

COMPLICATED?

Bisexual people's experiences of
and ideas for improving services

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Acknowledgements



The Equality Network would like to thank all the respondents to the survey for taking the time to contribute their experiences and ideas to better bisexual inclusion. We would also like to thank the authors of 'The Bisexuality Report'¹ for inspiring this work.

Thanks also to our research assistant, Mel Maguire and all the people who provided feedback on the consultation draft and proof read the final draft.

Thank you to the Scottish Government Equality Unit for funding this work.

1. **Barker and others, 2012**



Foreword

Meg John Barker

Back in 2012 when we produced The Bisexuality Report, my co-authors and I struggled with a few things. There was the lack of evidence regarding the experience of bisexual people in the UK – particularly those outside of the official ‘bisexual community’ – to support the findings from other countries. There was the absence of in-depth qualitative data from UK-based bisexual people to illustrate our points, particularly regarding experiences of services - which is so necessary if we are to fight for improvement in those areas. And there was the dearth of material anywhere regarding people whose bisexuality intersected with other marginalised identities and experiences. This in particular was something we subsequently hugely regretted giving such a small amount of space to, given its vital importance and the danger of suggesting shared experience where actually there is so much diversity.

For these reasons – and so many more – I am extremely grateful to the Equality Network for producing ‘Complicated?’. It addresses all of these absences admirably, and points the way forward for future work in this area.

The usefulness of this report really cannot be over-estimated. Many of us are regularly asked to provide statistics and examples of bisexual experiences for manifestos, service guidelines, and government reports. Now we have a wealth of information to draw upon. Also, the report is a wonderful example of community-embedded research: which starts by listening to what the needs and absences are, and then attempts to address them. So much of the research which has emerged from within UK bisexual communities in recent years has been grounded in this way, and it is great to see the Equality Network following this tradition and extending it still further.

I would like to join the authors in thanking all of the respondents for taking part in this research, and for providing such detailed and helpful information. There is no question that this will help us hugely in raising awareness of bisexual people and their needs in future, as well as in improving LGBTIQ+ services and bisexual spaces and communities.

Contents

1.	Key findings and roadmap to bisexual inclusion	
1.1.	Key findings	6
1.2.	Roadmap to bisexual inclusion	8
2.	Introduction	10
3.	Methodology	11
4.	Demographics	13
5.	Findings	
5.1	Feeling part of a bisexual community	15
5.2	Feeling part of an LGBT community	19
5.3	Feeling part of a heterosexual community	23
5.4	Sharing sexual orientation when using services	25
5.5	Experiences of using services	30
5.6	Experiences of using LGBT services	38
5.7	Impact of other types of discrimination	43
5.8	Examples of good bisexual inclusion by services	52
5.9	Ideas for improving services	55
6.	Conclusions and recommendations	62
7.	Key UK bisexual groups and events	65
8.	Glossary	66
9.	Bibliography	70

1. Key findings and roadmap to bisexual inclusion

1.1. Key findings

- Respondents experienced a number of challenges in regard to feeling part of a bisexual, LGBT or straight community. Only a minority of respondents describe feeling “quite a lot” or “very much so” part of any of those three communities.
 - In many parts of the UK there are a lack of local bisexual groups and events because bisexual specific work receives very little funding or mainstream support. This was the main difficulty identified by the 85% of respondents² who only feel “a little” or “not at all” part of a bisexual community.
 - 66% of respondents only feel “a little” or “not at all” part of a LGBT community. Many said that biphobia and bi erasure within their LGBT communities limited their full inclusion.
 - 69% of respondents only feel “a little” or “not at all” part of a straight community. Some stated that they are misread as straight and therefore are assumed to be part of a straight community.
- Although LGBT services might be expected to be places where people would feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation, 25% of respondents were not usually comfortable doing so.
- Only 33% of respondents usually feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with their GP. 28% of respondents never feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with their GP.
- The highest amounts of biphobia experienced were within LGBT and NHS services.
- 66% of respondents feel that they have to pass as straight and 42% feel they need to pass as gay or lesbian when accessing services.

2. All percentages are based on the number of respondents who answered the questions. Additional statistical breakdowns and details are available in the following sections and are available on request from the Equality Network.

- 48% have experienced biphobic comments and 38% have experienced unwanted sexual comments about them being bisexual while accessing services.
- 61% have experienced multiple discrimination. Respondents said that the types of biphobia they experience depend on other aspects of their identity.
- People of minority ethnic backgrounds and those of faith remain under-represented in this and other research.
- In common with other LGBT research, the number of disabled bisexual respondents, 35%, was higher than the UK general population average of 18.8%.
- Respondents call for services, including LGBT services, to increase their knowledge and understanding of bisexual experiences and needs.

1.2. Roadmap to bisexual inclusion

- **Research:** Read up on bisexuality, bisexual people's experiences and bisexual inclusion. The bibliography at the end of this report can be a starting point.
- **Support:** Reach out to bisexual groups and activists in your area and work with them in developing your services. In exchange for their expertise, support their groups and work. The list of national bisexual groups in section 7 can be a starting point. If there are no bisexual community groups in your local area, seek assistance from national bisexual groups to reach individual bisexual equality activists.
- **Check your language:** Do not say 'gay' when you are referring to all LGBT people or issues. Talk and write about all forms of sexual orientation discrimination, for example: biphobia and bi-erasure. Say same sex marriage instead of gay marriage, same sex relationships rather than gay relationships and mixed sex relationships instead of straight relationships. Relationships do not have a sexual orientation.
- **Deal with biphobia:** Explicitly include all forms of discrimination, including biphobia, in your code of conduct. Deal with reports of biphobia within your service with the same level of seriousness that you do any other form of discrimination.
- **Update your training:** Ensure that any training you receive or provide on sexual orientation explicitly and significantly includes bisexual equality in detail. Consider getting bisexual specific training, especially if you are going to do a significant piece of LGBT equality work or represent LGBT people.
- **Celebrate bisexual identities:** Bi Visibility Day is on 23 September each year. Include bisexual people and stories in projects that celebrate LGBT history or identities. Do not label people, including historic figures and fictional characters as gay or lesbian unless these are terms that they have used to define themselves.

- **Represent:** When organising events, include bisexual people in your choice of speakers and workshop facilitators. Ensure that your programmes include items and issues that may be of particular interest to bisexual people. For example: safe sex information that is inclusive of multiple diverse gender combinations and behaviours.
- **Speak up:** When engaging with other organisations about equality in general or sexual orientation equality in particular, add other sexual orientations to the discussion. Even if you only ask a question about bisexual equality this helps to get the issue on the table and discussion started.

2. Introduction

This report details the findings of the largest UK survey to date that specifically explores bisexual people's experiences of services. Various writers have noted that there is very little bisexual specific research at present³. This report aims to assist in part with addressing this research gap. We hope that our findings will help organisations to better understand and implement improvements for bisexual people.

We use the term bisexual in the broadest possible sense. That is, people who experience sexual or emotional attraction to people of more than one gender or regardless of gender. Not all such people identify with the term bisexual. Some prefer to use terms such as queer or pansexual or prefer not to label their sexual orientation. Others may currently identify as heterosexual, gay or lesbian but have experienced attraction to more than one gender in the past.

We also recognise that the term bisexual can be problematic because some people read it as suggesting that there are only two genders when in reality there are many diverse genders. However, it is used in this report because it is the most well-known of the various terms available, and because most bisexual people understand it to mean either attraction to the same and other genders, attraction regardless of gender or attraction to more than one gender.

This report contains some references to sexual violence. However, there are no descriptions of such acts.

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3. **Williams and others**, 2010, Page 8
Eisner, 2013, Page 19
Warner, 2004
Williams, 2011, Page 8
BiPhoria, 2011, Page 6

3. Methodology

The online survey was launched at BiCon 2013 in Edinburgh on 18 July 2013 and ran until the end of September 2013. The survey was promoted primarily through UK wide bisexual online networks and the Equality Network's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) mailing list of over 25,000 people. Recipients of the survey invitation email were encouraged to redistribute it via their own friendship groups and online networks.

Sampling is a challenging issue when undertaking research with bisexual populations. Those who might be considered as bisexual may or may not self-define that way and bisexual people can be considered a relatively hidden population. There is currently no definitive way of ascertaining the size of the bisexual population in its entirety and therefore no identifiable population base from which to draw a representative sample⁴. For this reason, the present research relies on participants self-selecting. While our sample is essentially one of convenience, we believe that we have fairly robust findings given the size of the sample. We are mindful though that there is currently no way of knowing for sure how demographically representative our sample is of the bisexual population as a whole.

The survey received 720 responses. The data was cleaned to remove people who stated that they had never experienced sexual or emotional attraction to more than one gender, people who stated that they lived outside of the UK, and responses that only filled in the first initial questions about how they identified but did not answer any questions about their experiences of accessing services. One duplication was also removed. 513 usable responses remained. As different numbers of people completed different questions, the actual number whose data is being reported on for each question will be clear in the text and graphs as 'N'. For example if 300 people completed a question and we report that 50% of those agreed with a statement, the 50% figure will be followed by (N=300) to show how many this figure is based on.

4. **Aspinall**, 2009, Page 53

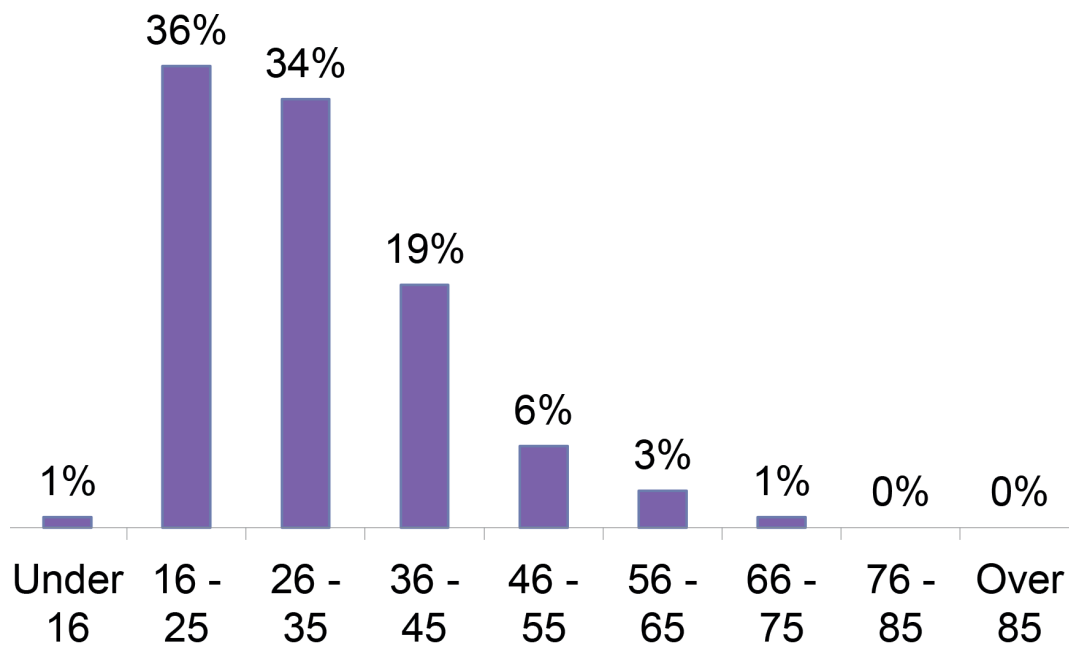
Some quotes have been shortened or very slightly adapted for readability but we have not changed their meaning. Following advice from disability equality organisations we have minimised the use of ellipses and brackets in order to improve accessibility. We have also avoided using Latin abbreviations.

