



Older Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual
People in the UK

A Policy Brief

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November 2008

ILC-UK

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This policy brief was first published in November 2008.

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Acknowledgements

This research has been made possible by an unrestricted grant from Pfizer Inc. We are grateful for their continued support.

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Background

This brief which provides an introduction and background to the issues that may be faced by older lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)¹ people in the UK is part of a series of policy briefs. It provides background and introduction on why the ageing experience for LGB people may be different from that of their heterosexual counterparts and what the implications for providers of services used by older LGB people may be. Briefs in the series include:

- **Housing** issues faced by older LGB people in the UK
- **Health care** issues faced by older LGB people in the UK
- **Social care** issues faced by older LGB people in the UK

Introduction

The population of the UK is ageing. For the first time ever, there are more individuals aged 60 and older than those aged 16 and younger (Office for National Statistics)². The proportion of people 60 years or older, now constitutes nearly one fifth of the population and is only expected to increase in the coming decades.

As a group, older people are heterogeneous³. There is diversity in their age (some as young as 60 and others more than 100 years old), ethnicity, socioeconomic class, health status, etc. Older people are also diverse in their sexual orientation. However, to date not much attention has been focused on older lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

There is a need to raise awareness among providers of housing, health and social care about this group of older people if they are to provide services that are 'person-centred and fit around

people's needs'⁴ as well as services that 'put people first'⁵; these being government policy objectives in service provision.

Older people are the main users of health and social care services and these services still do not always adequately address their needs partly because they are not 'person-centred'. With regards to older LGB people, what needs to be understood is whether they have different needs from those of their heterosexual counterparts. If so, how are these needs different? How can service providers meet these needs and therefore ensure that this group of older people is treated with 'dignity, respect and fairness'?

This brief summarizes what is known about the demographics of older LGB people. How many older LGB are there in the UK? What are their living situations? Do they face stigma and discrimination and how does this impact on how they access formal services?

How Many (Older) Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People are in the UK?

The numbers of people who are gay, lesbian or bisexual in the UK are unknown and only estimates exist. Further, these estimates are likely to be underestimates as there are many LGB people who are not 'out' and who are not open about their sexual orientation and if asked, may not acknowledge that they are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Additionally, while most population surveys may have questions on gender and ethnicity, to date many have not had questions on sexual orientation and so opportunities to gather such data have not been realized.

Despite these short-comings, the UK Government estimates that lesbian, gay and bisexual people comprise approximately 5-7% of the population⁶. Based on the projections of the number of older people provided by the Office of

¹ While transgender people have some experiences similar to those of lesbian, gay and bisexual people, many of the issues including their legal position regarding discrimination are different and therefore they are not included in the review. However, some studies on lesbian, gay and bisexual people which have also included transgender people (LGBT) are included in the review.

²http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget_print.asp?ID=949

³ Office of National Statistics (2008). Focus on Older People: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/focuson/olderpeople/>

⁴HM Government (2001) National Service Framework for Older People Department of Health

⁵ HM Government(2007) Putting People First: A shared vision and commitment to the transformation of adult social care, London: Department of Health

⁶http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcern/openingdoors_facts.asp

National Statistics, by 2031, there could be as many as 1 to 1.4 million gay, lesbian and bisexual people aged 60 and over in the UK.

Who are Older Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in the UK?

Although there is a shortage of official survey data about their demographic characteristics, it is known that older LGB people, like many other groups of older people are a diverse group. Their heterogeneity is not only a result of cultural, ethnic and racial diversity, but similar to heterosexual older people, their diversity is based on educational background, socioeconomic class and income. There is variation in where they live with more LGB 'communities' in large urban areas such as London, Edinburgh, Manchester and Brighton and fewer in smaller towns and rural communities.

Moreover, there is wide variation in the nature of their personal histories and relationships with biological families. There is great variety in the kinds of previous relationships they have had throughout their lives with some having been previously in heterosexual relationships or marriages. Some have children and others are without⁷.

There are also differences in lengths of current or past same-sex relationships, the age and experiences of coming out and the degree to which individuals identify as being lesbian, gay or bisexual. The nature of the relationships LGB people have with their biological families differ greatly; with some families 'accepting' or 'rejecting' their gay, lesbian or bisexual family member.

Notions of 'family' among LGB people are broad and go beyond the traditional 'biological families' that are familiar to most heterosexual people. Lesbian, gay and bisexual people, following rejection from biological families for their sexuality, often seek out friends with whom they can be themselves without fear of being 'outed'. These friends become family or what is known as 'families of choice'. Thus, older gay men and lesbians often

⁷ Heaphy, B, Yip, AKT and Thompson, D. (2004). Ageing in a non-heterosexual context. *Ageing and Society* 24, 882-902.

have 'family of choice' networks made up of partners and friends who act as family.

