

Housing, homelessness and young LGBT people

Solutions to a crisis for LGBT youth



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Summary

Many people are suffering as a result of a national crisis in both the provision of housing, where growing demand exceeds current house-building, and the cost. A higher percentage of young people than ever before are renting their home, and more than ever are doing so in the private rented sector as the supply of social housing continues to fall, a problem exacerbated by government policies such as the expansion of *Right to Buy*. Government cuts to housing benefits for 18-21 year olds make the situation for young people even more acute. It is reported that up to 44% of young people in homelessness services may be affected.¹

For young lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people, these issues are compounded because they may also be facing homophobia and transphobia in the home.

Research indicates that young LGBT people experience high levels of homelessness as a result of the homophobia they experience. Being homeless makes people even more vulnerable to other risks and to mental health problems, and many of the services that should be there to help are under extreme pressure.

Trade unions are supporting calls to challenge the shortage of genuinely affordable housing and campaign for better housing policy. This report reinforces these wider messages and identifies specific action needed to help young LGBT people.

The social context

The good news is that people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual and those who identify as transgender have never been more accepted in British society following a transformation in public attitudes over just a few decades, accompanying growing equality in law, most recently the legalisation of same sex marriage. This process has brought major benefits to many parts of the LGB communities (statistics are much rarer for trans people's lives). For example, official statistics showed that 69 percent of people in civil partnerships owned or are buying their home compared to 64 percent of the population as a whole². But not all LGBT people have shared the positive gains of social change.

Despite the progress, a high level of continuing prejudice against LGB people (again, there are few figures for trans people) is confirmed by research and by the evidence of LGBT trade unionists. At the same time that trans people have

¹ <http://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/news/2015/dec/15/more-than-four-in-ten-homeless-young-people-could-be-hit-by-removal-of>

² Labour Force Survey July-September 2015. People in same sex marriages are not counted separately from other married households. The number of CPs was 98,962 in a total population of 64,174,529.

never had a higher public profile, the prejudice that still exists against them has also become more open.

The national picture is therefore mixed. While many LGBT people now live without discrimination, others are not so fortunate, and younger LGBT people are particularly vulnerable. Homophobic bullying continues throughout the education system, where it may be generated as much by hostility to “difference” and to a failure to comply with “gender norms” as anything else. Stonewall’s “School Report” 2014 identified only modest improvement in the experience of young LGB people and education unions confirm that national changes in culture have yet to percolate into the practice of too many schools. One additional result of this lack of progress has been the unwillingness of many LGBT teachers to be “out” at work (as identified by union surveys), bad in itself, but also with the consequence of losing opportunities to normalise the reality of LGBT people and to offer positive role models. Too many schools are not a good place for young LGBT people as they grow up.

Alongside this, and closely connected to it, is the reality that many parents remain prejudiced. This means that young LGBT people who “come out” risk being thrown out of their homes, a danger to which their heterosexual peers are not exposed. There is much anecdotal evidence, and some statistics (see below), to support the idea that despite the changes in popular attitudes, this affects significant numbers.

Historically, young people who discovered they were lesbian, gay or bisexual might not risk “coming out” at home but would simply leave and head for the big cities where they expected to find a flourishing LGBT community, social venues for meeting people and support networks. In many cases, they would simply rent a room to live in.

Now, many are finding that their families may not be as tolerant as they had been led to expect from the unprecedentedly positive media exposure devoted to LGB (and sometimes T) celebrities and the generally positive attention paid to LGBT issues. The same problem arises even if they have received a more positive reaction in the family home, but they live in an area where there are no facilities for LGBT people, a scenario that is becoming ever more common as cuts have closed or threaten to close many LGBT community and support groups. Many members of today’s LGBT communities who were not born in a big city will have chosen to leave an environment lacking in any kind of facility enabling them to meet other LGBT people and will have headed for the bright lights.

They are now finding that they cannot afford to rent somewhere to live when they arrive and that the support they may have hoped for when they need it is under increasing pressure.

Oppression based on sexual orientation and gender identity can be compounded for young people from faith communities. Imaan, a charity working with LGBT Muslims, as well as Albert Kennedy Trust, have reported of

the threat of “honour based violence³” for some young people in these groups. In these instances being an LGBT young person is seen as bringing “shame” and “dishonour” to the family and young people are at risk of violence, forced marriage and even death. Housing and homelessness for LGBT people is an intersectional issue.

