

**“We feel supported as we
are among people who
understand and don’t judge”**

The experience of lesbian, gay,
bisexual and/or transgender
communities in the North East

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A report by:

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Introduction

Societal attitudes toward lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the UK have changed dramatically over the last 20 years.

The Equality Act (2010) made discrimination on the grounds of sexuality illegal, whilst the first same-sex marriages took place in 2014 amid much celebration. High profile role models in all walks of life have had a positive impact and made “coming out” easier for many - there will even be a same-sex dance partnership on the 2020 series of Strictly Come Dancing. And as more people are able to be open about their sexuality in their everyday lives, so then does acceptance and understanding increase in the wider community - a virtuous circle. Meanwhile, the internet and social media have made it so much easier for even the most isolated individuals to reach out beyond their immediate community to find others “like them”, and thus feel less alone.

For trans people, the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which allows trans people to apply for a Gender Recognition Certificate, was an important milestone. This allows them to change the gender marker on their birth certificate following transition, bringing it in line with other documentation, and also to be legally treated in the gender in which they identify.

An illustration of the changing landscape can be seen in the history of the Pride movement on Tyneside. Through the late 1990’s and early 2000’s the community organisation Pride on Tyne ran celebratory events in safe spaces. These were well attended within the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and/or trans (LGBT) community, but largely invisible to the wider community. The idea of having a “Pride March” was regularly debated but at that time there were too many concerns about the safety of so visible an event. Fast forward to 2019 and 22,000 people joined the Pride parade through a Newcastle city centre bedecked in rainbow flags, progress indeed.

However, despite all these positive changes, being LGB and/or T can still bring challenges for individuals and LGBT people continue to face significant barriers to full

participation in public life. In July 2017, Government launched a survey¹ to gather information about the experiences of LGBT people in the UK. The survey response was unprecedented; over 108,000 people participated, making it the largest national survey of LGBT people in the world to date. Its findings shed light on the experiences of LGBT people in the areas of safety, health, education and employment.

LGBT respondents were less satisfied with their life than the wider UK population (rating satisfaction 6.5 out of 10 compared with 7.7). Trans respondents had particularly low scores (5.4 out of 10). Over two thirds of LGBT respondents said they avoided holding hands with a same-sex partner for fear of a negative reaction from others. Two in five respondents had experienced an incident because they were LGBT, such as verbal harassment or physical violence, in the previous 12 months. 2% of respondents had undergone conversion or reparative therapy in an attempt to “cure” them of being LGBT, and a further 5% had been offered it.

As the various studies quoted in this report show, LGBT individual’s experience of discrimination, hate crime and bullying can lead to disproportionate levels of poor mental health, increased likelihood of homelessness and social isolation and difficulties in accessing appropriate services and support.

Some LGBT people also face additional hurdles or discrimination because of their background, ethnicity, gender, faith, disability etc. Recognising the impact of these intersecting and overlapping identities is essential to understanding how inequality shapes the lives of many LGBT people in the North East.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/722314/GEO-LGBT-Survey-Report.pdf

Northern Pride (NP) started in August 2007 after a brief gap in Pride activities following the closure of Pride on the Tyne. Led by volunteers, NP is a registered charity. Whilst it is mostly known for the annual festival, now the largest free pride festival outside of London, NP also undertakes outreach campaigns and provides support services, aiming to:

“Proudly promote Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender culture through public celebration of our heritage and engaging in education and cultural activities that enrich the community, whilst raising awareness of the issues LGBTQ+ people face, building mutual respect and working to end discrimination.”

The first NP festival was held in 2008 and attracted over 2,500 people. The three-day event now includes: a parade through Newcastle city centre; entertainment; queer culture; family and youth engagement; a large health provision (with STI and HIV testing on site); information and market stalls, all on Newcastle’s Town Moor and Exhibition Park. In 2019 NP delivered its Pride in Schools campaign in schools across the region in advance of changes to relationships and sex education. It’s Pride in Sport campaign showcased inclusivity in sport at Newcastle’s European rugby championship weekend. NP also produced a musical dealing with depression and suicide, performed at Northern Stage.

