



Homelessness support for LGBT+ people

Public Services and Governance

Homelessness and LGBT+ people

Homelessness among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) people is becoming an increasing concern among LGBT+ organisations and homelessness organisations. There is a concern that young people who identify as LGBT+ might make-up a disproportionate number of young homeless people. In this research we spoke to people who identified as LGBT+ who had experienced homelessness, and service providers, to better understand their experiences and the best ways to provide services for LGBT+ experiencing homelessness.

We know that people become homeless through complex reasons. Often numerous individual issues will compound one another and lead to the eventual crisis that ends in homelessness. Our research suggests that the same is true for LGBT+ people. We did find evidence of people being made homeless due to familial rejection, but this was not a common experience in the people we spoke to. In telling their stories of homelessness though, their sexual and gender identity did matter to them and it often intersected with other issues they were facing.

Key findings

- The experience of homelessness for LGBT+ is as complex as it is for other people. A number of different issues may be linked to their homelessness, or be a cause of their homelessness.
- Sexual or gender identity is often not the root cause of someone's homelessness.
- Experiences of homelessness for LGBT+ people often parallel a process of them understanding and becoming comfortable with their sexual or gender identity.
- Services should ensure they are asking services users about their sexual and gender identity when they are collecting information about service users.
- Supported accommodation services should ensure that they have policies and procedures in place to effectively deal with homophobic and transphobic abuse.

Causes of homelessness

Our research found that among the young people we spoke to, understanding their identity as LGBT+ was part of an ongoing process. As part of realising they shared such an identity they were also becoming different from a society where being heterosexual and cisgender is a norm, and they were not part of that norm. As a result they experienced numerous exclusions and had to navigate these, for example:

- A marriage ending when a gender transition began;
- An heterosexual relationship ending and a same-sex relationship starting;
- Domestic abuse, from a same-sex or opposite-sex partner, or parents.

This list is not exhaustive. What is important is to recognise that in such examples, sexual and identity is important, and that a period of homelessness was then precipitated by the situation. Therefore, our evidence suggests it is important not to make LGBT+ peoples' experiences of homelessness exceptional. It is more important to understand their experiences, and given them opportunities to explain how their sexual or gender identity matters to them.

Supporting LGBT+ people

In a survey of homelessness support organisations in Scotland, of 34 (out of 218 contacted) who responded, only 13 (38 per cent) reported that they routinely collected data on the sexual and gender identity of their service users.

When we spoke to service providers, the main reason for not routinely asking for this information was that they took a person-centred approach. Services users have complex needs, so it is understandable, and right, that such an approach is taken. However, in this case it meant that service providers felt that sexual and gender identity should only be disclosed to a worker when a young person was ready. Another concern was that such monitoring could alienate young people and prevent them accessing services.

Such a view is understandable, and well-meaning. However, it is problematic because it places the burden on young people to come-out as LGBT+. As these people are likely to be exploring their identity, it is likely they might feel shame about their identity, so such situations have to be handled. But it should be recognised that if they feel such shame they will not be forthcoming with such information, or how it had interacted with their current situation, unless they are prompted for information about the sexual and gender identity and know that a service provider is open to understanding such issues.

Best practice

One organisation used the ISO9001 standard to manage their frontline services. Their processes included routinely ensuring all clients filled in an equalities monitoring form covering all Protected Characteristics. The ISO9001 certification meant this process was regularly reviewed by senior managers

For example, among many of our participants, an experience of domestic abuse or bullying, related to their sexual or gender identity was part of why they became homeless. They were able to explain this to their support workers and get appropriate support and housing away from their families or partners. If they had not been so open, or had the opportunity to be open, the vulnerability may not have been recognised and they may have received wholly inappropriate interventions, such as being returned to their homes.

Hostel accommodation for LGBT+ people

On the whole, those participants who had been in hostels or supported accommodation reported positive experiences. Good quality supported accommodation, with self-contained rooms with ensuite bathroom facilities, provided a supportive environment for with other young people.

Transgender people, in particular, had concerns about hostel accommodation. Some participants actively avoided accessing such accommodation because of concerns about being allocated to a single-sex hostel that did not align to the gender they identified with. Other participants who had positive experiences in mixed-sex hostels, were worried that they could have been misgendered in single-sex accommodation.

