



### Secret Loves, Hidden Lives?

Exploring issues for men and women with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual

The mental, emotional and sexual health of people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian and bisexual is being jeopardised by the failure of many services to meet their duty of care in this area.

Researchers at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol working in partnership with Terrence Higgins Trust and REGARD found significant barriers were put in the way of people with learning difficulties exercising their human rights to consenting same sex relationships including:

- Experiences of discrimination, harassment and bullying: Virtually every person with a learning difficulty who took part in the research said they had been bullied or harassed as a direct result of their sexuality. Much of the verbal abuse came from close family members. Half of the people we interviewed had been physically or verbally abused by strangers on the street or on public transport. Experiences of depression and loneliness featured heavily in people's accounts. Two men spoke about trying to commit suicide and one woman had self harmed and thought about suicide.
- Lack of support: People wanted support to meet other gay, lesbian and bisexual people, go to pubs and clubs and groups and find boyfriends and girlfriends. However, the gay scene was felt by many to be unwelcoming and staff were often reluctant to see this work as part of their jobs.
- A failure on the part of many services who support people with learning difficulties to talk about, or do work on, sexuality and relationships and meet required standards in this area. However, a small number of staff in a minority of services were doing thoughtful and innovative work.

Despite these barriers the desire to meet and get to know other people was one of the strongest messages from the research. Most people wanted to fall in love and have more gay and lesbian friends.

Despite the very many messages telling men and women with learning difficulties that it is a problem for them to be sexual at all – never mind gay, lesbian, or bisexual – people were forging their identities and striving to lead full sexual and emotional lives. Nonetheless much work needs to be done to ensure that the human rights of people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual are upheld and supported.

## Introduction

There is a growing policy and legislative imperative to ensure that people with learning difficulties are supported to develop relationships, including sexual ones. However gay, lesbian and bisexual people with learning difficulties may have additional needs or face particular barriers in this area of their lives, including prejudice and discrimination in the wider society, as well as from staff, services, family and friends. Researchers at the Norah Fry Research Centre, University of Bristol worked in partnership with Terrence Higgins Trust and REGARD (the national organisation of gay, lesbian and bisexual disabled people). A 3 year study, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, aimed to:

- Find out more about the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women with learning difficulties;
- Explore what kinds of barriers or prejudice they encounter; to see how they have been supported (or not) by the services and professionals with whom they are involved;
- Identify ideas, and then produce resources, for training and policy development which would enable them to get the positive support they need in this area.

## About the study

The research had three stages:

1. Interviews with 71 staff in 20 learning disability services across the UK about their views and experiences of working with people with learning difficulties who were, or may have been, gay, lesbian or bisexual.
2. Interviews with 20 women and men with learning difficulties who were having, or wanted to have, a same sex relationship.
3. The production of resources for people with learning difficulties and staff.

## Findings: Experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual people with learning difficulties

### *First feelings and 'coming out' –*

Everybody told us about feeling attracted to people of the same sex in their teenage years. All of the men and women we interviewed were out to at least one other person. People's accounts of coming out were dominated by a fear and anxiety of rejection followed by a strong sense of relief if, and when, the news was well received. One fear about coming out was that people might be asked to leave services or organisations that they valued.

### *Reflections on being gay, lesbian or bisexual –*

Almost all of the men interviewed described themselves as gay. About half of the women described themselves as bisexual and half as lesbian. Many of them had felt (and a small number continued to feel) that there was something wrong with their sexuality.

*Homophobia and discrimination –* 19 of our 20 interviewees told us about being bullied or harassed as a direct result of their sexuality. Much of the verbal abuse came from close family members. Many had experienced direct or indirect homophobia from professionals and four people told us about serious discrimination and harassment in their places of work. Half of the people we interviewed had been physically or verbally abused by strangers on the street or on public transport. Experiences of depression and loneliness featured heavily in people's accounts. Two men told us about trying to commit suicide and one woman had self harmed and thought about suicide.

### *Meeting other gay, lesbian, bisexual people –*

There was a fairly even split between people who knew quite a few other gay, lesbian and bisexual people, and people who knew very few, if any. The desire to meet and get to know other people was one of the strongest messages conveyed in our interviews. Most people

had been to gay bars or clubs. Some had enjoyed this but others felt excluded or simply did not enjoy it.

