

The Experiences and Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People Seeking Asylum and Refugees Living with HIV: A Liverpool Study

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Disclosure, Non-disclosure and Isolation

The first section of the research focussed on the ability of people seeking asylum or refugees to disclose information regarding their sexual orientation, gender identity or HIV status to others (including family members, friends, their communities and to service providers in Liverpool). Personal, social and structural barriers that impeded on the ability of individuals to disclose this information were identified in the research:

Personal and Social Barriers:

- Not being emotionally or mentally ready to talk about their experiences
- Fear of rejection from their friends, communities and professionals within support organisations
- Fear of prejudice and discrimination associated with their sexuality, gender identity or HIV status
- Fear of further disclosure by individuals to their communities which may result in them becoming ostracised from these communities
- Fear that the disclosure of their identity may harm their asylum case

Structural Barriers:

- The lack of services
- The lack of safe spaces

The research identified that although some organisations in Liverpool do provide some services and safe spaces to these groups of individuals, it is often the case that organisations are restricted by funding conditions that make them unable to be fully inclusive (i.e. service users must explicitly be living with HIV to access any of the services available in HIV organisations). In addition to this, although there are small support teams or professionals within some support organisations that can offer advice, support and guidance to people seeking asylum who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or HIV positive, there is no dedicated team or service in Liverpool which can streamline the support that is available.

Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and HIV status

The second section of the research focuses on the experience of seeking asylum in regards to sexual orientation, gender identity and HIV status. The UK asylum process is a daunting experience for any individual who hopes to seek asylum in the UK. However, for individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or HIV positive it is a process that can be significantly re-traumatising. These individuals are in a particularly vulnerable position not only mentally and physically, but socially, culturally and politically also.

The research identified that:

- Regardless of the acts of persecution they have suffered in the past at the hands of their families, communities and state actors, many LGBT and HIV positive people feel a great sense of guilt and shame for seeking protection in the UK.
- Identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or HIV positive can result in individuals being ostracised from their communities in their home countries and in Liverpool due to the high prevalence of prejudice and discrimination around sexual orientation, gender identity and HIV.
- Accessing voluntary, community and statutory support organisations in Liverpool can be extremely difficult for these individuals as they can face discrimination from service providers and service users alike.

The Journey through the Asylum Process

The third section of the research highlighted the key issues and barriers impacting upon people seeking asylum at four key stages of the asylum process. These were identified by professionals working in support organisations in Liverpool that were in some way supporting people seeking asylum or refugees who identified as LGBT and/or HIV positive. The key issues and barriers are shown below:

Before Seeking Asylum

- Experience in their Home Country
- Fear of Authority
- Ostracised by their Community

During the Asylum Process

- Getting their need for protection recognised
- Dispersal
- Accommodation
- Poverty
- Substantive Interview
- Legal Advice and Representation

- Use of Interpreters
- Fear of Detention or Forced Removal

Denial of Asylum Application

- Further Traumatization
- Appeals Process
- Destitution

Acceptance of Asylum Application

- Oppression of Experiences
- 28 Days to Destitution
- The Benefit System
- Refugee Entitlement

Recommendations

The research called for:

- A dedicated support service for LGBT people seeking asylum to be established in Liverpool
- The provision of safe spaces to disclose in
- The provision of additional support services
- Greater visibility of services that are already available
- Specialist training given to all frontline staff in services who support individuals from these groups
- Greater accessibility to good quality legal support
- The provision of specialist interpreters who are aware of the issues associated with disclosure of sexual orientation, gender identity and/or HIV status
- Further partnership work between services and organisations in Liverpool