A consultation draft of this report was presented at BiReCon 2014, the biannual conference on bisexual research in order to receive feedback from academics and activists experienced in researching bisexual issues. The report was well received and feedback from delegates has been incorporated.

4. Demographics

Age (N=377)

Chart 1: Ages of Respondents (N=377)



Location (N=376)

The majority, 56%, of the respondents stated that they lived in Scotland, with 42% living in England. Only 2% lived in Wales and 1% in Northern Ireland.

Ethnicity (N=334)

The vast majority of the respondents, 75%, were White British, White Scottish, White English, White Welsh or White Northern Irish, with a further 22% describing themselves as being from other white backgrounds. Other ethnic groups represented less than 3% of the respondents.

Religion or belief (N=319)

Atheists were the largest group among the respondents, with 27%. The next largest group, at 20%, were those who stated they have no religious beliefs. A further 12% identified as Agnostic and 4% as Humanists. Of those who held religious beliefs, just under 17% were Christians, 8% were Pagans and just over 2% were Buddhists. Jews and Hindus accounted for less than 1% of the sample each. A further 9% gave a diverse range of less common religions and beliefs. No respondents stated they were Muslim.

Disability (N=374)

The percentage of respondents who stated they were disabled was 35%. Out of these 129 disabled respondents, 32% stated they had mental health impairments, 25% had physical impairments, 10% had learning impairments and 33% did not specify what impairments they had.

Gender Identity (N=376)

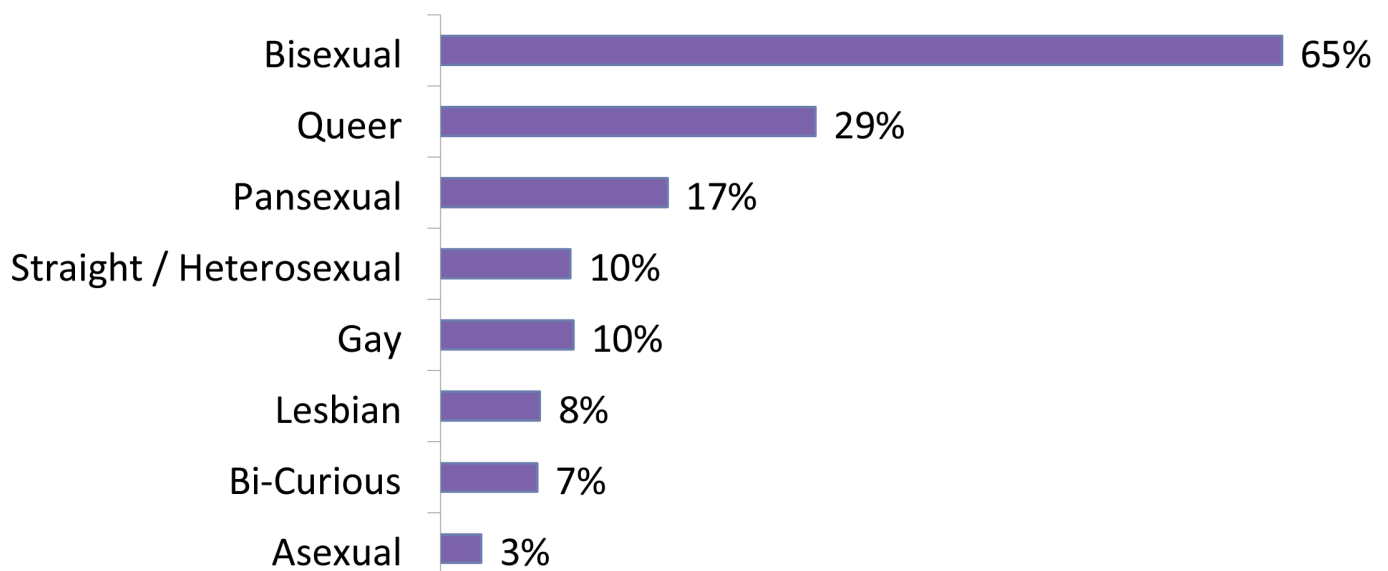
The majority of respondents, 62%, identified as women, 27% as men and 11% identified their gender in other ways.

The number of trans people was high, with 26% of respondents stating they were trans in various ways. Among those 99 trans respondents, 42% identified as women, 17% as men and 40% identified in other ways.

Sexual Orientation (N=511)

Some people who experience attraction to more than one gender or regardless of gender may self-describe using sexual orientation terms other than bisexual. Respondents were able to select multiple terms.

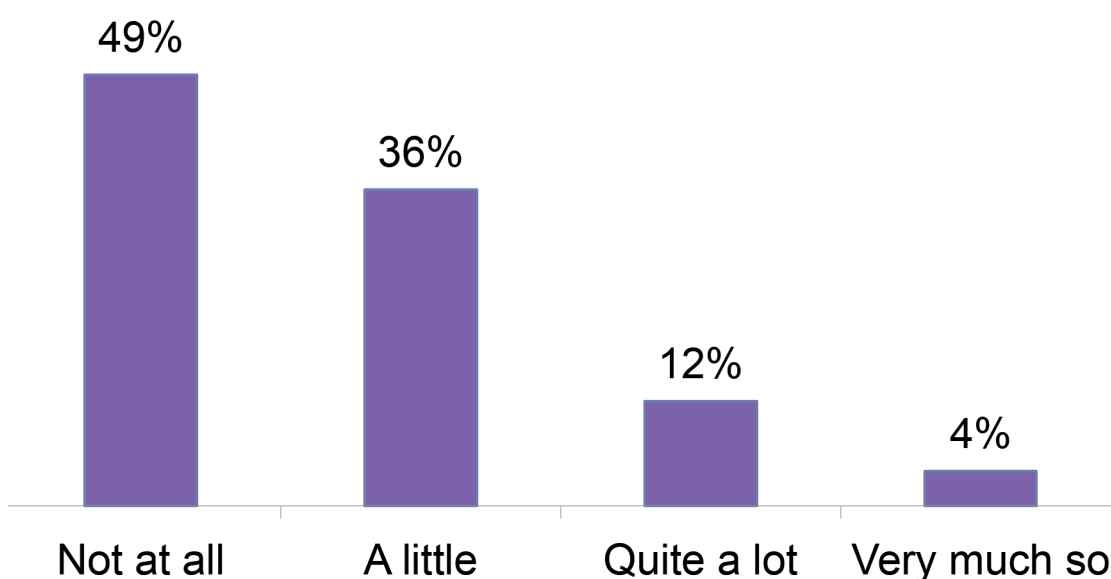
Chart 2: Sexual orientations of respondents (N=511)



5. Findings

5.1. Feeling part of a bisexual community

Chart 3: How much do you feel part of a ‘bisexual community’? (N=510)



The text responses for this question (N=90) fell into nine themes⁵:

Limited visibility of bisexual community spaces and events

Most of the respondents who provided text comments questioned whether or not there actually is a bisexual community, or thought that there is not one. Very little bisexual specific work has received any funding to date and most areas of the UK lack local bisexual specific community spaces and events. It is therefore not surprising that many of the respondents felt they had no visible bisexual community to connect with.

5. Themes throughout listed in order of frequency, with the most commonly occurring themes discussed first. Except in sections 5.8 and 5.9

“I don’t feel there is a strong bisexual community and although I feel part of the LGBT community, I still feel there is a great deal of biphobia within the LGBT community itself.”

“Is there a bisexual community?”

“It almost feels like there is a lack of one.”

“There’s a bisexual community? Where do I sign up?”

“The bisexual community has been very much non-visible in my experience, though that seems to be slowly changing.”

Only feel part of a bisexual community online

Some respondents felt that they were part of a bisexual community online, but not ‘in real life’.

“Only online, a virtual community.”

“Although my contact is almost solely online I very much feel connected with and part of the bi community.”

Feel part of a community at a specific event or place

Some respondents said that they felt part of a bisexual community when attending a specific event or place.

“I recently attended my first BiCon which was really my first proper experience of bisexual community.”

Felt part of a bisexual community in the past

Some respondents said that they had felt part of a bisexual community at some point in the past.

“I used to be very involved with bisexual groups, volunteering to put together bi fests, talks etcetera. but I didn't seem to find a place in my local bi group and I stopped attending about a year ago.”

Do not wish to define a community by sexual orientation

Some respondents said that they do not like to define a community by sexual orientation or didn't feel any particular need for such a community.

“I'm familiar with the BiCon gang, who really helped me at one point in my life. That said, I find the idea of people coming together solely on the grounds of a sexual identity to be a bit limiting.”

“I don't think I actually know any other bisexuals, although I don't feel I'm 'missing out' because of this. It's not important to me.”

Feel involved and accepted in a bisexual community

Some respondents felt that they were involved and accepted in a bisexual community. A few of them stated that they were very involved in bisexual community activism.

“The community is a vital source of informal support for me and provides the only space where I feel completely free to be myself.”

“I feel more accepted in bisexual communities than in LGB communities.”

Feel excluded from a bisexual community

A few respondents felt excluded from a bisexual community.

“I have attended BiCon but did not find it very friendly.”

Don't feel part of a bisexual community because of the binary nature of the 'bisexual' label

A few respondents felt that the binary nature of the bisexual label prevented them from being part of a bisexual community.

“Considering how many people use ‘bisexual’ to mean ‘only men and women’ I feel pretty excluded from it.”

“The whole gender binary thing feels like a barrier and that’s why I wouldn’t choose a bisexual label for myself, preferring queer or something that isn’t so easily defined or pigeon-holed. My limited experience with bi people, though, has been more positive and recognising the complexities of gender labels in relation to sexual attraction and the relation with genders.”

Not actively involved but feel part of a bisexual community

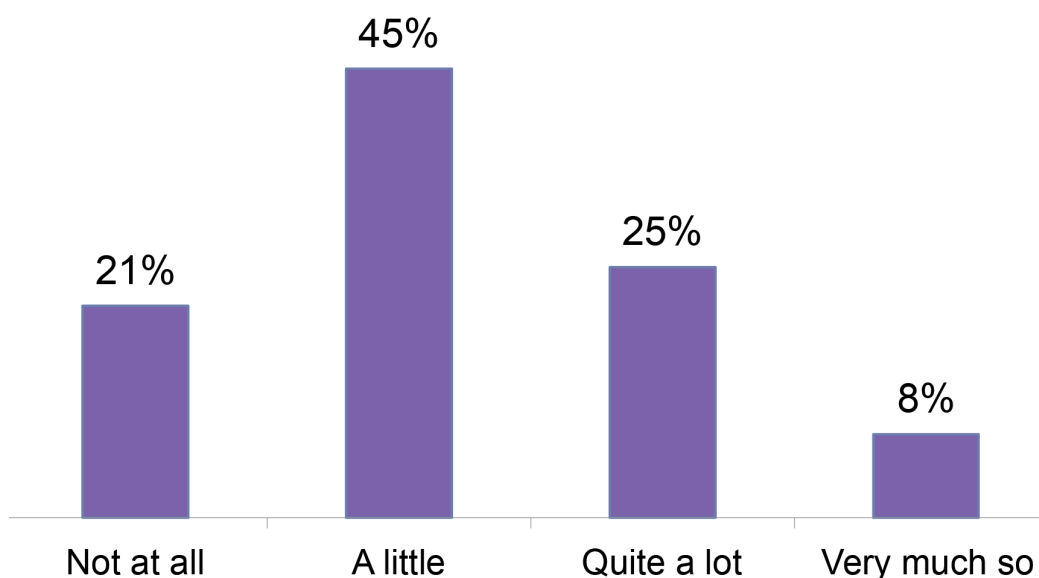
A few respondents felt that they were not actively engaged in a bisexual community but still felt part of it.

