

Homophobic Bullying in Youth Sport

Background

Every child in every sports club or activity has the right to participate, train and play free from the fear of bullying of any form. Everyone involved in children's sport needs to work together to ensure that this is the case.

Sports clubs, governing bodies and activity providers should take steps to prevent bullying behaviour wherever possible, and to respond to incidents when they occur. A preventative approach to bullying means that organisations safeguard the welfare of their members. It also means that sport is playing its part to create an environment and society in which people treat each other with respect. Sports clubs and activity providers may already have general anti-bullying strategies in place. [Preventing and responding to homophobic bullying](#) should be part of these existing strategies.

Social attitudes have meant that there has been a reluctance even to acknowledge participation in sport by those whose sexual orientation is anything other than heterosexual, which can be challenging for that individual. Discrimination can run deep: it may be implicit through cultural attitudes as well as explicit through more overt homophobia, and often results in self-censorship by lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB)¹ people.

Discriminatory views about heterosexual and homosexual behaviour are evident in all areas of society but are especially prominent in sport. Homophobia is often driven by a lack of understanding which only serves to strengthen stereotypes and can potentially lead to actions that may cause LGB people to feel excluded, isolated or undervalued. If these values and actions operate at an organisational level then the organisation itself should be deemed to be "institutionally homophobic".

Many LGB people in sport face discrimination simply because they are perceived to be different from the heterosexual 'norm': As well as causing many LGB athletes to leave clubs or sport, in the worst cases such negative treatment has resulted in self harm or suicide.

Values

The sports councils in the UK have recognised the social and legal imperatives for sports bodies to support participation among LGB people and to oppose homophobia and related discrimination in sport. Through including and valuing them, sport offers opportunities to transform the lives of a substantial number of young people, regardless of their sexual orientation,

Impact

All bullying has the potential to cause permanent harm (physical, emotional or psychological) to young people and blights the sport where it takes place. Homophobic bullying can be hard to identify because it may be going on in secret. It may include a person being made to feel unwelcome, belittled, or harassed (through gossip, name-calling, jokes and other hate acts – both on-line and in the 'real' world). Sometimes, athletes witness homophobic bullying and even if they are not LGB and the subject of the abuse, they may be reluctant to report it in case participants, coaches or other adults assume they are gay.

Generally, homophobic bullying looks like other kinds of bullying, it may include:

- Verbal abuse – including spreading rumours that someone is gay, with its implication that this is somehow inferior – for example, "you're such a gay boy!" or "those trainers are so gay!"
- Physical abuse – including hitting, kicking, sexual assault, threatening behaviour, and theft or destruction of property.
- Cyberbullying – using on-line spaces to spread rumours about someone or exclude them. This can also include text messaging, including video and picture messaging.
- Exclusion and isolation – for example always being picked last for the team.

¹ Issues relating specifically to gender reassignment and transgender in sport are distinct from the purpose of this briefing paper and should be considered separately.



Facts about the impact

- 55% of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils have experienced direct homophobic bullying
- 99% of gay young people hear the phrases 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' in school
- 96% of gay pupils hear homophobic language such as 'poof' or 'lezza'
- 3 in 5 gay pupils who experience homophobic bullying say that teachers who witness the bullying never intervene
- 50% of gay pupils report that their schools say homophobic bullying is wrong (drops to 37% in faith schools)
- 32% of gay pupils experiencing bullying change their future educational plans because of it - 3 in 5 say it impacts directly on their school work
- 41% gay young people have attempted or thought about taking their own life directly because of bullying – 41% have self harmed

*The School Report – Stonewall (2012).

Challenging Myths

• All Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people choose to be 'that way'

All individuals discover, rather than choose, their sexual orientation. This process of discovery can take any length of time, sometimes happening over time during adolescence, sometimes later in life. For LGB young people the only point at which choice seems to come into play is when around their decisions about how they will acknowledge their identity i.e. choosing if and how to 'come out' and choosing who to tell. This process includes self-acceptance, and responses from other people (both supportive and offensive) can have a profound impact on the person's wellbeing.

• Young people cannot be Gay, Lesbian or Bisexual

Like most young people, LGB young people may become aware of sexual attraction from an early age. It can take a number of years for the young person to fully acknowledge it themselves and those close to them - this can be a difficult and emotionally-charged time. It is difficult to gauge how many LGB people (and therefore young people) there are in the UK as this relies on people self-identifying as LGB (something which many LGB people are reluctant to do). The position of The Rainbow Project (NI)² is that LGB are approximately 6-10% of the population.

