



Coming Out at Work: A Guide for Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Staff

“people perform better when they can be themselves”

[Stonewall]



Stonewall

DIVERSITY CHAMPION

1. Welcome to the Guide!



Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and Northumberland County Council are fully committed to equality of opportunity and to promoting diversity. The organisations value all staff regardless of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, we aim to create an environment in which all staff, whatever their sexuality feel equally welcomed and valued, and in which homophobic and other discriminatory behaviour is not tolerated.

This guide aims to support staff who want to be “out” at work to manage the process in the most positive way possible.

The Trust and the County Council are the biggest employers in Northumberland and between them employ over 20,000 staff, of whom around 6.5% are likely to be Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (LGB)¹.

A report published by the Department of Health and Stonewall, the UK’s leading gay rights organisation, ‘Being the Gay One’ (2007), shows that there is still homophobia and discrimination in parts of the NHS and public services.

Every day at work and in their personal lives, LGB people are forced to choose between being open and honest about their circumstances (and encountering possible harassment and discrimination), avoiding the issue, or lying to their colleagues or friends. This can cause a huge amount of stress to the individual, both at work and in their personal lives. This stress is evidenced in the health inequalities suffered by many LGB individuals.

¹ According to the National Audit Office and Stonewall

2. Your Rights!



The Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate at work on the grounds of sexual orientation. The Act applies to all aspects of employment, including training, recruitment, promotion and dismissal.

Our organisations recognise the extent of heterosexual assumptions within society and the existence of homophobia and other forms of discrimination. Through our different policies the organisations aim to ensure that:

- Recruitment, progression and promotion are based entirely on relevant criteria, which do not include sexual orientation.
- Everyone is treated with equal dignity and respect regardless of their sexual orientation.
- Homophobic abuse, harassment or bullying is a serious disciplinary offence, and will be dealt with under the Dignity at Work and Disciplinary Policies.
- Homophobic propaganda in any form, including e-mails, graffiti, songs or speeches, will not be tolerated. The organisations will remove any such propaganda whenever it appears on their premises and take action against those responsible.
- Assumptions will not be made that partners are of the opposite sex.
- Any workplace benefits will apply equally to same sex partners as they do to heterosexual partners.
- LGB issues will be included in all equality and diversity training, internal equality and diversity surveys and in the monitoring of complaints of bullying and harassment cases.

3. Weighing up the pros and cons of coming out!



For some people being “Out” at work will be something that they consider a routine and simple issue – while for others the thought of sharing their sexual orientation, or indeed other personal information with their work colleagues, would be the last thing they would want to do.

Essentially, it all comes down to personal choice and people’s decisions about sharing information about sexual orientation or gender identity with their work colleagues can depend on a whole range of factors including:

- The general culture of sharing what is considered ‘personal information’ within your work setting
- How confident or aware you are of people’s attitudes towards LGB issues
- How confident you feel personally about your own sexuality/identity and your comfort levels in discussing LGB issues
- How supported you feel to be ‘fully yourself’ in your workplace – both by colleagues and by the organisation itself
- Whether you consider there to be any risk to your personal safety or future employment prospects as a result of being out at work
- Concerns about information leakage – you may be comfortable with your immediate colleagues knowing but may not want the information shared more widely

4. Assessing the Risk – What might influence your decision to come out?



Whatever you decide in terms of who you come out to and when, everyone will undoubtedly make some kind of assessment of the relative risks and benefits involved.

There are a number of ways to approach coming out (bearing in mind that it is almost never a one-off process) that have been tried and tested by LGBT staff – not all will be right for you but some of these ideas may help you with the process:

- Test out tolerance levels by discussing current LGBT issues that are prevalent in the media e.g. Gay adoption/surrogacy/parenting.
- Talk about other cultural issues that are pertinent to LGBT communities e.g. TV programmes with LGBT themes, films, books or music produced by LGBT people and use the opportunity to gauge people's reactions.
- Come out first to those people you think will be most supportive and accepting of you to build up a support network before disclosing to others though don't be put off if their reaction isn't what you expect. For some LGBT people who have found coming out exceptionally stressful it can be something of an anti-climax to find that the person you are telling is pretty much OK with it! Remember that there may also be some disappointment / anger from colleagues who have assumed you were friends if you have not been "honest" with them in the past. People's reactions will vary depending on a range of factors and can change over time. Remember that you've had a long time to think about this issue but they may not have considered it before now!

- pictures of partners/children/friends on your desk to create opportunities for people to ask questions as part of routine exchanges.
- Who needs to know? Do you think it is beneficial for you/them to know – particularly this may be an issue for service users, knowing that someone in the organisation is LGB may enable them to be honest and open about their specific needs in relation to those areas? Alternatively, it could create potential risk of aggression and even violence from service users.
- Know what your rights are and maybe get support to come out from another colleague, a member of HR or a union Rep.
- Be positive about who you are and other people will be more likely to value the difference you bring.
- Start small! It may not be the best item to bring up in a large meeting under AOB! Rather tell a couple of colleagues who you trust and gain their support to tell a wider audience if you feel the need.
- Look for opportunities to bring it into the conversation in a routine way e.g. when someone asks you what you did at the weekend tell them you visited your boyfriend's / girlfriend's parents or that you had a dinner party for a group of gay friends.

5. What support is available locally?

Apart from the Stonewall Support Group (details below) there are a number of other support mechanisms that you can access to support you in being comfortable with who you are and if necessary can support you in coming out at work.

The HR Department should be able to offer you advice and support to enable you to feel confident in your employer's fair application of policies and can direct you to the relevant policies that outline your rights as an employee to be treated with dignity and respect. You can also access support from your union rep (whether or not you are a union member) who can put you in touch with any local or national LGB support systems that they are aware of – many unions have access to these support mechanisms for a whole range of staff.

There are a number of LGB Groups and Helplines that are readily accessible via the internet or through local LGBT services and some of these are described below.

Whatever you decide, remember that you have a right to feel confident and comfortable about who you are at work and that there is support available to help you feel a valued member of staff.

6. Useful contacts and resources

Northumberland Staff Stonewall Group – Patrick Price, LGBT Champion, Tel: (01670) 840 894,
Email: Patrick.Price@northumbria-healthcare.nhs.uk

Stonewall (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Charity) –
www.stonewall.org.uk

MESMAC North East (Charity for Gay and Bisexual Men) –
www.mesmacnortheast.com

LGF (Lesbian and Gay Foundation) – www.lgf.org.uk