Director of Northern Pride, Ste Dunn, says:

We know that COVID-19 and the global pandemic has impacted the community in many different ways. From key working to home schooling, to being furloughed or education being moved online. Some of our LGBTQ+ community have found it harder than most. The community can sometimes be the family we chose, and we may be isolating alone or away from our support network. We also may be living in hostile environments where we are hiding our true identity to remain safe.

Current attitudes toward LGBT+² people

A recent study³ asked a representative sample of 1,617 people from across the UK questions on their beliefs about LGBT+ people.

More than four in five people said that LGBT+ people should be free to live as they wish, with only one in 20 disagreeing. One in five said being LGBT+ was “immoral or against their beliefs”; interestingly this rose to one in four among 18-24 year olds, higher than other age groups. One in 10 people thought LGBT+ people were “dangerous” to other people, with the same number believing that being LGBT+ could be “cured”. Three in five people responded very positively about having LGBT+ people as neighbours; one in five showed reluctance to the idea of LGB+ neighbours, and one in four showed reluctance to the idea of trans neighbours.

Attitudes towards trans people tended to be more negative than towards LGB+ people. This reflects experiences reported by trans people, who often face hate crime on a daily basis and still do not have legal equality in all areas.

Language and Labels

Language can be important in helping us as individuals to affirm our identity, to feel confident in sharing our authentic self with others.

Often, the labels that we give ourselves help us connect with others who share the same identity and integrate into a larger community. Within LGBT communities, language is incredibly diverse and constantly evolving.

Whilst most of the wider community feel confident in the language and labels used to describe different sexualities e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual and heterosexual, many of us may feel less sure about the emerging language and labels relating to gender. The information

² Where LGBT+ or LGBTQ or LGBTQI are used in this report, this reflect the usage by the organisation or research being quoted.

³ <http://www.galop.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Hate-Crime-Report-2019.pdf>

in this section is based on really helpful guidance published by the LGBT Foundation.⁴

Gender is your internal sense of self, who you feel you are whether that’s male, female or perhaps you don’t feel strongly attached to any particular label about gender. Gender is often linked to ideas of masculinity, femininity, stereotypes etc. Your gender can be expressed in a number of ways, including through clothing, behaviour and pronouns. If your gender is the same as you were assigned at birth, this is known as cisgender (or cis for short). If you feel your gender is different to the one you were assigned at birth you may identify as trans or non-binary.

Trans is a really broad umbrella term. In general, it refers to anyone who isn’t cis and is inclusive of a range of identities such as trans woman and trans man. Some people who cross dress will also identify as trans.

Non-binary is used to describe people who feel their gender cannot be defined within the margins of gender binary (male or female). Instead, they understand their gender in a way that goes beyond simply identifying as either male or female.

Some organisations use the acronym LGBTQ with the “Q” standing for “queer” or “questioning, the latter is used particularly by organisations working with younger age groups. Other organisations use LGBT+ to be even more inclusive.

Impact of Covid-19

As with other communities, the Covid-19 pandemic has magnified pre-existing inequalities and affected LGBT communities in many ways.

Of course, the wider pressures: key working; home schooling; being furloughed/made redundant; education being moved online etc have all had an impact. However, for some LGBT people who have had to create their own “family” and community to feel safe, lockdown meant living in hostile environments where they had to hide their true identity to remain safe. This increased social isolation and, in some instances, the

strain of living with family who may not know or approve of their gender identity or sexuality, has placed increased pressure on people’s health and well-being. A number of key LGBT helplines across the UK reported an enormous increase in calls during lockdown.⁵

akt (formerly known as the Albert Kennedy Trust) supports LGBTQ+ young people aged 16-25, who are facing or experiencing homelessness or living in a hostile environment. Staff support young people to: stay safe in a crisis; find emergency accommodation; develop skills and identify and achieve life goals. Its North East office provides: specialist housing advice; one-to-one mentoring; accommodation with a specially trained akt host; a safe place with one of our housing provider partners; life skills training, events and peer support networks. Founded in 1989, akt was set up by a foster carer who found that many gay, lesbian and bisexual young people were not receiving the care and support they need and deserve. In 2013, it merged with North East charity Outpost Housing Project; it also has offices in Bristol, Manchester and London. A recently appointed specialist caseworker in the North East will develop services for trans young people and explore ways of preventing homelessness by providing support to parents. One young person said:

akt is fantastic, whenever I have had a problem or need advice, regardless of what the subject is, I have always received help and support. You guys are awesome!