• "It's only banter" or "just part of the culture of team sports"

This type of atmosphere destroys the opportunity for young people to develop self-esteem, confidence and leadership skills. It's up to your organisation to promote the benefits of sporting participation to all young people, and to ensure that they are protected from homophobic abuse and discrimination.

Prevention

- Promote environments and behaviours in which **difference** (in a variety of senses) **is embraced and celebrated**. For example this may include having discussions about positive gay sports role models, posters or signs that denote 'safe spaces' for LGB people (rainbow flags or pink triangles), or specific events/displays
- Ensure relevant **policies and procedures** exist, for example, checking that homophobic bullying is included in anti-bullying policies and related policies, procedures and codes of conduct, and that reports and referrals are acted upon.
- **Assess and monitor** the extent of homophobic bullying through anonymous coach and youth members surveys, and existing methods like bullying boxes. Evaluate the responses received and ensure consistent recording and reporting.
- **Raise awareness** of what homophobic bullying is and how the sports organisation will respond. Ensure effective reporting systems are in place to enable members to report incidents. Sports leaders attending specific training about sexuality and /or diversity.
- **Create a safe culture** for example by challenging the word 'gay' as a derogatory term. Ensure fast and effective removal of any graffiti.
- Know how to **provide sensitive support** to LGB members to help them feel safe, and able to tell adults in authority positions about incidents of homophobic bullying.

² <http://www.rainbow-project.org/>



Recognition

The most important step is to recognise that all sorts of bullying takes place in sports clubs. The homophobic aspect of bullying may be hidden from view. If you record the incidence of racist/sectarian bullying, you can do the same with bullying involving homophobia. Don't assume that all members, participants, coaches or staff will be heterosexual.

Coaches are often unaware of the nature and extent of this form of bullying in particular. Other young people are often reluctant to get involved and don't know how to help. Effective interventions involve the entire culture of the club and sport, rather than just focusing on traditional notions of perpetrators and their victims.

Responding to homophobic bullying

Many ways of tackling homophobia are quite simple to implement. Even the act of explicitly stating that homophobic bullying is wrong, and why, has an impact on the behaviour and attitudes of members. Coaches should be aware of sexual orientation issues so that they will not only recognise homophobic language but avoid using such language and know how to respond confidently and effectively. It is important that there are consequences for those who use homophobic language or engage in homophobic behaviour in the same way that a club should challenge any form of bullying. It must be explained to young people why the words and behaviour are wrong, how it affects young LGB people and that it will not be accepted in sport.

Homophobic language is common in sports organisations but, if it is not challenged, members may think that homophobic bullying is acceptable. It is therefore important to challenge homophobic language when it occurs:

- Ensure that members know that homophobic language will not be tolerated in your sports setting. Make sure it is included in policies and procedures for example including specific statements in your Code of Conducts for:
 - **Coaches** – should display behaviour that does not discriminate on the grounds of religious beliefs, race, gender, sexuality, social classes or lack of ability and challenge those who do.
 - **Young People** – should not participate in any behaviour that discriminates on the grounds of religious beliefs, race, gender, sexuality, social classes or lack of ability.
 - **Parents/spectators** – should display behaviour that does not discriminate on the grounds of religious beliefs, race, gender, sexuality, social classes or lack of ability and discourage those who do.
- When an incident occurs, members should be informed that homophobic language is offensive, and will not be tolerated. If a member continues to make homophobic remarks, explain in detail the effects that homophobic bullying has on people. (If it is the young person making the remarks their parents should be informed just as in any breach of the organisations Code of Conduct or Anti-Bullying policy).
- If a member makes persistent remarks, they should be removed from the training setting in line with managing challenging behaviour guidelines where these operate and the Club Welfare Officer or club officials should talk to them in more detail about why their comments are unacceptable.
- If the problem persists, involve senior managers. The member should be made to understand the sanctions that will apply if they continue to use homophobic language.
- Consider inviting the parents/carers to the club to discuss the attitudes of the youth member.

Legislation

What does the law say about sexual orientation in sport?

