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Implications of austerity for LGBT people and services



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Key Messages

- 1. We found evidence of a number of ways in which austerity cuts had affected LGBT people and the services they used, although the extent to which they were experienced varied among participants.**
- 2. The main effects of austerity on LGBT people at a personal level were:**
 - greater financial hardships from redundancies, real term pay cuts and changes to benefit rules;
 - problems finding accommodation where they could feel safe and that was LGBT-friendly;
 - a reduction in sexual health and mental health services that addressed their specific needs;
 - greater feelings of marginalisation and invisibility as specialist LGBT services and support disappeared.
- 3. There was a fear that progress on challenging heterosexism and discrimination was being reversed and that homophobia and transphobia were on the rise again.**
- 4. LGBT issues and concerns were treated as less important than other concerns; as a 'nice thing to do' that could be dropped in harder times.**
- 5. Public funding for LGBT services was considered to be more important because prejudice and discrimination among some members of the public was thought to make funding through charities less likely.**
- 6. Attempts to keep services going through restructuring and efficiencies were seen to be largely unsustainable in the longer term because of negative effects on staff and on the quality of service delivery.**
- 7. Key ways that UNISON can help challenge cuts to services for LGBT people:**
 - providing information about the nature of cuts and coordinating more strategic opposition to them at a local level;
 - gathering evidence on the effects of cuts and disseminating it widely through organisations and the media;
 - taking collective action where necessary.

Executive Summary

In May 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition government began introducing a series of significant and sustained reductions in public spending intended to reduce the budget deficit. Often referred to as *austerity cuts* these reductions are cuts in funding to or via government departments. In 2010 it was planned that non-protected departmental spending would be cut by 10.6% by 2015. Other cuts have occurred through job freezes, changes to pensions and 1% pay cap in the public sector. Of particular significance are cuts in local authority spending and related services in the voluntary and community sector, where many specialist LGBT services are situated.

This report presents the findings of qualitative research conducted by *NatCen Social Research* to provide detailed insight into the effects of austerity on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and the services they use. The research used two qualitative data collection methods:

- 101 individual **written contributions via a secure website**;
- 12 **follow-up in-depth telephone interviews** to explore specific issues in more depth.

The report discusses the cuts perceived to services by participants, including both service providers and users. It should however be noted that it was not always easy to attribute the observed reductions in funding and services directly to austerity measures and to disentangle the effects of austerity measures from effects of persistent homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and discrimination towards the LGBT community. The use of qualitative data also means we cannot draw conclusions about the prevalence of different views nor make a wider assessment of the impact of austerity measures. Instead, the focus is on mapping the range of different types of cuts and their effects.

The first section draws out key messages from across the research. Information about what we found specifically is then outlined in the sections that follow.

Key messages

1. We found evidence of a number of ways in which austerity cuts had affected LGBT people and the services they used, although the extent to which they were experienced varied among participants.

- There was thought to be the need to challenge the stereotype that all LGBT people (especially gay men) were wealthy, encapsulated in the idea of the 'Pink Pound'.

- For some participants the effects of austerity were said to be already worse than they had expected, with this being even more so for LGBT people with disabilities or on low incomes.
- Where participants felt limited or no effects from austerity cuts this was because
 - there were no services for LGBT people in the area to start with
 - services such as those in the NHS were partly protected from cuts or funding was secure until 2014 (although some participants thought such ‘protection’ disguised cost savings hidden elsewhere through job freezes and reductions in ‘back room’ management and administrative staff).

2. The main effects of austerity on LGBT people at a *personal* level were:

- **greater financial hardships from redundancies, real term pay cuts and changes to benefit rules;**
- **problems finding accommodation where they could feel safe and that was LGBT-friendly;**
- **a reduction in sexual health and mental health services that addressed their specific needs;**
- **greater feelings of marginalisation and invisibility as specialist LGBT services and support disappeared.**

3. There was a fear that progress on challenging heterosexism and discrimination was being reversed and that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia were on the rise again.

