



# **Justice through Equality**

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Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual & Trans  
(LGBT) Employee  
Project

## **Report on focus groups for and feedback from LGBT employees of Devon County Council**

September to November 2003

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans (LGBT) Focus Group Project explores employees' experiences of living in Devon, receiving services from the Council and working for the Council. A number of concerns are raised which present issues for Devon County Council (DCC) and this report offers recommendations to begin to address these concerns. It also suggests the setting up of an LGBT employee network preliminarily for DCC employees and the piloting of a local government LGBT employee network.

Participation having been sought from LGBT employees of DCC, their comments and discussion highlighted some key themes in their experiences:

- Feeling of isolation
- A lack of a public profile for LGBTs
- The prevalence of heterosexism
- LGBT as an 'uncomfortable' subject
- An inconsistency of approach to dealing with LGBTs and issues, particularly in terms of acceptance

Specific issues were outlined in relation to:

- Schools, recognition of same-sex partnerships, fears of homophobia, an absence of LGBT resources and DCC's role as a community leader for LGBT equality.
- Employment: learning & development training, clumsiness around LGBTs and issues, an exclusive office culture.
- Justice Through Equality Policy on Equality for LGBT People: relatively low profile, equal rights for same-sex partners – pensions, what happens after this project.

An LGBT employee network was desirable to participants.

Clearly the comments and discussions of participants present issues that DCC must seek to address if the County Council is to live up to its commitment to equality for LGBT people. By considering the recommendations presented and indicating how the concerns raised are to be positively progressed, DCC will have taken the first steps to reassuring its LGBT employees, as well as, in this area, beginning to translate its commitment to equality and diversity in Devon into practice.

## INTRODUCTION

As part of Devon County Council's (DCC) ongoing commitment to equality and diversity, in view of the statements set out in the DCC Policy on Equality for LGBT People, and the County Council's continual progression upwards through the levels of the Equality Standard for Local Government, this brief was commissioned by the Chief Executive's Directorate:

*"To run and document a series of focus groups for LGBT employees to find out what their experiences are of:*

- 1. Living in Devon*
- 2. Receiving services from the Council*
- 3. Working for the Council*

*To explore and present options for setting up an LGB employee network:*

- 1. Across local government in Devon*
- 2. Within the County Council."*

This report seeks to outline the response to this brief. It does not claim to represent the opinion of all LGBT employees of DCC but does offer a summary of participants' views from which a valuable insight can be gained of the experiences of LGBT employees.

### The focus groups

The focus groups were facilitated by David Watson, author of the consultation paper 'Celebrating Diversity – How does DCC embrace equal opportunities by reaching out to Devon's rich diversity of people? With particular reference to the LGB and Traveller communities.'

Before any work could begin on this project, the Intercom Trust (a network for LGBT people and communities in the South West) and UNISON were consulted. Their advice was sought on how best to facilitate the focus groups and get the feedback that was required. It was also important at a preliminary stage to have the support of both these organisations with a remit for representing LGBT employees of DCC.

In the interests of ensuring that LGBT employees would feel able to participate in this exercise, a number of steps were taken to publicise the project and put employees at ease:

1. Publicity in the form of posters, adverts in the JOBS! Bulletin, an article in Common Ground, and an email to all staff were

- produced. All high profile statements of DCC's commitment to the project.
2. A letter to all senior managers was sent out by the Chief Executive so line managers would be aware of and be able answer questions about the project, as well as being able to reassure any employees in their departments who wished to take part.
  3. An online questionnaire was formulated to better enable those outside of County Hall to participate, as well as those who may feel uneasy with group situations.
  4. The Intercom Trust agreed to be a third party receiver of any contributions individuals may wish to make without directly contacting David Watson. It was also made known that David Watson was an LGBT employee himself to foster trust for the project and remove some of the uncertainties about empathy that could have otherwise existed.
  5. All contact and participation from LGBT employees would remain confidential, with the anonymity of those participating in the project assured.

### The participants

Those taking part in the focus groups were in no way 'selected' apart from in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity. They put themselves forward to participate in reaction to awareness raised about the project. Due to the nature of the absolute anonymity of those filling out the online questionnaires, it is not possible to judge whether or not participants were representative of their Directorates. However, the focus groups themselves had at least one participant from each Directorate.

