

# Meeting the needs of homeless lesbian and gay youth



The causes of homelessness  
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Monitoring sexuality  
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Strategies for service delivery



A guide for housing and homelessness agencies



# Introduction



This booklet presents some guidelines for housing and homelessness agencies in meeting the needs of lesbian and gay youth.

It is based on research carried out by the *National Centre for Social Research*, in collaboration with Stonewall Housing, and grant funded by the Community Fund. The research had three main aims:

- to investigate the causes of homelessness for young lesbians and gay men;
- to explore the nature of homelessness as experienced by lesbian and gay youth;
- to consider broad strategies for tackling the issue amongst this minority group.

The study was based in four urban areas, chosen to reflect diverse demographic circumstances, different levels of homelessness and varied lesbian and gay infrastructure. In each area, homelessness agencies, housing providers and lesbian and gay organisations were consulted. In addition, a cross-section of young lesbians and gay men aged 15 to 24 from a diverse range of backgrounds and circumstances were interviewed about their experience of housing crisis.

This booklet draws together the main lessons of the research for housing and homelessness agencies, with a view to improving service delivery for lesbian and gay youth. Its production and distribution was grant funded by Comic Relief.

# The causes of homelessness

The role of sexuality in the creation of youth homelessness is complex.

## Being lesbian or gay can cause young people to become homeless

Intolerance of sexuality can lead to young people being thrown out of or deciding to leave home. In addition, expectations of intolerance by young people or emotional and psychological difficulties in coming to terms with sexuality, particularly in unsupportive environments, can cause homelessness. Richard's story illustrates how housing crisis can be a direct consequence of sexuality:

Richard (23) grew up with both parents and siblings in the North. He had always dreaded his parents finding out he was gay, believing his father to be very homophobic. When he turned 17 he arrived home from work one day to find all his belongings packed and his father demanding he leave. Someone had told his family that he was gay. He went to stay with a boyfriend he had not known for very long but hated being away from home. His parents agreed to allow him to return home if got 'help'. Richard went home and began a relationship with a woman that lasted for over two years. He felt the situation was '*a farce*', but was much happier back at home with his family.

His attempts to suppress his sexuality became increasingly difficult. He was seen in a gay bar by one of his father's friends and was thrown out a second time when he was 21. He was homeless for a couple of months before he obtained housing association accommodation.



### Young lesbians and gay men can become homeless for reasons entirely unconnected to their sexuality

They may experience the full range of more familiar causes of housing crisis such as family breakdown, disruptive parental behaviour, violence, abuse, leaving care, bullying and religious and cultural expectations. Liam's experiences demonstrate how housing crisis can be entirely unrelated to sexuality:

Liam (18) was taken into care at the age of seven because his father sexually abused him. Whilst in care, he lived in numerous children's homes and with different foster families. During that time, he developed behavioural problems and described himself as very violent and aggressive. This resulted in frequent movement between different carers. Upon leaving care, he had been helped to obtain a supported tenancy but abandoned it because he found it difficult to maintain: *'I ran up great big debts and owed thousands of pounds'*. He sought refuge in emergency hostel accommodation. He had been there for a number of months at the time of interview. He felt that his housing crisis was *'mainly all related to the way my dad treated me and the abuse'*.

### Homelessness may also be caused by a combination of factors

Some young people may become homeless due to a mixture of factors, some of which are related, and some unrelated to sexuality.

# Experiences of homelessness

The difficulties young lesbians and gay men face while homeless are similar to those experienced by all young homeless people. These include practical difficulties associated with finding somewhere to sleep, obtaining food and staying clean and healthy, and dangers such as sexual exploitation, prostitution and developing a dependency on drugs and alcohol.