*Relationships* – Only a small number of people were in sexual/intimate relationships at the time of our interview, though most had experience of being in a relationship at some point in their lives. We heard accounts of all the positive and difficult things about being in relationships. One of the most positive features was having someone to do day to day things with.

*What support do people want?* – People wanted staff to be supportive and non-judgmental about their sexuality. We heard some accounts of individual professionals and some services doing very positive and person-centred work with people to develop their sexuality or to lead sexual lives. However, we also heard many instances of staff and services who had been unsupportive or hostile. In practical terms, people wanted tangible support from staff to meet other gay, lesbian and bisexual people and wanted staff to see this as a legitimate part of their job.

*Hopes and dreams* – Five interviewees wanted to have children at some point in the future, although four of them said that they were being quite heavily dissuaded from this by staff and family members. Almost everyone else spoke about their hopes for the future in terms of being in a relationship.

## **Findings: The views and experiences of staff**

*Approaching work on sex and sexuality* – In most services, the issues of sex, sexuality and relationships were not introduced into groups, activities or plans unless service users actively brought them up. A small number of staff in a minority of services took a different approach and were proactive in raising these issues.

*Barriers to doing work in this area* – There were concerns – and some reticence – about doing work in this area. These related to a lack of experience and confidence, gaps in policy and training provision, prejudicial attitudes and concerns about the (potential) adverse reactions of other people including parents, carers and other colleagues.

*Homophobia and heterosexism in services* – The majority of staff said that they worked in services and staff teams which were not homophobic but which were fairly, or very, heterosexist. Most, but not all, gay, lesbian and bisexual staff were out to some colleagues. Very few gay, lesbian or bisexual staff were out to service users, although some were. Some lesbian, gay and bisexual members of staff had been challenged by colleagues about their interactions with lesbian, gay or bisexual service users.

*Staff experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual people with learning difficulties* – The overwhelming majority of staff said that they knew or had known men and women with learning difficulties who were having, or wanted to have a same sex relationship.

*Privacy* – Staff said that there were few places where men and women with learning difficulties could go to have privacy together for intimacy and/or sex.

*Women's relationships with women* – Staff described women's intimate or sexual relationships with each other as largely hidden. Expressions of intimacy and touch between women were characterised as platonic and essentially unproblematic.

*The gay, lesbian, bisexual 'scene'* – We were told about difficulties for people with learning difficulties in accessing the 'scene'. Gay venues were described as not particularly welcoming and access to transport and the views of parents and carers could be barriers.

*Supporting relationships* – There was some frustration from staff that they did not feel able to support men and women with learning difficulties to achieve their goal of being in a relationship. However, there were many positive examples of staff and services working in innovative and thoughtful ways to support people in this area of their lives.

### **Conclusion: Secret loves, hidden lives?**

Twenty gay, lesbian and bisexual people with learning difficulties took part in this research. It was relatively easy to find men to interview but we struggled to find nine lesbian or bisexual women with learning difficulties across the whole of the UK. It seems that women's relationships with other women remain more hidden than men.

The men and women with learning difficulties that we met told us that being gay, lesbian or bisexual was an important part of their identity. It was a part of themselves that most people wanted to develop more. Despite the barriers to doing this, people's stories about their sexuality were characterised by resilience and successful strategies for finding support. Love was a major topic of conversation in our research interviews and relationships featured strongly in people's hopes and dreams for the future.



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## **Resources**

**Secret loves, hidden lives? Exploring issues for people with learning difficulties who are gay, lesbian or bisexual** by David Abbott and Joyce Howarth is published by **The Policy Press** and is available from:

**Marston Book Services**

Tel: +44 (0)1235 465500

Fax: +44 (0)1235 465556

Email: [direct.orders@marston.co.uk](mailto:direct.orders@marston.co.uk)

**Please go to the 'Online documents' section of the Norah Fry website for information about the following documents:**

[www.bris.ac.uk/norahfry](http://www.bris.ac.uk/norahfry)

1. **An 'easy to read' version of this summary.**
2. **'Phil's story': a photo-story about a gay man with learning difficulties.**
3. **'Jan's story': a photo-story about a lesbian with learning difficulties.**
4. **A booklet about homophobia and heterosexism for people with learning difficulties and the staff that support them.**
5. **A resource pack containing information, ideas and training suggestions about sexuality designed to be used by staff working with people with learning difficulties.**

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