LGBT people may also experience homelessness as a result of fleeing domestic violence. About 25% of LGBT people suffer through violent or threatening relationships with partners or ex-partners which is about the same rates as in as domestic abuse against heterosexual women.

Housing and young people

Compared with the 19 percent of households overall that do not own or are in the process of buying their home, 67 percent of households headed by a young person (aged 16-24) live in the private rented sector. Nearly half of those aged 20-24 live with their parents, a figure that has increased substantially since the recession (2008). More than two thirds have explained that the reason for this is the lack of affordable housing⁴. It is well known that insufficient numbers of new houses are being built to cope with the demand. In the private rented sector, rents have been rising rapidly. They rose by seven percent between March 2011 and March 2014, more than twice the rate of increase of median earnings for young people. At the end of 2014 the average weekly rent in Britain was £176, and in London it was £281 (ONS figures).

It is little comfort that increases may have levelled off (2016) as the rate is now so high. Priced out of buying a home, most young people must remain with parents, or seek out affordable rented housing, but are finding that this is also less available. At the same time, many private tenants face poor quality accommodation (one fifth of privately rented homes contain a hazard that represents a serious risk to health and safety), landlords’ failure to make repairs and tenants’ fear of eviction if they complain⁵.

Added to this, support to help young people meet the costs of housing is being cut back. Under 35s already face restrictions on the amount of housing benefit they can claim, and the government now intends to remove entitlement to the housing element of Universal Credit from some young people aged 18-21 from April 2017. Cutting back on this vital support will make life more difficult for many young people who need help with housing costs.

Homeless, young and LGBT

It is estimated there are about 80,000 homeless young people⁶ and young LGBT people make up 24 percent of them. This is significantly in excess of their proportion in the population. The General Household Survey identified fewer

³ <http://www.cps.gov.uk/legal/h to k/honour based violence and forced marriage/>

⁴ Shelter, *The clipped wings generation* (2014).

⁵ Shelter, *Safe and decent homes* (2014).

⁶ Centrepoin, *Lifeline not lifestyle* (2015).

than 2 percent of the whole population as LGB (there are no figures for trans people) and even if (as the TUC suspects) this is an undercounting reflecting that many people remain reluctant to disclose their sexuality, it is evident that homelessness disproportionately impacts on this group.

For LGBT young people, the option of staying with the parents can be even more difficult than it might be for others. The Albert Kennedy Trust, one of the voluntary organisations working in this sector, has published research confirming a grim reality that of the young LGBT people who found themselves homeless, no fewer than 69 percent had experienced familial rejection, abuse or violence⁷. Stonewall Housing report that two-thirds of their callers have housing problems arising from discrimination because of their sexuality or gender identity.

Similarly, a Scottish survey found that 19 percent of trans people had been homeless at some point⁸ with a significant proportion reporting this was the result of other people's attitudes on discovering their transgender history.

The surveys also confirmed that while homeless young people in general are vulnerable to many other risks, LGBT people are significantly more likely to experience targeted violence, sexual exploitation, substance misuse and physical and mental health problems. Many studies have identified that LGBT people generally are far more vulnerable to mental health problems as a result of the prejudice they face and are more than twice as likely to consider or attempt suicide. There is an even greater disproportion among young people, who may face mental and emotional difficulties over their emerging awareness that they are different. They are also more likely to engage in high-risk sexual behaviour than non-LGBT peers. On top of this, they are less likely to seek support than non-LGBT homeless young people – too many generalist agencies assume their clients are heterosexual and anyway do not monitor for sexuality or gender identity and therefore fail to offer appropriate support for LGBT clients.

Finally, the specialist services provided by voluntary sector organisations that have existed to offer the tailored and sympathetic support that they are more likely to seek out are themselves falling victim to cuts from funders because of year on year budget cuts to local authorities. In 2010, for example, there were 35 different LGBT youth groups in North West England; now there are 15⁹. The well-established national LGBT mental health organisation, PACE, closed in January 2016 when funding ran out.

Policy solutions

If the housing problems faced by young LGBT people are to be resolved, it will be necessary to implement a range of solutions to tackle the housing crisis as a

⁷ Albert Kennedy Trust, *LGBT Youth Homelessness: a UK national scoping of cause, prevalence, response and outcome*, 2015.

⁸ J McNeil, L Bailey, S Ellis, J Morton, M Regan, *Trans Mental Health study 2012*, 69-70.

⁹ K Brewer, *Services for young LGBT people will just disappear*, The Guardian, 2 February 2016.

whole, but also that extend beyond the housing market itself to address other services supporting this group. In doing so, many of the steps proposed would also benefit other groups of people who face a combination of prejudice and discrimination to add to the more general problem of obtaining suitable housing.

