension of matrimonial home rights to registered civil partners, measures to equalise the law on succession, and the extension of access to legal remedies for domestic violence.

The Employers' Association for Local Government (EALG) publishes the Equalities Standards for Local Government, covering six equalities strands, including sexuality. These standards form part of the Best Value Performance Indicators, and encourage local authorities to reach different levels of achievement in the promotion of equality across these strands.

The Audit Commission's new round of Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPAs) have an increased emphasis on diversity, and this forms part of the category that local authorities are awarded. The Audit Commission has adopted the same strands as the EALG, including sexuality, and local authorities will need to be able to demonstrate how they have taken account of this in order to score highly. Many local authorities are also extending their race equality impact assessments to take account of sexuality, following the introduction of the new equality employment regulations. It is clear that monitoring of sexuality would help local authorities demonstrate compliance in the sexuality strand of these audits.



Photo: Alex Menace

These developments create a statutory framework for LGB equality, and provide a timely opportunity for local authorities to take the next step in LGB equalities.

LGB housing issues: work so far

A number of reports on the subject of LGB issues in housing and homelessness support the need for action by housing providers.

In 1999 the National Housing Federation published a report on equality in housing for LGB people.⁵ In the report, the NHF recognised the need to:

*seek to develop and maintain monitoring systems that help identify discriminatory practices and outcomes . . . [which] may also include quantitative measures.*⁶

The report acknowledged that there is limited research about LGB people's

3. Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003

4. The Civil Partnership Act 2004 and the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004

5. *Equality in Housing: Guidance for tackling discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and promoting equality*, Nigel Rogers and Jane McVeigh, [1999], National Housing Federation

6. *ibid*, page 6



housing needs and encouraged Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to influence local authorities to change this.

In 2002 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) published a report highlighting the need for local authorities to investigate the patterns of homelessness amongst lesbians and gay men:⁷

A lack of analysis of the data collected is preventing local authorities from identifying reasons for repeat homelessness in their districts. More work also needs to be done in conjunction with other partners to assess underlying causes and trends of homelessness with particular client groups eg BME, lesbians and gay men.

In 2003 the ODPM published guidance for local authorities building a strategic approach to equalities issues.⁸ One of the recommendations stressed the need for monitoring, including sexuality:

Further work is needed to explore what kind of practical assistance councils

– differentiated by type and demography – need to allow them to assess needs, integrate equality and diversity into mainstream service delivery, and monitor and measure impact . . . Such practical assistance must address the whole range of equality and diversity issues, including ‘newer’ aspects such as age and sexual orientation.

In 2003 the Employers’ Organisation for Local Government and the Local Government Association published guidance for local authorities on engaging with LGB communities.⁹

The report encourages local authorities to take a strategic approach to LGB equality, and includes a checklist for action in housing departments. It takes a neutral stance on monitoring, recognising some of the difficulties inherent in a monitoring system (see page 18). It does, however, encourage local authorities to develop performance indicators on their sexuality equalities work.

7. *More Than a Number: Report on the analysis of ODPM homelessness statistics: 2001/2002*

8. *Research summary: Equality and diversity in local government*, [2003], ODPM

9. *Sexuality – the new agenda: A guide for local authorities on engaging with lesbian, gay and bisexual people*, [2003], EOLG, LGA

The issues

This section covers some of the main housing and homelessness problems that LGB people experience. These are all areas that practitioners need to be aware of.

Young people and vulnerability

Growing up can be a particularly difficult time for LGB people. Heterosexism in society means that there are very few positive cultural references to LGB people. Negative stereotypes are pervasive and can cause internalised homophobia and related problems.

School

Homophobia is a significant problem in schools. The word 'gay' is a fashionable insult, and is used indiscriminately to describe anything negative, eg 'your hair is gay'. Other offensive words (queer, faggot, bender, shirt-lifter, etc) are also used as insults. Some schools are more prepared than others to challenge bullying but even so, school can be a threatening and painful place for LGB people.

