



Your tenants are gay, get over it!

Public Services and Governance

Social housing and LGBT+ people – a guide for social landlords

Registered Social Landlords and other housing providers recognise they have a diverse group of tenants and other customers, and that this diversity is increasing. The tradition of community-based housing associations in Scotland means there is an impressive track-record in providers knowing the communities RSLs work with.

However, we can always do more. Knowing more about minority groups among tenant and customer groups can improve lives and improve outcomes.

This policy-briefing focuses on the experiences of customers with a non-normative sexual or gender identity. That is, they are not heterosexual/“straight” or identify with the gender they were assigned on their Birth Certificate. This group is usually referred to as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT+) people. As we get to know more about people and they explain their lives, this group is growing in diversity, and we now use the term LGBT+ to represent this diversity.

Recommendations

- Registered Social Landlords and other housing providers should routinely ask their customers and service users their sexual identity and gender identity.
- In implementing new tenant and customer portals, RSLs should allow customers to update their equalities information when they feel they need to.
- Make sure you have an up-to-date Equalities and Diversity policy that recognises sexual and gender identity as protected characteristics.
- Ensure staff training on equalities and diversity is up-to-date and recognises all protected characteristics.
- Verbal and physical homophobic and transphobic abuse should be recognised as a hate crime and reported to the Police.

The experience of tenants

Our research found that many customers had positive experiences of living in social housing. Their sexual or gender identity did not change how they experienced the service of their housing provider.

However, all our participants had either experienced abuse or direct assault, or lived in fear of this. The quote provides an example of a particularly bad example of this.

The fear experienced by LGBT+ meant that people changed their everyday behaviour. They would not walk back to their homes at night, getting taxis to their door or planning for a friend to drop them off in their car. One participant spoke about how, when living in one neighbourhood they “basically keep my head down and keep walking - get in the flat and lock the door and that was the routine.”

You may think that customers could keep their sexual or gender identity to themselves if they did not want to experience victimisation. LGB participants explained how local knowledge of the housing stock made this impossible – neighbours would know when a same-sex couple moved into a one-bedroom flat, for example.

The housing associations spoken to in this research rightly were proud of their communities and felt they were welcoming places. But it is very important to keep in mind that it may not be experienced as such by everyone.

We could not get a full picture of the prevalence of hate crime or anti-social abuse against tenants who identify as LGBT+ in this research because of one basic reason: RSLs do not regularly record this information about their customers.

“There was a group of teenagers that would come to my house to shout abuse and throw stones at my window. Every window apart from my kitchen and bathroom windows has stood smashed at one point or another just because they know that the tranny lives in there, we will go and smash their windows.”

Ask the question

The key recommendation from this research is very simple: RSLs should regularly ask their customers their sexual identity and gender identity.

This means you will know how many of your customers identify as LGBT+. As people become more used to answering such monitoring questions, or if trust with customers is built up and they agree to data-sharing, then you can start monitoring further, for example to understand if LGBT+ people experience more anti-social behaviour; or have specific comments or complaints about your service. Just including the question on an anonymous form in your introduction packs will help, as LGBT+ people will know you are interested in knowing, so might be more forthcoming with this information when they report issues.

Questions can easily be added onto equalities monitoring forms that record other information – such as sex, ethnicity and disability – and added onto customer portals for people to add their own information as their circumstances change. They should also be routinely asked in tenant surveys and included in the analysis of results, with care taken not to identify individuals.

The box below provides an example of how to ask people about the sexual identity and two questions that will capture peoples’ gender identity. Further advice on how best to phrase such questions is available from the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) and [Stonewall Scotland and the Scottish Trans Alliance](#).

But what if people are offended?

This is a common reaction to the idea of routinely asking services users their sexual or gender identity.

It needs to be recognised that presuming people would be offended is homophobic and transphobic. It presumes that sexual and gender identity is something that people should be ashamed of and want to keep secret.

It denies LGBT+ service users their identity, and any issues relating to their identity – you are putting LGBT+ people back in the closet. If a landlord has never asked someone about their sexual or gender identity, they might not then be willing to report transphobic or homophobic abuse or harassment by a neighbour or contractor, for example.