The demographics of those taking part in the project were as follows:

- Focus Group participants – 19
- Respondents to the online questionnaire – 11
- One to one interviewees – 2
- **TOTAL – 32**
  
- 24 female and 11 male employees contacted me with an intention to take part in the project, however, as can be seen by the total number of eventual participants, 3 were unable to contribute and it is not possible to determine whether these are male or female.
  
- From discussions at the focus groups it emerged that there was a mix of employees from within and beyond County Hall. Although

the attendees were mostly Exeter-based. Respondents to the questionnaires were predictably based in the most part in the County outside Exeter.

- 3 employees of local authority organisations other than the County Council contacted me further to an advert in the JOBS! Bulletin which is made available outside DCC. All expressed disappointment that their employer was not conducting a similar exercise.

### An LGBT Employee Network

The second part of the project brief concerning the possibility of setting up an LGBT employee network formed part of the discussions and questions mooted with participants. It is intrinsically linked to the experiences of LGBT employees and the comments and discussion serve to illustrate a clear need here.

## **THE COMMENTS AND DISCUSSION**

Drawn together from all of the feedback gathered during the project, there were a number of key themes that dominated discussion, be it in relation to living in Devon, receiving services from the Council, or working for DCC.

This summary inevitably focuses on the concerns participants raised, as it was the less positive issues that provoked the most discussion. However, the majority of participants felt reassured by this project as an indication that DCC clearly cared about their experiences. They agreed that this was an important measure to begin to build confidence among LGBT employees.

### Isolation

There were many comments about a traditional attitude to LGBTs from the heterosexual population of Devon. One commentator remarked of a 'Hovis' style collection of small communities, that seem to hold what one could now refer to as an outdated image of LGBTs. Of course, this small community feel to many areas in Devon is as attractive to LGBTs as their heterosexual counterparts, however, some participants indicated that by default of the close-knit community, 'coming out' was rendered especially difficult.

There tended to be a perception that the number of LGBTs in Devon was relatively low compared to more 'cosmopolitan' areas. This contributes to the feeling of stark contrast with the 'norm' of a seemingly overwhelmingly heterosexual Devon. Few of the participants were aware of any networks that existed for LGBTs, although some were more familiar than others with organisations like the Intercom Trust. The lack of a vibrant 'gay scene' in Devon was considered to strongly contribute to a feeling of isolation in Devon. Regardless of whether participants would frequent scene venues themselves, there was a consensus that the scene made a statement about what was going on for LGBTs in an area. Perhaps also how accepting the wider community was of LGBTs.

LGBTs outside of urban areas also recounted an experience of rural isolation that adds to the situation they find themselves in as an LGB or T.

### Profile of LGBT people

Participants spoke of a general lack of a public profile of LGBTs, the kind that is created by social and community spaces for LGBTs, events for LGBTs, a media interested in LGBT issues and the like.

But also by a genuine acceptance of LGBTs that allows people to be overtly LGB or T in Devon. Few participants said that they would feel confident to walk down Exeter high street holding hands with a partner of the same sex.

Businesses seem to be slow to cater for the 'pink pound' both in terms of a vibrant gay scene and the wider business community providing for LGBT consumers. An example was given of the aversion exhibited by newsagents on the purchasing of the *Gay Times*. Also bookshops, video stores seem to offer little of specific LGBT interest, and treatment can still sometimes be less than amicable when a same-sex couple attempt to check into a hotel.

The South West peninsula is somewhat unique in having no major 'Pride' festival, the closest being Bristol. Devon certainly does not host such an event and the majority of participants said they would welcome a Devon Pride. Exeter was suggested as a potential location as a 'capital city.'

### Heterosexism

Perhaps the most all pervasive experience of the participants was that of heterosexism. The fact that everyone in Devon seems to assume everyone else is 'straight until proven otherwise' creates an immense pressure on LGBTs. Participants described the consequences as feeling alienated, strange and ultimately abnormal.

