



Older People's Commissioner for Wales
Comisiynydd Pobl Hŷn Cymru

EQUALITY & SEXUAL ORIENTATION FACTSHEET

Introduction

Sexual orientation is a 'protected characteristic' in the Equality Act 2010 this means that the law protects lesbian, gay or bisexual people from discrimination. Using varying analysis of 2011 census data it is estimated that there may be between 45 and 57 thousand older lesbian, gay or bisexual older people in Wales.

The issues

A recent report by sexual orientation campaigners suggested that many older lesbian, gay and bisexual people hide their sexual orientation from professional agencies with 60% hiding it from social care agencies; 20% from their GP; 33% from their housing provider and 50% from care home staff.

The impact of this lack of confidence in being openly 'out' should not be underestimated. Older lesbian, gay or bisexual people report having to make continual decisions about whether it is safe to be openly gay as it is psychologically stressful. This problem is exacerbated by the increasing number of occasions when this becomes necessary as ageing forces individuals to access health and social care services they have never previously required.

The illegality of homosexuality in the UK until 1968 contributes to the fear of identifying as an older lesbian, gay or bisexual person. This lack of confidence affects the lives of individuals on a daily basis and has

created amongst public and private service providers a false impression of the nature and extent of need. Although many health and social care providers assume they have not encountered these issues, this will not remain the case in the future. A new generation of older lesbian, gay or bisexual people who are confident in their identities and have much higher expectations of service providers will soon require an array of mainstream older people's services.

Older lesbian, gay or bisexual people often describe themselves as 'invisible'. Isolation and loneliness are major concerns as the youth orientated focus of the wider gay community is not always welcoming to older people, many of whom may have come out in later life. Due to this, and breakdown in relations with families and friends, many older lesbian, gay or bisexual people will have limited or non-existent networks of support.

Another commonly reported issue is the assumption of heterosexuality. This not only has an impact at first point of contact with services but also complicates other important matters, such as recognising a same sex partner when establishing next of kin. The provision of private space and sexual activity remain issues of embarrassment and a subject rarely discussed in relation to older people generally.

Conclusion

It is crucial that all those working with older people receive training about delivering services to older lesbian, gay or bisexual people. However, irrespective of training and the development of robust policies in both public and private spheres, older gay people can still be vulnerable to prejudiced and discriminatory language and behaviour from others and public services should do everything it can to ensure that this does not occur.

To see the evidence base for this factsheet and further resources visit www.olderpeoplewales.com