

stonewall
housing

Finding safe spaces

Understanding the experiences of lesbian, gay,
bisexual and trans* rough sleepers



homelessness
transition fund



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housing

Stonewall Housing is the specialist lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-spectrum (LGBT) housing advice and support provider in England. We have been providing services to the LGBT* community for over 30 years.*

We provide housing support for LGBT people in their own homes, supported housing for young LGBT* people, as well as free, confidential housing advice for LGBT* people of all ages. We also research and lobby for LGBT* housing rights, so that all LGBT* people can feel safe and secure in their homes.*

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1 Introduction

The Finding Safe Spaces project was commissioned by the Homelessness Transition Fund to understand the experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-spectrum (LGBT*)¹ people who have been street homeless.

We worked with a range of service providers in sectors such as domestic abuse, young people, older people, sex working, housing, community safety, mental health and drugs and alcohol services. Additionally we were grateful for the involvement of LGBT* community writers, speakers and activists who added to the depth of our understanding about people's experiences.

Research throughout the summer of 2014 allowed us the opportunity to speak directly with LGBT* people who had experienced, or were experiencing, rough sleeping.

Finding Safe Spaces worked across three cities: Manchester, Brighton and east London.

In the research we wanted to find out about people's journeys, about how they became homeless, their needs when they were on the streets and who helped them. We also asked whether their sexual orientation or gender identity played a part in their needs when they were rough sleeping.

We developed a training toolkit, piloted with outreach services in each of the three cities.

The training had the following aims:

- understand how LGBT* people can become homeless and end up without a safe space;
- be clear on the experiences of LGBT* people when they are rough sleeping;
- gain awareness on the global impact of homo/bi/transphobia and how this relates to reconnection to country of origin;
- learn the types of places where LGBT* people go when they are street homeless;
- learn about the needs relating to LGBT* rough sleepers;
- develop knowledge on why it is important to ask about sexual orientation and gender identity and how to ask;
- have insight into local and national LGBT* services who can offer support.

¹ *Trans* is an inclusive, umbrella term used to describe the diversity of gender identity and expression for all people who do not conform to common ideas of gender roles.*

2 Methodology

Finding Safe Spaces worked across three cities: Manchester, Brighton and East London.

In the research we wanted to find out about people's journeys. We developed a topic guide of questions to ask people about their time as a rough sleeper.

The topic guide focused on how people became homeless, their needs as a rough sleeper, places they found safe and asked if they had received any help. The questions were open-ended with secondary questions focusing on the impact of events.

We recruited ten community researchers to help us to conduct and recruit participants to be involved in the research. The researchers had either had their own personal experience of rough sleeping or had extensive experience of working with people who had. All our researchers identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* or queer.

Researcher underwent training in building rapport skills to be used in interviews to gain the trust and confidence of the people we were speaking with.

Recruitment took place with the help of organisations working with rough sleepers acting as gateway organisations. We also enlisted the help of our researchers who asked people they knew and spread information by word of mouth.

Twitter was actively used, particularly to access communities that do not have a representative in the form of funded organisation. Finding Safe Spaces will always be indebted to the various community activists who retweeted call outs for participants.

We developed an online version of the interview on Survey Monkey for people who could not, or did not, want to be involved in a face-to-face interview.

A project advisory group was set up to scrutinise the project. It met quarterly to review practice and developments. The topic guide and ethical practice was signed off by this group.

3 Who we spoke with

1 Ethnicity



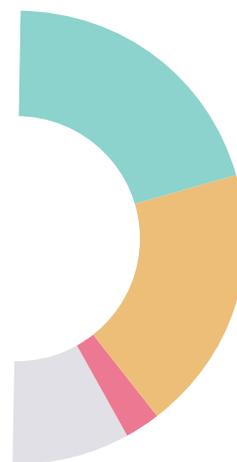
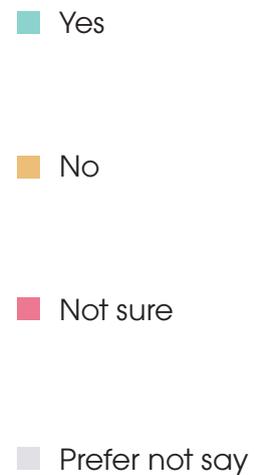
Base: 39

2 Gender



Base: 39

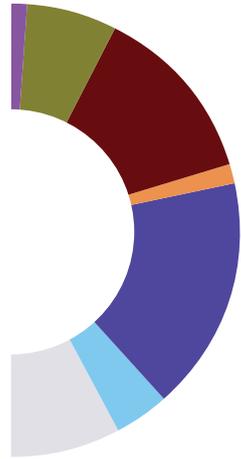
3 Same gender as assigned at birth?



