

Your tenants are gay, get over it!: How housing services discriminate against LGBT+ users



Are public services delivering equality for LGBT+ service users? In a socially progressive society like the UK, the presumption is that probably they are. However, [Peter Matthews](#) and [Chris Poyner](#)'s research suggests some very basic steps are still required to deliver equality.

In 2017 gay men and LGBT+* allies in the UK are celebrating 50 years since sex between two men, aged over 21, in private, was decriminalised in England and Wales in the Sexual Offences Act 1967. The 2007 Equality Order then banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and the Equality Act 2010 brought together all equalities legislation in the UK, developing one of the most advanced statutory frameworks for promoting equality. Equal Marriage legislation removed the last legal barrier to equal treatment, except in Northern Ireland.

It might seem that the battle for equality has been won. But policy is a much broader tool than just legislation. We would suggest we now have to study implementation and service delivery, and whether it is delivering equality. To date, research of this sort has focused on public and sexual health services for [men-who-have-sex-with-men](#), a result of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment work. Increasingly, researchers have also looked at the experience of [LGBT+ people and ageing](#), and issues around accessing social care services, as well as the experiences of people going back into the closet when they receive care services, or are resident in a care home.

There is surprisingly little research on other services. Our research sought to understand the experiences of LGBT+ people accessing housing and homelessness services in central Scotland.

Why housing and homelessness services?

The stereotype of the modern gay man is a young professional living in an inner-city loft conversion. Previous [research by us](#), and analysis by the [Scottish](#) and [Welsh](#) governments have all shown that non-heterosexual people are over-represented in the most-deprived neighbourhoods. In Scotland, roughly 20% of non-heterosexual people live in the most deprived 15% of neighbourhoods – an over-representation of five percentage points. Given the majority of the housing in such neighbourhoods is socially rented, it is very likely these residents will be tenants and have contact with social landlords – councils, housing associations, and co-ops.

[Anecdotal evidence](#) suggests that LGBT+ people make up a disproportionate number of young homeless people. However, we do not know for sure, as accurate data does not exist. A point to which we will return.



Credit: [Pixabay](#)/Public Domain.

Are the experiences of LGBT+ people different?

Generally, the people we spoke to in our research had no major problems interacting with service providers. In fact there were many positive stories of people moving to a permanent home after being homeless. People were living in good quality homes, and on the whole did not report problems with service providers because of their sexual or gender identity.

However, nearly all the people we spoke to had experienced some form of homophobic or transphobic abuse. This could be comments from other residents of hostels; or harassment and antisocial behaviour from local residents. One transgender tenant described how:

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 been smashed at one point or another just because they know that the tranny lives in there, we will go and smash their windows.

Those research participants who had not had directly experienced such abuse spoke of how they internalised the fear of such attacks, for example not walking back to their house at night and avoiding going out.

Did service providers discriminate?

Under regulatory regimes, and under the Equality Act 2010, public services have duties to actively respond to such incidents, which could be hate crimes under Scottish legislation. Yet when we spoke to service providers, very few reported incidents of homophobic or transphobic harassment of tenants or service users. The trouble was, they would never know as very few of the service providers regularly asked service users their sexual or gender identity. They recorded data on sex, ethnicity, and disability, but had no data on LGBT+ service users or tenants.

When we probed as to why, the usual response was that staff would be afraid of causing offence. This was incredibly problematic. It presumed that LGBT+ identifying people *should* be ashamed of answering a simple question on a monitoring form. It also placed the burden on LGBT+ people to come out if they had experienced something negative associated with their sexual or gender identity.

As Sara Ahmed suggested in [Living a Feminist Life](#) 'queers might be asked not to make others feel uncomfortable'. In this case there was no *might*; LGBT+ people were expected to keep quiet about their identity to avoid staff feeling uncomfortable.

Subsequently, we can say that service providers were *indirectly* discriminating against LGBT+ people. They did not know about the experiences of LGBT+ people as they did not routinely ask people their sexual or gender identity. In such circumstances, it is very likely people are going to feel uncomfortable volunteering such information if it is relevant. Thus, it is [good news that the NHS in England](#) is to start asking for such data routinely.

That this was occurring in housing services should be surprising. The household is one of the most basic units making up heterosexual society. As Kitzinger suggested in her ground-breaking paper [Speaking as a Heterosexual](#), heterosexuality is made normal, and recreated, through everyday language like “wife”, “husband” and the presumption of opposite-gender coupledom. Linking this everyday heterosexuality back to our research, we asked housing associations if they recorded data on household composition. The answer was, of course they did – they had to so they could deliver services. Therefore they were happy to ask about a person’s heterosexuality, but not their homosexuality.

It is in these subtle ways service delivery will continue to discriminate against LGBT+ people. Of course, across most countries in the world, the fight for LGBT+ equality continues to be a [fight for basic legal equality](#), and not to be [killed for who you love](#). For countries where legal progress has been made, we now need to consider “queering” our policy, and understanding how everyday practices of policy implementation and service delivery might be discriminatory.

*A number of different acronyms are used to cover non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered, queer people as a collective. Here, we have chosen LGBT+, in the recognition that T+ covers all non-cisgendered people and queers.

Note: This research was funded by the British Academy under their small grants scheme. It was carried out in cooperation with [LGBT Youth Scotland](#) and was led by the authors.

About the Author



Peter Matthews is Senior Lecturer in Sociology/Social Policy and Criminology at the University of Stirling.



Chris Poyner is Research Associate at the Salford Institute for Dementia and PhD Candidate at the University of Stirling.

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.