Cuts to services that dealt with awareness-raising, anti-homophobic, biphobic and/ or transphobic bullying in schools and hate-crime reporting were thought to send out the message that prejudice and discrimination of this kind were not important. Some participants reported increased homophobic and transphobic comments going unchallenged in public spaces and workplaces.

4. LGBT concerns and needs were treated as less important than other concerns and needs; as a ‘nice thing to do’ that could be dropped in harder times.

Participants felt that LGBT concerns and needs were being marginalised. This was described in a number of ways:

- there being fewer or no specific advice and support services for LGBT people in some localities;
- the fact that some mainstream services were not collecting information about the sexual orientation or gender identity of their users;
- reduction or removal of funding for: LGBT awareness training in workplaces, engagement activities between public bodies and the LGBT community, and for LGBT local forums and networks.

LGBT needs and concerns were often being ignored or pushed to the bottom of the agenda whereas participants thought they should be represented fairly alongside other ‘protected characteristics’.

5. Public funding for LGBT services was considered to be more important because prejudice and discrimination among some members of the public was thought to make funding through charities less likely.

6. Attempts to keep services going through restructuring and efficiencies were seen to be largely unsustainable in the longer term because of negative effects on staff and on the quality of service delivery.

Some services had restructured to try to become more efficient and to protect their users from the worst effects of the cuts. This often meant the loss of valuable staff and expertise through redundancies and poor morale and stress for those left behind. While some people thought that specialist services (e.g. support groups, helplines) could be run ‘self-sufficiently’ by LGBT people themselves, this depended on people having the time, skills and resources to offer in particular areas. Ongoing austerity level spending was thought to make services ‘unsustainable’ in the longer-term.

7. Key ways that UNISON can help challenge cuts to services for LGBT people:

- **providing information about the nature of cuts and coordinate more strategic opposition to them at a local level;**
- **gathering evidence on the effects of cuts and disseminate it widely through organisations and the media;**
- **taking collective action where necessary.**

Summary

The nature of the cuts (chapter 2)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cuts in spending on public services and welfare were generally viewed negatively and met with concern and anxiety. While participants accepted the issue of a budget deficit, approaching it with cuts to public services, and therefore LGBT services, was widely considered a *false economy*. Changes in commissioning structures in the NHS and public health sectors also sometimes compounded austerity by creating gaps in and uncertainty about funding.

A range of different **specialist and mainstream services** used by the LGBT community were observed to have been cut or curtailed under austerity. This was largely due to a reduction or greater instability in statutory and other sources of funding - including charitable funding and donations from service users. The types of services affected included (but were not limited to) a range of health services, information and advice services, LGBT forums and support groups, youth services and social cohesion projects.

The cuts were recognised to have a detrimental effect on all marginalised communities. However the cuts were expected to **disproportionately affect LGBT** groups. This was because:

- There was felt to be a *de-prioritisation of LGBT services* due to the common misperception that there are no financially or socially disadvantaged LGBT people. Securing funding from other sources was thought to be difficult due to persistent discrimination among some members of the public that meant LGBT charities would be less popular to support.
- LGBT people were thought to *rely more heavily on particular publicly funded support* services such as those offering help around housing and welfare, unemployment, workplace discrimination, education, hate crime and a range of health issues. If specialist services were cut, some LGBT people would be *reluctant to access mainstream services* for fear of discrimination and prejudice, with clear detrimental effects.

Where participants said there were **limited or no effects** from austerity cuts this was for a variety of reasons including:

- There being few if any services for LGBT people in the area to begin with (particularly for bisexual people);
- Services being protected from the cuts (e.g. NHS) to date or until 2014;
- Low awareness of the effects of cuts through lack of personal experience of them or because organisations failed to collect information on service users' sexual orientation or gender identity;
- Greater effects being felt by the poor and vulnerable rather than LGBT people per se (although some felt the emphasis on financial effects of austerity masked issues of discrimination);
- The possibility that services could be restructured to deliver them more efficiently (although this had negative effects on people delivering the service which was probably not sustainable long term).