Base: 38

4 Religion

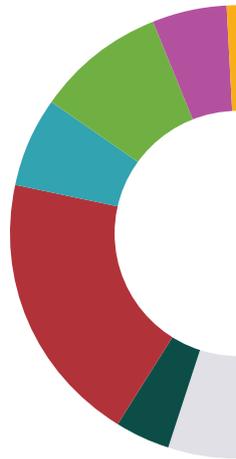
- Agnostic
- Atheist
- Christian
- Muslim
- None
- Other
- Prefer not say



Base: 39

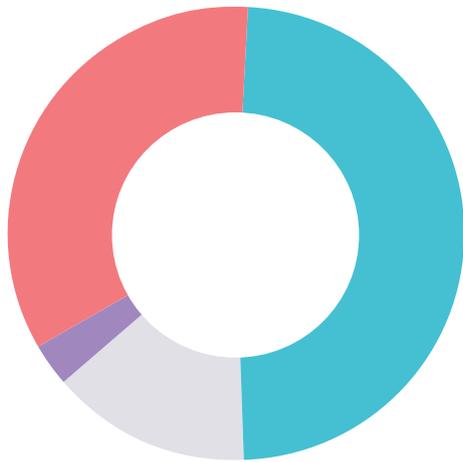
5 Age

- 16-17
- 18-21
- 22-25
- 26-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- Prefer not say



Base: 39

6 Disabilities

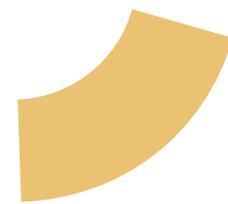


- Disability
- No disability
- Not sure
- Prefer not say

Base: 30

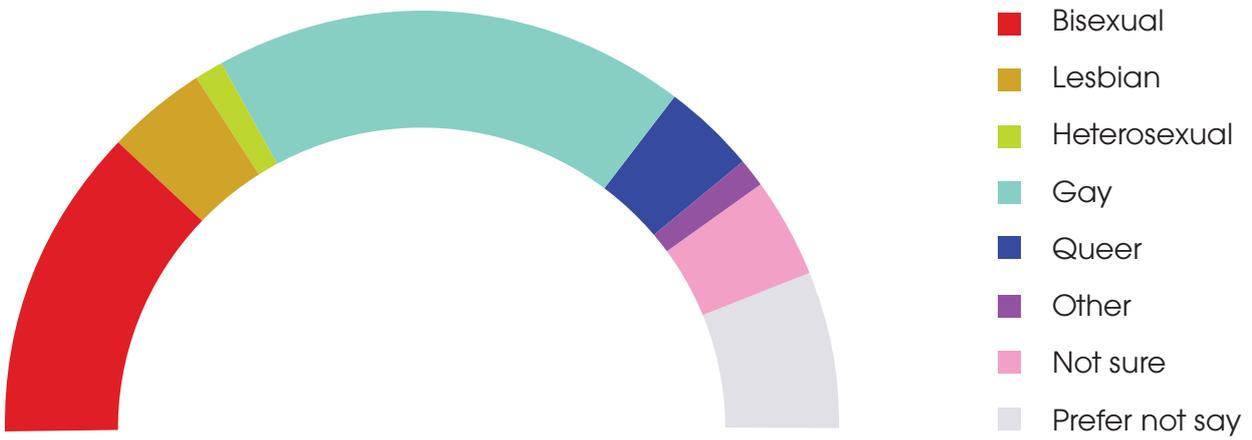


- Of those disabled, those with a mental health condition



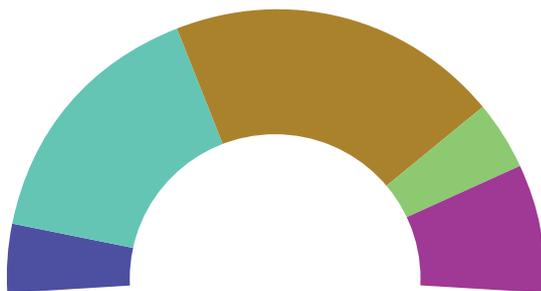
- Of those disabled, those more than one condition

