

Lesbian, gay and bisexual people and sport

What are the important issues?

There is no official data on the total number of people in Scotland who are lesbian, gay or bisexual. Estimates range from one to seven per cent. This makes it very difficult to explore equality issues in sport – and in many other areas - for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Scotland.

Participation in sports

Data on sports participation in Scotland¹ indicates that lesbian, gay and bisexual participants are not significantly different from heterosexuals in activity levels. But, it is expected that many people do not identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual within national surveys – for example, due to concern about how this information may be used, or due to not being 'out' in all aspects of their lives. This means that this survey data is likely to reflect the experiences of those who are 'out', more than those who are not 'out'.

More focused, qualitative research with a small number of people in Scotland² has found that while most of those lesbian, gay and bisexual people have had positive experiences of sport, there are key barriers to participation including:

- homophobia;
- previous negative experiences of sport, particularly in school;
- lack of positive role models; and
- lack of knowledge of what is available.

Working, volunteering and coaching in sports

There is little evidence about the number of lesbian, gay or bisexual people working, volunteering, coaching or in decision making roles within sport. There are gaps in information about employment, coaching and leadership within sport for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Lack of data and evidence can mean that issues remain hidden.

¹ Analysed in Active Scotland Outcomes: Indicator Equality Analysis, Scottish Government, 2015

² <http://www.equality-network.org/our-work/policyandcampaign/out-for-sport/the-facts/>

What do we know about the problem?

There can be a range of barriers to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people taking part in sport, including:

1. Homophobia

Homophobia (or fear of homophobia) is one of the key barriers facing LGB people in participating in sport. This is evidenced through a wide range of research undertaken both in Scotland and in other parts of the UK.

- **sportscotland** conducted a thorough investigation of the literature surrounding participation of LGB people in sports and found that homophobia was a significant issue in sport in Scotland³.
- The Equality Network researched LGB people's participation in sport and found that homophobic and bi-phobic bullying was a major problem. Its survey results showed that 79 per cent of participants felt there was a problem with homophobia in sport⁴.
- Research carried out by Stonewall included an online survey of over 2,000 football fans. The results showed that LGB abuse was "all too common" and almost always went unchallenged. Fans believed that it was this abuse, from fans, players and teammates that deterred gay people from playing football and created a culture of fear where gay players felt it was unsafe to come out⁵.
- Research with LGB people in Wales identified that over half of those responding to a survey would be more likely to participate in club sport if other members were LGB, or if the club was inclusive of LGB people or LGB friendly⁶.

2. Experiences at school

School sports also play an important role in influencing attitudes towards sport among LGB people⁷. A range of research shows that lesbian, gay and bisexual people can be put off participating in sport because of their experiences at school^{8,9}.

³ A Review of Sexual Orientation in Sport, **sportscotland** research report no 114. A research study for **sportscotland**, Sport Northern Ireland, Sport England and UK Sport by Celia Brackenridge, Pam Alldred, Ali Jarvis, Katie Maddocks and Ian Rivers, Centre for Youth Sport and Athlete Welfare, Brunel University, December 2008.

⁴ Out for Sport, Tackling homophobia and transphobia in sport, Equality Network, June 2012.

⁵ Leagues Behind – Football's Failure to tackle anti-gay abuse, Stonewall,

⁶ Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) People in Sport: Understanding LGB sports participation in Wales, Stonewall Wales, December 2012

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⁸ Out for Sport, Tackling homophobia and transphobia in sport, Equality Network, June 2012.

⁹ Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) People in Sport: Understanding LGB sports participation in Wales, December 2012, Stonewall

3. Lack of positive role models

There are some openly LGB elite athletes, particularly within women's sport.¹⁰ However, the numbers are small. During the 2012 Olympic Games there were only 23 'out' gay participating athletes, and only one of these was from the UK¹¹.

Research undertaken by Stonewall, focusing on football, found that:

- three in five fans believed anti-gay abuse from fans dissuaded gay professional players from coming out
- one in four fans believed anti-gay abuse from team mates contributed to there being no openly gay players in football

Example

Thomas Hitzlsperger is a former Aston Villa player who revealed he was gay after his retirement from premier league football.

"I'm coming out about my homosexuality because I want to move the discussion about homosexuality among professional sportspeople forwards."

The BBC reported in January 2014 that he was the most prominent footballer to publicly reveal his homosexuality. The BBC noted that examples of out gay footballers were 'few and far between', and that the culture of football needed to change to encourage more players to come out, while still playing premier league football.¹²

What can we do about it?

