

Forward into the future with Rainbow Lives

While attending a conference in York some time ago, entitled *Over the rainbow, but not over the hill*. I sat and listened intently to the stories relating to experiences of homophobic and transphobic prejudice and exclusion within care settings.

Reports of exclusion and distress due to prejudice moved me to be involved in forming the Rainbow Lives project, which helps to educate and inform social care providers about the issue. In this article, I share the homophobic and transphobic experiences of prejudice that have been reported to me, and suggest ways of taking action to make the situation easier for these residents.

Compared with heterosexual people, older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people are two and a half times more likely to live alone, two times as likely to be single, and four and a half times more likely to have no children to call upon in times of need. This means they may be more likely to need your support in the care home and may be more vulnerable, especially in the face of prejudice.

A collection of experiences

Older people are part of a generation that was around when being homosexual or transgender was considered to be both a crime and a mental illness.

Older heterosexuals also suffer the indignities of old age, but there is something special about having to hide this part of your identity at a time when your entire identity is threatened. This is a faster pathway to depression, failure to thrive and even premature death.

Even now, at 81 and with her memory beginning to fade, a lady recalls her pain-



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Homophobic and transphobic prejudice may persist in care homes, and can lead to fellow-residents shunning those who express their identity. Rev. Maria Renate explains how the Rainbow Lives project can help.

ful brush with bigotry and prejudice in sheltered housing. Sitting in the communal lounge with fellow residents she considered to be friends, she said:

'People were laughing and making certain kinds of homophobic and transphobic comments, and I told them: please don't, because I'm gay.'

The response to her outspokenness, she said, was instant.

'Everyone looked horrified...I felt like I was a leper ... For me, it (moving accommodation) was a choice between living or dying.'

No longer included in conversation or welcome at meals, she plunged into a depression that medication did not help. With her emotional health deteriorating, she moved to a different community nearby, which is more LGBT friendly.

Older gay people living in sheltered housing, in care homes, or receiving home care, should not have to run the risk of being disrespected, shunned or mistreated in ways that range from hurtful to deadly.

We heard the story of one openly gay man without family or friends, who was moved into sheltered accommodation. It was not long before he was moved off his floor to quiet the protests of other residents and their families. The particular housing associ-

ation called upon an LGBT advisory group, who assured the 79 year old man that a solution would be found, but he hanged himself before that solution was found. While this outcome is exceedingly rare, moving gay residents to placate others is common, and a solution that promotes the thinking that being homosexual or transgender is not acceptable.

A 77 year old lesbian who is out, said she does not broadcast the fact as it would feel unnatural to someone of her generation. She also uses a wheelchair, and has spent time in assisted living centres and sheltered housing. There, she said, her guard was up all the time.

She came out to a few other residents in the assisted living centre—professional women who she thought would accept her. But even with them, she said:

'You don't talk about gay things ... You learn size people up, but for the home help, I would be very lonely ... It would have been nice if someone else was out among the residents.'

The Rainbow Lives project

The Rainbow Lives Project emerged as a result of the documentary by First Take Films called *Pink Past and Present*, which looked at the LGBT community in Liverpool from the 1950s to the present day. Many of those who appeared in the film are now of an age where ongoing care needs and service provision is a priority.

The fears and concerns these films captured led a group of people to gather and examine adult services. This research resulted in the group designing LGBT training and information for adult care services, which is now available nationwide from the Rainbow Lives Project.

The deep concern the project has is centred around the health inequalities and lack of staff training, especially around their statutory obligation to comply with current legislation protecting the rights of LGBT people.

Rainbow Lives have begun this national drive to educate and inform housing associations and healthcare service providers by using media productions produced by the Liverpool based film company, First Take. These films also look at social isolation and discrimination faced by older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender tenants, care home

residents, and those receiving care in the community.

Support

When talking with the members of the Age Concern Liverpool & Sefton Silver Pride group for older LGBT, we found that loneliness and isolation was a significant source

of fear and dread.

Silver Pride was first set up with an event called: *Over the rainbow, but not over the hill* with the main aim of obtaining the views of the older LGBT community about existing services provision and support for the LGBT community. The event was so successful that it has become regular event, which brings together the LGBT communities for an afternoon of good food and live entertainment. Despite Silver Pride being solely a Merseyside initiative, there is no reason why it, like Rainbow Lives, cannot be implemented throughout the country and beyond.

Diversity accreditation

Support for diversity accreditation recommendations is strong, especially among potential care service users who have these immediate concerns. There is a pressing need for greater signposting to guide clients to LGBT approved housing associations and care services.

The Rainbow Lives Project has been working in partnership with the Merseyside Navajo Charter Marking, which provides the necessary training and accreditation (within Lancashire and Merseyside) for care services. The Navajo Charter Marking is a local example of an accreditation that signals a compliance with all diversity legislation in the services of organizations bearing their mark. Stonewall runs a nationwide lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) diversity accreditation scheme.

