



Experiences of and barriers to participation in public and political life for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people

Abstract

This research generates new evidence on the nature and levels of involvement by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGB&T) people in public and political life and the barriers to increased participation. The research critically examines the extent, nature and experience of involvement and participation in public and political life among LGB&T groups, including the meaning and effects of being visibly LGB or T; explores the attitudes and perceptions of LGB&T people towards participation in public and political life and the nature of demand among these groups to participate more and explores the barriers to participation among LGB&T people identifying how to increase representation (including 'visible' representation).

Policy context

This research project and the wider work programme plays a part in fulfilling one of GEO's strategic aims to "promote greater participation and inclusion in public, political and community life". Following the publication of *Working for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equality* in June 2010, the Government will set out how they will take forward the recommendations in a detailed action plan in early 2011. The evidence provided in this report and its recommendations enables us to develop targeted actions to improve the opportunities for, and tackle the barriers faced by LGB&T people who want to participate. This will ensure that LGB&T people believe that the democratic process represents them. This in turn will increase confidence in the decisions that are made and the desire to get involved in the decision making process.

Key findings

- Interviewees had been involved in a range of public and political participation activities, including:
 1. Being part of a trade union
 2. Involvement with a local-decision making body, such as a council or health organisation
 3. Involvement with a community group, taking part in charitable work
 4. Being part of other campaigning organisations, such as a student union
 5. Being a member of, or working with, a political party (either voluntarily or through employment)
 6. Taking part in campaigning activities, including demonstrations and petitions
- Engagement in these broader activities was spread evenly across the four sub-communities (LGB&T) with few notable differences. However, individual activities and experiences within each of these types of activity varied considerably.
- The difference in the activities and experiences gave a rich and detailed picture of the experiences of LGB&T people and the kind of barriers they face in public and political life; it also told us a lot about LGB&T visibility in other areas such as the workplace, education or training and their local communities.
- Despite great difference in the individual experiences of the LGB and T people we spoke to, a clear set of considerations and decision making criteria emerged which we present below as a



Background

Research into the nature, extent and experiences of participation in public and political life amongst lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) and transgender (T) people is rare. Recent reviews on sexual orientation and transgender inequalities for the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) have identified this as a gap in the understanding of LGB&T people's lives and experiences in Great Britain today.

The overriding message from the literature is that the participation in public and political life of LGB&T people needs dedicated attention, if equality of representation and involvement are to be achieved. Within any such dedicated research, exploration of people's actual experiences, the factors that encourage and support participation, the factors that act as barriers to it, decision making around visibility and the fears of LGB&T people, need to be explored.

Research findings

Routes into participation

Among the 20 interviewees who were defined as 'non-active' civic participants, their main reasons for this were personal in nature, such as their natural disposition, lack of time or confidence. However, they also acknowledged not being aware of how to become involved in civic society. For those who do consider participating, their motives are mainly altruistic such as representing their community or working for equality. Some were moved to participate following a negative personal experience and some through the encouragement of others.

Among the active sample their main routes to participation had been through social networks, word of mouth and their workplace or profession. For some transgender interviewees, getting involved in public or political life was seen as much harder compared to LGB people.

Appraisal of the opportunity presented

Aside from a person's motivation and an opportunity being available, there are other factors an individual would consider before deciding to participate. This could include anticipated fear or anxiety which many people feel as part of the participation process. General concerns for homophobia, biphobia and transphobia were frequently reported, as were specific anxieties such as being 'outed' and subject to public scrutiny. A notable number of interviewees from across the sub-communities suggested that fear as a barrier may be more about perception than reality. A few felt that in reality LGB&T individuals had less to fear than they may think. These were often the reflections of those actively participating.

Internal fears were the most frequently cited barrier to participation, but interviewees also cited numerous other factors that influenced their decision. Location, profession and workplace were important determinants. Teaching was frequently cited as a challenging profession for LGB&T people and rural locations presented more participation challenges than urban environments, though not always. Another reported theme is the influence of the media on society's perception of LGB&T people. Interviewees cited frequent negative media portrayals of LGB&T individuals, lifestyles and relationships. Society's perceptions also made many interviewees sensitive to the effects of public or political participation on their significant others. Some acknowledged this to be a prominent barrier.

Action and experiences

There are a wide range of feelings, attitudes and experiences associated with being 'visible' when participating. The data varied considerably according to individual circumstances. Key themes for those who chose not to be visible were fears for safety but also a feeling that sexual orientation or gender identity is not relevant to the



situation. Those who did choose to be visible did so in the main to represent their community.