Low-level hostility can develop into active bullying and violence – and some LGB students feel they have nowhere to turn. For a young person with a developing sexuality, this can lead to a lack of self-confidence and very low self-esteem.

Family

A significant number of young LGB people experience homophobia within the family. For some, this homophobia may prevent them being open about their sexuality, and may cause them to begin living a double life. This can add to the internalised homophobia that some young people experience.

Homophobia in the family can develop into violence and active restriction of a young person expressing her/his sexuality. For some young people, this can lead directly to homelessness.

Causes of homelessness¹⁰

Research has shown that being LGB can be the direct cause of homelessness for young people. Homophobia can lead to young people being thrown out of home, or deciding to leave home. In addition, expectations of intolerance by young people or emotional and psychological difficulties in coming to terms with their sexuality, particularly in unsupportive environments, can cause homelessness.

Richard's story

Richard (23) grew up with his parents and siblings in the north. He had always dreaded his parents finding out he was gay, because he believed his father to be homophobic.

When he turned 17 he arrived home to find his belongings packed away and his father demanding he leave. Someone had told his family that he was gay. He went to stay with a boyfriend he had not known very long, but hated being away from home.

His parents agreed to allow him to return home if he got 'help'. Richard went home and began a relationship with a woman that lasted for over two years. He felt the situation was 'a farce', but was much happier back at home with his family.

His attempts to suppress his sexuality became increasingly difficult. He was seen in a gay bar by one of his father's friends and was thrown out a second time when was 21. He was homeless for a couple of months before he obtained housing association accommodation.

10. The sections 'Causes of homelessness' and 'Experiences of homelessness' for young LGB people (including case studies), are taken from *Hidden in plain sight: homelessness amongst lesbian and gay youth*, William O'Connor and Donna Molloy, [2002], National Centre for Social Research, London. Grateful thanks to the authors and the National Centre for Social Research for their generosity

Experiences of homelessness¹¹

The research found that being lesbian or gay can add to the difficulties experienced while homeless in four main ways:

- **Emotional distress** The rejection felt by young people who are thrown out of home because of being LGB can make them very distressed and vulnerable. It can be difficult for them to come to terms with the withdrawal of love and acceptance that accompanies being forced to leave home. This can lead to them putting themselves in difficult, dangerous or exploitative situations to meet their need for love and affection.
 - **Coming to terms with sexuality** Difficulty in coming to terms with sexuality without access to proper support and help can lead to depression or other emotional and mental-health related problems. In the research, the young people spoke of their use of alcohol or drugs and attention-seeking behaviour to try to cope with or block out issues arising from being LGB. This has implications for the type of help needed by young people and their receptivity to services.¹²
 - **Homophobia** Homophobia, perpetrated by staff, service users or other homeless people, can compound the difficulties faced by young LGB people while homeless. Some young people experience actual homophobia; others, because of past experience, come to expect homophobia and develop very low levels of trust in services. Young
- LGB people may assume staff are homophobic unless they are shown to be otherwise. Homophobia in services can have three different, but equally undesirable, consequences for young LGB people:
- *They do not use the services* This may mean that they decide to sleep rough or stay with friends, or that they remain in difficult or dangerous households.
 - *They leave services without having their needs met* Homophobia can lead to young people running away from services, returning to or entering dangerous or abusive situations because they need somewhere to stay.
 - *They remain in services and suffer homophobic abuse and harassment* Intolerance of sexuality, reflected in remarks, gestures, verbal and physical abuse, can make the use of services difficult and frightening. The experience of abuse or harassment exacerbates their problems, such as low self-esteem, and increases the likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse.
 - **Invisibility** Lack of awareness among service providers about the sexuality of some of their clients can mean they are not always aware of the needs of young LGB people. This can make it difficult for young LGB people to get the right help and support, which can in turn lead to increased vulnerability.