Among older LGB people, there is an older cohort which has had a significant history of oppression⁸. These are older gay and lesbian individuals who lived most of their youth and adulthood in environments that were almost exclusively hostile to them. Homosexuality was illegal (until 1967 when the Sexual Offences Act came into force in England and Wales) and being gay considered to be 'perverse and immoral' by the majority of the population.

Not only was homosexuality considered as being morally wrong, it was also viewed as a mental health disorder. It was only as recently as 1992 that the World Health Organization declassified homosexuality as a mental illness⁹. Thus, a significant proportion of the older cohort of LGB people may have been considered for or undergone shock and aversion therapy to 'cure them'. This of course has had ramifications for this cohort such as diminished feelings of self worth and an aversion to accessing services provided by formal institutions.

Finally, it is important to note that LGB people may not view themselves as being part of a 'community' that is defined by sexual orientation. Further, there may be conflicts between various subgroups of people who are lesbian, gay and bisexual and one must always remain cognizant of the fact that older LGB people are not a homogeneous group.

Facing Prejudice and Discrimination

Since 1967 when the Sexual Offences Act came into force in England and Wales, more legislation has been enacted to ensure that the rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual as citizens are protected.

More recently, the Civil Partnership Act was passed in November 2004 and gave same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as married heterosexual

⁸ Brotman S, Ryan, B and Cormier, R (2003) The Health and Social Service Needs of Gay and Lesbian Elders and Their Families in Canada. *The Gerontologist* 43:192-202
⁹ Department of Health (2007). Mental health issues within lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) communities

couples. In 2007, the Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations became law, making discrimination against lesbians and gay men in the provision of goods and services illegal.

However, despite the existence of legislation and the more general acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in society they still experience stigma and discrimination¹⁰. Older LGB people may face discrimination and prejudice based on at least two factors; their age and their sexual orientation. They may face additional discrimination based on their ethnicity or gender among many other factors.

Prejudice and discrimination against LGB people is typically in two forms: *homophobia* and *heterosexism*. *Homophobia* has been defined as 'the irrational hatred, intolerance, and fear of lesbian, gay and bisexual people'¹¹. It can be in the form of words and language used (e.g. speaking disparagingly about LGB people) or be in the form of actions that are taken e.g. violence perpetrated against an individual or defacing of property.

Heterosexism, on the other hand, is the assumption that everyone is heterosexual and is endemic in the society¹¹. It is entrenched in societal institutions, traditions and in customs. While heterosexism might be unintentional, it marginalizes and fails to recognize at the outset that not everyone is heterosexual. This can have a direct impact on whether the needs of a lesbian, gay or bisexual person are met when they access services.

¹⁰ A recent poll by Stonewall revealed that the majority of Britons are comfortable with gay people and most people support the equal legal treatment of lesbians and gay men, and want to see anti-gay discrimination addressed.

However, a quarter of people still say they have a low opinion of lesbians and gay men.

¹¹ Stonewall.

http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/Beyond_barriers_postcard_x4.pdf

The Needs of Older LGB People: How Do They Differ From Those of Their Heterosexual Peers?

Older age can be characterized by ageism, social isolation through loss of family and friends, poor health and income poverty and it is generally accepted that similar to older people in general, older LGB people are faced with these same issues. However, previous and continued experiences of stigma and discrimination because of their sexuality often make the experience of growing older for lesbian, gay and bisexual people one that is different from that which may be experienced by their heterosexual peers. Perceived or experienced discrimination by older LGB people can prevent them from accessing housing, health or social care services that they need.

As individuals grow older, they are increasingly dependent on their families, friends, neighbours and others in their social network to provide them with various kinds of support. This support can range from getting help with bathing and dressing, to having someone who can take an older person for a check-up with the GP. Most social support that is provided to older people is done so by family; particularly spouses and adult children.

Various comparative studies of older LGB and heterosexual people have found their living and family situations are likely to differ significantly. In general, studies have found that older LGB people are more likely to live alone than their heterosexual peers. An often cited study is one that was conducted by the Brookdale Center on Aging¹² in New York. This study found that:

- Up to 75 percent of the older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population lived alone. This was two and a half times more than their heterosexual counterparts were likely to.
- 90 percent of the LGBT people were childless. This made them four and a

¹² Brookdale Center on Aging of Hunter College and Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE) (1999). *Assistive Housing for Elderly Gays and Lesbians in New York City: Extent of the Need and Preferences of Elderly Gays and Lesbians*. New York: Hunter College and SAGE

half times less likely to have children to call upon in time of need compared to heterosexual peers.

- 80 percent aged as single people, without a life partner or "significant other". This made LGBT individuals twice as likely to age as a single person compared to heterosexual peers.

While many LGB people have extensive social networks and 'families of choice', the facts and figures produced by the Brookdale Center on Aging above and other studies reveal that the older LGB population can be at higher risk of loneliness and social isolation compared to heterosexual people, and therefore may be in greater need of using formal services that foster better social support networks for them.