Most interviewees did not feel that LGB&T people are adequately represented in public and political life and considered it important to have visible LGB&T politicians, councillors and MPs to increase representation, act as role models and challenge negative stereotypes. Others felt (though not mentioned as often) that visible role models are not necessary as sexual orientation and gender identity are private matters.

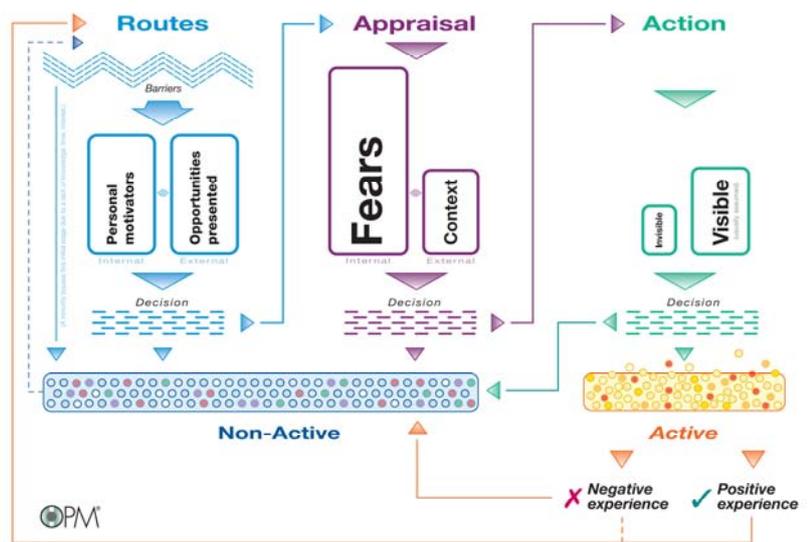
Interviewees reported a wide range of experiences as a result of being in public and political life, some positive, some negative. Verbal abuse, vandalism to property and increasing fears are consistent themes in the data. However, evidence showed positive reactions from others, including, increased confidence, improved well being and the chance to gain new skills. This striking contrast highlights the community costs of discrimination and prejudice.

Conclusions

The range of activities and experiences of the individuals gave a rich and detailed picture of the experiences of LGB&T people and the kind of barriers they face in public and political life. It also told us a lot about the visibility of LGB&T people in other spheres such as the workplace, education or training.

Despite great differences in the experience and position of LGB&T people, there was a clear set of considerations to emerge across the interviews. Below is a model of a person's experiences and thought processes when deciding whether to participate.

The model describes the pathway through three broad stages; routes, appraisal and action. Within each stage of the model are the factors that might influence the outcome of whether they participate or the factors which might feature in their decision making as they decide in each case whether to participate in public and political life or not. Every LGB&T person we spoke to described considering some (or all) of these factors in deciding whether they should participate and whether to do so as openly LGB or T or not. The model brings clarity to the detailed findings from the 100 plus individual LGB&T people that were interviewed and provides a structure for the recommendations.



Recommendations

Recommendations build on the ideas and suggestions of the research participants and are organised around the structure of the action model. A selection is included in this summary.



Routes into participation

- The participation of LGB&T people in both wider and formal public and political life needs to be 'normalised' through national and local awareness campaigns, and outreach to LGB&T communities by public and political bodies.
 - Guidance and support for individuals and groups to remove barriers, encourage people to participate and offer support in situations resulting from participation as LGB or T should be prepared and made available.
 - Monitoring of sexual orientation and gender identity is required nationally and locally in order to establish the size of the LGB&T population
- should be captured and utilised in promotional campaigns.
 - The decision to be visible (as LGB or T) is dependent on other personal characteristics and identities. Further research is required to understand the effects of these characteristics on visibility and subsequent access to public and political life.
 - Research is needed to explore how different forms of social capital can be nurtured within the LGB&T community, and how social capital can be used to facilitate and aid greater levels of participation by LGB&T individuals and groups.

Considering the opportunity presented

- Clearer information on LGB&T rights and protections should be made available.
- More open support for and enforcement of LGB&T rights from government and public bodies is necessary.
- Positive representations of sexual orientation or gender identity in the media need to be strengthened.

Action and experiences

- Positive experiences of participation reinforce and increase the chances that an LGB or T individual will continue and/or broaden their participation. These

Further information

The full reports produced by **Iain Ryrie, Sarah McDonnell, Kate Allman, Robert Pralat - Office for Public Management** are published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

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