“I don’t actively engage, but I am on the periphery of a social group that spends a lot of time working on BiCon and Bi Community News. I know it’s there and I know how to access it, but it doesn’t feel like a thing I specifically need at the moment.”

5.2 Feeling part of an LGBT community

“My answer would probably be more like 50/50. Sometimes I feel like I get to be part of it as long as I’m not too open about the fact that I’m bi, especially when I’m in a mixed-sex relationship.”

Chart 4: How much do you feel part of an ‘LGBT community’? (N=512)



The text responses for this question (N=87) fell into seven themes. A large majority of these responses fell into the first two themes:

Experienced biphobia in an LGBT community

Most respondents who provided additional details said that they felt unwelcome and sometimes discriminated against due to biphobia in an LGBT community.

“I constantly feel like I’m a fake LGBT person and am constantly questioning my bi-ness.”

“Recently I was discouraged by comments on twitter due to a ‘gay men’s’ account asking if they would date bisexual men, and the comments begin along the lines of ‘make up your mind’ and ‘never in a million years’.”

Feel community is 'LG' rather than 'LGBT'

A large proportion of respondents felt that LGBT community events and organisations often render bisexuality invisible within them, making it feel more like a lesbian and gay community than an LGBT community.

"I tried going to the local queer women's group, but it turned out to be both biphobic and transphobic, which repelled me."

"Although I do feel part of an LGBT community, I feel that more emphasis has been on the L and G sections of the community. More recently, the T section has been gaining much needed awareness, but the B section is still over looked."

"I volunteer in LGB settings every week. I have done this for a long time, yet I am constantly aware that the 'B' is purely tokenism. I do not feel as welcome as LG people. If I don't introduce bi content to these settings, no one else will."

"I am very lucky that I live near Dumfries, where the LGBT centre is genuinely for bisexual people as well as lesbians and gay men. I have felt very alienated from 'LGBT' community in the past, in which the B and the T are just initials, not actually welcome and valued members."

Feel excluded when in mixed sex relationships

Some respondents felt excluded from an LGBT community because they are currently in mixed sex relationships.

"I'm a bisexual woman married to a straight man, so I often get made to feel like I don't belong in LGBT communities because we look like a straight couple. Also, I'm disabled and usually need my husband with me to access any community events, so I don't have the option of hiding."

"I receive comments, often abusive, that because I am in a long term relationship with a man my bisexuality is negated."

Depends on which LGBT organisation

Some respondents said that the extent to which they felt part of an LGBT community largely depended on the specific organisation they were participating in.

“Because I am not in a same-sex relationship, I feel a bit wary of the broader LGBT events, not knowing whether I’ll be very welcome as I don’t experience a lot of the same issues. But I am a happy member of LGBT groups at work.”

“Some groups are very welcoming and supportive, but others have actively discriminated against me as I have an opposite sex life partner.”

Feel welcomed and accepted in an LGBT community

Some respondents felt they were welcomed and could feel part of an LGBT community.

“In that all my experiences socialising and working with LGBT groups have been inclusive and welcoming and my sexuality is irrelevant.”

“I feel part of it though I may not always be involved in LGBT events.”

Do not wish to define a community by sexual orientation

A few respondents said that they do not like to define a community by sexual orientation or didn't feel any particular need for such a community.

"There is a good support network if I need it, but 'community?' Seems to me to involve proscribed convention and behaviour to a degree. I don't like to make my life about my sexuality, I feel like that should be incidental."

"I personally do not mix with people according to my or their sexuality. If people have an issue with it after it has come up in conversation, of course, then I'd rather not be friends with those sorts of people."

Use a different sexual orientation term to make it easier to be part of an LGBT community

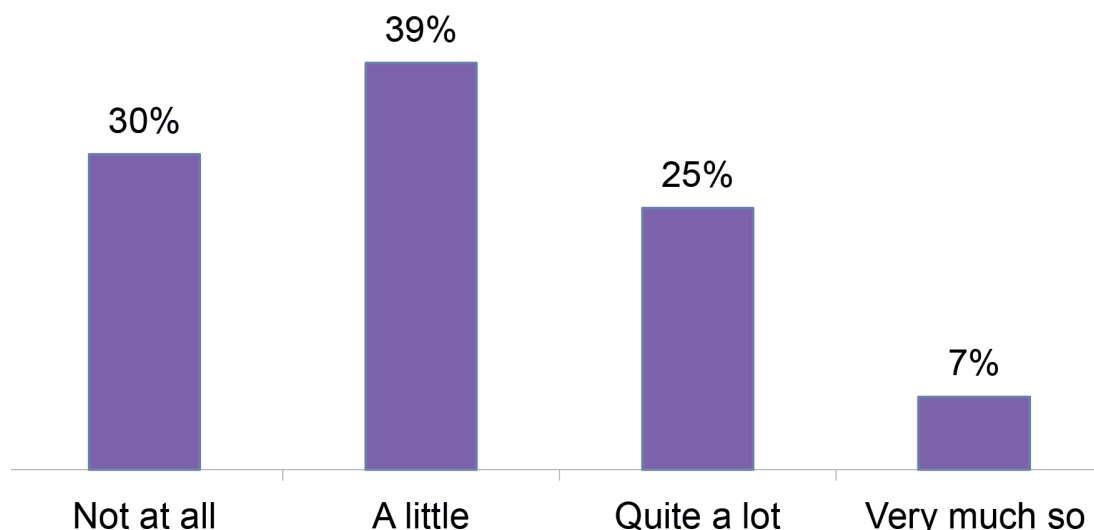
A few respondents said that they felt it was easier to feel part of an LGBT community if they said they were gay or queer rather than bisexual.

"In some cases it's easier to say you're gay than bi, a lot of people find it easier to understand the concept than bisexual."

"I use the term queer to identify myself because it makes me feel like I'm not stuck as just being the B, we're all in it together. I do sometimes worry that straights think I'm attention seeking and gays think I'm not gay enough to be queer."

5.3. Feeling part of a heterosexual community

Chart 5: How much do you feel part of a 'straight / heterosexual community'? (N=509)



The text answers to this question (N=87) fell into eight themes:

Assumed by others to be part of a heterosexual community

Just under half of the respondents who provided additional details felt other people assume that they are heterosexual and as a result they end up automatically included in a heterosexual community. This can make people feel that their identity is being erased or misunderstood and can make it harder to share their actual sexual orientation with others.

“I’m only out to a tiny group of people, and since I don’t ‘look queer’ and am currently single, I get read as straight and included in the community.”

“I’m aware that I’m often ‘read’ by others as straight, but I don’t identify with the straight community, even when people assume I’m one of them. It’s an odd feeling, being assumed to be one thing and feeling like you’re something else.”

“People, including gay people, think I am straight until I correct them, but I get the standard biphobic comments when I do.”

“I feel part of the straight/heterosexual community but not by choice. I feel that because I’m a female who is in a relationship with a male, people assume that I am straight when, in fact, I’m not.”

Feel discriminated against or uncomfortable in a heterosexual community

Nearly a quarter of respondents who provided text comments said they feel discriminated against or uncomfortable when in a heterosexual community.

“I have many straight friends. But that doesn’t mean I feel part of the community. I have recently moved to a new college for my graduate studies, and am scared to death to talk about my boyfriend because of how they might react. If I was part of the ‘straight community’ that fear wouldn’t be there.”

“Again, many straight people, including those accepting of homosexuality, don’t accept bisexuality. They feel its black and white, one or the other, it can’t be both. It’s not this at all, it’s a wonderful world of grey. But many people refuse to accept or understand this.”

Do not feel there is a heterosexual community

Just under a quarter of respondents did not feel that there is a heterosexual community.

“I’m not sure what the ‘straight community’ would be. Straight people making up the majority of the world’s population I don’t think they really have a community of straight people.”

Do not wish to define a community by sexual orientation

A few respondents said that they do not like to define a community by sexual orientation or did not want their sexual orientation to define who they associate with.

“I would be more interested in a community where sexuality just isn’t an issue, rather than assigning yourself a label or community which defines you as separate from other communities.”

5.4. Sharing your sexual orientation when using services

“I’ve experienced serious homophobia and biphobia from NHS services, including a GP who made a remark about ‘revolting faggots’ and a psychotherapist who told me that because I’m bisexual, it was my fault I’d been raped.”

Being open about one’s sexual orientation can be necessary and important when accessing services, in order to ensure that needs are met appropriately. Some people even exclude themselves from accessing services because they fear being in a situation where they need to come out.

While it should be up to each individual person to decide if they want to ‘come out’ and who they want to tell, the Equality Network believes in bringing about a society where everyone feels able to live openly and be themselves. No bisexual person should feel as though they need to hide who they are for fear of negative reactions and treatment.

According to ‘Count Me In Too’ “stereotypes of being ‘greedy’, can be used to police bisexual people’s desires, and it is understandable in this context that bisexual respondents try to keep being bisexual to themselves.”⁶ Whether it be for this reason or others, in our survey there were only two services in which over 50% of respondents usually felt comfortable sharing their sexual orientation, LGBT services and sexual health services.

6. Browne, 2008, Page 20

Even then, although LGBT services might be expected to be places where people would feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation, 25% respondents were not usually comfortable doing so. This links with the concerns about biphobia within LGBT services that were raised by respondents across several of the survey sections.

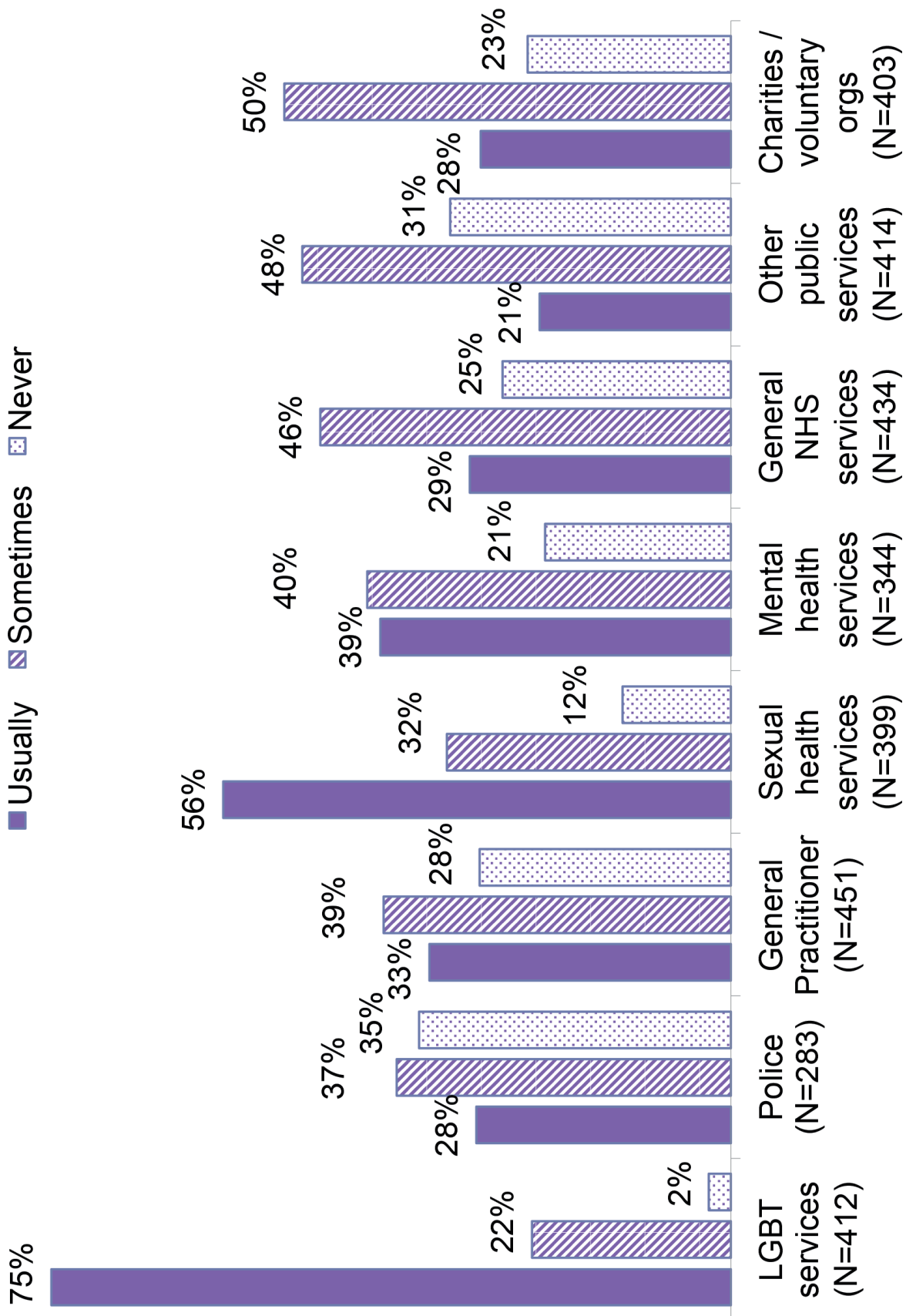
In regard to different health services, respondents were much more likely to feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with sexual health services as opposed to other parts of the NHS. However, even within sexual health services, over 10% of respondents said they never feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation.