11. cf footnote 10, page 8

12. Services could include hostels, housing support projects, alcohol and drugs support, and youth support work, for example

Juliet's story

Juliet (24) spent most of her teenage years in residential care, but decided that she could not come out in that environment because 'it was too dangerous . . . I would have gotten my head kicked in all the time.'

When Juliet left care she entered a mixed supported-accommodation project where her sexuality 'just came out'.

Though many of her peers were supportive, a staff member displayed severe discomfort with her sexuality. On one occasion she was told by him it would be better if she found somewhere else to live because her 'difference' was causing problems within the project.



Photo: Alex Menace

Seeking support

Many young LGB people seek support by trying to meet other LGB people, and the commercial scene is often the easiest place to do this. The scene tends to be in urban, cosmopolitan areas (for example, Brighton, London and Manchester), so young people often migrate to these areas. Such areas also tend to have a more developed LGB community, with support services for young people coming to terms with their sexuality. Access to these services can have a highly positive effect on young LGB people.

The commercial LGB scene can provide support, but it also carries risks. It is often based around a culture of heavy alcohol consumption or drug use. For young people to access the scene, they need the money to buy alcohol in pubs and bars. Pressure to conform can lead young people to use drugs and alcohol at dangerous levels, and this in turn can increase the risk of other dangerous practices, such as unsafe sex.

Mental health

Research¹³ among LGB under-24-year-olds found that:

- 53 per cent of under-24-year-olds had thought seriously about suicide
- 19 per cent of under-24-year-olds had been prescribed medication for depression in the previous 12 months
- 41 per cent of people of all ages had had thoughts about suicide, and, of these, 18 per cent of people of all ages had attempted suicide
- 30 per cent of people of all ages had had thoughts of self-harm, and 10 per cent of people of all ages had actually self-harmed.

Young LGB people are at similar risk to other young people of suffering mental-health difficulties. The risk is intensified, however, by the problems they may have faced as a result of their sexuality.

13. *Count Me In: Findings from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community needs assessment 2000*, University of Southampton, 2001

Low self-esteem, social isolation, and lack of support can lead to high levels of depression and self-harming behaviour. This behaviour can manifest itself in many ways – by causing physical damage to their bodies, by misuse of drink or drugs, or by practising unsafe sex. Young LGB people are even more vulnerable when they find themselves homeless, without any obvious means of support.

Sexual exploitation

Young, homeless LGB people are at increased risk of sexual exploitation. Many have very damaged self-esteem, and will avoid mainstream homelessness provision because of their fears of homophobia, whether perceived or real.

The emotional distress of being thrown out of home can lead young people to put themselves in dangerous or exploitative situations to meet their need for affection and validation. This can lead to unsafe sex, and also to young people seeking ways of supporting themselves without approaching local authorities (LAs) or hostels: providing sex in exchange for somewhere to sleep, for example.

Older people and invisibility

As people grow older they face difficult decisions about housing and care. Options include:

- having someone care for them in their own home
- visiting a day centre
- moving to sheltered accommodation
- moving to an extra-care facility or a residential home.

As the population ages, the need for these services will grow. The number of people who are open about their sexuality will also increase with time, and it is

important to plan for this growth. That said, there are already a significant number of LGB people using services designed for older people. Many of these people are already out, others may not be, but all have a need for their sexuality to be valued and acknowledged within the service.

For older LGB people, accessing these services can be a particularly negative experience. The problems they encounter include:

- LGB invisibility within services (heterosexism)
- discomfort and lack of openness among workers in talking about LGB issues
- isolation from family and from other service users
- harassment from other service users.

Older people often find that society behaves as though they no longer have an active sexuality. In many cases, it will not have occurred to services staff that a client could be lesbian, gay or bisexual. This means that, although services are not designed specifically for heterosexual people, this is how they are delivered.

It is particularly important that older people are confident their service providers will not allow discrimination on grounds of sexuality. Equalities statements do not always include sexuality equality so there needs to be specific mention of LGB people.