7 Sexuality



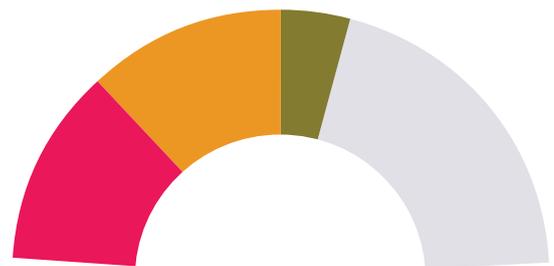
Base: 41

8 Where staying



- Squat
- Rented place
- Hostel
- Own flat
- No answer

Base: 25



- Staying with friends
- Supported accommodation
- With family
- Prefer not say

Base: 26

4 Results

Becoming homeless

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans-spectrum (LGBT*) people can become homeless for a diverse range of reasons.

More often than not this is related to their sexual orientation or gender identity, having a detrimental and often irreversible effect on their support systems of people who care.

Not having a 'family' who cares has significant impacts on people's ability to navigate healthy relationships and can increase vulnerability when someone is experiencing street homelessness.

Having a 'family' who 'hates' an individual because of their sexual orientation or gender identity and who have shown this through psychological, physical and sexual abuse and violence, will create long lasting mental impacts.

These impacts include:

- lack of self worth;
- self harm;
- feeling suicidal and suicide actualisation;
- body image issues;
- eating disorders;
- risky sexual behaviour;
- risk of sexual exploitation;
- drug and alcohol misuse;
- depression;
- vulnerability to being exploited into unhealthy relationships.

"I ran away. My dad was very violent. I had no mother present. I had a girlfriend. We spent a lot of time on the streets. I wasn't sex working then and I didn't do drugs.

It started when I was 14 years old because no one wanted to put us up. You try and tell your father that your bezzie mate is not your bezzie mate, she's your girlfriend. We met in a kids home. She had experienced some very serious sexual abuse.

We stayed with some older friends. After that had a husband and a child. We could have been a couple, but no one would let us. She went on to live with a guy and I think she became happy.

We could have been a family, but no one would let us."

(Female, White British, 30-40 years old)

Some of the reasons why LGBT* people become rough sleepers are noted below. This list was compiled by carrying out research with LGBT* people and through talking with the professionals who support them. It is not an exhaustive list, however it aims to help towards developing an understanding:

- poverty due to discrimination at work or losing a lack of opportunity;
- lack of safety net from parents or close personal networks due to hate crime or domestic abuse;

- compounded effects of multiple discrimination such as racism, mental health and transphobia;
- lack of training or education because of bullying at school;
- healthcare issues - barriers to accessing appropriate healthcare;
- discrimination from landlords and housing providers;
- discrimination from those in authority, such as the police or social services;
- domestic and/or sexual abuse and rape from a partner, gang or parents;
- drug and alcohol issues;
- validation of sexual orientation or gender identity through coming to an LGBT* 'beacon' city;
- escaping violence in their home town.

"I had recently become HIV positive. This affected my work and so I was sacked. My landlord told my flatmates I was HIV+ and they chucked me out and I had no tenancy agreement.

The building manager let me store stuff in the basement and sometimes I slept there."

(Male, White European, 26-30 years old)

"I left home when I was 14, spent 4 years rough sleeping. Kind of didn't get any help at that point because I was avoiding help just due to my age at the time. I eventually went into a hostel and detox, left Manchester and came to Brighton.

Sorted myself out, got somewhere to live, was in a relationship and had a good job but hadn't really addressed any of the stuff I needed to sort out.

