

## THE RAINBOW RIPPLES RESEARCH PROJECT

### INITIAL FINDINGS ON LGB DISABLED PEOPLE'S UNIQUE EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE PROVISION

“Services provided for disabled people were criticised for not recognising the diversity of disabled people”  
Department for Works and Pensions 2003<sup>1</sup>

The words of this government report echo the findings of several recent national research projects into the experiences of Disabled People. Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) Disabled People are amongst those whose needs at times go unrecognised. The need to gain a greater understanding of their experiences, requirements and aspirations is clear. Research can help service providers become more aware of the barriers LGB Disabled People face and can help improve current practices to provide effective and supportive services for all.

To this end, you may recently have seen advertising leaflets and press releases for the Rainbow Ripples Research Project. Funded by Comic Relief and with the support of both Leeds Involvement Project and the University of Hull, the aims of the research are:

- To gain an understanding of the needs and aspirations of LGB Disabled People in Leeds.
- To assess current service provision from statutory, and voluntary agencies, and private businesses for LGB Disabled People in Leeds.
- To gain an understanding of what constitutes good practice.
- To inform service providers of LGB Disabled People's needs and how they can best meet them.
- To create training materials on the issues raised for courses on health and social care.

In order to meet these aims we are interviewing 20 LGB disabled people who live and/or work in the Leeds City Council area. And I should explain, that by LGB we mean anyone who is lesbian, gay or bisexual or who is questioning their sexuality. By disabled we mean

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<sup>1</sup> Molloy, D., Knight, T. and Woodfield, K. *Diversity in disability: exploring the interactions between disability, ethnicity, age, gender and sexuality*. DWP Research Report 188, October 2003.

anyone who finds themselves discriminated against in society because of mental distress, physical or sensory impairment or learning difficulty, or because they are a Deaf person.

We have sent out approximately 700 questionnaires to all kinds of service providers, and we are interviewing key service providers including West Yorkshire Police, Social Services and the NHS Primary Care Trusts about their services for LGB disabled people.

Whilst it should be stressed that the data is still being compiled and analysed, the initial findings can perhaps be summarised under five main headings. Each of which I will briefly illustrate with examples.

- i) There are few services which specifically consider LGB disabled people.
- ii) Problems of homophobia in services particularly aimed at/developed for disabled people.
- iii) Interrelated misconceptions about disabled and LGB people which impact upon service provision.
- iv) Some problems faced by LGB or Disabled people are exaggerated for individuals who fall into both populations.
- v) Problems of disablism in services particularly aimed at/developed for LGB people.

If I were to ask you as an audience of mainly LGBT individuals to name organizations which specifically offer support and advice to LGB disabled people, you may well struggle, as indeed did our interviewees. Rainbow Ripples is one of only a very small number of such organizations nationally. None of the first 45 service providers to return questionnaires reported offering any services with this specific population in mind.

Whilst, we do not wish to suggest that LGB disabled people want their own private bars, sports centres or housing associations, ghettoized from the rest of Leeds inhabitants. The lack of services with an awareness of the specific needs of LGB disabled people does have significant implications.

For example, a lack of consideration of the particular needs of LGB disabled people in housing services resulted in one interviewee explaining how the process of being placed in what has been considered

the best residential home with respect to his impairment, harshly ignored the home's isolation from the Leeds Gay community, located as it is in a stereotypically heterosexual satellite town, which has been known as a location for homophobic hate crimes.

On the one hand, such an episode points to the all too familiar invisibility of LGB issues in service planning. Something we may all have experienced. On the other hand, however, it also points to more blatant homophobia in services aimed at and developed for disabled people. Whilst many disabled people are able to access the gay community in some way, in terms of bars, telephone help lines and newsletters, others live in frightening isolation, unable to discuss their most basic feelings and emotions. Two individuals I interviewed at a day center each individually told me after two to three hour long meetings how it had been the best day they'd had in ages. Simply to be able to talk to someone about themselves and how they honestly felt, had been 'fantastic', 'wonderful', 'a relief'.

