

# Breaking the Silence!

## Summary

Experiences of Lesbians, Gay Men, Bisexuals and Transgender people in Barking & Dagenham - issues for Barking & Dagenham Council & other public sector service providers

### Introduction

This is a summary report of the issues raised by a survey carried out in 2002 in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham. It reviews the key findings and research from the full report which is available from Barking & Dagenham Council's Corporate Equalities Unit on 020 8227 2806.

It was prepared through the assistance of 42 lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people living or working in the borough and targeted professionals working in the field of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) support.

The basis for 'difference' of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities is deeply personal. It is based on emotion, on sexuality, on their own bodies and on the treatment from family, friends, work colleagues and society as a result. As such this report and its contents should be treated as a rare glimpse into lives of Barking and Dagenham people that are usually hidden from the mainstream. It should also be said that this report represents the tip of the iceberg.

### How many LGBT people locally?

The most important study that shed light on the geographical distribution of lesbians and gay men in the UK is the NSSAL survey 2000. This found 5.4% of men and 4.9% of women reported a "homosexual" sexual partner in past five years. However, in London 10.5% of men and 6.9% of women reported a past homosexual contact. It would probably be safest to assume that Barking & Dagenham would reflect the national figures more than the inner London figures. On an assumption of 6.4% men and 5.4% of women (national figure plus one percent for men and 0.5% for women) this would suggest around 5,030 men and over 4,700 women locally who have had sex with "homosexual" partners based on the 2001 census. There is no similar research for transgendered people. It should be stressed that these figures will cut across the population, ethnicity, age, religion, class, disability etc. This is examined in more detail in the full report.

### The need for further research

To examine the needs of the wider lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community would be a long process, involving trust building and digging deep into friendship networks locally. The fieldwork for this report was carried out over a period of four weeks and, while it has had a reasonably wide input there will be many experiences not reflected here.

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## 1) IMPROVING COMMUNITY SAFETY

In general many LGBT people report feeling safe in their part of Barking & Dagenham, and very safe in their homes. A significant minority, however, more than a third (figure for Tower Hamlets 20%), said that they did not feel very safe or did not feel safe at all. A national study of over 4,000 lesbian, gay and bisexual people - published by the gay lobby group Stonewall in 1996 - found that in the previous 5 years a third had been assaulted, and  $\frac{3}{4}$  suffered abuse. Less than 10% in our survey reported it. Local Police state that homophobic violence is *"pretty much under the surface and the true extent has not come to the fore"* and the local community and borough infrastructure is *"not really geared up to deal with the issues"*. In addition same sex and homophobic domestic violence is often more invisible - 20% of our sample reported it. Gay men have been criminalised in the past simply due to being involved in sexual acts that if they were straight would have been legal. Now the age of consent is equal and the Sexual Offences Bill (2003) should remove other areas of discrimination.



## 2) OVERCOMING PARENTING DISCRIMINATION

LGBT people will suffer negative attitudes from schools, neighbours and courts if they are parents. They may be prevented or discouraged from putting themselves forward as potential foster and adoptive parents (despite a clear willingness to do so and a change in the law to allow this). In addition there are many existing lesbian or gay male parents who have children and are facing discrimination and homophobia, especially at schools. Courts have routinely used sexuality as a means of restricting access or custody. Health authorities have resisted attempts by lesbians to access donor insemination services. In addition, the council will be a parent to LGBT children. Social Services need policies for LGBT young people who are looked after, which will ensure that they can access specific services.



## 3) OVERCOMING FINANCIAL DISCRIMINATION

The growth of lesbian and gay financial and legal institutions is evidence that there is discomfort in using mainstream services among a large section of the LGBT community. This is particularly the case for gay men, who as a result of the AIDS pandemic sometimes find themselves advised to lie in forms or are subjected to unwanted HIV tests. 2 local men, reported problems obtaining a mortgage or loan as a direct result of their sexuality. Many others will not have revealed their sexuality. AIDS transformed the insurance market, with many insurers turning away gay customers because of misunderstanding of the disease. Insurance is a legal minefield for transgender people. The fact that a transgender person's legal sex is contrary to what they appear to be means that an obligation is created for them to disclose the "facts" when taking out a range of insurance products in which sex may conceivably be a relevant factor. With the majority of pension schemes, a surviving same-sex partner is unlikely to get any pension benefits after their partner's death, even if the deceased partner was the breadwinner.



## 4) OVERCOMING JOB DISCRIMINATION

Of the 35 people surveyed for this report 9 reported incidences of harassment at work based on their sexuality and 7 reported discrimination that negatively affected their career. Just 13 of 29 working said they were 'out' at work, with 16 not out. Many transgender people lose their jobs or give them up in the process of changing gender. Transgender people are now protected in employment by an amendment to the Sex Discrimination Act. However, there has been no law to stop employers from treating lesbian and gay employees less favourably. However by December 2003 the government will provide employment protection for lesbians and gay men through the incorporation of an EU Directive into UK law. This will make harassment, direct and indirect discrimination illegal in the workplace. Ignorance of issues and of your workforce will be no defence under this law and many public and private organisations are beginning to ask questions of their workforce around issues of sexuality and of their employees sexuality to gain an understanding and to gauge the extent of any problems there are.