Only 1 in 3 respondents usually feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with their GP. 28% of respondents said they never feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with their GP. 'Count Me In Too' found that while 68% of lesbian and 58% of gay men had been open about their sexual orientation with their GPs, only 23% of their bisexual respondents had been⁷. Given the findings of both of these surveys, bisexual people may be particularly unlikely to share their sexual orientations or the full diversity of their sexual experiences with their GPs.

7. **Browne**, 2008, Page 56

Chart 6: Do you feel comfortable sharing your sexual orientation when using these different services?

Excludes respondents who have not used these services



The text responses for this question (N=64) fell into six themes:

Concern about negative responses

Just under a third of respondents who provided additional details raised concerns about the negative responses they have received, or worry about receiving, when being open about their sexual orientation to services.

“I feel I would be judged and not treated fairly and also not sure my sexual orientation would be kept confidential if I wanted it to be.”

“Mental health professionals diagnose people based on biphobic assumptions (for example bisexual = confused and promiscuous, so perhaps the patient is bipolar or has borderline personality disorder). I know this is very common, therefore I have never come out to a mental health professional.”

“I am straight-passing, due to my current partner, and am never comfortable disclosing my orientation because of that. I get odd and surprised looks and questions, and my partner gets sympathetic ones, it's easier to not say anything.”

Bisexuality not understood

Some respondents said that they were not comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with service providers because, in their experience, bisexuality is often misunderstood and is subject to incorrect assumptions.

“Even within organisations that think they are LGBT-aware, bisexuality is never seen as an option. My sexuality is judged entirely based on the gender of my current partner, even in LGBT settings. Most service providers have no knowledge of biphobia and they actively or passively contribute to bisexual erasure.”

“I don't like being expected to give an explanation or to educate the person asking me. My sexual orientation is rarely understood by service providers.”

Do not regard as relevant

Some respondents said that their sexual orientation is often irrelevant when accessing services.

“It does not usually seem relevant to share my sexual orientation in the above contexts, so I rarely have cause to do so.”

Only share when asked

A few respondents noted that they only share their sexual orientation if the service provider asks them and that they are not usually asked.

“It’s not the kind of thing I would disclose unless asked but I do not have any issue with who I am.”

“I am rarely asked. As a woman with children, I find bi-erasure and heteronormativity occurs quite often.”

“Even if asked there is often not a bisexual option.”

Depends on who is asking

A few respondents noted different levels of comfort sharing their sexual orientation depending on the attitudes of the individuals providing the services and whether they had an established relationship.

“This usually depends on the individuals I’m dealing with. I’ve had good and bad experiences within the same organisations.”

Usually happy sharing

A few respondents explained that they are usually happy sharing their sexual orientation with service providers because they are generally ‘out’ in all areas of their lives or because sharing this information enables them to increase LGBT equality and awareness within the services they use.

5.5. Experiences of using services

“Since it was my support workers making biphobic comments, and these are people who come into my home to help me with my disabilities, including helping me bathe and other things when I’m naked and vulnerable, it was extremely distressing. I was also very afraid to report them, and was not satisfied with the response when I did so.”

Service provision discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, including specifically on grounds of being or being perceived to be bisexual became unlawful in 2007. As a result the survey explored only experiences of services which had happened during the five year period of 2008 to 2013.

The survey explored the specific phenomenon of biphobia as experienced by people perceived, or known, to be bisexual. It focused specifically on biphobia and not on sexual orientation discrimination in general. However, it is important to remember that biphobia is not the only form of sexual orientation discrimination that bisexual people face. They also face general homophobia, especially when in same-sex relationships. Therefore our findings on levels of specific biphobia should not be read as the total level of sexual orientation discrimination bisexual people face when accessing services.

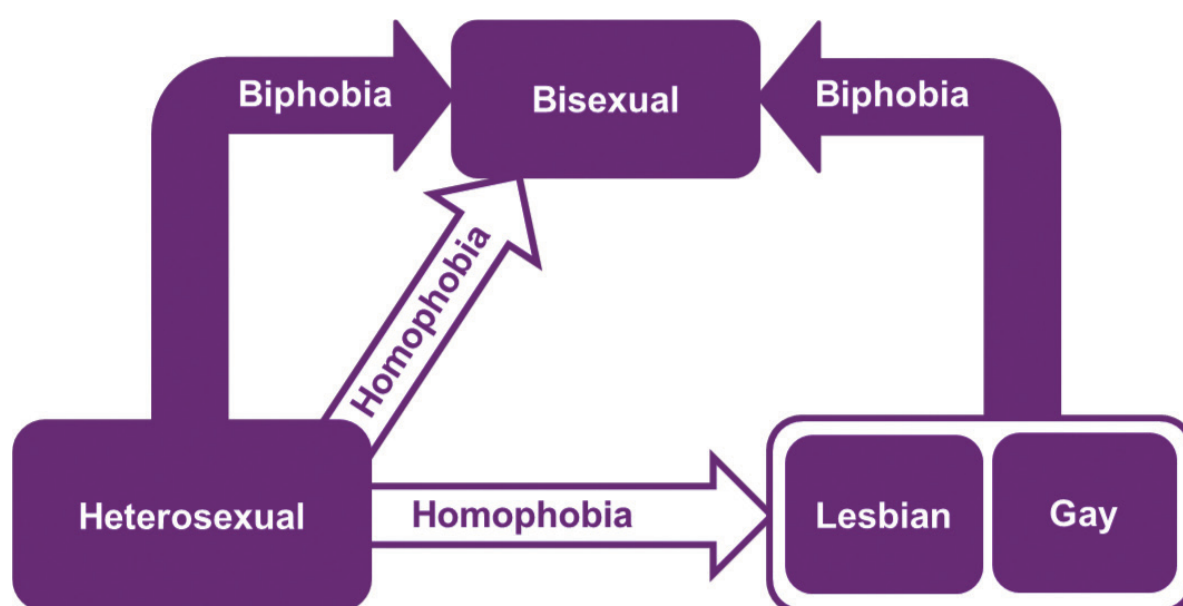
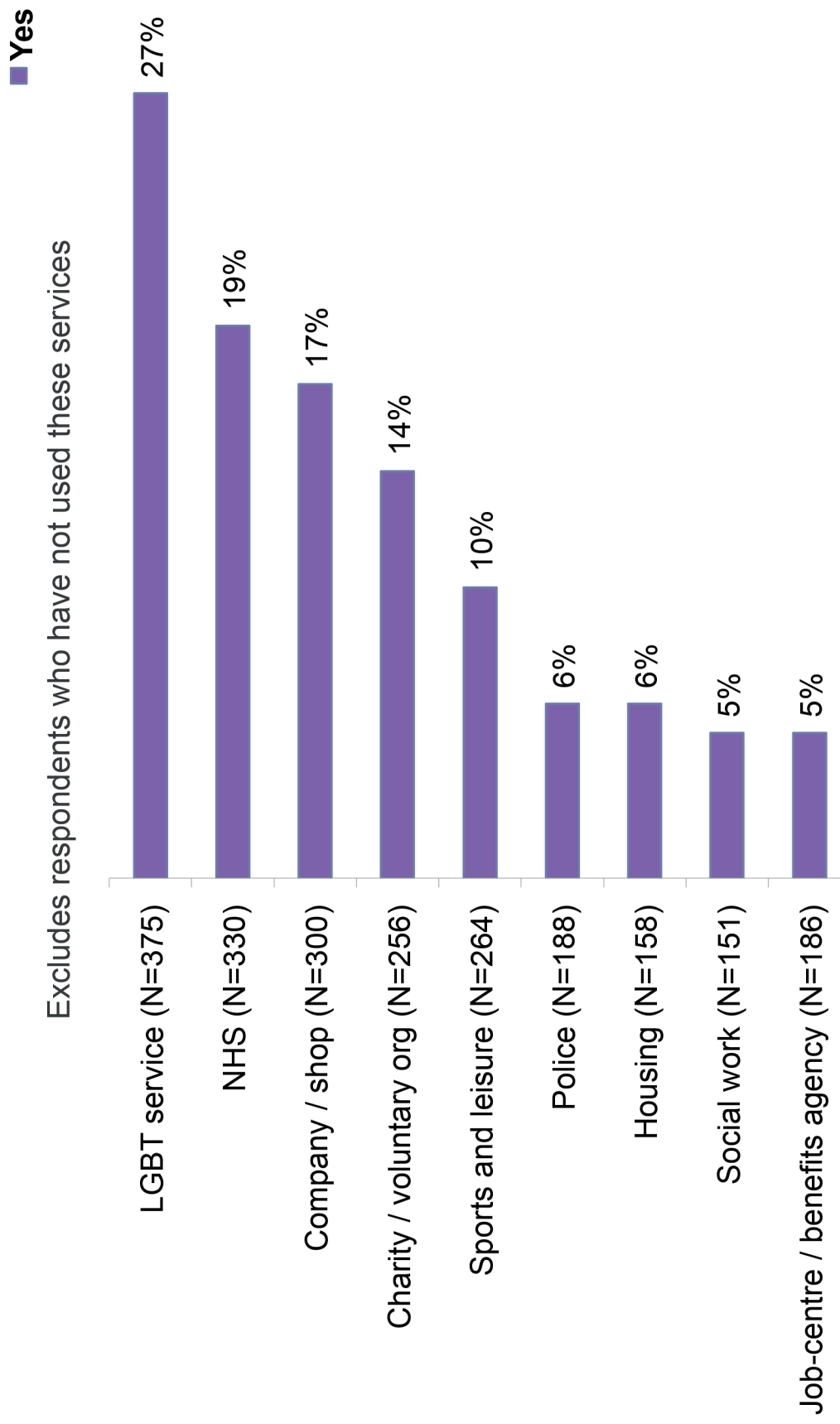


Chart 7: Within the last 5 years, have you experienced any biphobia from any of these service providers?



As can be seen in chart 7, the highest amount of biphobia experienced was within LGBT services. This is explored in detail in report section 5.6. With regard to mainstream services, NHS services rated the highest for the amount of biphobia experienced.