One of them explained at length how they lived with their parents who were their carers. They had come out to them a number of years before, but had been told not to be so 'stupid' and 'disgusting'. In their mid thirties, they had never had a relationship and life consisted of the routine of attending a day centre five days a week, where they were too afraid of negative reactions from care assistants and other users to talk to anyone about their feelings, and a home life where their parents were ever present, their privacy was virtually non-existent and their only social life consisted of trips to the local working men's club with their parents. Access to the 'gay community' was little more than a day dream, the occasional glance at a website in their bedroom or at a copy of Shout! When they were sure no-one else was looking at the day center information rack.

The resistance of residential home staff to any partners, let alone gay or lesbian partners visiting residents was another issue raised in interviews. Too many homophobic PA's, readers and interpreters restrict disabled people's access to information on LGB services, events, and venues as they take it upon themselves to screen out what they consider inappropriate or simply refuse to assist an individual with access to it.

Some times stereotypical misconceptions about both LGB and disabled people interact with one another to exacerbate the discrimination LGB disabled people face. Possibly the best example of this has been raised

particularly, though not exclusively, by Mental Health Service Users. Several interviewees have outlined how psychiatrists and counselors whom they have been referred to have worked from an automatic assumption that their sexual orientation is the main, if not sole cause of their distress.

This scenario may seem familiar to any of you who do not necessarily consider yourself disabled, but who have chosen to make use of counseling services at any time. Many of the issues raised by interviewees were common to all LGB people or all Disabled people respectively. However, it is perhaps worth noting that the combination of being both disabled and LGB can sometimes exacerbate an individual's difficulties.

For example, many past studies on LGB people's experiences have pointed out how many, on occasions, choose to be dropped off, or picked up, by taxis a street or two away from a gay venue, so as to conceal their identity and reduce the risk of homophobic confrontation. Such, practices, however, are not so easy to implement if your mobility needs are such that you have to be taken, quite literally, door to door; or where a visual impairment may make it impossible to find your way the short distance between drop off point and venue without assistance.

As I said, many aspects of these points may all seem familiar and you may to some extent feel that I am preaching to the converted. However, the final issue that the early findings of the research appears to be throwing up, is that of disablism in the LGB community, something which perhaps raises some uncomfortable questions which we need to address.

I am delighted to see the interpreters here tonight, to have seen the offers of assistance for disabled people on the adverts for this AGM and know that MESMAC are working generally on improving access for disabled people to their events and information services including their website. But ask yourselves how many of Leeds gay bars and clubs have accessible toilets, low bars, flashing light free areas and so on, and you will realize they are an extreme rarity rather than the norm. How many LGB organizations whilst offering information on venues on websites or in magazines give details of disability access, and offer this information in different formats? How many websites meet with the Disability Discrimination Act's guidelines for access via screen readers and other specialist software packages which many disabled people rely upon?

Some sections of the gay communities obsession with the body beautiful and designer labels equally leaves many people I've spoken to feeling unwanted, unaccepted and indeed undesired by their LGB peers.

In short it is clearly overdue for the gay community to ask itself what part it plays in failing to welcome and even in actively isolating disabled LGB people from the support, events, friendships and relationships which they need and crave just as much as anyone else.

LGB disabled people are first and foremost people. They all have feelings, they all have abilities, but like us all they at times depend on others to interact with them to provide them with information in accessible formats and to assist them with practical needs. Just as information on LGB issues has become increasingly available to non disabled people over the last few decades it should be stressed that there were positive responses from interviewees as to how services are improving. However, the gay rights movement still has a long way to go and its diversity, including its disabled members should not be forgotten in those struggles.

Further details of the research project and, in due course, the final report will be available on the Rainbow Ripples website at <http://www.leedsinvolvement.org.uk/rr.html> or from myself at CASS, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX. Some leaflets with a summary of this presentation and the contact details are available.