Virtually all participants had at one point encountered heterosexism. As heterosexuals are the default, it is necessary to proactively challenge the assumption that everyone is straight. In life and work this experience was widespread and always placed LGBTs in a position of having to correct assumptions, often dealing with the uncertainty and sometimes fear that such a correction involves. One participant during a focus group seemed to sum up opinion well but remarking that 'it just doesn't occur to them that you might be gay!' 'They' referring to members of the community, service providers and colleagues.

Contrasts were drawn with places like London or Manchester, where, albeit not comprehensively, the approach seems to be more open minded about the sexual orientation of individuals. The word 'partner' for example being more commonplace in these areas than in Devon.

### Uncomfortable subject

There seemed to be a sense that the whole LGBT discussion remained somewhat taboo. Schools especially were singled out as an area where ideas and approaches are formulated, although unsure of the exact nature of the County Council's role as the Local Education Authority, there was significant support for the necessity of an LGBT profile in schools. At present, it was felt simply not to be talked about.

The reluctance to discuss LGBT life or issues is clearly alienating. In any environment, the word 'gay' being a scary one is not at all helpful in inclusion terms. Some participants felt that the potential reaction to introducing the 'LGBT factor' to the equation was just not worth the bother. This for fear of the inevitable 'grief' that would result or just a desire not to cause friction.

### Inconsistency of acceptance

The experiences of participants obviously varied, and it was clear that the level of acceptance for LGBTs was inconsistent. There was a tendency to feel that the city of Exeter was more cosmopolitan, hence less averse to LGBTs than rural areas. Exeter was also felt to be less intimidating for LGBTs than Plymouth, despite Plymouth having a larger gay scene.

However, those born in Devon had an alternative commentary to those who had moved to the area from elsewhere. By no means consistently, but for some participants growing up in a small community and being 'out' rendered being LGBT just not an issue. Homophobia was perhaps surprisingly not a word often used (heterosexism being far more common) but experiences here differed from outright verbal abuse and discrimination, to individuals who had never experienced homophobia in Devon.

This inconsistency was also a characteristic of interaction with organisations, including local authorities. The experiences vis-a-vis the police, the health service, different County Council directorates and other local government organisations were all tainted with the dominant themes to varying degrees.

### Specific issues – living in Devon and receiving services

A number of specific examples were noted throughout the project by participants of issues causing particular concern:

- The situation for young LGBTs being quite a lonely and unsupported one. How schools deal with the issue of being LGBT

was a prominent concern including a lack of general discussion and homophobic bullying. Also the lack of LGBT youth groups across Devon and the isolation young LGBT people can feel.

- Recognition of same-sex partnerships was demanded, both nationally, but also practically in terms of how people are dealt with. Not assuming partners will be of the opposite sex, addressing 'next of kin' irregularities in the health care setting, and welcoming gay couples as adopters. It was also questioned why 'marital status' continued to appear on forms for all sorts of things when participants failed to understand the relevance and were unable to indicate that they were not 'single' but could not be 'married'.
- Fears of homophobia in services such as in the elderly care setting.
- LGBT literature and resources in public libraries were noted to be scarce.
- DCC was felt by all participants to have a role leading the community in inclusive provision for LGBT people. There was disagreement as to whether currently the County Council successfully did this, some participants feeling that internally much work still needed to be done before DCC could realistically tell others how to progress. However, most felt that DCC was ahead of the private sector and other public sector organisations in terms of its work on this project, with the Intercom Trust and on the broader equality agenda. DCC was clearly felt to have a responsibility as the representative body and the largest employer to set a good example in the local community.

#### Specific issues – the employment context

In particular respect of LGBTs as employees and the environment they find themselves in, participants raised a number of concerns:

- The current absence of learning and development training that raises awareness of LGBT issues was highlighted. In an organisation where heterosexism is perceived to be widespread and there is a severe lack of confidence with LGBT issues, participants noted the importance of measures to increase their colleagues' understanding here.
- There was a dissatisfaction that equality and diversity has seemed to mean race equality to DCC in the past.
- Some observations were made of a 'clumsyness' when dealing with LGBT colleagues or service users that could be easily avoided with awareness.
- An office culture that was alienating to LGBT employees was the concern of some participants, with differing openness to 'out' colleagues. Whilst some were entirely happy with their working environment, others were afraid to come out or had been forced

to come out by incessantly prying questions about marital status or the like.