Protecting LGBT residents

An area of prime concern for the Rainbow Lives Project is how older LGBT tenants or care home residents can legally protect themselves, and how to safeguard their rights. One issue that came under the microscope is the wording on application forms. The project thinks that because application forms are confidential, the tick box section should include a box informing prospective residents that the care home have diversity policies in place, that full awareness training has been undertaken, and a charter mark awarded.

The Rainbow Lives Project in partnership with the Merseyside Navajo Charter mark, are preparing training packages. Their training will include explanations of current legislation to enable service providers to develop a strong diversity policy for residents.



Some elderly LGBT people expressed how they have witnessed their partners and friends insulted or isolated, entirely because of their sexual orientation or transgender identity. Others live in fear of the day when they too are dependent on care workers coming into their homes. That dread alone can be damaging, physically and emotionally say GPs, psychiatrists and social workers. There are many times when LGBT people avoid seeking help in health care situations because they fear how they will be treated. Unless they see affirming actions on the part of health care providers, they'll always assume the worst.

Homophobia or transphobia directed at older LGBT people has many faces, and needs to be addressed whenever or wherever it manifests itself. One of those areas of concern is home care provision for those still living in the community. An observation was noted from a community care nurse in relation to elderly LGBT care, who stated:

'Care providers must remind their staff not to wear gloves at inappropriate times, for example while opening the front door or making the bed, when there is no evidence of HIV infection as this can give the give the wrong impression.'

This is another prime example of how the Rainbow Lives Project with the implementation of an accreditation system such as the Merseyside Navajo Charter Mark Training can help to prevent potentially distressing situations from occurring.

Discussing the situation

The most common reaction for the older generation, who are accustomed to being in the closet, is a retreat back to the invisibility necessary for most of their lives. They may identify a partner as a brother, no pictures or gay-themed books are left around, and transgendered friends are discouraged from visiting.

Problems may be compounded, experts say, by most gay or transsexual older people not declaring this part of their identity. Sheltered housing or care communities rarely make an effort to find this out. Finding out about this part of a resident's identity can help to prepare staff and residents for what may be an unfamiliar situation that needs to

be addressed in various ways. One way of addressing the situation is to ask a prospective resident on a one-to-one basis during their interview whether gender or sexual orientation is something that needs to be discussed. This means that the housing association or care home is properly informed and reduces the risk of any transphobic or homophobic situations arising.

Application forms have boxes to check for marital status and next of kin. But a concerted effort should be made to ensure that these boxes match the circumstances of gay, lesbian or transgender people. There is a need for suggested follow-up questions like: 'do you have a specifically named person who you would wish us to contact in case of emergency.' There is always the scenario of the long term gay, lesbian or transgender partner being left out of the loop when it comes to being kept informed of a loved one's ongoing care plan, by maintaining a rapport with the partner, and respecting their right to privacy at all times.

Conclusion

The problems we are reviewing through the Rainbow Lives Project are not simply those based on sexual orientation, a transgender identity ranks very highly in the exclusion stakes.

Greater use of LGBT support groups need to be utilized by care providers and commissioners. Support groups have a greater understanding of the everyday problems faced by older Gay or transgender men and wom-

en. In Lancashire there is an LGB support agency called *Friends of Dorothy*, which visits residential homes to provide training and support for both residents and staff.

We have to see an end to LGBT residents suffering in silence, and this means remaining vigilant to ensure that such incidents of exclusion do not develop into homophobic or transphobic hate crimes. The needs of older transgender men and women will be of special concern to the newly formed North West & North Wales Trans Assembly when they meet in July

'As strong as I am today,' one of them said, 'when I'm at the gate of sheltered accommodation the closet door is going to slam shut behind me.'

Acknowledgements

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Key points

- **Older LGBT people are four and a half times more likely to have no children to call upon in times of need and may be more likely to need your support**
- **Older people are part of a generation when being homosexual or transgender was considered to be both a crime and a mental illness**
- **Older people having to hide the LGBT part of their identity at a time when their entire identity is threatened by requiring care may encounter more problems such as depression and a failure to thrive**
- **Homophobia or transphobia directed at older LGBT men and women has many faces, and needs to be addressed whenever or wherever it manifests itself**
- **The Rainbow Lives Project and the Merseyside Navajo Charter mark, are preparing training packages to include explanations of current legislation and to enable services to develop strong diversity policies for residents.**
- **Discussing the issue of sexual orientation and gender during a resident's initial interview can help inform the home and reduce the risk of any discrimination arising**

Box 1: Further information

Training resources

A Social Care TV clip, which looks at the issues a Gay man and his partner have encountered with respect to residential care.
<http://www.scie.org.uk/socialcaretv/video-player.asp?guid=cacaae12-7375-429a-9d9a-1d28e29e65bd>

Rainbow Lives Project

Nationwide LGBT training and information for adult care services.
 Email: rainbowlives@live.co.uk

Stonewall Diversity Champions Programme

Nationwide LGB diversity benchmarking, training and advice programme.
http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_work/diversity_champions_programme/default.asp