Older LGB people may be concerned about confidentiality from local authority and housing association staff. It is important that staff or contractors who go into people's homes are trained in equal opportunities and confidentiality.

The situation for older LGB people could be improved by:

- ensuring all workers are non-judgemental about sexuality

- ensuring staff who challenge tenant homophobia are confident they will have the support of the local authority or housing provider
- placing a number of LGB clients in one residential scheme to combat isolation
- workers understanding that, whether or not service users are still sexually active, their sexuality remains an important part of their identity
- stocking the library with films and books featuring LGB people
- making it easy for people to request a personal carer of a chosen gender
- having visible statements about non-discriminatory practices in publicity materials, drawing attention specifically to the diversity of older people, including LGB people
- having a zero-tolerance approach to any kind of verbal harassment based on sexuality.

It is vital that staff do not assume that everyone they meet is heterosexual. This kind of assumption has an enormous effect on the willingness of clients to disclose their sexuality and to seek suitable services.

Homophobic harassment and violence

Research¹⁴ has found that 59 per cent of people questioned had experienced abuse, violence or harassment outside the home; of those people, 51.5 per cent identified sexual orientation as a possible motivation for this.

Many LGB people experience homophobic harassment and violence in their neighbourhood. This may be because someone knows their sexuality, or has guessed it. In addition, LGB people are forced to be open about their sexuality in order to report the crime.



Photo: Graham Fink

Harassment can take a number of forms. Stonewall Housing has dealt with incidents including:

- name-calling
- homophobic graffiti (including that which identifies the person's address)
- gangs surrounding the person
- damage to cars
- houses broken into
- people ostracised in their neighbourhoods
- post opened
- windows broken
- faeces put through the letter-box.

In some cases, harassment escalates into violence. In others, clients have been attacked without any previous harassment. Incidents have included:

- houses set alight
- stones and eggs thrown at clients
- clients physically assaulted.

14. cf footnote 13, page 10



Photo: Eleanor Black

The experience of harassment can be very debilitating. Over time, even small incidents can cause extreme distress and fear. Clients are often too afraid to leave their home. Their quality of life is enormously reduced.

Housing providers: good practice

Policies designed to deal with antisocial behaviour are a good starting point, but it will not be possible for some people to remain in their homes while these policies take effect. In these cases, requests for transfers should be dealt with sympathetically. If the LGB person is in danger, it may be more appropriate to deal with their situation as a homelessness application in order to relocate them more quickly. Housing providers should also consider other solutions, such as the

provision of safe houses, to move people temporarily while dealing with the perpetrator.

It is important that the client is made to feel that s/he is being taken seriously, and that the housing provider will respond to her/his problem. It is also essential that the worker from the housing provider makes it clear that s/he is supportive, and that the organisation recognises the particular sensitivity of cases which involve a person's sexuality.

Asif's story

Asif and his partner, Gael, live in housing association accommodation in south London. Neighbours guessed their sexuality, and they were ostracised. This developed into a campaign of harassment; their post went missing and gangs of young people followed them, shouting homophobic abuse. Homophobic graffiti began to appear close to where they lived.

Asif and Gael contacted their housing officer, and over a period of a year tried to get support to move. The housing association was unsympathetic, and things began to get worse. The gang began throwing stones, and eventually Asif was seriously harmed in a violent attack. Although the police were involved, the housing association would not support a transfer and the housing officer said that emergency transfers were only applicable to women fleeing domestic violence. Asif became afraid to leave his home, for fear of further attacks.

Same-sex domestic violence

Research has found that 33 per cent of LGB people have experienced violence in the home, of which 62 per cent was characterised by respondents as domestic violence.¹⁵

Domestic violence within same-sex relationships is often overlooked. It is, however, a substantial problem. There are few studies indicating the level of frequency, but anecdotal evidence suggests that it is significant. There is also a lack of services to support those who experience same-sex domestic violence.