- ❑ The reactions to the Justice Through Equality Policy on Equality for LGBT People were revealing, with only a small proportion of participants even being aware of the policy. The policy provoked vehement discussions about whether or not DCC was translating policy to practice, some individuals were clearly annoyed by the document and its manifestation in reality.
- ❑ Whilst the commitments laid down in the policy were felt to be positive, some participants being impressed at how forward thinking DCC was in areas, the policy was felt to be somewhat inconsistent with the perceived reality.
- ❑ Most contentious was the statement that the Council will “acknowledge same sex relationships and ensure that, wherever possible, partners have equal access to the services and benefits available to heterosexual couples.” The specific bone of contention here was in respect of pensions and the lack of recognition for same sex partners. The vast majority of commentators on this matter were insistent that without equality in this area, the rest of the policy was largely piecemeal. It was seen as blatant discrimination.
- ❑ This project was specifically noted as the first real consultation participants had received, and what happens to this information – i.e. what DCC does about it – will be telling of the real commitment to LGBT equality.
- ❑ Participants questioned whether the policy was made available at inductions or on notice boards. The level of awareness about the policy was criticised.

### An LGBT Employee Network

All participants felt that some kind of LGBT Employee Network would be a good thing and that they would consider being a part of such a network. With no other support specifically for LGBT employees in the face of the concerns raised, the peer support that a network would provide was considered valuable.

Participants also found the idea of staying in touch with other LGBT employees appealing in order to continue to share experiences. If members were willing, such a network would help DCC remain informed of the concerns of LGBT employees as an ongoing consultation forum post the successful completion of this project.

Discussion and subsequent feedback on the group considered it taking this form:

- ❑ An email mailing list

- ❑ Regular get togethers
- ❑ A forum for debate of LGBT issues in DCC
- ❑ A means of continually communicating concerns to DCC
- ❑ A way of DCC asking LGBT employees for input
- ❑ A chance to share experiences with other LGBTs in a safe space

When contacted by employees of other local authority organisations in Devon, they expressed a desire for some kind of local government LGBT employee network. Discussions with a number of UNISON representatives would also tend to indicate a need here.

## **ISSUES THIS PRESENTS FOR DCC**

Clearly DCC is aware that previously it has had little knowledge of LGBT employee's experiences, hence the initiation of this project. The participants were eager to find out how their comments would be dealt with, and how DCC would move forward further to the concerns that had been raised.

The County Council has a responsibility set out in a number of places<sup>1</sup>: to be a community leader in equality, to provide best value to 100% of the community and uphold a commitment to equality as an employer. By finding out what DCC employees think of living in Devon and receiving Council services, we can infer that LGBT people across Devon may experience similar problems. The information this project reveals surrounding concerns of LGBT employees will better enable us to address problems and move forward.

We must respond to these key points:

1. The isolation felt by LGBTs in the community, as service users and employees. This indicates that social inclusion strategies are potentially failing LGBT people.
2. Outdated attitudes and prejudices to LGBTs suggest that DCC is falling short of its policy commitments on "eliminating homophobic prejudice and discrimination."
3. If community networks are presently lacking or inadequate, how is the County Council to successfully engage with this hard-to-reach group?
4. Rural isolation is clearly also a factor for LGBTs.
5. A lack of a gay scene reflective of Devon's size and desired diversity not only contributes to a sense of 'nothing going on' for LGBTs but also could remove the County from the destination list of potential LGBT visitors.
6. A virtually non-existent profile of LGBTs suggests a community which perhaps lacks diversity and is not cosmopolitan. This is not the image of Devon DCC seeks to present.
7. That LGBTs feel unable to walk hand-in-hand in public with a same-sex partner reflects intolerance and potentially raises community safety issues.
8. Prejudice from businesses deters LGBT consumers but also potentially damages tourism from LGBTs.
9. The lack of an LGBT Pride festival is a missed opportunity for celebrating diversity and positively engaging with the LGBT community. Other local authorities have found such events positive initiatives to foster.

