

Making organisations more accessible to young LGBTQ volunteers

“What people do in the privacy of their own homes is none of my business, and certainly not relevant to placing them as volunteers”

– Volunteer Manager, Voluntary Organisation, England 2007

The major barrier facing young LGBTQ people in relation to volunteering is other people’s attitudes. From assumptions that sexual orientation and gender identity are not ‘relevant’ to allowing homophobic and transphobic comments and behaviour to pass unchallenged, a lack of awareness around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity is the major barrier preventing young LGBTQ people from volunteering.

Young LGBTQ people have told us that they face a number of barriers in relation to volunteering, all of which stem from other people’s attitudes. Some have experienced homophobic and/or transphobic discrimination whilst volunteering, which has put them off. Others, whilst they may not have experienced discrimination, are fearful of it and of being isolated as a volunteer because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Some young LGBTQ people have spoken of a patronising attitude where they are seen as vulnerable on the grounds of their age and sexual orientation/gender identity, while others have spoken of the confusion surrounding equal opportunities monitoring.

So how can organisations break down these barriers and ensure that they are accessible to young LGBTQ volunteers?

The single most important step an organisation can take is to realise that an ‘open door’ policy is not sufficient. We often hear the comment, ‘we are accepting of everyone, we don’t need to make a special effort with LGBTQ people’. Evidence tells



us that this is not the case. Fear of homophobia and transphobia, often based on experience, means that unless an organisation makes active reference to sexual orientation and gender identity, LGBTQ people will assume that they will be unwelcome or ignored. It is essential to be explicit and open about welcoming LGBTQ people.

An easy place to start is with your equal opportunities policy. Young LGBTQ volunteers have told us that they would be reluctant to volunteer for an organisation which didn't have a clear and prominent equal opportunities policy which mentions sexual orientation and gender identity. If you can ensure confidentiality, you should also monitor sexual orientation on your equal opportunities monitoring, and include trans options under the gender section. For more information on this, including specific wording to use, refer to the monitoring section on our toolkit, 'Step by Step: Engaging with LGBT Volunteers'.

To ensure that equal opportunities policies and monitoring are a starting point rather than a box-ticking exercise, make sure that they are backed up by strong anti-discrimination practice. Deal with homophobic or transphobic comments or behaviour immediately and effectively, just as you would with racist or sexist ones. And if your monitoring shows that you are not engaging with the community, make positive steps to do so.

Reaching out to LGBTQ volunteers is not just about paperwork, forms and reactive initiatives. Proactive initiatives are what make the real difference. There are many ways you can do this, from displaying a rainbow flag or images of same-sex couples on your website to getting LGBT diversity training for your staff and volunteers. See our 'Step by Step' toolkit and guidance sheets for more information and ideas.

If you can reach out to young LGBTQ people, you will be tapping into a wealth of enthusiasm, new ideas and commitment. Young LGBTQ people, just like other young people across the UK, want to get involved and make a difference.

Implementing Support Systems for Young LGBTQ Volunteers

Implementing support systems for young LGBTQ volunteers is a two stage process. Firstly, you have to know what the main issues facing young LGBTQ people are. Once you know this, you can set up appropriate support systems.

As any group in society, young LGBTQ people face specific issues and have specific needs. These include 'coming out', dealing with bullying and discrimination and potentially sensitive relationships with families and friends. They can experience isolation both from their straight peers and the commercial gay scene, which for age, financial or taste reasons they may not be able or wish to access. For various reasons which we can't explore now, LGBTQ people have high incidences of substance abuse, eating disorders, mental and other health needs.

The best way to ensure that your organisation understands the issues facing young LGBTQ volunteers is to get LGBT diversity training, details of which can be found on Consortium's website www.lgbtconsortium.org.uk/lgbtvolunteering.

However, young LGBTQ volunteers have told us about being patronised and treated as victims in volunteering roles, something which has put them off volunteering in the future. So whilst you need to understand the issues they face, the key to implementing support services is to ensure that this is done in a way that empowers LGBTQ volunteers, rather than pities them.

These two articles were written by Emma Foxall, Volunteering Development Officer at The Consortium. They appeared in Youth Action Network's *Activate* Issue 40, April/June 08 © Youth Action Network

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