Had some relationship issues, domestic violence, led me to relapsing and led to me losing my job which led to me losing my accommodation which ended up with me back on the street involved in all sorts of things.

The second time was so much harder than the first time because I had had that time indoors, I was re-sensitised."

(Female, White British, 26-30 years old)

Understanding needs

We asked LGBT* rough sleepers what their needs were during their time without safe accommodation. Their needs were similar to those of their heterosexual and cisgendered counterparts, often for different reasons. Additionally, people we spoke with had needs applicable to their sexual orientation or gender identity that needed to be understood in order for those needs to be met.

Key themes from the research were:

- somewhere to get clean and go to the toilet;
- someone to talk to who knows what they are going through;
- knowledge of services for LGBT* people, locally and nationally;
- an awareness of trans* needs;
- knowledge about experiences of LGBT* care and prison leavers;
- somewhere safe to go in the form of appropriate accommodation;
- peer-led projects offering support and appropriate knowledge;
- a safe way to make comments, or make a complaint, about services people have received.

In this section, we explore these needs in more detail.

"I was admitted into hospital after being on the streets the second time. I have to take medication for my bipolar. I was discharged back onto the street... however was linked in with services who helped me to get out of sex working.

Primary needs were healthcare. Physically I was in a really bad way. I needed to get back on the 'script. I avoided day centres, just kept myself to myself. I didn't like the chaos of being around lots of other people. I didn't feel safe with others.

The only people I would speak with were punters, someone I was buying (drugs) from or the police if they picked me up. So I would go through a chunk of time not speaking to anyone. When I went into a hostel I had to learn to talk again, to practice conversation. It's quite isolating being in the city anyway. People walk past you and just ignore you."
(Female, White British, 26-30 years old)

Trans* people's experiences of services focused on the appropriateness of services when being placed in cisgendered spaces. On the whole, trans* people who were rough sleeping had to stay very vigilant and found even simple acts such as getting clean to be dangerous.

"In the (day centre) there were no locks on the door of the showers. You had people walk in on you. I would wash as much as I could and then go into McDonalds to wash interpersonal areas because (I was trans). I couldn't take the chance and it would have put me in a lot of danger."
(Trans-Male, Black British, 40-45 years old)

Having access to hormones was talked about as a primary need for trans* people and the opportunity to have a safe space to take them.

"I used a needle exchange in Soho so I could get clean needles for my hormones. I had to find a safe space to inject. I couldn't in the hostels because I didn't want to be targeted in any way."

(Trans-Male, Black British, 40-45 years old)

Being clean was very important to all the respondents involved in the research. Feeling clean was just as important as actually being clean. Having access to laundry facilities proved a major challenge.

For LGBT* people, the word 'dirty' is often used as a prefix to any homo/bi/transphobic language used in physical, verbal or sexual assault or in association with having sexually transmitted infections. Being referred to as dirty, and then actually being dirty, has a significant psychological impact.

"You need things like soap or a razor to make you feel good about yourself. If you don't you start to wonder what's the point and you feel crap about yourself. If you can't eat properly or get a wash you can't look after yourself and so you have to do other stuff..."

(Male, White British, 26-30 years old)

"What I used to do was go to (a department store) once a week, get a pair of jeans, a top and a pack of seven pairs of knickers. In my handbag I always had wipes, tissues, condoms and body spray. So even though I was sleeping rough I always had those essentials with me."

So I would do a punter and then go to (a department store). I'd take my knickers off and throw them away and put on the clean things. Being clean was important."

(Female, White British, 31-40 years old)

Having someone who could understand to talk to about your experiences, and someone to relate to, was considered important.

"Peer mentors, someone to help you, who has had a similar experience. Like in an AA meeting, where everyone pisses in the same pot."

(Female, White British, 31-40 years old)

"Someone to take the time to listen to me."

(Male, White British, 22-25 years old)

Additionally, having a space to be open about sexual orientation and gender identity was important.

"I was told (by the hostel) to keep my sexuality to myself. I ignored that and told (residents). I told them because I had already lived a lie. I got problems for that, I stood up for myself."