Services Manager, Dawn Gascoigne says:

Lockdown has been tough for a lot of LGBTQ young people... Having a chat with a different person is sometimes all a young person needs, to get out of their own head and see a different perspective.

⁴ <https://lgbt.foundation/>

⁵ <https://www.consortium.lgbt/2020/08/20/lgbt-futures-covid-19-response-fund-launched/>

LGBT community groups and organisations

Specific LGBT-focused voluntary and community organisations operate in communities across the North East, often being set up in response to inadequate support for LGBT people from mainstream services.

Meanwhile national campaigning groups such as Stonewall⁶ and GALOP⁷ raise community-wide issues and challenge wider discrimination across the UK.

Although diverse, innovative and passionate, the LGBT sector has historically been marginalised, underfunded, and thus isolated and disparate. Many groups are run entirely by volunteers; and income for the sector remains incredibly low (at 0.06% of national charitable income).⁸ Consortium, which hosts a network of LGBT groups, projects and organisations in the UK, notes most of its members are micro organisations, with income of under £50k⁹. Many North East LGBT organisations took an early hit during the recent decade of public sector funding cuts, with some closing and others losing most of their paid staff. Only a handful of specialist organisations remain (including akt and Trinity Youth Association), complemented by volunteer-led community groups such as: Northern, Sunderland and Northumberland Prides; Northern Proud Voices Community Choir; Gay Men Tyneside; Dyke Hikes and Newcastle Frontrunners. Some LGBT-specific groups and services are offered by mainstream organisations e.g. Washington Mind and Gateshead Young Women's Project's youth groups and Age UK North Tyneside's trans support groups.

MESMAC Newcastle¹⁰ is a statutory agency (funded and managed by Newcastle City Council) which works with gay and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men to increase the range of choices open to them. MESMAC was established in 1990 to focus mainly on sexual health. However, it takes a community

development approach and is able to offer more general support and advice about other issues.

Pride Radio¹¹ is an inclusive radio station broadcasting across the North East on 89.2FM and throughout the UK on other platforms. It has been broadcasting online since 2010 and on FM from 2018, offering a mix of live and pre-recorded shows, music, conversation and listener interaction. A proud, inclusive broadcaster, Pride Radio is part of Pride Community Network Ltd, a not-for-profit organisation that aims to raise awareness of LGBT+ issues, inclusion and diversity through broadcast.

LGBT voluntary and community work is predominantly focused around four (often over-lapping) areas:

- culture and social connectedness – building strong networks for LGBT people from all walks of life, creating physical and virtual spaces, celebrating and amplifying LGBT stories and histories
- health and well-being, including interventions that recognise the specific physical and emotional health and well-being issues facing LGBT communities
- safe and equal communities, ensuring LGBT communities and individuals feel safe and are able to be themselves
- youth work, recognising that LGBT young people can face particular challenges, at school, at home and with peers

⁶ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

⁷ <http://www.galop.org.uk/>

⁸ <https://www.consortium.lgbt/>

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ <https://mesmacnewcastle.com/>

¹¹ <https://prideradio.co.uk/>

Culture and social connectedness

The most visible organisations working to build a positive culture and social connectedness are the Northern, Sunderland and Northumberland Prides.

Although differing in size and geographical focus, all three volunteer-run groups marry an annual festival with activities throughout the year to provide safe spaces to celebrate LGBT lives. The increasing profile of local Pride events as an integral part of the calendar of local events is a powerful demonstration of the wider community’s acceptance of LGBT individuals. Each Pride also supports other activities throughout the year, including awareness and diversity training, support and social groups.