Being lesbian or gay, however, can add to the difficulties experienced whilst homeless in four main ways:

## 1. EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

The rejection felt by young people who are thrown out of home because of being lesbian or gay can make them very distressed and vulnerable. It can be very difficult for them to come to terms with the withdrawal of love and acceptance that accompanies being thrown out of or forced to leave home. This can lead to young people putting themselves in difficult, dangerous or exploitative situations to meet their need for love and affection.

## 2. COMING TO TERMS WITH SEXUALITY

Difficulty in coming to terms with sexuality without access to proper support and help can lead to depression or other emotional and mental health related problems. In the research, the young people spoke of using alcohol, drugs and attention seeking behaviour to try to cope with or block out issues arising from being lesbian or gay. This has implications for the type of help needed by young people and their receptivity to services.

## 3. HOMOPHOBIA

Homophobia, perpetrated by staff, service users, or other homeless people can compound the difficulties faced by young lesbians and gay men while homeless. Juliet's story illustrates this:



Juliet (now 24) spent most of her teenage years in residential care but decided that she could not come out in that environment because *'it was too dangerous...I would have gotten my head kicked in all the time'*. When Juliet left care she entered a mixed supported accommodation project where her sexuality *'just all came out'*. Though many of her peers were supportive, a staff member displayed severe discomfort with her sexuality. On one occasion she was told by him that it would be better if she found somewhere else to live because her *'difference'* was causing problems within the project.

Homophobia in services can have three different but equally undesirable consequences for young lesbians and gay men:

- **They do not use these services:** This may mean they decide to sleep rough or stay with friends rather than access existing provision or that they remain in difficult or dangerous households.
- **They leave services without having their needs met:** Homophobia can lead to young people running away from services, ceasing to receive help and returning to or entering into dangerous or abusive situations because they need somewhere to stay.
- **They remain in services and suffer homophobic abuse and harassment:** Intolerance of sexuality reflected in remarks, gestures and verbal and physical abuse can make the use of services difficult and frightening. The experience of abuse or harassment exacerbates their problems or needs (such as low self-esteem and drug or alcohol use).

#### 4. INVISIBILITY

Lack of awareness amongst some mainstream service providers about the existence of young lesbians and gay men within their client group can mean that they are not always aware of the needs of these young people. This can make it difficult for young lesbians and gay men to get the right help and support, which can in turn lead to increased vulnerability.

# Monitoring sexuality

## WHY IS MONITORING IMPORTANT?

At present, young lesbians and gay men are relatively invisible in most housing and homelessness services. The research has shown that one of the main reasons for this is fear of harassment and violence. Monitoring is one of the only ways to determine the true scale of homelessness amongst lesbian and gay youth.

It can also help to:

- heighten awareness of the presence of lesbians and gay men in housing and homelessness agencies;
- create a better understanding of client need;
- plan and deliver effective and inclusive services;
- promote your organisation as one that is supportive of young lesbians and gay men.

## WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS ABOUT MONITORING SEXUALITY?

Some agencies, understandably, are reluctant to ask questions about sexuality. This might be because it is considered too personal a question, or because staff are not comfortable addressing issues of sexuality. Many agencies also voice fears about the confidentiality of such data.

The research has shown that these concerns are not unfounded – but they should not be seen as reasons not to monitor sexuality. It found that the advantages of monitoring far outweigh the drawbacks – *provided it is done with good cause, and in a sensitive way.*



## **SOME TIPS ON MONITORING SEXUALITY**

Talking to organisations who currently monitor the sexuality of clients – and listening to young people’s positive experiences of monitoring - has yielded some tips about how best to monitor sexuality:

### **Equip staff to ask about issues of sexuality**

Effective monitoring has at its root a programme of staff training in sexuality issues. It can prepare staff for addressing issues of sexuality with young people, and heighten awareness of local support services.

### **Explain clearly why monitoring information is collected**

Young people are resistant to monitoring practices where they are not accompanied with an explanation of why the information is needed, and how it is used – in language they can understand. Monitoring is viewed most positively by young people when it is linked to service provision, or to determining appropriate referrals.