## 5) EQUALITY IN SERVICE PROVISION.

Barking & Dagenham Council has a duty to consult and involve its users and potential users, as well as the community at large (those living and working in the borough). Developments such as 'best value' and 'community leadership' underline this. This is important as many of the services provided by public bodies may not be appropriate to the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender user. Because of illiberal social attitudes many of these groups will not access regular consultation events. However, according to the survey carried out for this report just 6 had ever been consulted by a public body and of these just 3 people said it was related to their being part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender communities. Furthermore all 3 said this was an exercise around 'safer sex' and HIV issues. Where people are engaging with the LGBT communities, or where services are being provided to them, it is essential that the officers have an understanding, awareness and sensitivity of the issues affecting them. For all services officers should not assume the sexuality of the person they are dealing with.



## 6) PROMOTING HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

All the health and social services issues that impact on the wider community will affect LGBT people. However, there will be some areas where there is a greater need for more appropriate and sensitive services such as in support and counselling. Many LGBT people are not out to their GPs as a fundamental fear is that, if they disclose that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, they will receive poorer treatment than if they remain 'in the closet'. They may also be reluctant to risk being 'judged' at a time when they may be feeling vulnerable anyway. It is important for health service staff to be aware of this phenomenon. While LGBT people will use all health and social services there will be a greater need for HIV/AIDS services, gender reassignment support and mental health services. Disability groups stress the need for sensitivity from care workers and professionals towards their LGBT clients.



## 7) GROWING UP SAFE AND SECURE

The period prior to and during coming out can be traumatic. Suicide rates among young people in inner London and particularly young LGBT people are very high (up to 20% make an attempt). There is great misunderstanding about developing sexuality and gender identity and problems associated with these start at a young age. An online poll of 981 young lesbians and gay men found that 13.46% had sex at 12 or under and 26.81% had sex between the ages of 13-15. An inclusive school respects the developing identities of its pupils and students and their parents. Local Education Authorities should have a good and broad policy on Education for Personal Relationships, which deals with how diversity in sexual orientation and, in particular, homophobic bullying can be addressed. 16 of 35 questioned for this report said that they had experienced bullying at school. There is no local youth service provision for young LGBT people locally although some access an LGBT club in Romford.



## 8) GREATER SECURITY IN HOUSING

Housing issues impacting on LGBT people in Barking & Dagenham fall into a number of groups. For council tenants and housing association tenants there may be succession of tenancy issues or security issues, for those renting privately there may be discrimination in allocating properties, with homophobic landlords blocking lesbian and gay tenants, for those that own their own home there may be inheritance issues. For LGBT young people living at home there are other difficult issues to face. If they come out to their parents, or are 'discovered' they may find themselves homeless or living in an abusive or hostile environment. Age Concern believes that one in every 15 of the people who use its' services are gay and that elderly gay people who have to share residential care homes with heterosexuals go through *"the very real fear of suffering and discrimination"*. Many local authorities have advanced policies and procedures around racial harassment but little or nothing for homophobic or transphobic harassment.



## 9) INCLUSION IN REGENERATION.

Barking and Dagenham has experienced many government regeneration initiatives and is currently undergoing a structural renaissance that will bring many jobs and change the local environment. The community needs to be involved in this renaissance and the LGBT community is no exception. While there is a common belief that many LGB people have greater disposable income this is not the case in Barking and Dagenham. One report into poverty in the LGBT community found that working class lesbians and gay men are being denied the opportunities that are regarded as essential in the prevention of poverty and social exclusion – basic educational skills, a sense of self-esteem and self-respect, good health and a supportive family environment, because of the pervasive homophobia that they face. In a direct criticism of regeneration and social inclusion work the report concluded that *“Not only do lesbians and gay men experience poverty and social exclusion as a result of homophobia but as a group they face an additional layer of exclusion as a result of being excluded from the inclusion agenda.”*



## 10) CELEBRATE DIVERSITY - PROMOTE CULTURE

Every local authority has been strongly encouraged by Government to develop and implement local cultural strategies for their areas in order to promote the cultural well being of the area. The strategies should play on the strengths and diversity of each area. 27 of 35 LGBT people questioned for this survey said they would or might attend LGBT themed events in the borough. The development of a cultural infrastructure can be a vital element of community development in general for communities. This is particularly so for the LGBT communities where, in many areas, the only focal point for this community will be a pub, if that. However, the visibility of LGBT people can be raised through a range of local authority cultural services, including relevant information, newspapers, periodicals and books in libraries, exhibitions in library and other spaces, arts and sports events.



## 11) SUPPORTING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

LGBT people develop strong friendship networks of other LGBT people to support themselves and because of similar interests. However, these are harder to develop in boroughs that appear hostile. There is evidence that LGBT people find it more difficult to meet others within Barking and Dagenham than in neighbouring boroughs. This friendship network is the ‘social capital’ of the LGBT world. A friend is usually who an LGBT person comes out to. Given the issues faced by LGBT people it is surprising that many local councils offer no community development support. There are no specifically LGBT projects supported by the council through grant funding and there has been no community development work done with this community. However, levels of need are just as great here as in neighbouring boroughs and local LGBT people often seek out support from organisations based elsewhere.



## 12) ESTABLISHING PARTNERSHIP RIGHTS

There is real discrimination against LGBT people because of barriers to marriage. These include problems around ‘next of kin’ in medical care, pensions, inheritance, employee benefits, immigration and accident and compensation arrangements. There is evidence that living in a hostile environment can affect your ability to develop healthy partnerships (illustrated by the finding that two thirds of LGBT people surveyed in Tower Hamlets had a partner, and just a third in Barking & Dagenham). 67% of the survey said they would consider a legal partnership if it was established. There was less enthusiasm for a ‘symbolic’ partnership register. The government is currently consulting on the format of legislation to establish partnership rights for same sex couples and also examining separate legislation to allow transgender people to marry an opposite sex partner.