These concerns by staff and board members are well-meaning. People do have a right to keep such details private and not be “outed” by their landlord. Best practice is to collect such data on a self-completion questionnaire with a “Prefer not to answer” category. It should also be treated as strictly confidential in your databases. Staff should also be supported to ask for such data in a confident way, with proper data protection training, and the skills to explain to customers why the data is needed.

If the question is not routinely asked, then you are putting an expectation on LGBT+ service users to out themselves if they have a particular issue. This may be very difficult and distressing if, for example, it is related to an experience of hate crime and victimisation. By making it routine you are demonstrating that you, as an organisation, are open to having this discussion with LGBT+ people.

Would you describe yourself as mainly...

- **Straight (heterosexual)**
- **Gay or lesbian (homosexual)**
- **Bisexual**
- **Other**
- **Prefer not to say**

Which of the following describes how you think of yourself?

- **Female**
- **Male**
- **In another way:**

Do you consider yourself a trans person?

- **Yes**
- **No**
- **Prefer not to say**

Best practice

Simply asking service users their sexual and gender identity is a big step towards best practice. This will mean organisations know how diverse their service users are, and can start collecting more information about experiences. Once you have started collecting this data you can start understanding more about your LGBT+ customers.

Local leadership

Demonstrating that your organisation openly embraces all identities is a good way of showing leadership in inclusion.

Queens Cross Housing Association did this by celebrating Purple Friday, part of LGBT History Month which takes place every February. You might want to find out what LGBT people are associated with your neighbourhoods, or shares the stories of LGBT service users or staff in a similar event.

Even simple actions, such as putting a rainbow sticker in your office entrance or including same-sex couples in your newsletters, will help you demonstrate that you are proud to include everyone in your community

Policy and procedures

Make sure you have an up-to-date Equalities and Diversity policy that recognises sexual and gender identity as protected characteristics. The Chartered Institute of Housing [Equality and Diversity Charter](#) is a good starting point for all organisations to start reflecting on how well they do at promoting equality and diversity.

Use the resources from LGBT organisations (see links below) to help you think about how LGBT customers and service users may be impacted by your service delivery.

Your policy and procedure should have robust processes for dealing with hate crime. This research found that some organisations wanted to minimise the disruption caused by anti-social behaviour, and deal with verbal homophobic and transphobic abuse through anti-social behaviour procedures. This prioritises mediation and only contacting the Police as a last resort.

Verbal abuse should be recognised as a possible hate crime and investigated by the Police.

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+ who had either experienced homelessness, or lived in the most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland, or both.

As well as speaking to LGBT+ people we spoke to people within four RSLs, two homelessness organisations, and one local authority, to understand how they delivered services and the challenges they faced.

Contractors and people working on behalf of your organisation should take these issues seriously as well, and this should be reflected in procurement policies. Ferguslie Park Housing Association received a report of verbal hate abuse toward a tenant by a member of staff working for a contractor. The complaint was formally investigated, including contacting the Police who confirmed that its content would qualify as a hate crime if it were reported. The contract was terminated for other reasons, prior to this investigation. However, the Contractor was made aware that Police advice had been taken and that criminal action was a possibility. The Investigation went ahead on the basis of gross misconduct and potential dismissal. The contractor was not allowed to approach the tenant or their home without association staff present and their staff member was instructed to keep away. The Association upheld the tenant's Complaint.

Equality and diversity in practice

Recognise the diversity of your customers. One organisation responded to a request to participate in this by suggesting that it was not relevant to them or their customers. All landlords will have some LGBT+ customers – they make up around two per cent of the Scottish population, and are over-represented in our most deprived neighbourhoods.

Once you recognise the diversity in your customers, you can start practically supporting them. For example, one organisation who participated in this research would ensure that young LGBT+ tenants were not housed in stairs where a neighbour had been involved with harassment or abuse in the past.

Helping LGBT+ staff members to become visible role models can also make LGBT+ customers feel more comfortable.

Making sure your staff are trained in equality and diversity is important as well. This is not just about understanding the Equality Act and your legal duties, but more importantly making sure your staff understand the different ways people understand the world, and making sure they are confident, polite and respectful in a diverse environment.

[Stonewall Scotland](#) offer advice and the Equality Index scheme for your staff and HR policies. LGBT Youth Scotland run their [Charter Mark](#) scheme to support and recognise best practice with young LGBT people. [Scottish Trans](#) also have a wide range of resources to understand gender diversity.

Contacts

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