

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Homophobia: An Individual and Community Safety Issue

Homophobia and homophobic crime are serious social problems.

What is homophobia?

The Oxford Dictionary defines homophobia as “an irrational hatred, and/or fear, of homosexuals”. Strictly speaking, this amounts to prejudice. For the purposes of this report, homophobia is understood as *acting* upon this hatred and/or fear. Acts of violence and other crimes against people because of their sexuality constitute homophobic crime.

What is heterosexism?

Heterosexism is wrongly assuming that everyone is heterosexual. Studies suggest that *at least* 4 per cent of the British population is gay or lesbian (see section 2.1). This figure does not include those who identify as bisexual. Others are behaviourally bisexual (termed ‘men who have sex with men’ and ‘women who have sex with women’ and used to describe those who identify as heterosexual but engage in homosexual acts). Transvestites and transsexual people also identify as bisexual, gay or lesbian. Bisexual, behaviourally bisexual and trans-gendered people can find themselves in situations where they are perceived to be gay or lesbian and so can be the victims of homophobia and homophobic crime.

How are homophobia and heterosexism expressed?

Homophobia and heterosexism are expressed through negative and stereotypical attitudes towards bisexual, gay and lesbian people; through verbal abuse, harassment, intimidation and violence (sometimes resulting in disablement and even death); through rejection by colleagues, families and friends, etc. Homophobia and heterosexism are expressed in families, schools, colleges, universities, in the media, in the workplace, on the streets, and in other places.

Homophobia creates a climate of fear, for individuals and the bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community as a whole. This fear encourages silence. This silence reinforces invisibility. Invisibility reinforces assumptions, myths and negative attitudes. They legitimise abuse, harassment and violence. This is a vicious circle that needs to be broken.

1.2 The Aims of this Report

The aims of this report are to outline the work of the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group to date, and to present the results of the county-wide Homophobic Incidents Survey. This survey aimed to ‘map’ the incidence of homophobia and homophobic crime locally.

ReachOUT’s Research and Development Worker, who currently represents ReachOUT on the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group, undertook this study.

ReachOUT – Reading’s Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth Group – has been funded by the National Lottery to conduct a three-year Research and Development Project. This project aims to identify the health and housing experiences and issues of young bisexuals, gays and lesbians in Berkshire, and the specific experiences and issues of Asian and Black young people. A research report, with recommendations for improving local services, will be published in the early summer of 1999. This study of individual and community safety for the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group forms part of a much wider research programme.

1.3 The Aim and Objectives of the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group

Representatives of the local bisexual, gay and lesbian community established the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group in March 1998. The initial founders of the Group favoured developing a wide and diverse membership, focusing particularly on those in the front-line of dealing with the issues of homophobia and homophobic crime. Accordingly, this working group includes representatives from Thames Valley Police, local authorities, and Reading Victim Support.

The aim of the Berkshire Anti-Homophobia Group is to work towards making local communities in Berkshire safer for bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered people by:

- ⇒ Promoting dialogue and trust between the local bisexual, gay, lesbian and trans-gendered community and the police (and other agencies charged with their safety);
- ⇒ Developing effective communication links between this community and the police, and other appropriate agencies;
- ⇒ Monitoring homophobia, homophobic crime, and police response;
- ⇒ Developing effective support networks and services for the victims of homophobic crime;
- ⇒ Promoting appropriate and sensitive policies, procedures and training for the police and other agencies around issues of homophobia and sexuality;
- ⇒ Raising awareness of homophobia and homophobic crime in the wider community.