Numerous small activity-focused community groups, from singing to hiking, running to rugby, climbing to football, provide regular opportunities to socialise away from commercial pubs and clubs. Most are volunteer-led, although there are also a number of social groups facilitated by organisations such as MESMAC. Some groups offer support around particular situations e.g. for LGBT parents.

Age UK North Tyneside facilitates social groups for the over 50's LGBT community. One group has been meeting twice a month in Whitley Bay since 2010. It attracts trans men and women from across the region with people travelling from Northumberland, Washington, Wallsend and even Middlesbrough. This group provides the opportunity to socialise in a safe, non-judgemental space, whilst group members support one another with practical tips and advice.

Group facilitator, Emily Houlder says:

People attend our transgender group for a variety of different personal reasons and all at different stages of their transgender journey. Some have told no one else, some have told a friend, others close family. They are all seeking a safe place to be themselves and are looking for reassurance on what they are thinking, feeling, worrying about and striving for... Countless members have blossomed whilst attending the group. It is heart-warming and inspiring for everyone at the group to see one another growing in confidence and being who they want to be.

M used to come as himself. It took M three attempts to enter the building to first attend the group. Over time he started to get changed at the group until one night she turned up as herself; you could see the pride in her face.

A and E would both change when they arrived (from male to female attire); neither had ever been out in public. One night they both came to the group and told how they had individually been out shopping for the first time as themselves. The joy and confidence this gave them was clear to see and they both regularly started going out.

Some group members say:

We got a warm and friendly welcome, meeting nice sympathetic and friendly people with the same difficulties.”

“Everyone has a chance to speak. It is light-hearted and though not a support group we feel supported as we are among people who understand and don't judge.

Health and wellbeing

We know that LGBT people are significantly more likely to experience poor mental health. 24% of LGBT respondents to a large Government study had accessed mental health services in the 12 months preceding the survey;¹² whilst another recent study¹³ on the health and wellbeing of LGBT people in the UK showed:

- half of LGBT people have experienced depression and three in five have suffered from anxiety, far exceeding estimates for the general population.
- poor mental health was more likely among LGBT people who are young, Black, Asian or minority ethnic, disabled or from a socio-economically deprived background.
- one in eight LGBT people aged 18-24 attempted to take their own life in the last year.
- instances of discrimination, hostility and unfair treatment in healthcare services are still commonplace, with many LGBT people particularly those who are trans being “outed” without their consent, treated with inappropriate curiosity and subjected to unequal treatment because of who they are. This discrimination, both experienced and expected, can deter LGBT people from accessing help when they’re in need: one in seven LGBT people, including more than a third of trans people, have avoided treatment for fear of prejudice.
- one in five LGBT people have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives. This number increases to three in ten LGBT disabled people and one in four trans men and women.

The higher incidence of mental ill-health amongst LGBT communities is generally understood to be a result of “minority stress”.¹⁴ Being a member of a marginalised group requires extra effort. When you’re the only LGBT identified person in your team at work, you have to think on a level that members of the majority don’t. The

awareness of being different, alongside past experiences of discrimination or bullying, can cause internalised shame and anxiety. People can struggle with social validation and may constantly scan social or work situations where they may not fit in. Even if someone doesn’t experience overt stigma, the expectation of it can generate stress which takes its toll on mental health over time. Additionally, having to “come-out” to people every time you encounter a new situation can also be draining.

Young (and older) LGBT people especially may feel they need to conceal their true identities and being “invisible” or “unknown” can also be a stressor and lead to isolation. Young people who have come out as teenagers may go back into the closet once they join the workplace. Whilst many LGBT people are not out when they seek services for their health needs, which can impact on the care they receive.

Rainbow Renegades (RR) is an LGBTQI support group for young people aged 13-25, provided by Washington Mind and working with young people from across Wearside. Established in 2019, the group holds weekly group sessions and provides support and social contact via its Instagram and Facebook pages.

