

LGBT and getting older in Scotland today



connecting
equalities

Discussion paper

What's life like now for older LGBT people

- There may be around 100,000 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people aged over 50 in Scotland, but estimates vary greatly.
- As a whole, people identifying as LGBT are sometimes referred to as 'the LGBT community'. However, there are as many differences between LGBT people as there are amongst heterosexual ('straight') people and likewise for transgender people.
- Same sex sexual activity was not legalized in Scotland until 1980 – it was 1967 in England and Wales – and in 2001 the age of consent was made the same for everyone throughout the UK.
- There were many prosecutions for gay sex in the early 1950s in UK as a whole. For example, there were over 1,000 gay men in prison for sexual activities in 1954.
- Any person born before 1965 who reached adolescence with an attraction to the same sex may have experienced a fear of exposure and its possible consequences.
- Most older LGBT people have experienced discrimination from families, at school and at work, and from public services.

When older LGBT people were growing up, homosexuality was seen by many as a perversion. Until 1973, it was still classified as a mental illness. Some individuals had experience of people wanting to 'cure' them of their sexual orientation. Many lived in constant fear of discovery and harassment. And many have always felt very isolated and lonely. Changes in the law came even later for transgender people. The right to change legal gender came into law in 2005 and then in 2014 it became possible for individuals to change their legal gender without having to end marriages. A small majority of older people in Scotland still see LGBT people as very different from themselves.

The term LGBT includes a diversity of sexual orientation and of gender identity experiences. As a collective term for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, it also includes people identifying with other terms including questioning and queer.

At the same time, there are large numbers of older people, and a large majority of people aged under 45, who see LGBT people of all ages as equal members of a diverse society with the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else.

“There are lots of gay men of my age who have never been ‘out’. That is their choice, and not surprising given all the ill feeling they might have experienced in the past and even now. But it could make it more difficult to reach them and include them.”

“Just by being open about my sexuality in my day-to-day life, at work, and with my own family, there are many people in my life who have shifted in their attitudes to gay people.”

Getting older can be more difficult for LGBT people

- They are more likely to be living alone and to lack the support of children or other family members or a faith group (all of whom may have rejected them when they first came out).
- If they are living with a partner, they can feel vulnerable to the prospect of losing their partner, and then being on their own without the family support that many people enjoy.
- Many say that it can be difficult to make new friends – they feel that attitudes amongst other people of their age are often not very welcoming.

- In both rural areas and towns they may have a long way to travel to find support and activities that suit them. Transport may be an issue, both in terms of availability and cost.

LGB people aged over 70 have lived more than half of their adult lives in a Scotland where same-sex sexual activity was illegal. They are often afraid of spending their final years living in care homes where some staff members and other residents still see a homosexual orientation as unacceptable. This can seem like a return to the close from which many older LGB people have gradually been able to emerge as society has become more open to diversity.

Some people feel that the wider 'LGBT community', and LGBT specific social activity, groups and services, are very focused on the needs of younger people.

LGBT people have a higher risk of experience suicidal feelings, self-harm, drug or alcohol misuse and mental health problems such as depression and anxiety. We do not yet understand all the reasons why this should be the case. However, many studies have linked mental health problems experienced by LGBT people to their experiences of discrimination, homophobia and bullying.

Studies suggest that LGBT people face additional or multiple discrimination if they are disabled, living with HIV or if they belong to certain minority ethnic groups.

Transgender people and intersex people may be particularly concerned about receiving intimate personal care because staff may react negatively.

“My biggest fear is that if we both become ill and need care that we might be separated or be looked after by people who are anti-gay and would treat us badly.”

“My body looks different from other people’s and I worry that I might end up being looked after by people who will not respect me.”

“Isolation for older LGBT people is an extreme problem and only likely to get worse. I feel that doors close to me because of my age and I feel very isolated because there are hardly any older people at community events such as Pride.”

“After his first stroke, William was unable to drive and it was largely his Church friends who provided him with social and other practical support. Although grateful for their help, William expressed feelings of loss of his identity as a gay man, and desperately missed his opportunities to spend time with other gay people. He had never been out at work or at Church.”

What works well in groups

Peer support from other older LGBT people can help.

- A common experience of both past and present discrimination and harassment can support a sense of solidarity.
- For some older people such as a sense of solidarity was forged during the battles for equal rights and the fear induced by AIDS.
- Older LGB people often feel more comfortable in a support group made up of other gay people where they can talk openly about their partner and family and the same may also be true for transgender people.

There is lots of guidance and support available to people who want to set up their own groups and activities. This includes guidance that is particular to the needs of LGBT people.

Prime Time is the name for the informal and friendly social groups in Edinburgh and Glasgow for gay and bisexual men aged 40 and over which, with the support of Gay Men’s Health, have been organising fortnightly meetings in a relaxed and safe space for a number of years.

50s & Friends is an independent social group for older LGBT adults to make new friends and take part in social activities across Dumfries & Galloway.

The Scottish Transgender Alliance assists both individuals and other organisations to engage together around improving equality and inclusion for transgender people in Scotland.

The STA website www.scottishtrans.org contains guidance and other resources to support this work.

In 2014, the Big Lottery Fund gave a large grant to the charity LGBT Health and Wellbeing for work over 3 years with older LGBT people in Edinburgh, Lothian and Glasgow. The LGBT Age work will initiate new sources of support to promote the independence of older LGBT people.