When you go into a hostel you're one of four things: a boozier, a druggie, gay or you've just come out of prison. That is why you are in the hostel. People in there spend their time working out which one you are."

(Male, White British, 31-40 years old)

Finding 'safe' spaces

The LGBT* people we spoke to had a range of experiences about finding safe spaces.

Notably, nearly everyone we spoke to said that the streets were an unsafe space. The large majority of people we spoke to chose to find an alternative, however most people told us there was nowhere they felt safe.

Some people told us how drugs, alcohol, sex work or transactional sex (sex exchange for accommodation) was used as a way to secure accommodation, usually at great risk to safety as well as to their mental, physical and sexual health.

"I would go back to people's houses and sleep with people. I wouldn't use any protection. I did it to get a roof over my head."

(Male, White British, 22-25 years old)

"When I was 17 or 18 I got into a relationship with someone who said they were 35, but he was 47 and that messed up my mental capacity."

He was on steroids. We used to fight, he gave me two black eyes.

I used to go back because I didn't have anywhere. It was go there or go on to the streets."

(Male, White British, 22-25 years old)

"Anywhere you can get your head down without getting hassled first thing in the morning when people are going to work. It's embarrassing being seen sleeping on the street."

(Male, White British, 26-30 years old)

"(I stayed in a) night shelter... had money taken off me, had my college stuff stolen."

(Male, White British, 22-25 years old)

Places like parks, cars, squats, under railway bridges and platforms were chosen.

"I slept under the platform. The people are on the platform above boarding the train and I was underneath."

(Female, White British, 26-30 years old)

Additionally, people chose to stay awake all night. People walked around, went to soup runs or cruising grounds (if they were male) to find safety in numbers.

"I stayed out... I stayed awake and walked around. Sometimes, I would (go to) the cruising area... napped on the benches... everyone looked out for everyone else. Didn't sleep at night... I've seen people have their heads kicked like a football or pissed on. I could sleep in (a day centre) and get my head down during the day. Not sleeping at night meant that I could be safe."

(Male, White British, 31-40 years old)

Some people chose to stay away and hidden.

"No, not a town centre... people walking past... peeing on you... I've seen it. Also, I would feel so embarrassed."

(Female, White British, 31-40 years old)

"Not on the street. People come out of the clubs and kick you and record it on their phones and laugh. There were no safe places."

(Trans-Male, Black British, 40-45 years old)

"I didn't feel safe in so called hotspot because it's really hard to sleep where you have people walking past you. There was also this big thing about being seen. There is also a lot of violence on the streets."

"The further out of the way the better."

(Female, White British, 26-30 years old)

Barriers to accessing services

Here are some of the barriers LGBT* people can face when they try to access services designed to help them:

- invisibility within services;
- discomfort and lack of openness among workers;
- isolation from family and friends;
- harassment and isolation from other service users;
- internalised homo/bi/transphobia people experience as a result of hate crime, targeted sexual violence and discrimination;
- fear of reprisals, and arrest, if engaged in sex work or begging in order to obtain money;
- historic distrust of institutions who, in the past, criminalised people because of their sexual orientation and gender identity, if not cisgendered;
- hostels and housing often not sensitive to LGBT* people's needs;
- having to go 'back in the closet' or 'stealth' in order to get help.

Having an awareness of an individual's sexual orientation and gender identity will help to provide them with services that meets their needs.

5 Conclusions

Finding Safe Spaces was awarded the opportunity to speak with LGBT* people and learn first hand about experiences of rough sleeping in Manchester, Brighton and London.

We have learnt that, for LGBT* rough sleepers, bedding down on the street, as per the definition outlined in rough sleeper verification protocols, is often considered too dangerous an option. Staying up and sleeping through the day, being invisible and out of sight, transactional sex, sex work, finding someone to go home with or staying on a night bus were felt to be safer alternatives.

The long term impacts of LGBT* rough sleepers not interacting, and getting support, from outreach services is significant in terms of their mental and physical health.

Additionally, there is greater risk of sexual exploitation. The more vulnerable someone becomes, the more identifiable they are to predators looking for them, particularly when the person in need is looking for a bed.