Effects of the cuts on LGBT people and service users (chapter 3)

Although not all LGBT people discussed personal effects arising from austerity cuts, a wide range of effects were described on participants themselves or on others they knew personally or in the wider LGBT community. These can be grouped into 5 broad areas:

Financial hardships linked to redundancies, reduced earnings and benefit rules, including difficulties paying for basics and being able to socialise. LGBT people working in public and community services experienced loss of jobs and/ or worsening terms and conditions. Changes to benefits included the increased use of sanctions and the effect of the benefit cap. Financial difficulties were compounded by costs related to 'transitioning' for some transgender people.

Problems linked to finding LGBT-friendly housing and accommodation when people were homeless linked to their sexual orientation or gender identity. If the only affordable option was shared accommodation this may not provide a safe or suitable environment to be 'out'.

Increased feelings of invisibility and marginalisation – this led to a feeling that LGBT people were treated as problematic because their *needs differed from the norm* in times of scarce resources. A result was that some LGBT people felt *guilty* about asking for their needs to be met; others felt more isolation as community resources were reduced.

A sense that positive attempts to address discrimination against LGBT were in danger of being reversed, for example, through reduction in school anti-homophobic, biphobic and transphobic initiatives and hate crime reporting channels. In both cases this led to increased feelings that LGBT people would be unprotected against negative comments and hate crimes.

The view that sexual health and mental health needs of LGBT people were less likely to be met in a way appropriate to their needs due to the effect of cuts to LGBT-friendly services for sexual health and mental health, where LGB and T needs may not be easily addressed within mainstream services.

These issues were expected to be more acute for LGBT people with multiple minority identities (e.g. Black and minority ethnic and disabled LGBT people), who were already experiencing disadvantage and/ or discrimination in other ways.

Effects on service delivery and providers (chapter 4)

Overall participants described a number of ways in which **austerity cuts had an effect** on service delivery, service provision and on providers.

In relation to **service delivery**:

- Loss of valuable and experienced staff able to deliver or give advice on appropriate, non-discriminatory service delivery;
- Inability to meet the rising demand for services due to cuts on resources and staffing and the failure to commission support services for LGBT people in some geographical areas;

- Reduced ability to be proactive and do outreach work because time for service delivery was taken up with fundraising;
- LGBT service delivery was treated as a 'nice thing to do' rather than as important resulting in:
 - reduced levels of training and engagement on LGBT issues by policy and decision makers leading to lower awareness of them;
 - reduced support for LGBT networks, forums and events leading to greater invisibility of LGBT people.

In relation to **service providers**:

- Some services had tried to keep going and protect users from the worst of the cuts through restructuring and voluntary work to gain greater efficiencies. However, there was generally little support for the view that this was sustainable in the longer-term.
- Increased workloads and worse terms and conditions for some participants had led to low morale and stress, which raised questions about retention of staff in the public and community sectors and about the quality of service delivery in the longer-term.

Responses to the cuts (chapter 5)

Participants described responding to the austerity cuts by individual activism, service-level restructuring and/ or attempts to make services self-sustaining through drawing on LGBT resources, networking, collaboration and volunteering.

Participants were highly appreciative of UNISON's work to protect the LGBT community from the cuts. It was thought that UNISON could do more to protect public and community sector services to LGBT people in the future by:

- assisting in the **provision of information to services providers** about changes in policy and related cuts that would affect them and co-ordinating a more strategic level response to cuts in specific localities or regions;
- gathering **evidence on the nature and effects of cuts** on LGBT people and publicising this information through awareness campaigns and in the media. Evidence that contradicted stereotypes that all LGBT people are wealthy or that their needs are not a priority or deserving in relation to public funding was thought to be especially important;
- **stronger collective action** by LGBT people by campaigning and lobbying against the cuts, recruiting and organising members and taking part in industrial action.

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