There is significant social stigma attached to reporting incidents of same-sex domestic violence. As the case study at the end of this section demonstrates, the police often respond unsympathetically to same-sex domestic violence between men. The police may not take violence between women seriously either, and may trivialise reports. This means that reporting violence can be a daunting experience. A significant added pressure is that people who report same sex-domestic violence against themselves are forced to reveal their sexuality, at a time when they are already vulnerable, and potentially mistrustful of those in official positions.

One of the biggest obstacles for those wishing to flee same-sex domestic violence is the lack of suitable emergency accommodation. Women have only one option: to go to a women's refuge. Refuges are rarely set up to deal with lesbian residents, and the women often experience homophobia from other residents. There is no emergency accommodation available for gay men fleeing domestic violence. Men in this situation may not have additional support needs beyond the

physical and emotional effects of escaping the violent situation. If the man has lived independently in the past, and does not have other issues such as drug or alcohol addiction or mental-health problems, he may not be suitable for supported hostel accommodation and may not be found to be in priority need by the local authority. For men in this situation there are no emergency options at all.

Julian's story

Julian had lived with his partner Ben for a year. After Julian and Ben split up, Ben began visiting Julian's accommodation and being verbally aggressive. The aggression escalated and Ben became violent. He broke into Julian's home, smashed a window, and threatened on a number of occasions to kill Julian. Ben then assaulted Julian; he gave him a black eye and tried to strangle him. After Ben left, Julian called the police. They did not attend until the next day, took a report but did not take any action against Ben.

In the following weeks, Ben became increasingly violent and assaulted Julian on a number of occasions, both at home and at work. Julian called the police on each occasion, and, despite being able to provide his address, no action was taken against Ben. On one occasion, the police arrived while Ben was still there. They refused to intervene, saying to Julian that they were both grown men who should be able to sort it out themselves.

Julian eventually obtained a non-molestation order with the help of a charity. No action has yet been taken against Ben by the police.

15. cf footnote 13, page 10

Monitoring

Reasons for monitoring

Systematic approach

Much of the evidence of the housing needs of LGB people is anecdotal. This evidence is given credence by the statistics collected by organisations such as Stonewall Housing and Shelter, and by the research discussed above.

Only systematic monitoring will produce a clear picture of the type and scale of the problems. Once this information is available, housing providers will be able to assess the service they provide to their LGB clients, and incorporate the information into the planning cycle, making provision for new services where necessary.

When is sexuality relevant?

The sexuality of a client may be relevant in a number of situations. In some, the nature of the situation may mean that the client has no choice but to disclose her/his sexuality. In others, the client's sexual orientation may help clarify a situation; if the client chooses not to disclose her/his sexuality, this factor could be missed.

A system of monitoring will keep count of the occasions when sexuality is relevant. Asking about a client's sexuality will make it more likely that the client will disclose, and mean that the adviser will have a greater understanding of the client's needs.

Situations where the client's sexuality may be a factor in her/his housing situation include:

- family breakdown as a result of sexuality
- homophobic harassment from neighbours
- homophobic violence
- deciding where to allocate someone temporary or permanent housing
- domestic violence

- deciding whether to grant someone a joint tenancy
- when a same-sex couple makes an application as homeless
- where a client expresses worries about living in a particular area
- where a client has been working in the sex industry
- where a client is vulnerable as a result of her/his sexuality
- where an older client needs to move to sheltered or residential accommodation
- where one partner dies and the remaining partner wishes to succeed to the tenancy.

Once a housing provider has an idea how prevalent these situations are, it will be in a stronger position to respond to the needs of the client, whether by improving referral information and providing staff training, or by developing new services.

Monitoring would allow the housing provider to gauge the success of initiatives to tackle LGB housing and homelessness problems. The provider would also be able to ensure that its current practices do not disproportionately affect LGB people. For example, a monitoring system would allow housing providers to ensure that cases of harassment are dealt with equitably, and would identify whether action is taken in cases of homophobic harassment as often as for other types of harassment.