The text responses to this question (N=109) have been organised by service type except for the last point, which cuts across all services:

Health services

Nearly half of respondents who provided additional details described incidents of biphobia that they experienced when accessing NHS services. Just under a third of these were about mental health services in particular. Other studies have also found high rates of negative reactions to bisexuality within mental health services⁸ and that bisexual people are at higher risk than lesbians/gay men of mental health professionals making inappropriate links between their sexual orientation and their mental health problems⁹. Bisexuality and mental health may be a particular priority given that “Health Inequalities statistical information shows that 42% of gay men, 43% of lesbians and 49% of bisexual men and women have clinically recognised mental health problems compared with rates of 12% and 20% for predominantly heterosexual men and women.”¹⁰

Bisexual people may be in particular need of accessible and safe health services. ‘Count Me In Too’ found that “bisexual respondents are also more likely to be disabled than lesbians or gay men”¹¹ and that those identifying as bisexual are significantly less likely to describe their emotional and mental wellbeing as good or very good in the last twelve months compared to lesbians and gay men¹². An article in the ‘Journal of Public Health’ found that “Bisexual women were 64% more likely to report an eating problem and 37% more likely to have deliberately self-harmed than lesbians. They were also 26% more likely to have felt depressed and 20% more likely to have suffered from anxiety in the previous year than lesbians.”¹³ Other research has also found that “self-reported health is much worse among bisexuals and those identifying with another non-heterosexual identity.”¹⁴

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8. **King and others**, 2003, EHRC RR34 Page 208 as quoted in **Williams and others**, 2010, Page 15
 9. **King and others**, 2010, Page 6
 10. **Greater Manchester West, Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust**, 2014, Page 31
 11. **Browne and others**, 2008, Page 14
 12. **Browne and others**, 2008, Page 59
 13. **Colledge and others**, 2007
 14. **Williams and others**, 2010, Page 36

'The Bisexuality Report' references a survey of a bisexual conference at which "36% of attendees had either single (24%) or multiple (12%) mental or physical health impairments that interfered with their day-to-day life."¹⁵ This is much higher than the 18.8% estimate of the Office for National Statistics for the percentage of disabled people in the general UK population¹⁶.

"A nurse refused to treat me due to being bisexual. My mother overheard him saying to the senior nurse, 'I refuse to treat her, she's not normal and just a greedy bitch, she needs to decide what gender she loves, it's unnatural to love both'."

"NHS mostly as an employee but also as a patient, including assumptions about my sex life, I was lectured by a GP about how by being bisexual I was exposing myself to all kinds of STD's and that I was inviting sexual assault."

"GP asked me if getting married meant I'd 'made up my mind'."

"An NHS sexual health nurse called me 'greedy' when I said I was bisexual."

"When a physiotherapist asked what I was doing at the weekend and I mentioned BiCon, he was instantly hostile. He didn't say anything specific but a previously friendly professional relationship suddenly went cold and he glared at me in a way that made me feel uncomfortable about returning for further treatment."

"My mental health social worker looked disgusted when I mentioned having previous girlfriends."

"I have been treated worse as a psychiatric inpatient because I talked about my relationships, friendly nurses became unfriendly."

15. **Barker**, 2012, Page 26

16. **Office for National Statistics**, 2015, Page 4

Sport and leisure

A few respondents gave examples of biphobic exclusion in sports and leisure facilities.

“I was asked to change in separate cubicle at the gym.”

Sexual health clinics

A few respondents gave examples of biphobia when accessing sexual health services.

“Sexual health clinics have repeatedly made derogatory comments when I reveal my sexual history.”

“Went to a sexual health clinic for a check-up, preparatory to possible new relationship. Described sexual history - lots of men, a few girls, 20 years monogamous with a man. Doctor start to tick ‘straight’ box on form! Challenged. He said obviously my same-sex experiences with women were long ago, clear implication of experimentation, less serious. Had to tell my new interest was female to convince him.”

Schools and education system

A few respondents wrote about experiences in education.

“Was educated at a religious school, homophobia and biphobia was everywhere, the only ‘normal’ sexuality that they described was a heterosexual one.”

“It was name calling and jokes made while I was in the education system, but I think this is mainly due to ignorance and lack of understanding.”

Job-centre/benefits agency

A few respondents gave examples of biphobia they had experienced from the Department of Work and Pensions.

“Jobcentre refused to accept I had a male friend visiting me. I was told we must be in a relationship and therefore my jobseekers allowance would be stopped and he’d have to support me. I was openly told a female friend staying over just as often would have been no problem, till I said I was bisexual, so what’s the difference? Was then told I couldn’t have anyone stay over as everyone knows you people will sleep with anyone.”

Local authority

A couple of respondents expressed concern in relation to local authorities.

“Housing: complaints about neighbour being abusive, said we were “flaunting” our sexuality and upsetting neighbour.”

“My local council don’t allow bi foster parents.”

Police

A couple of respondents wrote about accessing the police.

“While reporting a sexual assault, the bisexuality of myself and my housemate were part of the investigation by the police. Neither of us had committed a sexual assault.”

Support workers

One respondent wrote in detail about experiences of biphobia from support workers.

“I’ve experienced quite a bit of prejudice from two of my support workers, whom I get coming to my home because I’m disabled. One has made repeated comments, including, ‘When you see two lesbians together, you can always tell which one is the man.’ The other burst out laughing when I told her about a transphobic incident and then got hostile with me. The agency did do some LGBT awareness training when I pretty much insisted, but they haven’t taken any disciplinary action against either of the support workers, seem to think the incidents were my fault, and are now trying to charge me £600 a year to make sure that my support workers “have the right values for me” - they’re repainting homophobia/biphobia/transphobia as a ‘values clash’.”

Avoid biphobia by passing as straight or gay

Cutting across all types of services, some respondents noted that they feel they have only avoided experiencing biphobia because they have not been open about their sexual orientation.

“There’s a certain degree of invisibility still. People tend to assume you’re either straight or gay, and that there’s no middle ground.”

“I haven’t experienced biphobia because if I’d been in a situation which I could be negatively affected by prejudice, I have not come out.”

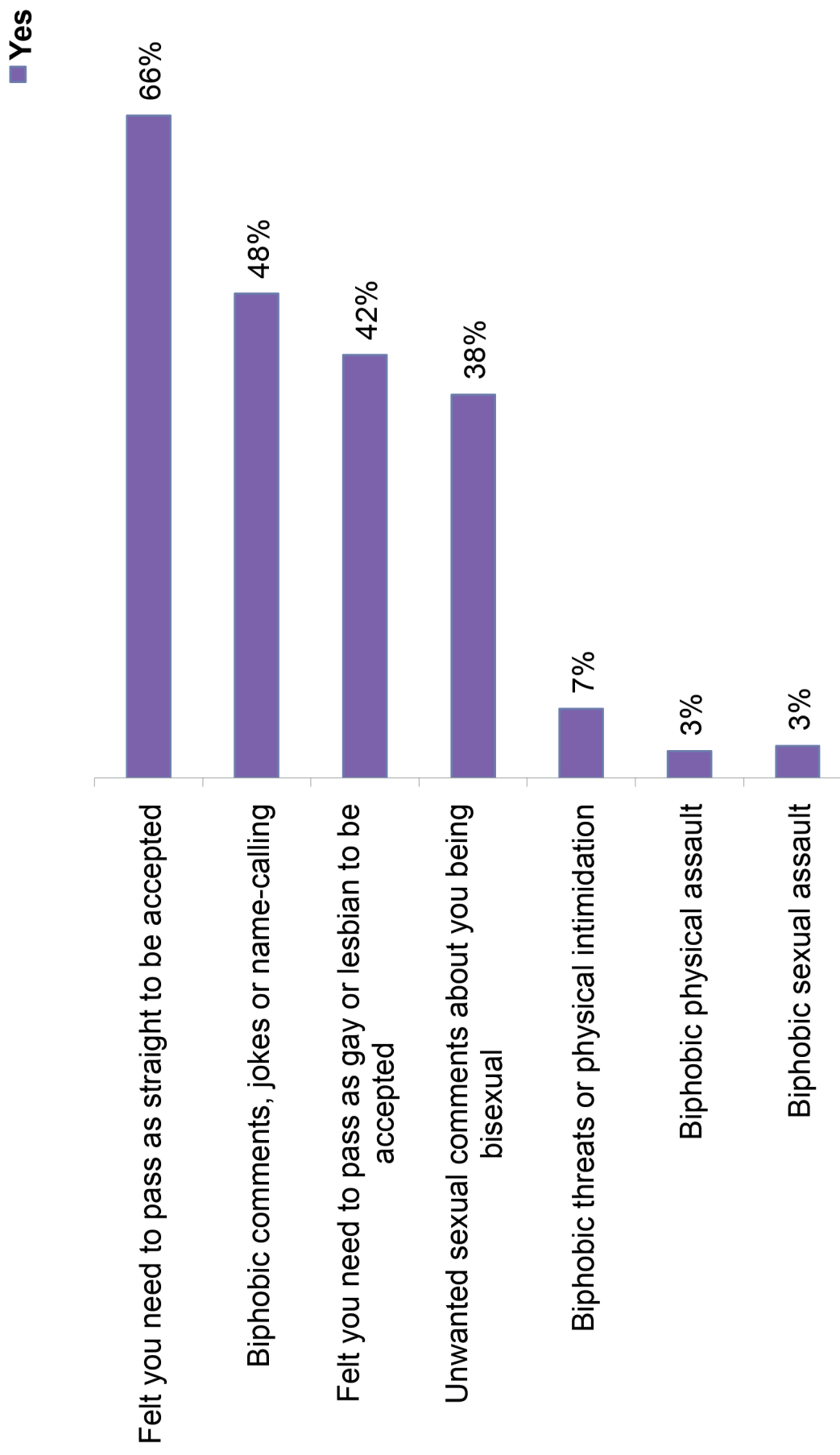
“Don’t generally receive any biphobic discrimination when accessing services, predominantly as I don’t declare it because I don’t feel comfortable doing so.”

Types of biphobia experienced

As shown in chart 8, 66% of respondents have felt they needed to ‘pass’ as straight while accessing services during the last five years and 42% have felt they needed to ‘pass’ as gay or lesbian.

While accessing services, 48% of respondents stated they had experienced biphobic comments and 38% had experienced unwanted sexual comments about them being bisexual. Biphobic threats had been experienced by 7%. Physical assault and sexual assault while accessing a service had each affected 3% of respondents.

Chart 8: Within the last 5 years, have you experienced any of the following while accessing services? (N=378)



5.6. Experiences of using LGBT services (N=375)

“I have been referred to as a weird hybrid, told that I can decide whether I’m gay or straight told, how lucky I am to be bi, told that if I don’t want abuse I need to pick one and it will keep happening till I do (‘cos being bisexual means I deserve abuse, right?) This was just from one service, at the time the only service in my area.”



Sadly, a higher proportion of respondents who have used services reported experiencing biphobia within LGBT services than any other type of service. Given that LGBT organisations are funded to promote inclusion, equality and support for bisexual people this is a particularly worrying finding.

As detailed earlier, this survey also found that 75% of respondents usually feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with LGBT services, a much higher percentage than for any other type of service. However it seems that this higher rate of sharing such information may increase the risk of experiencing biphobia, even within organisations that are specifically meant to be a haven from discrimination in the mainstream.

Recognising this issue of biphobia within the LGBT movement is not new. In ‘Bi Notes for a Bisexual Revolution’, Shiri Eisner explores how bisexuality has both been simultaneously excluded from and assimilated

with LGBT movements¹⁷ and cites others who have criticised these same phenomena. ‘Count Me In Too’ also reported high levels of “marginalisation from LGBT venues and events.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, the results from our survey also seem to indicate that, in general, LGBT organisations and groups have a lot more work to do if they are to become truly safe and inclusive of bisexual people and effectively understand and work for bisexual equality.