### **Consider the most effective way to ask about sexuality**

There is a clear preference amongst young people to be asked about sexuality as part of a face to face interview, rather than on a form or questionnaire. Even here, the ability of the interviewer to put the young person at ease is seen to be key in helping them to discuss their sexuality. Where questions are asked in a joking manner, or in a way that assume heterosexuality, young people are less likely to be open about their sexuality.

### **Ensure that monitoring systems are confidential**

Fear of harassment, violence and unfair treatment is a common concern for young lesbians and gay men. Monitoring works best when clients feel reassured of the confidentiality of their details and that disclosure of sexuality will not affect the service they receive.

# Promoting equality

The potential for homophobia in mainstream housing and homelessness services is viewed by young people and agency staff as one of the key challenges for service provision to young lesbians and gay men. Tackling this is viewed as the most fundamental step to improving the lives of homeless lesbian and gay youth. Two main strategies can lead to better experiences in services.

## **IMPLEMENT SEXUALITY AWARENESS TRAINING FOR ALL STAFF**

Staff training is seen as one of the main ways of preventing homophobic abuse, dealing with it when it occurs, or at the very least, alleviating its effects. Whether delivered alone, or as a key component of a broader programme of equality training, it should have three primary objectives:

### **To raise awareness**

Training should make staff aware of how discrimination and homophobia operate, as well as the policies and practices that can perpetuate or prevent them. Educating staff about how sexuality can make young people vulnerable to housing crisis is an important part of this.

### **To challenge attitudes**

Training should be an opportunity for an open and frank discussion about sexuality. It should also contribute to the development of strategies to ensure that all staff have a commitment to promoting equal opportunity and to challenging homophobia.

### **To offer practical guidance**

Any programme of training should offer staff practical guidance about how to put equal opportunities into practice when dealing with clients or delivering services.



## CREATE A SUPPORTIVE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

Training is but one strand of a more holistic strategy to tackle homophobia in services. Other ways in which to make housing and homelessness services more supportive of lesbians and gay men include:

### **Establish sexuality as the cornerstone of equal opportunities policies**

The inclusion of sexuality in all equal opportunities policies – on an equal footing with other criteria such as race, gender and disability – is crucial to tackling homophobia in services.

### **Commit to implementing equality standards**

Ensuring that staff at all levels of the organisation commit to equal opportunities and that anti-discrimination policies are applied in a consistent way are two practical ways of implementing equal opportunities. Having a staff team that reflects the diversity possible in your client group is another way of demonstrating a commitment to equality.

### **Forge links with lesbian and gay organisations**

Where mainstream housing and homelessness organisations develop links with lesbian and gay organisations, it can lead to greater awareness of the needs and circumstances of homeless lesbian and gay youth. Such collaborations often aid better referral to appropriate support services, and can foster the development of specialised services for homeless young lesbians and gay men.

### **Promote work with lesbian and gay youth**

In the research, young people generally gravitated towards services they felt were supportive of sexuality. One way they determined this was through agency publicity and word of mouth. Promoting your agency's willingness to, or past experience of, working with lesbian and gay youth is a way of making young people aware that you provide a supportive service environments.

# Understanding need

Young lesbians and gay men are a diverse group. Not only do they come from different backgrounds and circumstances, they are also different in terms of gender, race, culture and disability. Some face multiple sources of disadvantage and discrimination. Homeless young lesbians and gay men may have a varied and wide range of needs, including:

- A need for safe, supported accommodation – both emergency and longer term;
- Support in coming to terms with sexuality;
- Assistance in developing confidence and self esteem;
- Support around mental health issues, behavioural and emotional problems;
- Assistance in avoiding, managing and overcoming drug or alcohol dependency;
- Help to evade or abandon exploitative situations;
- Support around re-establishing contact with home or family, where young people wish to do so;
- Help to acquire independent living skills, qualifications and to increase employability.