Not having a caring system in the form of a strong family or friendship network means that people can not rely on this. It becomes a privilege. For LGBT* people who don't have the connection it can be because they are hated by those they love for something they are. Those working with rough sleepers must be the caring mechanism and bring with it an understanding that the ability to simply be who you are is also a privilege.

We need to be asking questions.

As a community we need to be clear on how we are supporting other people in our community when they experience rough sleeping. There is a considerable amount of shame felt by LGBT* people when they are homeless and rough sleeping and we need to overwhelm that with care, respect and understanding.

As a community, we need to be asking questions.

As service providers, we talk to LGBT* rough sleepers through outreach, advice and in day centres. We know LGBT* people use rough sleeper services, but we often have to omit information, go 'stealth' or de-transition their gender – all at additional risk compared to their heterosexual and cigendered counterparts.

We don't always know it, but we talk with LGBT* people all the time. What we do know is that LGBT* people have needs associated with their gender identity and sexual orientation when they are sleeping rough.

Asking the right questions, in the right way with confidence, clarity and consistency will allow all service providers to help rough sleepers to understand that they are in a safe space, that is aware of their needs and can help.

As service providers, we need to be asking questions.

Policy makers and those who focus on the bigger picture, reviewing and improving, need to be looking at how gender identity and sexual orientation is monitored. How inclusive are protocols? If LGBT* people don't fit into them, maybe there are other communities that also don't fit into them.

How are we making sure they are?

Who's reviewing this?

What changes can be expected?

As policy makers, we need to be asking questions.

6 Recommendations

We have been able to put together a series of recommendations for change based on hearing peoples experiences and partnering this with information we gathered from professionals working to support rough sleepers.

Recommendation 1: *Ask people about their sexual orientation and gender identity in an appropriate and consistent way.*

LGBT* people who are rough sleeping will have needs associated with their gender identity and/or their sexual orientation.

Asking questions has several positive impacts:

- it shows the person being asked it is potentially a safe space to talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity;
- it allows you, the worker, to understand if there are any needs associated with their sexual orientation or gender identity and enables you to have a conversation about any local LGBT* support services;
- it allows fair treatment so that you can plan services to respond to their specific individual needs;
- it delivers you an understanding of how many LGBT* people are using your service.

"One service thought that sexuality wasn't an issue and suggested I could go back to home. (They) didn't understand that I would experience violence (if I went back home)."

(Male, White British, 31-40 years old)

Recommendation 2: *Never make assumptions on how someone defines their gender identity of sexual orientation.*

Sexual orientation and gender identity should never be assumed. You can't tell by someone's clothes, voice, facial features or genitalia. No one can tell with 100 per cent certainty what someone's sexual orientation or gender identity is.

It is important you ask all clients the same questions not just the ones you assume it's for.

"I had a drug habit and I was funding it through prostitution. The reason I was homeless was because of domestic abuse in a same sex relationship and I found that workers didn't really grasp that. You can't be gay because you are selling sex. They couldn't make that differentiation, so I struggled to explain myself."

(Female, White British, 26-30 years old)

Recommendation 3: *Be consistent in how you ask questions relating to gender identity and sexual orientation.*

Questions that will help:

- Please can you tell me how you describe you sexual orientation?
- Please can you tell me how you describe your gender?
- Is your gender identity the same as you were given at birth?

Asking the questions in this way leaves it open for the person you are asking to give you their answer. Information on sexual orientation and gender identity should always come from the person not from assumption.

We ask the last question because some people's gender identity is different to the one they were given at birth.

"No (I wasn't asked). My experience of (transphobia from) the gatekeeper at the day centre and his discrimination meant my trust levels had gone. The (service) helped me but only after I had called the police and then they couldn't do enough."
(Trans-Male, Black British, 40-45 years old)

Recommendation 4: *Be able to provide safe spaces for LGBT* rough sleepers using your services and working with your staff.*

It is important that LGBT* people feel safe when using your service. As we have learnt from our research, LGBT* rough sleepers will have had a range of experiences before they come to use a service.

Therefore, it is vital everyone feels safe with workers and with the service that has been designed and commissioned to meet their needs and help them.

"It is on a form (the questions). It is never talked about – tick box – no conversation about it."