The text responses about experiences of biphobia while using LGBT services (N=69) fell into the following three themes:

Openly negative and prejudiced views about bisexuality

Two thirds of respondents, forty-four individuals, who provided additional information gave details about experiences of LGBT organisations or their service users openly expressing negative and prejudiced views about bisexual people and bisexuality.

Eighteen of these respondents recounted experiences about being told by LGBT organisations or other service users that they are either not really bisexual because bisexuality does not exist or that they are lying or are confused about their sexual orientation.

“I have been told I am just being fashionable and should get over it as I am with a man now. I have been told that a bi group should not exist as we are mentally ill and will grow out of it and should not encourage others to believe they are bi, we should support them to find their real gay or straight affinity instead.”

“Told to ‘get off the fence’ in a meeting of gay and bi men. Told ‘I don’t believe in bisexuals’ many times.”

“I was once called out by a fellow TU LGBT rep at a meeting (a lesbian) who aggressively asserted that I wasn’t actually bisexual, I just haven’t met the right woman yet.”

17. **Eisner**, 2013, Page 19, 92 and 287 - 318

18. **Browne**, 2008, Page 34

The other twenty-six respondents gave examples of staff or service users expressing other stereotypes about bisexuals and bisexuality, including that bisexuals are “greedy”, “liars”, “cheaters” or “dirty”. These negative stereotypes about bisexuality have previously been identified as prevalent in society¹⁹.

“When I was younger and identified briefly as lesbian I was told it was a good job I wasn’t bi cos bisexuals are ‘greedy’ and ‘confused’ and not as good as ‘real gays’. They all agreed that they hated bisexuals.”

“People saying they cannot trust a bisexual as if we are all innately liars and cheaters.”

“Heard lots of negative comments about bisexual people and dismissal of the need to include bisexual people. Have heard people falsely claim that bisexual people have not done any LGBT equality activism.”

“Negative general discussion amongst staff members.”

“When I newly joined the LGBT Society at my university, I was talking to the President (a gay man who didn’t know I was bisexual) who started to make jokes about ‘dirty bis’ and suggesting bisexual people were somehow contaminated or wrong.”

“I often have debates about the validity of my sexuality going on around me when I disclose my sexuality in gay pubs.”

19. **Eisner**, 2013, Page 37-43 and 122.

Subjugating bisexual needs and identities

Other respondents noted examples of LGBT organisations subjugating bisexual people into gay or lesbian categories.

“Service users frequently call their helpline and email them to say they are confused because they are attracted to people of more than one gender. They are told that it’s fine to be straight or gay - bisexuality is not discussed as an option. Bi issues are not separated out from LG issues in training and there is no one directly responsible for bi issues/ services. I would not access a lot of their services due to this.”

“Abbreviation of LGBT to ‘gay’, which instantly makes me feel excluded, is far too commonplace.”

“Bi erasure, non-binary erasure and pansexual+ erasure. It’s so common, I don’t bother remembering details. It’s the assumption that LGBT means gay, the assumption that everyone is either gay or straight.”

“A study on lesbian and bisexual women facing discrimination amalgamated lesbian and bi into one body and once again didn’t cover the discrimination of bisexuals as an individual group.”

“An LGB organisation answered the question about opposite sex civil partnerships as if it read “heterosexual civil partnerships”, ignoring the fact bisexuals also have opposite sex relationships. I also find booklets that talk about gay and lesbian partners to mean same sex relationships very excluding.”

Discouraged from accessing LGBT services when identifying other than gay or lesbian

Some respondents provided examples of being actively discouraged or prevented from accessing LGBT services specifically for not identifying as gay or lesbian.

“I have been excluded from LGBT groups for being bi.”

“Being told that if I want support I should access resources for straight people as I ‘don’t count’ or I have ‘passing straight privilege’ and therefore resources can be allocated to people who ‘actually need it’.”

“During my time at university, several individuals refused to acknowledge me once they found that I identified as bi. I would purposefully not be invited to events. I did not invest much time in the society and left very quickly.”

“Considering joining an LGBT choir, was told by a choir member that they didn’t really like bisexuals joining.”

“Being told I couldn’t get into a lesbian bar as I’d been seen with a man earlier.”

5.7. Impact of other types of discrimination on experiences of biphobia

When asked if they experience discrimination or harassment due to other aspects of their identities, the majority of respondents said that they do. 61% indicated that they experience multiple discrimination.

Intersectionality and multiple discrimination are usually regarded as topics that are of interest to only a few and as a “minority of a minority” subject that is “additional work” and not part of most services “core purpose.” The data from this question points to a very different reality. It may well be the case that the majority of people who experience discrimination experience multiple discrimination. But until we all start asking questions about multiple discrimination we will not properly recognise the full extent of the issue or the full impact it has on individuals and society.

In the meantime it is important to recognise that, at least in this survey, we have indications that for the majority of respondents multiple discrimination is a part of their lives and impacts on how they experience, process and respond to biphobia.

It should also be noted that while the rates of experiencing multiple discrimination are high in this survey, this may still be under-reported. People with multiple protected characteristics, especially those from minority ethnic backgrounds, are particularly marginalised in survey sampling and may be less likely to identify as bisexual in surveys²⁰.

20. **Aspinall**, 2009, Page 84 and 89

Chart 9: Do you also experience discrimination or harassment due to other aspects of your identity? (N=374)



Respondents were asked how any experiences of discrimination in regard to other aspects of their identity affect their experiences of, and reactions to, biphobia. The text responses (N=119) fell into six themes:

Experience different kinds of biphobia because of other aspects of identity

Nearly a half of respondents who provided additional information said that the kinds of biphobia they experience are different because of other aspects of their identity, especially their sex and gender identity. Some of these respondents also noted that the kinds of prejudice they face also depend on the identities of those who discriminate against them.

Many respondents said that bisexual women are seen as greedy, promiscuous, liars and cheaters. They are often taken less seriously or regarded as really heterosexual but pretending to be bisexual in order to seem cute or edgy and attract men. Many said that this was a particular problem when dealing with heterosexual men, even in formal situations such as accessing services.

“As a woman it’s quite normal to be called ‘greedy’ or to be told you ‘do it to interest men’, or to be told by the rest of the LGBT community that you’re an imposter and don’t need the same support ‘real’ gay people do.”

“Biphobia and sexism are often combined because people’s definitions of female bisexuality frequently come from porn. Bisexuality is regarded as synonymous with promiscuity and seen as deviant.”

“I find the sexism and biphobia combined is just awful, a lot of the stereotypes of bi people go against the expectations of what women should be (flighty, can’t settle down/will cheat, has sex with everyone etc.) along with the already embedded idea that same sex female relationships/intimacy is obviously just a show put on for hetero cis guys!”

Some respondents said that they experience more, and feel at higher risk of, sexual assault and feel generally unsafe because they are bisexual and female.

Unfortunately this fear of being at higher risk because of bisexual orientation is not unfounded or necessarily uncommon. Other studies point to bisexual women being at higher risk of sexual assault and rape. According to the USA's National Centre for Injury Prevention and Control Centres for Disease Control and Prevention: "46.1% of bisexual women experienced rape in their lifetime, compared to 13.1% of lesbian women and 17.4% of heterosexual women."²¹ Elsner also writes about the over sexualisation of bisexual women²² and bisexual women being particularly targeted for sexual violence and slut shaming²³.

"Being harassed for being a woman often makes me want to become a lesbian stereotype in the hopes I would receive less sexual harassment. It makes me feel like I should have to tell the world that I have a girlfriend, just to make people leave me alone. Whenever a man asks me if I'm a lesbian I feel like by telling him that I'm bisexual I'm somehow offering him a chance, rather than just telling him my identified orientation."

"It is almost impossible for me to tell a straight man my age that I am bisexual without being propositioned for a threesome, which happens in formal situations as well as informal."

"As a female I have often had guys make rude comments and remarks about my physical appearance or been groped in clubs, so on the occasions relating to biphobia I find it is worse from straight men and gay women."

21. **Walters and others**, 2010, Page 18

22. **Eisner**, 2013, Page 158-162

23. **Eisner**, 2013, Page 189-192

A few respondents said that bisexual men are seen as more threatening than gay or heterosexual men and thought of as really gay but in denial.

“My physical sex, unfortunately, sees me discriminated against. A large part of my job involves work with children and I feel myself discriminated against on being physically male alone. When people are aware that I am bi/pansexual, that discrimination is often more apparent. As a male and a bisexual, I am automatically seen as more of a ‘threat’ than even a ‘straight’ male and possibly even than a homosexual male, at least a homosexual male who mitigates their threat level through ‘camp’ modulation of their voice and body language.”

A few respondents said that the kind of biphobia they experience depends on their age.

“It makes it more difficult to openly admit my sexuality as people tend to associate bisexuality with younger females and automatically assume it’s just a phase and you cannot speak up as you will be passed off as just young and stupid.”

Some respondents said that they are at greater risk of bi-erasure because they are disabled or are people of faith, and so are regarded as desexualised beings, as not capable of being LGBT, or as automatically and obviously non-LGBT because of these other aspects of their identities.

Compound and complex effects that can be difficult to understand

Over a fifth of respondents who provided details said that, because they experience multiple forms of discrimination, their experiences are complex and the effects of discrimination on them are compounded and sometimes difficult even for them to understand or explain.

“It’s sometimes difficult to disentangle biphobia from sexism and discrimination or harassment on the grounds of gender identity/ presentation.”

“Being disabled makes me a lot more vulnerable, and disabled people are frequently treated very badly indeed, especially by social services, many health services, and even disability services. Institutional sexism makes everything worse. Bizarrely, being relatively young, age 35, makes some things worse, as many disability services are really only aimed at elderly people, and can get quite unpleasant with younger disabled people. With all this going on, it’s not surprising that I rarely dare to come out in these situations.”

“The complex interplay of ‘gender’ conception and sexuality have a big part to play. People find it easier to accept those who ‘fit’ with a compartmentalised idea of identity and sexual/romantic behaviour. For those that don’t conform, dealing with these issues can be difficult, both for them and others.”

“My sexuality is not limited to just “men” and “women”. When people re-state what I’ve told them in binarist terms, I feel like my non-binary gender identity is being disrespected, as well as my sexuality.”

A few respondents noted complex interactions between multiple discrimination and mental health. Most said that multiple discrimination had negative effects on their mental health including exacerbating isolation, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety. Some also noted that their bisexuality had been interpreted by others as resulting from their transgender identity or mental health issues.

While bisexual issues remains an area where little research has been done, all work on bisexual mental health points to bisexual people on average experiencing worse mental health outcomes than people with other sexual orientations. As well as the research referenced in earlier sections a “major Canadian study found bisexual men to be 6.3 times more likely, and bisexual women 5.9 times more likely, to report having been suicidal than heterosexual people.”²⁴

24 Reid, Public Opinion, 2011, referenced by Barker, 2012, Page 24

“I have a mental health issue that can cause me to mood swing into very bad depression, and not feeling accepted can sometimes trigger this.”

“People think my bisexuality is a symptom of my mental health condition. People think my gender confusion causes my bisexuality or vice versa and take neither seriously as a result. People think I am slutty or have no self-respect or call me a dyke because I am a bisexual who is perceived as a woman.”

More likely to experience prejudice and less likely to report it

Just under a fifth of respondents who provided details said that experiencing multiple discrimination has resulted in them expecting to face higher levels of prejudice in the future. Some said that they avoid accessing services because of the amount of discrimination they have previously experienced and therefore expect to happen again. Many of these respondents said that they felt that they are less likely to complain about discrimination than people who experience one kind of discrimination.