The **TUC Charter for young people in the private rented sector** calls for:

- Secure tenancies – all tenants should be offered a secure contract of a minimum of three years;
- An end to agents' letting fees – agents should no longer be allowed to charge these in addition to requiring a deposit and the first month's rental upfront;
- A national landlord register – to identify rogue landlords and strengthen security of tenure for tenants;
- A national housebuilding programme – the government should aim to increase the supply of housing to 250,000 new homes per year with a significant proportion being affordable and social homes;
- Student accommodation – purpose built student accommodation should be created and be affordable on student incomes;
- Rent caps – landlords should be prevented from making unreasonable rent increases during tenancy and in between contracts;
- Decent homes – properties in the private rented sector should be subject to a national standard to hold landlords to account over poor or unsafe living conditions; and
- Transparency in development – community and local authorities should be able to assess if development plans are in the public interest and take into account the supply of affordable rented homes.

Taken together, such measures would increase the supply of affordable housing while increasing choice and protection for young people. But the evidence confirms that additional measures will have to be implemented to ensure that young LGBT people benefit as well.

Such policies should include:

- In housing and homelessness services and youth services, effective and practical training of all staff in equality, and monitoring of users. The aim will be to identify shortcomings and gaps in service provision and target groups to encourage better ways to reach young LGBT people and to support them;
- Training in equality for all staff working in NHS mental health services to identify and respond to the causes and consequences of mental health problems for young LGBT people. Recommendations from professional bodies for what is needed exist, but services have been cut time and again since 2010, preventing implementation;

- Support for specialist LGBT services, in particular those working with young LGBT people. The LGBT voluntary sector represents just 0.04 percent of spending on the voluntary sector and the cost of resourcing such centres of expertise is minimal in contrast to the potential impact;
- Underpinning these steps, firm action to challenge homophobic, biphobic and transphobic culture in education, building on and generalising positive policies that already exist (in which training of all staff is of critical importance), employing good practice models that have been proven over many years to succeed, calling on the resources that are readily available, and legislating to end all exemptions from promoting LGBT equality across the curriculum in all schools.

Many of the individual steps could be taken at little cost in financial terms but substantial benefit to those young LGBT people who are suffering severely from a combination of crises in housing, health and social care.

Additional steps for trade unions

- Trade unions can lobby government to implement the policy steps set out above, drawing attention to the disconnect between the government's often-repeated commitment to LGBT equality on the one hand, and the real problems faced by young LGBT people, partly as a result of cuts in services and gaps in policies elsewhere (such as education).
- Unions can make links with local LGBT community organisations to spread information and awareness about their work in support of LGBT communities, and in particular use their influence to persuade local government to support essential funding for specialist support services (statutory and voluntary) for LGBT young people.
- Unions can support voluntary groups working to support LGBT young people in housing, homelessness and mental health. Organisations such as the Albert Kennedy Trust support homeless young LGBT people. The AKT operate in London, Manchester and Newcastle and hope to extend their reach to other cities. Stonewall Housing provides services and advice for LGBT people with specialist provision for young people.
- Using collective bargaining to push for stronger LGBT equality and anti-bullying policies in the workplace and beyond.

Conclusion

British society has become more accepting of difference as a result of strong campaigning by LGBT people and their growing number of supporters. Every major political party endorses LGBT equality. But too many young LGBT people risk missing out on the benefits of social progress, and some face a terrible combination of prejudice and homelessness with serious consequences for their health and prospects. To turn this around requires a change of policy and of

practice in housing policy, in education and in health and social services. Unions can contribute to making this happen.

Resources

Albert Kennedy Trust, *LGBT Youth Homelessness: a UK national scoping of cause, prevalence, response and outcome*. 2015.

www.akt.org.uk/webtop/modules/repository/documents/AlbertKennedy_researchreport_FINALinteractive.pdf

Stonewall Housing, services and contacts at www.stonewallhousing.org.

Stonewall, *The teachers' report 2014: homophobic bullying in Britain's schools*; www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/teachers_report_2014.pdf.

TUC publications on LGBT equality can be found at www.tuc.org.uk/equality-issues/lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-rights/

TUC policy on housing can be found at: www.tuc.org.uk/economic-issues/social-issues/housing/escaping-uk-housing-crisis-setting-new-vision-2015-2020.

Equality & Strategy Department, TUC, April 2016.