1. Let everyone know you are committed to inclusion

It is vital that people understand that your organisation or group is inclusive, safe and committed to ensuring that everyone can be involved. This applies to opportunities to participate, volunteer or work in sport. It is important to proactively let people know your opportunities are inclusive, through stating this clearly on all relevant communications.

¹⁰ Out for Sport, Tackling homophobia and transphobia in sport, Equality Network, June 2012.

¹¹ Including LGBT young people in sport – a guide, LGBT Youth North West, with support from Pride Sports

¹² Including LGBT young people in sport – a guide, LGBT Youth North West, with support from Pride Sports

2. **Build links**

There are a range of LGB sports groups and clubs in Scotland. These are trusted groups, and can provide a valuable link in to other activities. To encourage people to take part in your activities, try linking to existing LGB sports groups and clubs – through tasters, joint events, joint training sessions or other opportunities. Use LGB media to promote opportunities, and support and attend LGB sporting events. This will also help people to know that you are taking a proactive approach to providing inclusive opportunities.

3. **Deal with negative behaviours**

Homophobia (and fear of homophobia) is one of the strongest barriers to participation for LGB people. It is important to have clear, enforced policies and procedures on bullying and harassment which specifically mention dealing with harassment related to sexual orientation, and make sure that everybody knows about these.

4. **Raise awareness**

There are gaps in the evidence base around participation of LGB people in sport, and people don't always talk about the problems they experience. It is important that people planning, delivering and taking decisions in sport understand the problems and barriers that LGB people can experience. Training and awareness raising work is essential.

5. **Showcase good work**

Tell people about what has worked in getting LGB people involved in sport – and what hasn't. This will help build practice in Scotland, and will help people to realise that groups and organisations are working hard to involve LGB people. The more people talk about their experiences and share these, the more confident people will feel about becoming involved and coming out in the sports environment.

6. **Take a leadership role**

Governing bodies and organisations like **sportscotland** can play a key role through visible commitments to tackling homophobia in sport; work with the media to improve coverage of LGB issues in sport, train officials and stewards to identify and challenge homophobic language and support the creation of LGB sports clubs where there is interest.

7. **Gather information**

One of the key challenges in tackling inequalities for LGB people in sport is the lack of data about sports participation and involvement. Every group and organisation can play a role in helping to build the bank of evidence in this field, through building trust, talking to people about their experiences and gathering equality monitoring information (anonymously).

What is already happening?

There is lots of good work already happening.

The Scottish LGBT Sports Charter

In May 2015, the Scottish LGBT Sports Charter was launched in Glasgow. The charter was developed in consultation with sports governing bodies (SGBs), other sports stakeholders and LGBT people.¹³ It has five principles, focusing on actively involving and supporting LGBT people, developing inclusive policies and practices, and creating a positive and welcoming sporting environment. It is accompanied by a practical guidance document on how to put these principles into action.

LGB involvement in squash and racketball

Scottish Squash and Racketball mapped the demographics of the Scottish population, and used 'market segmentation' techniques to identify its target audiences. Its website now includes specific pages targeted at players and potential players from a variety of backgrounds. It developed information for lesbian, gay and bisexual participants, and used the high profile player Jonathan McBride as a role model to help positively promote the sports to LGB people. This web page also carries clear links to LGB organisations that support sport in Scotland. This approach required a clear commitment from a successful gay player to use his status and profile to positively promote squash and racketball to LGB people.

Pride House

LEAP Sports hosted a 'Pride House' in Glasgow city centre during the Commonwealth Games of 2014. A 'Pride House' is a venue to welcome LGBT athletes, fans and others during international sporting events. It was a welcoming place to view the competitions, to enjoy the event but also to learn about sexual orientation and homophobia in sport and to build relations with mainstream sport.

The first Pride House was organised for the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games in Vancouver and Whistler, and others have since followed. The aim of the Pride House approach is to help break down some of the social and personal barriers which discourage LGBT people from participating in sports.¹⁴

¹³ <http://www.equality-network.org/sports-charter/>

¹⁴ www.pridehouseglasgow.co.uk

Find out more...

Useful sources for finding out more include:

- the Scottish LGBT Sports Charter and Guidance - <http://www.equality-network.org/sports-charter/>
- the documents referenced throughout this Learning Note – as footnotes; and
- the full research report on equality in sport, produced for **sport**scotland in 2015.