Safe and equal communities

Despite the big changes in both societal attitudes and legislation over the last two decades, too many LGBT people can still face discrimination going about their daily lives.

A survey¹⁵ by campaign group Stonewall in 2017 found in the last year LGBT people experience discrimination on the grounds of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the following situations:

- One in ten who were looking for somewhere to rent or buy.
- One in six who visited a café, restaurant, bar or nightclub.

¹²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/722314/GEO-LGBT-Survey-Report.pdf

¹³ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-britain-health>

¹⁴ <https://www.mindout.org.uk/mental-health-awareness-week-what-is-minority-stress/>

¹⁵ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-britain-hate-crime-and-discrimination>

- Almost three in ten who visited a faith service or place of worship.
- One in ten LGBT people who attended a live sporting event.

Meanwhile harassment and discrimination in the workplace is still too common. A 2017 study by the TUC¹⁶ relating to LGBT+ workers found:

- Two in five respondents had been harassed or discriminated against by a colleague, a quarter by a manager and one in seven by a client or patient, with only a third reporting the latest incident to their employer.
- Only half of respondents were “out” (open about their sexuality) to everyone at work. This fell to just over a third of young people.
- Almost half of trans people had experienced bullying or harassment at work.
- Three in five respondents had heard homophobic remarks or jokes directed to others at work, while over a quarter had comments directed at them.
- A quarter of respondents had been outed against their will, while a third of transgender respondents had their trans status disclosed against their will.

Homophobic, biphobic and transphobic hate crime (directed at lesbians, gay men, bi-sexuals and trans people respectively) is better understood that it used to be and police forces and mainstream victims services in some areas do try to respond appropriately. However, there is little focused support available and Stonewall's 2017 study¹⁷ found that, in the last 12 months:

- One in five LGBT people had experienced a hate crime or incident due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.
- Two in five trans people had experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity.
- Four in five LGBT people who experienced a hate crime or incident didn't report it to the police.

- Three in 10 LGBT people avoid certain streets because they do not feel safe there as an LGBT person.
- Over a third of LGBT people don't feel comfortable walking down the street while holding their partner's hand. This increases to three in five gay men.

The majority of the most serious incidents the respondents experienced went unreported. The most common reasons for not reporting incidents to the police were because respondents thought the incident “was too minor, not serious enough, or it happens all the time”, that “it would not be taken seriously enough” and/or that “nothing would happen or change”. When incidents were reported to the police, almost half of respondents were unsatisfied with how their report was handled.

Locally, in 2019 Northumbria Police received 437 reports of homophobic hate crime and 70 reports of transphobic hate crime.

And whilst the internet and social media can be hugely important in enabling people to reach out to others, research by Galop¹⁸, the leading LGBT+ anti-violence charity finds LGBT+ people face high levels of online abuse too:

- Eight in ten LGBT+ people had experienced online abuse.
- Among those targeted, five in ten had experienced online hate more than 20 times; one in five had experienced more than 100 incidents.
- Six in ten were threatened with physical violence; four in ten received death threats or threats of sexual violence.
- As a result, four in ten used their online accounts less, while two in ten removed LGBT+ information from profiles or left social media sites altogether.
- Less than half reported their experiences to social media platforms, and less than 1 in 10 reported to the police.

¹⁶ <https://www.tuc.org.uk/research-analysis/reports/cost-being-out-work>

¹⁷ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/lgbt-britain-hate-crime-and-discrimination>

¹⁸ <http://www.galop.org.uk/online-hate-crime-report-2020/>

There are some excellent national organisations campaigning on these, and other, issues and some national helplines which can offer a listening ear. However, across the North East, there is very little LGBT-specific support available for people experiencing harassment, discrimination or hate crime. Of course, people raise these issues in support groups and with their peers but specialist support and advocacy for victims has not survived the public sector cuts of the last decade.