Yes (it is important to ask) – there's got to be other people struggling with their sexuality. Hostel and services should know where to refer people to. I know girls that find it so hard to talk about. Asking on a form – that's not going to help anyone."
(Female, White British, 31-40 years old)

Recommendation 5: *Know how many LGBT* people are experiencing rough sleeping in the area you work and are using your service.*

Having knowledge of all your service users is important. Outreach, advice and day centre staff will come into contact with rough sleepers who identify as LGBT*.

A responsibility lies with all services to make sure all staff are aware of the needs of LGBT* rough sleepers and know these are being met.

Continued low numbers of people identifying as LGBT* should be reviewed. This review should include specialists in the experiences of LGBT* rough sleepers.

Recommendation 6: *Be very clear about the long term harmful impacts of rough sleepers not being able to talk about their gender identity and/or sexual orientation.*

This report stresses the importance of asking questions to understand people's needs around gender identity and sexual orientation because the ramifications for not doing so are significantly detrimental.

Of the people we spoke to, 99% had multiple complex needs.

Having to hide your sexual orientation or gender identity when trying to access care and support around these needs is stressful, mentally harmful and dangerous.

"I needed to be validated. It would reduce the number of things I would have worry about – one less thing to omit from my history, hide or avoid when going through the narrative."

(Female, White British, 26-30 years old)

Recommendation 7: *Make sure the first point of contact is trained with a clear awareness around LGBT* people's needs and experiences as rough sleepers.*

Everyone on a rough sleepers care journey should provide consistency in their awareness and understanding of the needs of LGBT* rough sleepers.

The first points of contact, whether an outreach worker, No Second Night Out assessment centre, hostel worker or day centre reception is the face of the organisation they work for.

These people represent the core value of the organisation and the type of care and treatment an individual will receive.

As it's the first impression, it's vital it's inclusive, aware and consistent.

Recommendation 8: *For all LGBT* organisations, who carry out needs assessments for support, to ask their service users about the security of their housing.*

Knowing the security of someone's housing is crucial when providing support services. When living in a safe space, people are more likely to be receptive to positive change and improvements in health and wellbeing.

Rough sleeping is not widely discussed in LGBT* communities, however it is something members of our communities are affected by.

Understanding that LGBT* people tend not to sleep rough in the sense that they bed down on the streets is crucial in being able to talk with service users about where they are staying.

Recommendation 9: *A change in the verification protocol to fit the experiences of LGBT* people.*

Verification protocols require someone to be laying down with bedding in or around the same area for a period of time. From the people we spoke to, only one person bedded down in the way set out in a verification protocol.

A change in the definition to include LGBT* people and their experiences is recommended. LGBT* specialists should be involved in the review and reconstruction of the protocol, along with its communication to communities.

Acknowledgements

We have learnt so much on this project about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* people when they are street homeless.

We are excited about being able to take forward and champion those voices we have heard throughout this project, both from the people we spoke with and all the anecdotal information we received from having this valuable conversation.

First, we would like to thank the Homeless Transition Fund for giving us this opportunity to raise the profile of the invisibility of LGBT* rough sleepers and look at how they can be better supported.

Stonewall Housing would not have been able to learn, and thus share this learning, without all the people who gave up their time to give us their experiences. We would like to say a big thank you to those people who spoke articulately, honestly and bravely about their journeys – some of whom were still on them.

Our community researchers were brilliant. We were very lucky to have got such a great bunch of enthusiastic, caring and empathetic people who could marry caring with professionalism to create safe and comfortable environments people felt safe sharing in.

We would like to extend special thanks to those organisations who helped to recruit participants. They too, shared our passion for making sure the voices of LGBT* rough sleepers is heard, loud and clear.

In Manchester, this was the City Centre Project, The Men's Room, MASH, The Booth Centre and The Mustard Tree.

In Brighton, this was CRI, RISE and Brighton Housing Trust.

In London, this was Anti-dote at London Friend and Stonewall Housing.

And lastly, thank you to all those professionals who brought their expertise to our roundtable events. This was very helpful as it allowed us to set the scene and develop a very clear focus in which to drive Finding Safe Spaces.



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