Easing disclosure

Disclosing sexuality can be very difficult for some people. Because many LGB people have experienced homophobia in a number of areas of their life, they may come to anticipate or even expect it from housing providers. This can discourage a person from being open about her/his sexuality, which in turn can mean that the worker

is not aware of the full complexity of the client's housing need, and that the client remains nervous and wary of the worker.

One of the most difficult aspects (for the client) of disclosing is finding an appropriate moment to bring the subject up in conversation. This is made still more difficult if the worker assumes that the client is heterosexual, and the client has to explain that this is not the case.

By having a sexuality monitoring system, the housing provider is sending the message that the organisation is not heterosexual; it recognises that some clients may not be heterosexual, and that this may be relevant to their housing problems. If the question is asked in an appropriate way, it can make a positive statement about the organisation's stand on homophobia and heterosexism. This makes it easier for the client to disclose her/his sexuality, and reassures her/him that this disclosure will be treated with respect and confidentiality.

Practicalities

In an interview

Wherever possible, it is preferable to monitor sexuality by asking the question directly, in an interview situation, as part of the general equalities monitoring. In Housing Advice Centres (HACs) and Homeless Persons Units (HPUs), this would mean asking the client during an interview with a caseworker or advice worker. Because of the need to ensure confidentiality, it would be inappropriate to ask clients at the reception desk.

Over time, even the most committed caseworkers can become indifferent to the monitoring process. The pressure of

work, the need to complete interviews quickly, or the sheer number of times they have to ask the same question can lead to the questions being asked by rote. If sexuality monitoring is to be successful, it is important for frontline workers to remain aware of the effect of asking such personal questions, and to ensure that they are asked in an appropriate way, with a clear explanation.

The best way to ask a client their sexuality is to bring it up as part of a list of equal opportunities monitoring questions, so that the client knows s/he has not been singled out. It is vital that, before asking any of the equal opportunities questions, the worker gives a brief explanation of the reasons for asking and makes it clear that all clients are asked the same questions. This should include the following points:

- the questions are important because the information may be relevant to the client's problem
- the organisation uses the information to make sure that it behaves in a fair way to all clients
- if patterns appear, the organisation will use the information to plan its services
- the information given will be kept anonymously, separate from the main client records (unless directly relevant to the situation)
- the information will be completely confidential, and no other sections of the organisation will have access to it.

Staff should ask the question in a direct and jargon-free manner, for example: 'How would you define your sexuality? Lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, or unsure'? Avoid using the term homosexual, because this can seem overly formal and pathologised.

Finally, there are a few things workers should watch out for to avoid undermining the positive message monitoring should give:

- the worker should appear comfortable and confident about asking the question. If the staff member is uncomfortable, this will discourage disclosure
- if a worker makes a joke out of asking about sexuality, it will seem that s/he has assumed the client is heterosexual, or s/he will seem uncomfortable about sexuality
- if the worker assumes that everyone answering the question is heterosexual (for example, by saying 'I know this doesn't apply to you, but I have to ask everyone'), this will discourage disclosure.

One way to ensure that staff members are confident and understand the reasons for the monitoring, is to ensure that training is provided to all staff before the new system is brought in.

On paper

Most local authorities collect equal opportunities information in a standardised format during the application for the housing register. Research¹⁶ indicates that young people prefer to be asked their sexuality in person.

Wherever possible, it would be preferable for this monitoring to take place in person. It could, for example, take place as part of the signing-up process for new tenants. From a pragmatic perspective, however, it may be unrealistic for providers to make significant changes to the monitoring systems that already exist. Monitoring tenants at sign-up means missing out on monitoring unsuccessful

applicants. For this reason, organisations may choose to incorporate the monitoring in the format they already use; often as a section on the application form for the housing register.