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<sup>1</sup> The Strategic Plan, the duty of Best Value, the Justice Through Equality policies.

10. Heterosexism being widespread reflects badly on the County Council in terms of the message DCC is sending to those it claims to represent, service users and employees.
11. If schools are not dealing with LGBT issues then the County's LGBT young people remain invisible and feel excluded, potentially adding to homophobic bullying problems. As well as other young people not dismissing prejudice in this area at an early age.
12. Is DCC providing a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTs at work if participants felt the subject of LGBT issues taboo?
13. An inconsistent experience is an indicator that equality of opportunity is lacking in certain areas for LGBTs. This challenges the County Council's commitment to equality.
14. The specific issues raised in relation to living in Devon and receiving services effectively amount to complaints from LGBTs about a dissatisfaction, inequality or discrimination that DCC is in a position to influence.
15. The specific issues raised in relation to the employment context, in terms of working environment and the kind of organisation the County Council is, can be directly addressed.
16. Comments about the Justice Through Equality policy raise serious concerns for DCC in a feeling that commitments are not being met. Do enough people know about a core policy of the County Council? Is it being effectively implemented in practice?
17. An LGBT employee network, having proved desirable and indeed piloted on an informal basis, represents a tangible request that participants felt would be a valuable resource in addressing some of the concerns expressed.

## RESPONDING TO THE ISSUES

In order for this project to move beyond a simple documentation of the concerns of LGBT employees, DCC must address the issues raised and make a reasonable response, bearing in mind the County Council's commitment to equality and diversity.

### Recommendations

<b>1.</b>	<b>In undertaking DCC's role as a community leader:</b>
	a. To promote good practice around LGBT equality issues through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- encouraging employers to ensure workplace LGBT equality</li> <li>- promoting and raising awareness of LGBT equality in Devon</li> </ul>
	b. To challenge homophobia and anti-LGBT prejudice when it manifests in the public arena.
	c. To recognise the importance of LGBT community networks and support their work as partners in the County Council's commitment to LGBT equality.
	d. To investigate the possibility, with the Intercom Trust and LGBT Employee Network, of supporting an LGBT Pride festival in Devon.
<b>2.</b>	<b>In undertaking DCC's role as a service provider:</b>
	a. To ensure that schools are aware of the cessation of Section 28 and work with them to improve personal and social education around sexual orientation, gender identity and LGBT equality.
	b. To include considerations of an isolated LGBT community when formulating strategies and initiatives to tackle social exclusion.
	c. To continue to campaign for improved transport links to rural communities across Devon.
	d. To embark upon measures to ensure staff are not exhibiting heterosexist behaviour or excluding LGBT clients and are challenging anti-LGBT prejudice when dealing with the public or their colleagues.
	e. To continue to support the facilitation of LGBT youth groups in Exeter and North Devon, and seek to extend them across Devon through Devon Youth Service.
	f. To investigate the necessity of the inclusion of the 'marital status' category on forms and to exclude the category if the investigation yields no functional explanation as to its inclusion.
	g. To ensure that the public can access a range of LGBT literature and resources through such channels as the Library service.
<b>3.</b>	<b>In undertaking DCC's role as an employer:</b>
	a. To ensure that the new Learning & Development Training Programme in Equality includes awareness of LGBT issues.
	b. To embark on an initiative to raise the profile of the Policy on Equality

	<p>for LGBT people among employees. This could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ensuring that the Policy appears in employee starter packs</li> <li>- as part of the preparation for the new Employment Regulations (see 3.c.) an initiative to highlight LGBT prejudice in the workplace, possibly in association with an external organisation like LAGER, and where DCC's managers and employees responsibilities lie.</li> </ul>
	c. To ensure that the organisation is adequately prepared for the Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations that come into force on 1 <sup>st</sup> December 2003.
	d. To adopt a positive position on pension rights for same-sex partners with a goal of equal pension rights in the DCC pension scheme.
	e. To recognise the need for and facilitate an LGBT employee network provisionally for DCC employees. A local government LGBT employee network to be piloted among partner organisations.
	f. To join the Stonewall Diversity Champions scheme.

<b>4. To publish a response to this project and its recommendations.</b>
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