Young people sometimes just need accommodation in order to get their lives back on track. However, young people's difficulties can be much more profound – either because of the issues that caused them to become homeless, or the trouble encountered since. The different circumstances and outcomes of the two stories below, illustrate this.

Jonah (18) was kicked out of home when his parents discovered he was gay. He moved between different friends for a while during which time he contacted several housing advice centres and housing associations. After a short time, he was offered supported lodgings with a gay male couple. He stayed there for a few months and now lives in other supported accommodation specifically for lesbians and gay men. At the time of the interview, he was studying for A level examinations.

Anna, now aged 23, left home at 17 for a variety of reasons. She stayed with friends and had a flat for a while but got evicted when she did not pay the rent. After '*a long time*' staying in squats or sleeping rough, Anna – with some help from a housing advice centre – got a flat with her local council. She lived there for a year but '*did a runner*' because she was being threatened with eviction, again due to rent arrears. She explained that the little money she had during that time was supporting her chronic heroin addiction. After staying with friends and acquaintances for a time, she moved into a hostel for six months and after that into the council flat she was living in at the time of interview. However, she was being threatened with eviction again because of unpaid rent and wondered how long it would be before she had to find somewhere else to stay.

# Strategies for service delivery

The complexity of need identified has clear implications for the delivery of services to lesbian and gay youth.

## 1. Be aware of diverse and multiple needs

It is important that services are able to recognise the diverse range of needs that young lesbians and gay men present with. Assessments need to be comprehensive and able to identify the full range of needs of homeless young lesbians and gay men, including those arising from or compounded by issues of sexuality.

## 2. Provide tailored help and support

Homeless young people should receive a bespoke package of help and support appropriate to their full range of needs. This may involve helping with personal problems and emotional issues first to create the foundations for later work to assist young people to achieve sustainable accommodation, education and employment. Delivering the wrong sort of help at the wrong time – for example, placing a young person dealing with substantial emotional and behavioural problems in services requiring self direction and discipline - can exacerbate the issues a young person may be facing because they are not ready for such assistance.

## 3. Adopt a holistic multi-agency approach

Many of the services required by homeless lesbian and gay youth already exist, however, they require a strong element of communication and co-operation to ensure that resources are successfully targeted towards the young people who most need them. This necessitates a multi-agency approach, involving voluntary and statutory agencies and a commitment to the principles of partnership and joint working, as well as to the policies and practices that welcome and meet the needs of young lesbians and gay men.



## THE NEED FOR SPECIALIST HOUSING SERVICES

One of the primary needs is for housing services that are dedicated to meeting the needs of homeless lesbian and gay youth. The benefits young people can derive from such services are manifold. As well as providing a place to stay, specialised services allow young lesbians and gay men to:

- feel safe from homophobic violence and abuse;
- become 'ordinary' and share experiences;
- be more open and relaxed about sexuality;
- learn more about lesbian and gay life – including greater awareness of safer sex for young gay men.

In areas without any specialised accommodation services, it is clear that lesbian and gay youth are without a service that can effectively meet their housing and other needs.

## THE NEED FOR SPECIALISED EMERGENCY ACCOMMODATION

The greatest need in service provision is, without doubt, for specialised or dedicated emergency accommodation. This is currently not provided anywhere in the UK. Without such accommodation, young people will have to continue to brave the mainstream hostel system – and either conceal their sexual orientation or accept the possibility that they will experience harassment and violence. The only alternative at present is to avoid using mainstream hostels. However, the research has shown that such a strategy can leave young people unsupported and vulnerable to dangerous or exploitative situations.

The benefits of specialised emergency accommodation cannot be underestimated. Such provision can protect young people from the homophobia they currently experience in direct access hostels by providing them with a safe, supported environment. It can be the first step in helping the young person to deal with the issues that caused their homelessness, and to develop strategies for returning to independent living.

For more information about the research, or to obtain a copy of the full report, contact:

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