If the monitoring form is to have a section on sexuality, there needs to be a clear explanation of the need for this information at the top of the sheet. The form should offer options as lesbian, gay man, bisexual, heterosexual, and unsure.

Most monitoring for current tenants is kept attached to the client record, in order to track what happens to different groups throughout the tenancy. This poses particular difficulties for the monitoring of sexuality, because the information will not be anonymous. If a local authority is going to undertake this type of monitoring, it is vital that there are robust staff conduct policies, and that all staff are trained in maintaining the confidentiality of client information.

Equalities indicators

Once monitoring begins, it will be important to have a clear idea of the kind of issues that might appear through monitoring. Each local authority might develop its own performance indicators, following consultation with the local community and relevant organisations. There are some performance indicators that it may be useful for all local authorities to consider. These could include how many people, identifying as LGB:

Were under 25 and had housing problems following family breakdown, and of these:

- how many were referred to mainstream hostels
- how many were referred to specialist LGB organisations.

16. *Hidden in plain sight: homelessness amongst lesbian and gay youth*, William O'Connor and Donna Molloy, [2002], National Centre for Social Research, London

Were tenants who reported homophobic neighbourhood harassment, and of these:

- how many cases resulted in the perpetrator being moved
- how many resulted in the client being transferred
- how many cases resulted in no further action being taken.

Reported housing problems as a result of same-sex domestic violence, and of these:

- how many were found homeless and in priority need
- how many were referred to a women's refuge
- how many were referred to mainstream hostels.

Were evicted following rent arrears.

Applied for a transfer, and of these:

- how many were successful.

Applied as a homeless person, and of these:

- in how many cases the local authority found a full duty
- in how many cases the temporary accommodation broke down

Applied for a transfer to sheltered accommodation.

Potential pitfalls

Under-reporting

The main risk with systematic monitoring of sexuality is low levels of disclosure. Equal opportunities workers already struggle with low returns on equal opportunities monitoring. It is likely that many people will choose not to disclose their sexuality. This

will mean that the figures collected will not represent the true degree of the problems.

This is frustrating, but it should not be seen as a reason not to monitor. Given the total lack of quantitative information regarding sexuality and housing, the figures that a local authority collects will begin to improve the situation. As the local authority demonstrates responsiveness to this information, more people may be encouraged to disclose. It will be important, however, that local authorities do not underestimate the problems by considering their figures to be definitive.

Although levels of reporting may continue to be low, this information can be useful in itself. All local authorities will deal with LGB clients; therefore the levels of disclosure (compared with past years and with neighbouring local authorities) can be a useful indication of the level of trust that the LGB community has in the local authority.



Photo: Alex Menace



Photo: Alex Menace

Staff resistance

Local authorities may find that staff are initially resistant to the concept of monitoring for sexuality. This might be because of a resistance to what is perceived as an added layer of bureaucracy, or because they object to asking such a personal question of clients.

It is also possible that staff will consider that the monitoring is unnecessary 'political correctness.' It is very important that this

staff resistance not ignored. If staff do not back the monitoring, it will undermine the message that the local authority is accepting of everyone's sexuality.

Training should be offered to all staff, giving them the opportunity to question the issues, and to learn about some of the housing-related needs of LGB people. The training should aim to ensure staff are informed, and supportive of the new system.

Best practice

Equalities impact assessments

Equalities impact assessments are one way of judging how current policies and practice affect particular equalities groups. If a housing provider has made a commitment to respond more strategically to the issue of LGB equality, this is one way to ensure a systematic approach. Equalities impact assessments involve working through all policies and practices, and identifying where these may have consequences for equalities groups. Any negative consequences should then be eliminated, reduced or counterbalanced where possible.

Policies and procedures

LGB housing and homelessness has not been prioritised by housing providers. This is in part because these needs have not been recognised and incorporated into the strategies, policies and procedures used to guide this work. As a result, they tend to be missed out when decisions are made about resources. All written policies should specify the particular needs of LGB people. This should include tenants' handbooks, succession policies, allocations and transfer policies.