LGBT people are also at risk of domestic abuse with national statistics¹⁹ suggesting more than one in four gay men and lesbians and more than one in three bisexual people report at least one incident of domestic abuse since the age of 16. The figure for trans people, whose experiences are significantly under-researched, is likely to be higher. Few²⁰ LGBT people report domestic abuse to the police and research²¹ suggests various barriers which domestic abuse services and the criminal justice system could address to increase reporting and improve responses to LGBT victims. However, (again) local and regional initiatives in this field have been under-resourced as a result of funding cuts. Whilst local domestic abuse services often work with LGBT victims of abuse, they often lack the resource to promote this service directly to LGBT communities.

Sunderland Pride as an annual event started in 2010, with a Centre being opened in 2018 as a safe space for LGBT+ people to meet and make new friends. The Centre prioritises work for LGBT+ communities to feel safe, believing everyone deserves the right to feel safe and not live in fear just because of whom they are and how they identify. In addition to supporting the annual festival, the Centre provides training to frontline agencies around LGBT+ awareness and hate crime. It also hosts a number of social groups for different age groups, who want opportunities to socialise and make friends without having to travel through to the gay scene in Newcastle. Most groups happen during the day; people don't want to attend in the evenings as they don't feel safe, hate crime is a significant area of concern.

¹⁹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/adhocs/005986prevalenceofintimateviolenceamongadultsaged16to59bycategoryandsexualidentityofthevictimyearendingmarch2016csew>

Youth work

Young people are perhaps the group within LGBT communities who are most in need of support.

Dealing with emerging feelings can be confusing and many young people worry about the reaction of families, friends and peers at school if they “come out”. LGBT-specific youth groups provide a safe space to explore identities and talk about feelings without the risk of being ostracised.

Sadly nearly half of LGBT pupils are bullied for being LGBT in Britain's schools, although Stonewall reports that incidence of bullying is slowly reducing. When they have sufficient resources, LGBT youth workers can develop work in schools, training staff and supporting groups of students.

Whilst many families are supportive of their LGBT teen, some struggle. LGBT youth projects can support both the LGBT young person and family members, reducing the risk of family breakdown and homelessness.

Trinity Youth Association (TYA) is based in Bedlington but works across the North East, providing youth work and out of school provision. It has been supporting LGBT young people for 12 years. Staff provide groups and one to one support specifically for Trans young people and their families. They also do a great deal of work in schools providing: staff training sessions, developing and running LGBT support groups, pupil and staff support.

Head of Youth Services, Debs Hickling-Walker, says,

Supporting young people who identify as Transgender or Non-Binary has never been more important... Trinity has been that consistent ally for the last decade but rather than the task becoming easier, a concerted campaign to undermine Trans people's human rights has re-legitimised Transphobia, causing fear and concern amongst this already disadvantaged group.

²⁰ <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/resources/gay-and-bisexual-men%E2%80%99s-health-survey-2013>

²¹ <http://www.galop.org.uk/recognise-respond-strengthening-advocacy-for-lgbt-survivors-of-domestic-abuse-2/>

E, 17 years old, says:

I struggle with my mental health a lot, but it really helps being able to talk things through with my youth worker. Some days I feel like “nothing”, that I can’t keep going, but my youth worker has been helping me to build up my confidence.

A young member of a Trans youth group explained:

(the group) is a safe space, we can be around other people and being Trans isn’t the most important thing about you. It’s good to just have a normal conversation, make friends and escape the difficult situation at home. We explore different gender identities and we can also change our minds.

Conclusion

Whilst the UK is undeniably a safer and more tolerant place to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans, for many individuals there are still hurdles to overcome and prejudice to deal with.

Volunteer-led activities continue to provide safe spaces for support and the blossoming of local Pride events contribute enormously to the cultural landscape of both the LGBT and wider communities. However, it is a shame that so many LGBT organisations have lost funding over the last decade. There is a need for far greater resources for this small but important sector, to enable it to build a more robust network of support for those who need it.

Let's talk

We hope that this report will inspire more of you to give to causes that address diversity and equality issues.

If you would like to discuss this report and what you could do to help, please contact us:

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