“The interaction with biphobia for me is an increase in frequency of discrimination and the fact I can’t get away from it.”

“Biphobia is just one more contribution towards me being reluctant to access services or be open about myself.”

“It compounds my feelings of exclusion and reduces the chance of me complaining about biphobia.”

“I can’t hide my gender or that I’m not British but I could hide my sexual orientation and sometimes I’m very tempted to “tailor” my answers to fit in, depending on how I’m perceived, as straight or as a lesbian.”

“It makes me more nervous to stand up in personal terms and even nervous to stand up in general terms to point out misconceptions and bigotry.”

Little or no effect

Around a tenth of the respondents who provided additional details either said that experiences of other forms of discrimination had little or no effect on their experiences of biphobia or they were not sure how they interacted.

“Not related. My ethnicity and my gender by itself do not imply my sexual behaviour.”

“It doesn't really - while I've been harassed/hit on/groped simply as a woman, I feel that's a very different kind of harassment: while I occasionally feel unsafe as a single woman in certain situations, I much more often worry about not being accepted as a bi person. So the discrimination for bisexuality feels generally less threatening but more pervasive.”

“Not specifically, although there are some assumptions that my religion ties in to my 'immorality', and that both are 'just a phase', commenting upon my relative youth.”

“I sometimes experience comments due to my religion, I am pagan, but I don't feel this intersects with biphobia. Apart from maybe some people just think I am “weird in every department, for the sake of it/for attention.”

Better practised at dealing with prejudice

Around a tenth of the respondents who provided details said that they have become better at dealing with, and speaking out against prejudice as a result of experiencing multiple forms of discrimination.

“I think biphobia affects me less because I’m used to being singled out and discriminated against. Biphobia just adds to the list.”

“I haven’t, yet, had any reactions that obviously intersect my bisexuality and my disability. It has given me more confidence to stand up for myself though, to a degree. If someone makes a comment because of crutches or a wheelchair it’s easier to say something to them. And I get practiced at come-backs, so when I hear something biphobic I have the confidence to say what I think, or say something witty to make them realise how silly what they said was. At least, that’s the idea!”

Biphobia deprioritised because of other forms of discrimination

Some respondents said that biphobia was less of a priority for them because of other forms of discrimination. Some said that this was because they experienced more discrimination on the basis of their other, sometimes more visible, protected characteristics. Others said that they were too busy dealing with other forms of discrimination to deal with or complain about biphobia.

“Often experiences of biphobia are completely swamped by experiences of binarism & cissexism, to the point where I don’t even notice them. I suspect I do get read as straight even when I’m wearing my jacket covered in queer buttons just because I’m a ‘nice young wheelchair-using white lady’ and obviously you can’t be disabled AND queer.”

“I have experienced more casual harassment for being bisexual, but the harassment I’ve experienced for being trans has been more vicious and intimidating.”

“Just by being female and over 50 one is invisible. Too old for anything useful like a job.”

5.8. Examples of good bisexual inclusion by services

We asked respondents for examples of good bisexual inclusion by mainstream service providers.

NHS

Four respondents gave examples of good bisexual inclusion when accessing the NHS. One of these referred to an NHS board working well with a local bisexual group on training NHS staff about bisexuality. The other three were about neutral or positive responses when coming out as bisexual to NHS staff members.

Sexual health clinic

Five respondents said that they had positive experiences of bisexual inclusion at a sexual health clinic. They wrote about staff being friendly, non-judgemental and having bisexually inclusive forms and literature.

“Staff have generally been very good in not defaulting to referring to me as a gay male. On one rare occasion, a health professional did. She was suitably apologetic when corrected.”

“I recently went for a sexual health check-up at a local clinic and was very impressed by how easy to talk to the nurse was, and how nothing seemed to phase her, even talking about sexual relationships with both men and women, sometimes concurrently since I’m also polyamorous. I know it’s a sexual health nurse’s job to be non-judgemental, but I was impressed by how nothing seemed forced at all, she just took everything in her stride without missing a beat.”

Police

One respondent provided an excellent example of working on inclusion from a police service.

“South Wales Police have been doing videos of bi groups and senior officers on biphobia and distributing across the whole force. They are supporting Bi Wales to put on and promote Bi Visibility Day and BiFest Wales. Last Bi Visibility Day they booked and ran a joint stall in Swansea High Street with Bi Wales. They also have briefings on biphobia and run gay staff network materials past Bi Wales before publication and support secretary at the Swansea LGBT forum.”

LGBT services

We asked respondents for examples of good bisexual inclusion by LGBT service providers. The 59 text responses provided examples ranged across the following types of good practice:

- Organisations who take steps to be actively bisexual inclusive
- Organisations who make people feel welcomed and accepted
- Services engaging with high numbers of bisexual people
- Flexibility with terminology, such as using terms like pansexual
- Working in partnership with and supporting bisexual groups
- Users and staff who listen and do not react negatively or judge when people talk about having a partner of a different gender
- Supporting bisexual specific groups and work, such as providing free space and support for bisexual peer led groups
- Finding out from bisexual people what it is like to be bisexual
- Being accepting of bisexual people without being intrusive or making assumptions
- Displaying bisexual specific and bisexual inclusive posters
- Delivering bisexual inclusive workshops that acknowledge the differences between gay and bisexual needs and issues
- Asking inclusive questions on forms
- Supporting and having a presence at bisexual specific events, such as BiCon
- Checking how bisexual friendly organisations and groups are before signposting users to them
- Staff that are trained on bisexual specific issues and needs

“LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing. They make it clear their services are inclusive; but also because they provide a mental health service which is genuinely inclusive of all of LGBT. I know that bisexual people can be particularly vulnerable to mental health difficulties, so it’s so important to have somewhere like this where you can be supported but your bisexuality is neither the elephant in the room nor the cause of everything that’s wrong with you.”

“LGBT Youth Scotland. They display posters. They deliver bi inclusive workshops. They ask inclusive questions. They asked in forms. They don’t presume.”

“LGF²⁵ in Manchester supporting Biphoria²⁶.”

“Unity Wales, an LGBT group, are ensuring their staff and volunteers represent all letters and having training. They support and promote the bi groups.”

25. The Lesbian and Gay Foundation changed its name to the LGBT Foundation in 2015.

26. Biphoria is a local bisexual group

5.9. Ideas for improving services

“I guess speaking about it more would help, I kind of feel like I’m an impostor rather than the ‘B’ in LGBT.”

We asked respondents what they would like to see done to improve bisexual equality and inclusion within service provision. The text responses to this question (N=144) have been grouped into the same themes as the main recommendations of ‘The Bisexuality Report’²⁷:

Increase knowledge and understanding of bisexual experiences and needs

Two-fifths of the text responses called for service providers, including LGBT services, to increase their knowledge and understanding of bisexual experiences and needs. Over half of these specifically called for bisexual equality training and education activities to be carried out. The rest called generally for more understanding, awareness and information on bisexuality to assist service providers to be more inclusive.

“Mandatory LGBT awareness training for all staff. Proper action taken to avoid and stop any harassment or bullying. Proper explanation of more than just ‘some people are gay’, so that bisexuality, trans issues, poly issues and similar are properly understood.”

“All LGBT training should include a section in which bisexual experiences are separated out from LG experiences.”

“I want people to understand that bisexuality is real, it’s not just people ‘too scared to be gay’, or ‘who can’t make up their minds’. I want people to accept my feelings as valid.”

“I would make it compulsory that people attend training on bisexual awareness and related issues before taking up posts in LGBT services.”

27. **Barker and others**, 2012, Page 6

“Possibly awareness sessions run to combat some of the misinformation about bisexuals that appears across the board.”

Avoid making assumptions

Several respondents called for mainstream services to avoid making assumptions about people’s sexual orientation based on the gender of their current partner or assuming that all people are in mixed sex relationships. A few also called for mainstream services to avoid assuming that sexual orientation and gender are fixed for all people.

“Ask about one’s ‘partner’ rather than ‘boyfriend/girlfriend’.”

“There needs to be a cultural shift towards appreciating fluid sexuality.”

Twelve respondents called for LGBT organisations to avoid common assumptions about bisexuality. These included assuming that dealing with gay and lesbian issues will solve all bisexual issues; assuming that bisexuals will automatically feel safe and welcome in ‘gay’ or ‘LGBT’ labelled spaces and assuming that information that just covers same sex relationships is sufficient for an LGBT audience.

“Show an understanding that bisexuals have different issues to gay and lesbian service users. And not target everything at gay people as that’s intimidating for bisexuals. I feel that the B and T of LGBT are usually forgotten.”

“Specifically reach out to bisexuals through promotional materials and examples of how services are relevant to bisexual people’s lives.”

Consult and work in partnership with bisexual groups and organisations

Only one response fell into this theme. Working in partnership with bisexual groups is key to achieving all of the points in this section, but may not be at the front of community members’ minds as it is a process orientated aspect to inclusion work, rather than a product of such work.

“The inclusion of specific bi-representation within any organising groups would be a start.”

Have bisexual people represented in your work

Several respondents highlighted the importance of having bisexual people represented in the work of LGBT organisations. For example, on panels, representatives on committees, and in the language and photographs used in marketing and information resources.

“Putting the word “bisexual” out there, i.e. if there is an LGBT panel, actually include someone in the panel to bring a bisexual point of view. And continue to use the word bisexual or bisexuality throughout the event (it tends to be dropped pretty soon).”

“Having a bisexual flag sticker on window premises or a poster saying that bisexuals are welcome.”

Explicitly include bisexuality in policies

Explicitly including bisexuality in policies and procedures is often the first step for some organisations in becoming more inclusive.

“To have a charter about how they include bisexuality. That they reflect for each service on how they are going to be inclusive of bisexuals and include it in any promotional material. That they have someone to go to report breaches of it or any behaviours that obstruct inclusion of bisexuals. They should also take into account how bisexuals in ‘opposite sex’ relationships might access their service.”

“Mention bisexuality specifically within policy and diversity docs and funding applications.”

Include intersectionality

Without looking at intersectional issues, the needs of many bisexual people will not be met. Several respondents gave examples about how better including all protected characteristics and different socio-economic classes would better include more bisexual people. Particular mention was made of ensuring that organisations reach out to and include all ages, ethnicities and classes. One of these respondents also noted that being inclusive of transgender and pansexual people helps an LGBT organisation to include more diverse bisexual people.

“I would like more attention to be paid to race and class. It seems to me that most public services in Scotland are very conscious of women’s rights and very aware of physical impairments, but pretty blind to other forms of gender, race, class and minority discrimination and the linkages between them.”

“There is a great need for this matter to be subjected to further investigation...and for all ages over 16 years. Emotions within the LGBT community don’t stop at 20, 28 or 78!!”

Deal with all forms of discrimination and exclusion

Several respondents called for mainstream services to be more obvious about being inclusive and welcoming of bisexual people. They highlighted the importance of dealing with biphobia and all other types of discrimination. Exclusion and erasure can take many forms. Simply dealing with obviously prejudiced comments is not enough. Services also need to be able to recognise exclusion through lack of representation, subtly expressed judgemental attitudes and prejudiced ‘jokes’.

“I’d like service providers’ staff/volunteers to be able to recognise biphobia and to stop it and know why it is important to stop it.”

A quarter of respondents who answered this question said that LGBT organisations should recognise that the LGBT community discriminates against and excludes bisexual people, tackle discrimination within LGBT organisations and work harder on including bisexual people and needs. This includes bisexual stereotypes and erasure.

“Biphobia is most rampant within the LGBT sector and community itself. If LGBT organisations aren’t doing anything to tackle biphobia, then what hope is there?”