Research on housing need

There is a clear need to build on current knowledge of LGB housing needs with further research. Because this is an area that has not been prioritised in the past, there is a lack of information for planning service provision and ensuring the appropriateness of different approaches. Research into people's experiences, and on specific solutions, would be enormously valuable.

Training

Many frontline staff members do not have an understanding of the complexity of LGB housing and homeless problems. There is also a lack of understanding about the particular experiences of younger LGB people, which can lead to specific vulnerabilities. Changes in policies and procedures, and in monitoring, can only be successful in combating these problems if they are implemented at the same time as training in awareness of LGB housing issues for frontline staff.

Creating a safer space

There are a number of simple things frontline staff can do to help build an inclusive atmosphere for LGB people. This creates a space where people feel safe to come out, or to share issues relating to their sexuality, and it encourages people to respond positively to sexuality monitoring.

It is a good idea to research local support groups, and to ensure staff have referral information. A starting place for this type of research might be the Consortium of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Voluntary and Community Organisations (see Useful organisations). It is particularly helpful to ensure staff have referral details for local LGB youth groups.

Put up posters that announce that the organisation supports LGB people and will not tolerate homophobia. Make available, in racks, leaflets for local LGB services.

Consider organising an LGB housing forum for tenants. This may be a way to identify harassment hotspots and check that needs are being met.

Ensure that there is a system for dealing with temporary-accommodation landlords who are homophobic or harass LGB clients. Ensure there is a system in place whereby complaints are passed to those responsible for booking temporary accommodation.

Useful organisations

Shelter

Housing Aid Centres, contact Shelter,
88 Old Street, London EC1V 9HU.
020 7505 2000.
www.shelter.org.uk

Free housing advice helpline

0808 800 4444 (freephone/minicom).

Shelter Scotland

Fourth Floor, Scotiabank House,
6 Charlotte Street, Edinburgh EH2 4AW.
0131 473 7170.
www.shelterscotland.org.uk

Shelter Cymru (Wales)

25 Walter Road, Swansea,
West Glamorgan SA1 5NN.
01792 469400.
www.sheltercymru.org.uk

Stonewall Housing

(Lesbian and gay housing advice and
advocacy, and supported housing for
young lesbians and gay men),
Unit 2a Leroy House, 436 Essex Road,
London N1 3QP.
Office: 020 359 6242.
Advice line: 020 7359 5767 (open Mon, Thu,
Fri, 10am-1pm, and Tue, Wed, 2-5pm). Ring
for details of drop-in surgeries.
www.stonewallhousing.org

Consortium of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Voluntary and Community Organisations

Second floor, 13-17 Brunswick Place,
London N1 6DX.
020 7490 2365.
www.lgbconsortium.org.uk

Galop

(challenging homophobic and transgender-
phobic hate crime), PO Box 32810,
London N1 3ZD.
Office: 020 7704 6767.
Advice line: 020 7704 2040.
www.galop.org.uk

Polari

(raising awareness of the needs of older
lesbians and gay men),
Fifth floor, Central House,
14 Upper Woburn Place,
London WC1H OAE.
020 7255 4480.

Broken Rainbow

(LGBT Domestic Violence Service).
Helpline: 020 8539 9507.

Glossary

LGB

LGB stands for lesbian, gay and bisexual.

LGBT

LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

Come out

This is the term used to describe the process an LGB person goes through when revealing her/his sexuality to others. This is a process that continues throughout life. It can begin with friends and family, but can also include, for example, advice workers, colleagues, landlords, employers, and financial advisers.

Scene

Commercial premises, such as bars and clubs, popular as meeting places with LGB people. Usually found in urban areas.

Bad housing wrecks lives

We are the fourth richest country in the world, and yet millions of people in Britain wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded or dangerous. Many others have lost their homes altogether. Bad housing robs us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter believes everyone should have a home.

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We can only do this with your help. Please support us.

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