Lack of recognition of same sex relationships (or families of choice) by providers has also been raised as a problem that can be faced by older LGB people. There has been anecdotal evidence of partners being excluded from consultation on the care plan of a partner.

Fear of Discrimination and Disclosure

Fear of discrimination (or perceived discrimination) and stigmatization can have a hugely negative impact on a lesbian, gay or bisexual person.

Some research has shown that LGB people who may have internalized heterosexist values and who have remained secretive about their sexual orientation throughout their lives have relatively poor adjustment and lower morale in later life¹³. That is, later life adjustments may be especially difficult for those who have felt a need to hide their sexual orientation throughout their lives.

Coming out later in life may also mean having little or no experience in the gay 'community'. This may create new sets of problems for older LGB people including the lack of comfort of an established identity. These older people may feel they

¹³ Friend, R. (1990). Older lesbian and gay people: A theory of successful aging. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 20, 99-118

do not belong to either a gay or straight community and therefore may not know to whom they can turn to for the support they may need.

In contrast, lesbian and gay older people who have generally been open regarding their sexual orientation have been found to be more active, happier, and better adjusted in later life. Some have even theorized that the coming-out process provides a sense of competence in handling crises which is called upon to buffer against negative experiences in old age¹⁴. That is, being a lesbian or a gay man can have a positive effect on the process of ageing. However, others have disputed these assertions as very small sample sizes have been used and most of the participants in the research were in their forties and fifties. These are relatively young ages and these findings are unlikely to be generalized to older cohorts.⁷

Older LGB people may face discrimination because of their age, sexuality or both. To that end, older LGB people may feel that organizations which provide services for LGB people or older people in general may not meet their specific needs. As discussed above, older LGB people share many of the same concerns and needs as heterosexual individuals, but by virtue of their sexuality, they face additional challenges as well.

Two themes have consistently emerged from recent studies conducted in various cities and communities in North America on the health, social services and long-term care needs of older lesbians and gay men. These are *fear of discrimination* and *fear of disclosure*. These fears prevent older gay men and lesbians from accessing and utilizing formal services that they may need in order to age well¹⁵. Thus, it is imperative that providers of services foster environments which encourage and enable older LGB people to disclose their sexual orientation without fear of being discriminated against should they do so.

¹⁴ Kimmel D (1978). Adult development and aging: a gay perspective. *Journal of Social Issues* 34 (3):113-130

¹⁵ Cohen, HL, Cox Curry, L, Jenkins D, Walker CA and Hogstel, MO (2008). Older Lesbians and Gay Men: Long-Term Cares Issue. *Annals of Long-Term Care: Clinical Care and Aging*: 16[2]:33-38

Summary and Conclusion

At approximately 5-7 percent of the population of older people, older LGB people comprise a sizeable proportion. To ensure that services are provided which are responsive to the needs of users, it is important that providers of older people's services be aware of this group of older people and what their needs are.

Older people rely on social support networks as they become frailer in old age and because older LGB are less likely to have adult children on whom to call upon or a partner, they may be more likely, for example, need to use more formal services. However, because they may fear being discriminated against, they may not disclose their sexual orientation which may be directly relevant to the care that is provided to them. There is a need for affirming environments which may lead an older LGB person to feel sufficiently comfortable enough to disclose their orientation, thus ensuring that appropriate services can be provided to them.

Service providers should also be aware that families of choice are important to older LGB people and their significance in their lives needs to be acknowledged and affirmed as when in consultations about care to be provided to the older person.

Organizations Addressing the Needs of Older Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual People in the UK

Over the last two decades a number of organizations in the UK have been actively working on raising the profile of older LGB people in various capacities including service provision and policy. Some of these organizations and the ongoing work and activities they are undertaking are summarized here.

Age Concern England

Age Concern has the Opening Doors program. Opening Doors is the umbrella title of the developing programme of publications, resources and events for and about older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the UK. The national Opening

Doors programme began in 1999, with a series of training programmes around lesbian, gay and bisexual ageing.

There are a growing number of local and regional Age Concern initiatives for older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals which have been developing around the country.

For more information visit:
http://www.ageconcern.org.uk/AgeConcern/openingdoors_facts.asp

Polari

Polari works for better services for older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals and runs an information service for LGB older people and those who support them. Some of Polari's current activities are to working with national and local Government departments to get the needs of older LGBT on the agenda and advising older LGBT people's groups how to get their views and needs heard.

For more information
<http://www.casweb.org/polari/>

The Metro Centre

The Metro 50+ Group is for older Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual's who wish to get involved in a group that plans events, outings and volunteering in the community, based in Greenwich South East London.

For more information visit:
http://www.metrocentreonline.org/m_50.htm