What works well in mainstream groups and services

Where mainstream groups and services are welcoming, and aware of the needs of people from different groups, LGBT people and people with disabilities and from minor ethnic groups can feel welcome and accepted for who they are.

“Its lovely to find that younger people just accept me as a person. Such a nice change from people my age who seem to see me as a freak of nature and nothing else.” (Older transgender person)

The Care Inspectorate’s Equality Outcomes require that it takes account of the needs of LGBT people within all its work in social care. Most other statutory and voluntary organisations have equality policies and practices. This is required of them either by legislation, or by the demands of funding bodies, or by users, or by a combination of these.

“Publications and adverts which show examples of same sex couples as well as straight couples send a clear message to everyone that we are part of society and the community.”

“After we took a stronger approach as a staff team, when ‘Mrs H’ made a remark about ‘those awful queers’, other residents also started ticking her off.”

Benefits for all when things do change

As social and activity groups and voluntary and public services become more welcome of older LGBT people, there are benefits for everyone.

- The inclusion of people from different backgrounds as members, activists and organizers, will mean more people get invested, helping to keep local organisations going.
- Attitudes change as people get to know each other and find that - whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity - they have more in common than they might initially have thought.
- Groups and services that have planned how to be more accessible and welcome to older LGBT people will become more welcome for everybody, whatever their needs.

In 2009, some people in Highland got together to share their stories as part of the LGBT History Month. After that, in the form of Highland Rainbow Folk, this cross- generational group developed 20 stories into a presentation/drama which has been used for staff training. The group also published a leaflet called ‘Am I sure?’ to help others understand the needs of older LGBT people.

For older LGBT people their selves, and for the partners, friends and relatives who support them, it can be a huge relief if their fears of rejection by care services are provided to be needless. With support from competitive services and from LGBT peer support, they can have as much chance as everyone of enjoying their customer independence and activities well into old age.

Risks and points to watch

A starting point for many older LGBT people is an expectation, arising from experience, that they will be subject to prejudice and discrimination. Issues of trust and safety are commonplace and other people may need to demonstrate, through words or actions, that they are not prejudiced.

Many LGBT people are not aware: that most public sector organisations have to consider their needs; that staff should be trained in equality requirements; and that they can complain if their needs are not acted on.

In social contexts, communities and friends, a shared sexual orientation or gender identity is more important for some people than for others.

Not everyone wants to be 'out' and we all have many other aspects to our identity

“It’s scary to think I might not be able to be myself just because I’m getting older. I want open affirmation of my identity when dealing with public services.”

“I want to be with others like myself, to have a circle of friends who care for each other, and talk about things which some people who aren’t gay might not feel comfortable with.”

Continuing the discussion

For mainstream groups and organisations

Do we know much about the needs of LGBT people in this area? If not, then how can we find out more and get in touch with them?

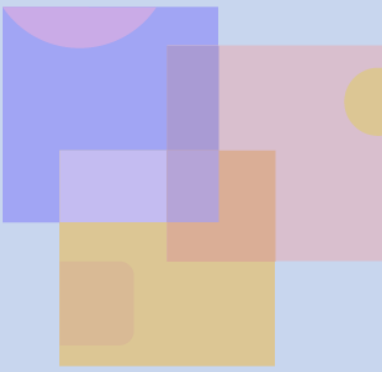
What might older LGBT people currently find unwelcoming in our activities and services?

How can we make our group or organization more accessible to LGBT people? Should we look at the LGBT Charter Mark?

For LGBT specific groups and organisations

What are the needs of older LGBT people in our area? How can we find out and reach more people?

Do we want to organize activities for LGBT older people or do we want to be part of mainstream activities and services or alternatively look at intergenerational work with younger LGBT people?



Information and advice

LGBT Age is a project of the LGBT Health and Wellbeing Centre. The Centre provides parallel services for LGBT people with learning disabilities, and support around mental health problems, gender transition, community development and community safety. www.lgbthealth.org.uk

LGBT Youth Scotland provides support to professionals working with LGBT people in the form of training and to organisations through the LGBT Charter Mark <https://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk/the-lgbt-charter/> The organisation also supports older LGBT people in Dumfries & Galloway where the 50s & Friends group is based. www.lgbtcentredg.co.uk

BiScotland is Scotland's national organisation for bisexuals run by volunteers. www.biscotland.org

The Equality Network (which works for LGBT equality in Scotland) hosts a directory of LGBT organisations. www.equality-network.org/resources/directory

Scottish Transgender Alliance has been funded by the Scottish Government since 2007 and is based with the Equality Network. www.scottishtrans.org

The UKIA or United Kingdom Intersex Association is an education, advocacy, campaigning and support organisation which works on behalf of intersex people. www.ukia.co.uk

Stonewall Scotland's resources available include guides to: setting up a group; LGBT inclusive communications; engaging LGBT people in your work; and a survey report 'Lesbian, gay, bisexual people in later life' which contains many statistics and stories on what older LGB people want. www.stonewallscotland.org.uk/scotland

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has published a 'Perspectives for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals' within its Perspectives on Ageing series. This explores the views of a wide range of people, their experiences of getting older and their expectations of support services. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/perspectives-ageing-lesbians-gay-men-and-bisexuals>

About Connecting Equalities

We are working with diverse groups of older people and their communities, supporting them to connect their everyday experiences with rights and equalities. We help them connect with decision-makers and media, to ensure their contributions are part of shaping what matters to them for a good life.

There is more information at <https://otbds.org/projects/connecting-equalities/>

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