LGB people in sport are likely to experience issues that are currently covered by a number of different legislative instruments related to:

- Employment
- Vocational training and qualifications
- Provision of goods, facilities and services
- The practices of members clubs or associations
- Individual discrimination, bullying or harassment

The **Equality Act 2010** provides a new cross-cutting legislative framework to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all; to update, simplify and strengthen the previous legislation; and to deliver a simple, modern and accessible framework of discrimination law which protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society. The majority of provisions came into effect on 1st October 2010 and others came into force in April 2011. http://www.equalities.gov.uk/equality_act_2010.aspx
For example;



It is unlawful for providers of goods, facilities or services to discriminate against actual or potential users based on their sexual orientation. This applies to all individuals and organisations that provide services, whether these are paid for or not. These regulations cover:

- Public authorities - individuals or organizations, and employees or any agents acting on their behalf, delivering public services such as PE in schools, local authority sports programmes or governing body services where these are publicly-funded, and
- Clubs or associations - with more than 25 members, whether they are corporate or unincorporated, and whether or not their activities are carried on for profit, so most sports clubs and associations are affected.

Conclusions

Equality issues around sexual orientation are still seen differently from comparable issues on race, gender or disability. Although the underlying prejudices are different, the impact on the young person is often the same as it can cause distress, fear or isolation. Therefore bullying and abuse on the basis of a person's sexual orientation must be challenged with the same energy as other equality issues. Homophobic discrimination and gender stereotyping are not just damaging to those who may be LGB but risk affecting performance and participation amongst far wider groups.

Much of the prejudice and negativity around LGB issues in sport can be traced back to the application of gender stereotypes and perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Attitudes within sport both reinforce and are underpinned by wider social attitudes. It would be unfair to judge sports organisations by higher standards than those demonstrated elsewhere, but it is **important that sport clubs** (which play a significant part in a young person's life) **develop and disseminate responsible advice, guidance materials and systems for athletes dealing with sexual orientation issues.**

Young people are seen as key to effecting change because they often express more enlightened attitudes to diversity than older generations. Sport can be a powerful influence both on young people's own personal development and on their attitudes to others, so young people's openness to diversity is likely to continue even after their personal involvement in sport ceases.

“Ignorance of the issues or being worried about doing the wrong thing is not a reason to not take action. It's about preventing bullying and discrimination, values which should be at the heart of any organisation's ethos in the first place. The positive effects of sporting participation can only be achieved if all young people are equally supported and empowered, regardless of sexual orientation.”³

Glossary of terms

- **Homophobia** – the fear of LGB people. Homophobic abuse and bullying is based on a person's fear or hatred of this group of people. A person's sexual orientation is distinct from a person's gender identity and expression.
- **Sexual orientation** - Usually refers to the direction of someone's emotional or sexual desire, and is usually expressed along a continuum from exclusively heterosexual (only being attracted to people of the opposite sex) to exclusively homosexual (only being attracted to people of the same sex).
- **Sexuality** – condition of being characterized and distinguished by sex: how people experience and express themselves as sexual beings.
- **Transgender** - A person whose sexual identification is entirely with the opposite sex i.e. born into one gender but identify psychologically and emotionally as the other. Transsexual generally narrows down into individuals who have undergone a medical transition. This can break down into many things, however the most commonly known are hormones and surgical procedures.
- **Gender Identity** - Refers to a person's actual or perceived sex, and includes a person's identity, appearance, or behaviour, whether or not that identity, appearance, or behaviour is different from that traditionally associated with the person's sex at birth.

Thanks to Professor Celia Brackenridge for the use of her material.

Useful Reading and web sites:

- Pride Sports – www.pridesports.org.uk
- www.outforsport.org or www.fflag.org.uk
- Brackenridge. C. at al 2006 Driving Down Participation: Homophobic Bullying as a Deterrent to Doing Sport

³ Heather Noller, Stonewall Scotland Policy Officer Scotland www.stonewallscotland.org.uk



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- Brackenridge. C. at al 2008 A Literature Review of Sexual Orientation in Sport Brunel University
- Brackenridge. C.2009 Sport and Sexual Orientation – Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation
- DCSF 2007 Homophobic Bullying- Safe to Learn: Embedding anti-bullying work in schools - DCSF Publications
www.teachernet.gov.uk/publications
- Rainbow - Myths about being Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual
- Stonewall Tackling homophobia in schools - Education for All Briefing www.stonewall.org.uk
- GLSEN (Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network) <http://sports.glsen.org/>

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