

Research tells us that older people who are LGBT+ are at particular risk of loneliness and isolation. It is therefore important for those who work with older people to feel confident in reaching and engaging LGBT+ individuals, creating an environment that is inclusive and welcoming.

LGBT+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. The '+' sign recognises and includes other gender and sexual minorities within this umbrella term.

In February and March 2019, The Diversity Trust ran two workshops for projects within the BAB programme as well as other organisations working with older people in the city. The workshops were co-developed with individuals aged 50+ who identify as LGBT+ as well as BAB's LGBT+ Community Development Officer for Older Adults.

This Learning Digest shares some of the key learning from these workshops. Please also see the training resources available from The Diversity trust which have been uploaded to the BAB LGBT+ project page [here](#).



## The context for people aged 50+

In the UK, homosexuality was (partially) decriminalised in 1967, meaning that **many older people grew up and became sexually active during a time when homosexuality was illegal**. The homosexual age of consent did not become equal with the heterosexual age of consent until 2000.

Similarly, homosexuality was classified as a mental illness until 1992. **The common attitude was that those who were LGBT+ needed psychiatric help**. Society sometimes blamed the mother for fostering a relationship with her child that was too close.

Both of these factors will have heavily impacted experiences of sexual identity for today's generation of people aged 50+, both those who are LGBT+ and those who are cis-gender and heterosexual. As a result of these attitudes, older people who are LGBT+ **may have difficult relationships with their parents and wider family**, and may even have been ostracized from their family when they were younger.

Some people who are LGBT+ may **feel anxious about the thought of going into a residential home** due to the possible homophobic, biphobic or transphobic attitudes of the other residents. Moving to a residential setting would also require them to disclose their sexuality all over again, for example when speaking to other residents about family or life experiences.

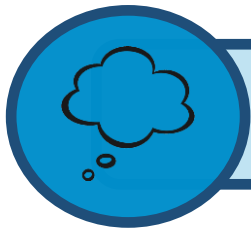
It was not until 2018 that transgender ('gender incongruence') was declassified as a mental illness by the World Health Organisation.



## Data and population estimates

**It is difficult to obtain accurate data about gender and sexuality.** This is partly due to people underreporting because of the stigma which still exists. It is also partly because these questions were not included in previous rounds of the UK Census. Questions about gender and sexuality will be included in the next UK Census in 2021; however as it is a household survey it is still likely that underreporting will occur.

It is estimated that between 5 - 7% percent of people in the UK are lesbian, gay or bisexual<sup>1</sup> and around 1% are transgender<sup>2</sup>. As of 2016, 454,200 people live in Bristol<sup>3</sup> of which 125,700 are aged 50 or over<sup>4</sup>. **This could give a population of roughly 7,542 – 10,056 people aged 50+ in Bristol who are LGBT+.**



## Inclusive language and conversation

**Use the word 'partner'** instead of making an assumption about gender when you do not know who someone's partner is. If other people ask why you are using the word 'partner' then it is an opportunity to open up a discussion about LGBT+.

Respect people's gender by **trying to find out what their preferred pronouns are** (e.g. he, she, they). If they have not said then try to get into the habit of using 'they' as a singular pronoun as this is gender-neutral. It might feel strange at first but you will get used to it over time!

**Respectfully challenge homophobia, biphobia and transphobia whenever you experience it**, keeping in mind the safety of yourself and others. For example when asked about their sexual orientation, someone might say that they are "normal". This may come from habit and lack of awareness rather than negative intentions; however it is still important to respectfully challenge their ideas of 'normal' and 'not normal' on an everyday level.

**Do not assume that someone who is LGBT+ will not have children or grandchildren.** The context of growing up during a time when homosexuality was illegal and/or seen as a mental illness means that many older people who are LGBT+ will have entered relationships or marriages with someone of a different gender to their own. Moreover legislation was passed in 2002 allowing same-sex couples to adopt children, which some people currently aged 50+ may have done.

Do not assume that someone who is heterosexual has never fallen in love with someone of their own gender. **Keep an open mind about the sexual and gender identity of the person you are speaking to**, and the previous experiences they may have had.

The terms '**queer**' and '**dyke**' can be uncomfortable for some people who are LGBT+ due to their negative history. This may particularly be the case for those aged 50+ who are likely to have experienced these terms being used insults. However in more recent years some people have reclaimed these as positive terms, particularly the term 'queer'. An individual may choose to refer to

<sup>1</sup> Estimate from the Department of Trade and Industry in preparation for the Civil Partnerships Act 2005.

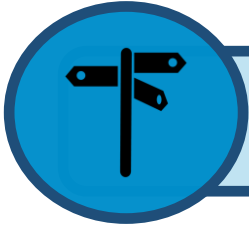
<sup>2</sup> The Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIREs), 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Bristol City Council: The Population of Bristol, September 2017.

<sup>4</sup> ONS 2016 Mid-Year Population Estimate.

themselves in this way, but others should not do so unless they specifically know that individual would like them to use these words.

It is best to use the term 'transgender' instead of 'transsexual'. 'Transsexual' was mostly used in the past in medical settings and has clinical associations. **'Transgender' is a wider umbrella term** for people whose gender is not the same as, or does not sit comfortably with, the sex they were assigned at birth. This may include people who are gender-queer, gender-fluid, non-binary, genderless, a third gender or a crossdresser, as well as many other identities.



## Further information and resources

  
**THE DIVERSITY TRUST**  
INFLUENCING SOCIAL CHANGE  
<https://www.diversitytrust.org.uk>  
[info@diversitytrust.org.uk](mailto:info@diversitytrust.org.uk) or  
0844 800 4425

### Other sources of information:

- **Sharifa Whitney James:** Bristol Ageing Better's LGBT+ Community Development Officer for Older Adults.  
<http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/lgbt/>  
<https://www.facebook.com/theOUTandABOUTproject/swhitneyjames@ageukbristol.org.uk> or 07932 970 456
- **Stonewall UK:**  
[www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)  
[info@stonewall.org.uk](mailto:info@stonewall.org.uk) or 020 7593 1850
- **LGBT Bristol:**  
<http://lgbtbristol.org.uk/>  
[sarah@lgbtbristol.org.uk](mailto:sarah@lgbtbristol.org.uk) or 07804 945 849
- **The British Library's timeline and overview of LGBT+ law reform:**  
<https://www.bl.uk/lgbtq-histories/lgbtq-timeline>

There are lots of different flags celebrating and representing different aspects of the LGBT+ community, including:



**LGBT+ pride flag**



**New LGBT+ pride flag proposed in 2017 in order to be more inclusive of BAME communities**



**Transgender pride flag**



**Bisexual pride flag**