

## Coming out at work: A Guide for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Staff

*“people perform better when they can be themselves” [Stonewall]*

### 1. Welcome to the Guide

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust and Northumberland County Council are committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive workforce to ensure that we are harnessing the talents of all our staff regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Being open at work can be a daunting challenge, but it might also relieve the daily stress of hiding who you are. It is our aim to create an environment in which all staff feel free to be who they are, so that they feel welcomed and valued. Homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic behaviour and other forms of discriminatory behaviour are not welcome within the organisations and will not be tolerated in anyway. We all have the right to be who we are and the aim of this guide is to help and support employees who want to be “out” at work.

### 2. Know the facts

Northumbria Trust and Northumberland county council are the biggest employers in Northumberland and North Tyneside and between them employ over 13,000 staff of whom around 6.5% are likely to be Lesbian, Gay or Bi (LGB).

A number of reports published by the Department of Health and Stonewall, show that there is still discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in accessing employment and services in parts of the NHS and other public services. As employers, we are keen to eradicate discrimination and have policies in place to support staff. We also regularly consult with our Lesbian, Gay, Bi or Transgender (LGBT) Network groups who lead the way on how we can improve the work experience of our LGBT Staff.

Every day LGB individuals are forced to choose between being open and honest about their circumstances, or avoiding the issue. We know this can cause a huge amount of stress, both at work and in their personal lives. We know there may be additional barriers for staff who are from different faiths, cultures or minority ethnic groups in coming out. Staff who are Bi may also feel they face additional

discrimination as there is a lack of understanding from others, who may presume they are really gay or straight. All of which can make it difficult to access help or support with coming out.

### **3. 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 heterosexist assumptions within society and the existence of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and other forms of discrimination. Through our different policies we aim to ensure that:

- Recruitment, progression and promotion are based entirely on relevant criteria, and will not be influenced by sexual orientation.
- Everyone is treated with equal dignity and respect regardless of their sexual orientation.
- Abuse based on sexual orientation or any form of harassment or bullying is a serious disciplinary offence, and will be dealt with under the Dignity at Work and Disciplinary Policies.
- Discriminatory behaviour based on sexual orientation in any form, including e-mails, graffiti, 'banter' or jokes, sexual harassment, making comments about people's appearance, or threatening to 'out' people will not be tolerated. The organisations will take action against those responsible.
- Assumptions will not be made that partners are of the opposite sex or the same sex.
- Any workplace benefits will apply equally to same sex partners as they do to opposite sex partners, spouses or civil 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.

### **4. 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 their sexual orientation. This may depend on a whole range of factors including :

- The culture of sharing what is considered 'personal information' within work

- How confident or aware you are of people's attitudes towards LGB issues
- How confident you feel personally about your own sexual orientation 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
- Concerns about information being shared with other to colleagues and/or service users/patients – you may be comfortable with your immediate colleagues knowing but may not want the information shared more widely

<b>Benefits of coming out</b>	<b>How we can support you</b>
<p>Developing better relationships in the workplace by being honest and open about who you are – enabling others to open up to you too</p>	<p>Having to deal with and challenge some people's prejudice and assumptions about what being LGB means can be stressful. But the organisation will support you.</p> <p>Check out the organisation's policies such as the 'Dignity at Work' policy. You can also access confidential support from the LGBT staff network.</p>
<p>Being a role model for others and breaking down barriers to understanding.</p>	<p>Being visible could make you open to questions, lack of awareness or experience negative attitudes. You do not have to manage this alone there are people in the organisation who can help and support you.</p>
<p>Being seen as an asset by an organisation that values diversity in its workforce</p>	<p>You may be concerned that this may affect your career opportunities or you could experience discrimination, but both organisations have a zero tolerance approach to any form of discrimination and have a duty to tackle any bullying, harassment or discrimination. If you encounter any problems please ask for help to deal with them.</p>

<p>Being able to be open and comfortable about who you are at work not only brings a better work experience, but will lead to greater productivity. It could mean that issues arising in your personal life which might affect work can be more easily dealt with</p>	<p>If your manager finds it difficult to discuss issues relating to sexual orientation additional training can be provided for them and any members of staff who need awareness training. You do not have to deal with this alone. Resources and support are available and there are organisations both within work and the wider community which can provide support.</p>
<p>You may be surprised at the amount of support that colleagues and managers are willing to extend</p>	<p>If any colleagues or service users respond inappropriately or subject you to harassment there are procedures in place to deal with this. Please see the Dignity at work policy for reporting routes, seek help from the LGBT champion or staff network. Action will be taken against perpetrators. If any incidents occur please report it.</p>

## 5. What might influence your decision to come out?

Whether or not you choose to come out at work, and who you choose to tell and when you do it, is entirely up to you. Don't feel under pressure to come out. Only you will know when you feel comfortable and ready to do it, but both organisations will support you if you choose to do so. If you decide to come out, but are unsure how others might react, here are a few different ways that might help, please remember, not all will be right for you but some of these ideas may help you with the process:

- You could consider making contact with the LGBT network groups or one of our E&D allies for support.
- 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
- Talk about other cultural issues that are pertinent to LGB communities e.g. TV programmes with LGB themes, films, books or music and use the opportunity to gauge people's reactions.
- The Trust offers coaching to all staff, coaching may help you discover the best way to come out that suits you.

Don't be put off if their reaction isn't what you expect. For some LGB people who have found coming out 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 on occasion 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 but they may not have considered it before now! Both organisations are continuously striving to change attitudes towards inclusion and diversity, we have a number of training packages, including coaching which we hope will aid staff with the confidence to be who they are in the workplace.

Please be aware you don't have to go through this process alone, we have committed staff in both organisations who will support you. The LGBT network group and LGBT Champion Patrick Price have experience in dealing with these issues and there are a number of resources and sources of help available.

## **5. Steps towards Coming Out**

1. Contact the LGBT+ Staff Network or LGBT+ Equality Champion for support
2. Know what your rights are and maybe get support to come out from another colleague, a member of HR or a union Rep.
3. If you are positive about who you are other people will be more likely to value the difference you bring.
4. Start small! Tell a couple of colleagues who you trust and gain their support to tell a wider audience if you want to do this.
5. 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.

## **7. Local support**

There are a number of resources that you can access to support you in being comfortable with who you are and with coming out at work.

The HR Department will offer you advice and support and can direct you to the policies that outline your rights as an employee to be treated with dignity and respect.

You can also access support from your union representative who can put you in touch with any local or national LGB support systems and local support groups that they are aware of.

We also have a joint LGBT+ staff network for council and trust staff that can offer confidential support to staff and managers.

There are a number of LGBT Groups and helplines that are readily accessible via the internet or through local LGBT services – contact details for some are given below.

Whatever you decide, remember that you have a right to feel confident and comfortable being yourself at work and there is support available to support you as a valued member of staff.

## **8. Useful contacts and resources**

- Joint LGBT+ staff network - [equality.diversity@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:equality.diversity@nhct.nhs.uk)
- Patrick Price, LGBT+ Champion - 01670 629105 or [Patrick.Price@nhct.nhs.uk](mailto:Patrick.Price@nhct.nhs.uk)
- Stonewall (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Charity) – website includes “coming out resources” [www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk)
- MESMAC North East - [www.mesmacnortheast.com](http://www.mesmacnortheast.com)
- LGF (Lesbian and Gay Foundation) – [www.lgf.org.uk](http://www.lgf.org.uk)