Providers of supported accommodation, and LGBT+ people who had lived in hostels or supported accommodation, did report that homophobic or transphobic abuse. All participants reported excellent responses to such incidents – with perpetrators told why such behaviour was wrong, and informed that they could be evicted if it continued.

However, this is in a context where very few service users are asked about their sexual or gender identity. Such harassment could be happening more regularly and is not reported to service providers as service users do not feel able to be open to them.

Participants who had accessed formal services spoke of the importance of good staff for their experiences.

Some of this was because staff also identified as LGBT+ so people felt comfortable talking about their issues. However, it is important to recognise that, for example, a gay woman may not be comfortable talking about their experiences with a gay man. Other staff were just understanding and supportive; one participant spoke about a member of staff in supported accommodation who the young people called “grandma”.

About the research

This briefing is based on research with LGBT+ people in central Scotland who had experienced housing insecurity. We interviewed 20 people who identified as LGBT+ and had experienced insecure housing. We also spoke to people within four RSLs, two homelessness organisations, and one local authority, to understand how they delivered services and the challenges they faced.

Finding a home

For our participants, finding a permanent home was key to stabilising their lives and becoming more comfortable. Only a small number of our participants used formal homelessness services, with many finding permanent housing themselves, for example by sharing with friends or acquaintances; when a new relationship started; or accessing housing in the private-rented sector. For some participants, their university offered accommodation that prevented homelessness over the summer between academic years.

Access to permanent, good quality housing varied depending on where the person lived. In low-demand areas, our participants were able to find, or were allocated, homes which they were happy with. In higher-demand areas, housing options were poorer. For example, one participant experienced transphobic violence in the Edinburgh neighbourhood they were allocated a house in and they would not have chosen to live there.

With its expansive definition of homelessness, and strong-rights based system, it is likely LGBT+ in Scotland experience less direct and indirect discrimination in accessing housing than they would elsewhere. In our research, there was evidence of indirect discrimination persisting in housing allocations policies. LGBT+ people are more likely to be single, and young people more so.

We did find evidence of housing allocation systems forcing young single people, particularly men, into poorer quality housing in low-demand areas. This can have an impact of isolating people from friendship networks and wider support – which is often based in city centres – which could help them achieve better personal outcomes.

Best practice

One housing association which ran supported accommodation as well as general needs housing, would ensure that people with an LGBT identity (or other protected characteristic) were not housed in stairs where neighbours had been reported for antisocial behaviour or harassment.

LGBT+ specific services?

Our research does not support the development of LGBT+ specific services, such as those that have been developed in North America. Practically, population estimates suggest that around three per cent of the population is not heterosexual and/or cisgender. This group may be over-represented among homeless people, but even allowing for this, with the UK's relatively smaller urban areas, the numbers of LGBT+ homeless people are likely to be smaller. The safety-net of welfare support services in the UK, and Scotland, is more expansive than it is in the USA, meaning experiences of homeless are less catastrophic for individuals.

Participants had positive experiences within services that were sensitive to their needs and the needs of all service users. Creating inclusive environments for all through effective staff training and good services is a more sustainable, and inclusive, approach to supporting LGBT+ people experiencing homelessness.

Recommendations

- Service providers need to routinely ask people their sexual and gender identity when they first access a service. This can easily be done sensitively and does not have to lead to a service user being overwhelmed with requests for information.
- LGBT+ staff should be encouraged to share their identity in the workplace, and providers should openly celebrate diversity, for example through rainbow flag stickers, or events.
- Staff should engage in regular training on equalities and diversity issues, especially for topics where we are learning more very quickly, such as transgender and gender non-binary service-users.
- Housing options services should ensure people are fully informed about the nature of hostel or support accommodation provision, and be given a choice to access supported accommodation that is suitable to their needs.
- Homelessness support and service providers should ensure people are supported according to their needs and wishes. Transgender people should be housed in single-sex accommodation which aligns to the gender they identify with. Vulnerable LGBT+ people should be prioritised for mixed-sex supported accommodation, with ensuite bathroom facilities.
- Supported housing providers should have robust policies and procedures to deal with homophobic and transphobic abuse within their services with clear sanctions for perpetrators. Staff should be adequately trained to deal with such incidents confidently and appropriately.
- Organisations that manage housing registers should ensure that single homeless people are given a full choice of housing.

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