Historically two main views have shaped policies and support: people with learning disabilities are either viewed as eternal children who have no sexual feelings or they are viewed as being hypersexual and hence their sexuality needs to be suppressed. Whichever position is taken the result is that people with learning disabilities themselves have often faced barriers to the expression of their sexuality and to the development of personal and sexual relationships. LGBT people with learning disabilities can often be a ‘hidden’ population and therefore research into their lives and experiences is limited. However, one member of the group (Joyce Howarth) undertook research in this area a few years ago with a colleague (David Abbott) at the Norah Fry Research Centre in Bristol.

Research project

‘Secret loves, hidden lives?’ was a three year research project carried out across the UK. Interviews with people with learning disabilities explored their lives as lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Virtually every person with a learning disability who took part in the research said they had been bullied or harassed as a direct result of their sexuality.

Experiences of depression and loneliness featured heavily in people’s accounts. Two men spoke about trying to commit suicide and one woman had self-harmed and thought about suicide.

People wanted support to meet other gay, lesbian and bisexual people, go to pubs and clubs and groups and find

The subject of personal and sexual relationships for people with learning disabilities is one that society often finds challenging. Views have started to change but whilst there is increased support for people with learning disabilities to engage in heterosexual relationships those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) still face many barriers. This article will explore this issue and discuss a new group that has been set up in Wales to raise awareness and provide support.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Learning Disabilities Forum
feel like?’ That’s when we realized we had to set up FTM to ask him, ‘what’s it like, how did you know, what did you Facebook I met a Tran’s guy. I had about 50 million questions Through one of the ‘female to male groups’ (FTM) on She has been absolutely brilliant. I don’t know what to do’. I said ‘well I’ve never met a trans male. She said ‘well I’ve never met a Tran’s person before and the hardest thing to do, I told her I should have been born to the GP was quite easy, even though I thought it would be worth it?’ and I thought ‘yes, of course it’s worth it’. Going in your life? If you could be happy for 5, 10, 20 years, is it were brilliant. He said to me, ‘have you ever really been happy to work up and tell my mother. She said ‘Don’t worry, it’s a to fall in love and have more gay and lesbian friends. Lewis’s story

Lewis Rimmer (a member of the newly formed group) tells his story of growing up feeling different, the effects on him and finally coming to identify himself as being transgender:

‘I grew up in the valleys, in Maesteg. I was convinced I was a boy. Somewhere along the line my mother told me I had to stop playing with the boys because I was going into puberty and was becoming a girl. My sister has a photo of us from Christmas time in the 70s. I had this blue dress on, a yellow cardigan and a black fluffy handbag with a gold chain on it. My mother had dressed us very similar, but I had a bow and arrow in my hand and my foot on a football. Growing up I fancied women, so I thought I was gay. I think I knew the word transvestite but didn’t know much about it. I thought I must be lesbian if I fancy women. It took months to work up and tell my mother. She said ‘Don’t worry, it’s a phase you’re going through’, but over the years she came to accept it. So I lived my life from the age of 16 till I was 52 as a gay woman.

‘Over the years I did try to take my own life quite a few times because I couldn’t figure out what was going on. Living in a small valley, there was no one like me, I couldn’t talk to anybody. I watched My Transsexual Summer in November 2011 and it was ‘oh my god, ding, ding, that’s it, this is who I am.’ I spoke to my brother first, and his partner Steve. They were brilliant. He said to me, ‘have you ever really been happy in your life? If you could be happy for 5, 10, 20 years, is it worth it?’ and I thought ‘yes, of course it’s worth it’. Going to the GP was quite easy, even though I thought it would be the hardest thing to do, I told her I should have been born male. She said ‘well I’ve never met a Tran’s person before and I don’t know what to do’. I said ‘well I’ve never met a trans person before so we’ll have to try and figure it out together.’ She has been absolutely brilliant.

Through one of the ‘female to male groups’ (FTM) on Facebook I met a Tran’s guy. I had about 50 million questions to ask him, ‘what’s it like, how did you know, what did you feel like?’ That’s when we realized we had to set up FTM

Wales because we couldn’t find anything on the internet for female to male. We started working with the NHS and realized we also needed to do something to provide information to people if they are thinking of transitioning so we started Transgender Awareness Wales. If I can leave that as a legacy, I’ll be happy. I don’t want anybody to go through what I went through. With transitioning, you take the hormones, you talk to psychologists but nobody teaches you life skills. When I first started, I didn’t even know how to shave. I moved to Cardiff where my brother lives as I needed male support and wanted to start a new life.

Transitioning is difficult but it’s the best thing I ever did. My confidence is growing and I’m becoming this completely different person. I promised myself when I got my top surgery the first thing I’d treat myself to was a suit. When I was a kid, my sister would be there with my mother’s shoes on and I’d be there with my father’s tie on and putting on one of his shirts, that’s one of my earliest memories of wanting to be a bloke. I’m meeting my brother on Saturday and we’re going to Slater’s to get a three-piece suit.’

What support is there?

Potentially both learning disability services and services for LGBT people have an important role to play in supporting LGBT people with learning disabilities. Stonewall Cymru are members of the newly formed group in Wales and Mabli Jones (policy and research officer) states:

‘At Stonewall Cymru we are committed to supporting all members of LGBT communities across Wales, and recognise the impact that multiple discrimination can have on people’s lives. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people with learning disabilities are some of the most marginalised members of our communities, and this is why we are pleased to be working with the LGBT Learning Disabilities Forum.

‘Our research shows that disabled lesbian, gay and bisexual people face higher levels of bullying at work, are at greater risk of hate crime and face significant barriers to getting involved in community life.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people with learning disabilities face stigma from several directions, are often doubted or ignored when they speak about their sexual orientation or gender identity,

and do not always have access to a safe and supportive environment where they can be themselves. Everyone has the right to live their life in safety, to be listened to and believed about their own experiences, to explore their identity and form relationships free from discrimination.’

Work undertaken by the Stay up Late group in Brighton, however, suggests that both learning disability and LGBT services need to adapt in order to provide effective support for LGBT people with learning disabilities (see http://stayuplate.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/LGBT-Identities-and-Learning-Disabilities-Report.pdf)
Why has this group been set up?

This group arose from personal experience. As Lewis Rimmer comments ‘Since I started to work with Transgender people nearly 3 years ago I started to hear a lot about Trans people being Dyslexic, Disabled and on the Autism spectrum. I had a meeting with Joe Powell … and that’s when we decided to have a group and to find out more about why this is happening and what we can do to help.’ The group brings together people with a wide range of background and experiences including those with personal experience, those working with people with learning disabilities, those working to promote equality, and those with a background in research. Together we aim to empower people to live with the gender identity and sexual orientation they identify with, and to support their right to meaningful relationships. The group plans to undertake a range of activities including awareness raising, education, the provision of information and support and research.

For further information about the group please contact:

Key Points

- **Whilst there is increased support for people with learning disabilities** to engage in heterosexual relationships those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) still face many barriers.

- **Research shows that many people with a learning disability** had been bullied or harassed as a direct result of their sexuality.

- **The LGBT Group brings together people with a wide range of background** and experiences including those with personal experience, those working with people with learning disabilities, those working to promote equality, and those with a background in research. The group plans to undertake a range of activities including awareness raising, education, the provision of information and support and research.