“Work to alter the attitude of lesbian and gay members towards bisexual people, as their often aggressive or dismissive stance towards bisexual people makes me feel like any LGBT organisations are not meant for me, like I am not legitimate.”

“More ‘safe’ spaces, for example writing down ground rules that would legitimise people to talk about their partners regardless of their gender.”

“More active discussion. Addressing stereotypes. Without active discussion bisexuality will always be thought of as the ‘path to being gay’ or a ‘phase’ or someone who ‘can’t make their mind up’ or is going for an ‘easy life’.”

Respondents also called for LGBT organisations to better recognise that bisexual people experience both homophobia and biphobia outside of LGBT spaces and need full access to supportive LGBT spaces that speak out against biphobia in society and in the media.

Be clear about terminology

It is important to be clear about how different terms are being used. For example, how an LGBT organisation defines bisexuality. Some respondents gave examples of how terminology can be confusing and excluding or inclusive and increase visibility.

“‘same sex’ and ‘other sex’ are more inclusive. ‘Gay’ doesn’t feel inclusive to me.”

“When people are talking about bullying in schools, they should be talking about homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying rather than just homophobic as is usually the case. Saying that homophobic bullying encompasses all is wrong and unhelpful.”

“Don’t assume someone has a same-sex partner but use inclusive language to show that you’ve realised someone might be bi. Always specify that events are inclusive towards bi people i.e. don’t use ‘lesbian/gay’ for a shorthand if you mean LGBTIQ because we still need reassurance that we are included.”

Support and commission bisexual specific research

Respondents also wrote about the importance of supporting and commissioning bisexual specific research. There is currently very little bisexual specific research in the UK and much work is needed to better understand bisexual needs and how biphobia impacts on individuals and how they access services. It is also important that research, especially LGBT research, clearly shows bisexual related results separately from lesbian and gay.

“Bi should be seen as identity with its own needs - not a ‘bolt-on’.”

Support bi groups and events

Respondents called for LGBT organisations to better support bisexual groups and events.

“More events/talks that specifically target or at least mention bisexuals. I often don’t feel confident enough to go to a general LGBT event.”

“Groups for bisexual people, bisexual women and bisexual men - to acknowledge that we are both part of this community and have specific needs and experiences for which we need support.”

“Do something without having to have a small number of bi people turn up every time and make it happen ourselves.”

“I’d like there to be an active bisexual group in Edinburgh again; but I see this as a community group, which might need a bit of help to get started. I’d like bisexual people everywhere, not just in Edinburgh and Lothian, to have access to the sort of bisexual-inclusive health and wellbeing services the LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing provides.”

At the time this survey went live plans were already in place to start the Bi Edinburgh group again. Bi and Beyond is now running with the support of the LGBT Centre for Health and Wellbeing.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

“I’ve experienced serious homophobia and biphobia from NHS services, including a GP who made a remark about ‘revolting faggots’ and a psychotherapist who told me that because I’m bisexual, it was my fault I’d been raped.”

“A nurse refused to treat me due to being bisexual. My mother overheard him saying to the senior nurse, ‘I refuse to treat her, she’s not normal and just a greedy bitch, she needs to decide what gender she loves, it’s unnatural to love both’.”

Many of the respondents’ quotes, like those above, are very worrying. But even more disturbing is that when consulting with bisexual people about our initial findings, many reacted to these quotes with “oh yes, that has happened to me” or “I think that’s pretty common. That’s happened to a number of my friends.” There was a sense that the findings of the report were as expected. While the report provides clear evidence of biphobic discrimination, for many bisexual people the report simply reflects the realities they have been painfully aware of for a long time.

The two quotes above are examples of how biphobia is different from homophobia. While blaming of rape survivors is common, it is unlikely that a psychotherapist would tell a straight or lesbian woman that a rape was their fault specifically because of how they identify. The nurse had a specific issue with bisexuality and not with same sex attraction. This report has also found worrying levels of biphobia occurring within LGBT specific services. This report evidences that biphobia is not homophobia experienced by bisexual people. It is an expression of a different kind of sexual orientation based prejudice that anyone can experience separately from, or in addition to, homophobia.

We were also moved by how many respondents do not feel a part of a community, especially those who said “I do not belong anywhere”. Many bisexual people feel misunderstood and unwanted. This may be because of a combination of factors, including the lack of resourcing and visibility of bisexual specific groups, biphobia within LGBT communities and being frequently mislabelled as straight. This combination of multiple forms of disconnection can impact both mental health and confidence to access services.

This lack of confidence accessing services can be seen in how many respondents said that they were uncomfortable sharing their sexual orientation with services. 28% of respondents said that they never feel comfortable sharing their sexual orientation with their GP. Respondents said that they are most likely to share their sexual orientation with LGBT services; although even then a quarter are not usually comfortable doing so. As happens with other marginalised groups, lower confidence levels in accessing services, combined with isolation from communities, can become a downward spiral of deteriorating mental health and wellbeing.

No work on an equality issue is complete, properly inclusive or representative without incorporating intersectionality. Bisexual inclusion is no different. We have seen that all intersections have effects on the particular issues bisexual people face and how they access services. It is unhelpful and often misleading to prioritise some protected characteristics over others. All are equally important and all deserve particular consideration. However, this report and other studies point to there being a common and pervasive issue with bisexual women being specifically targeted for rape and sexual harassment. As seen in the first quote above, this complex issue can be misunderstood and misrepresented by service providers. Like many intersectional issues, it may also be a situation that many services are not aware of but needs urgent action if service users and their issues are to be properly understood, included and addressed.

The experiences and needs of bisexual people who have other protected characteristics also need a lot more work. This is true for all intersections, but especially for the intersections with ethnicity, disability and faith. Minority ethnic bisexual people remain underrepresented, links between poor mental health and bisexuality are not understood by service providers, and bisexual people of faith can be caught between the ideologies of their faiths and sexual orientation equality movements.

What does all this mean for services? Service providers need to recognise that some bisexual people expect services to be biphobic, even if they are sending out messages that they are LGBT inclusive or even LGBT specific. This means that some bisexual people are avoiding accessing services and others are not being open about their sexual orientation to try to avoid biphobia. It means that services that lack clear visibility of bisexual inclusion actions are at particularly high risk of being seen as biphobic and to be avoided or used only while 'closeted'.

If services are to reach out and build trust with bisexual people, then they need to do things that are specifically bisexual inclusive and not just LGBT inclusive. At the very least, LGBT inclusive or specific initiatives should ensure that they are explicit and fair in how they include and represent bisexual identities. Organisations working to combat prejudice and exclusion because of sexual orientation need to ensure that they understand and explicitly explain how biphobia is different to homophobia, and how to recognise it and challenge it. In all work it is vital that the roles played by intersectionality and multiple discrimination are acknowledged, explored and embedded from the very beginning.

None of these things need to be onerous or expensive. The responses to this survey also indicate that the majority of work needed is about awareness raising and attitudinal change. We mainly need to develop our knowledge of bisexual experiences and needs and ensure that our procedures, trainings and resources are explicitly inclusive. A little understanding and inclusion can go a long way. The good practice examples and ideas for improving services provide inspiration for how services can do this. We have used them to create an easy to follow roadmap to bisexual inclusion²⁸.

28. Can be found in Section 1

7. Key UK bisexual groups and events

BiCon

The annual UK bisexual community get-together. The website includes a list of BiCons with links to their individual event websites.

<http://bicon.org.uk>

BiReCon

A biannual one day event focused on bisexual research held the day before BiCon.

<http://bisexualresearch.wordpress.com/birecon/>

Bi Continuity Ltd

The UK bisexual community charity.

<http://biconcontinuity.org.uk>

Bi Community News

A website and magazine dedicated to sharing bisexual news and events. The website lists local bisexual groups and events.

<http://bicommunitynews.co.uk>

Bis of Colour

The tumblr space for the UK Bis of Colour group.

<http://bisofcolour.tumblr.com>

The Bisexual Index

The Bisexual Index is a collaborative network of activists and other UK bisexuals, working together for a change in the way people view bisexuality and bisexuals.

<http://www.bisexualindex.org.uk>

BiUK

The UK organisation for bisexual research and activism. The website lists key bisexual publications and reports as well as discussion lists and groups.

<http://www.biuk.org>

8. Glossary

There are a wide variety of different definitions available for most of the words listed here. We encourage readers to explore and compare other definitions.

Asexual person

A person who does not experience sexual attraction.

Biphobia / biphobic

Discriminatory or prejudiced actions related to someone's actual or perceived bisexuality.

Bisexual person / bi person

A person who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of more than one gender or regardless of gender.

Bisexual erasure

To make the existence of bisexual people invisible by writing them out of history, academia, news media and other information sources. This can be done by ignoring that they are bisexual, calling bisexual people straight or gay or denying that bisexuality exists.

Disability

This report uses the social model of disability which proposes that disability is created by barriers in society or by the way that society is organised which does not take into account the various mental and physical differences and impairments that people may have.

Ethnicity

A socially defined category of people who identify with each other based on common ancestral, social, cultural or national experience.

Gay person

A person who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of the same gender.

Gender binary

The traditional western system of regarding gender as having only two options: men and women.

Gender expression

A person's external gender-related appearance (including clothing), speech and mannerisms.

Gender identity

A person's deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned to them at birth.

Heteronormativity

A viewpoint that preferentially treats heterosexuality as a norm from which people deviate if they have any other sexual orientation.

Heterosexual person / straight person

A person who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of a different gender.

Homophobia / homophobic

A discriminatory or prejudiced action related to someone's actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Impairment

One or more medical conditions that negatively affect a person's ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

Intersectionality

Identities, experiences or approaches to equality work that fall into more than one protected characteristic at the same time.

Intersex person

A person born with their chromosomes, reproductive organs or hormones varying in some way from what is traditionally considered clearly male or clearly female in terms of biological sex.

Lesbian woman

A woman who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted to other women.

LGBT / LGBTI / LGBTQ

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer

Multiple Discrimination

Experiencing discrimination on more than one protected characteristic, either on different occasions or at the same time.

Non-binary person

A person who has a complex or fluid gender identity positioned outside the man/woman gender binary or who identify as having no gender.

Pansexual person

A person who is emotionally and/or sexually attracted to people of more than one gender or regardless of gender. Some people use the term pansexual rather than bisexual in order to be more explicitly inclusive of non-binary gender identities.

Polyamorous relationships / poly relationship

Relationships which involve more than two intimate partners, with the knowledge and consent of all involved.

Protected Characteristics

The nine personal qualities that are legally covered by the Equality Act 2010: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy/maternity, marriage/civil partnership, race, religion/belief, sex and sexual orientation.

Queer

An umbrella term sometimes used for diverse sexual minorities that are not heterosexual, heteronormative, and/or gender-binary. It may be used to challenge the idea of labels and categories such as lesbian, gay and bisexual. It is important to note that the word queer is an in-group term, and a word that can be considered offensive to some people, depending on their generation, geographic location, and relationship with the word.

Race

Refers to defining a person or groups of people by physical characteristics such as skin colour, hair type and facial features. Can also include aspects of cultural, ethnic and national identity.

Sexuality

Refers to the sum of various aspects of attraction and behaviour that add up to how a person expresses themselves as a sexual being. This includes the type or types of partner a person is attracted to, the kinds of sexual activities they prefer and how they organise their relationships, for example: monogamy or polyamory.

Sexual Orientation

A person's identity in relation to the gender(s) to which they are emotionally and/or sexually attracted.

Transgender person / trans person

A person whose gender identity or gender expression differs in some way from the sex assigned to them at birth.

Transphobia / Transphobic

A discriminatory or prejudiced action related to someone's actual or perceived gender identity or gender expression.

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LGBTI Equality and Human Rights in Scotland



Published May 2015