

SOLUTIONS

THE SECTION FOR WHAT'S WORKING IN HOUSING



PRISONERS OF HATE



Gay people often face a range of special problems that can affect their housing situation. But do you know what they are? Or are you actually making things worse?
 Kate Freeman reports. Illustration by Gillian Blease

WHEN JOHN GREEN [NOT HIS REAL NAME] arrived at his new London council flat 10 years ago, he was looking for a home where he could feel secure and settled. Twenty-six years old and gay, he was suffering from depression and considering a sex change. But the haven he was looking for didn't materialise: within six months, he had been picked out by locals as being different and a campaign of harassment began that has continued ever since, including abuse, graffiti on his door and a hammer thrown through his window.

"I'm a prisoner in my own home because I've got to watch my back when I go out and come in. I go out early every morning and don't return until the middle of the night when everything has died down – even though that makes me more vulnerable in a way," he says. Three months ago the threat reached a new level when he was chased across the estate with a knife.

After years of reporting incidents to police and complaining to his antisocial behaviour officer to little visible effect, John was finally offered a transfer after writing directly to the head of the council's homophobic crime statistics committee. But three years on, he is still in the same flat, and part of the reason

for the delay, he believes, is that front-line staff either don't appreciate, or don't care, how bad his situation is.

Stonewall Housing Association, which has been helping John through its London advice service, says that he is one of many gay, lesbian or bisexual tenants that are receiving an inadequate housing service because tackling homophobic harassment is not a priority for many housing providers, and staff often don't know how to broach the subject of tenants' sexuality. For this reason, Stonewall HA – not to be confused with the gay rights movement with a similar name – has employed a policy, training and development officer to develop a pilot consultancy service and training scheme for housing associations and councils to raise awareness of how a client's sexuality can lead to problems that affect their housing. The scheme, part funded by Shelter, kicked off this week with the first of three training days at Hounslow council. It will run at least until next April, by which time they hope more councils and associations will have benefited and it will find funds to continue.

Stonewall's advice team deal with about 1000 cases from lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual people every year and

FIVE THINGS YOU CAN DO NOW

- Research local organisations that can provide support for gay people. Contact the Consortium of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Voluntary and Community Organisations on 020 7422 8611, your council's homosexuality crime forums or visit www.lgbconsortium.org.uk for more details.
- If you have strong policies on homophobia, display publicity about them prominently in housing aid centres. "If your poster says, 'we don't tolerate homophobic discrimination', it can make tenants feel better about coming out to your officers," says Deborah Gold, who runs training at the Stonewall Housing Association.
- Swot up on legislation. The Civil Partnership Bill looks at equalising succession rights and ensures same-sex partners can succeed a tenancy. The Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Bill will make the law on domestic violence for gay couples the same as for heterosexual couples.
- Organise an LGB housing forum for tenants. This could help identify particular harassment hotspots and is a good way to check that LGB tenants' needs are being met, Gold says.
- Strike landlords who harass LGB clients off your temporary housing list. Having this enshrined in policy will send a strong message to tenants. It will also ensure if a tenant complains about harassment from a landlord, there is a system to pass the message on to the person in control of the list.

➔ nearly half of their problems relate directly to sexuality. Colleen Humphrey, advice services manager for Stonewall, says: "Local authorities and housing associations take a lot of other issues more seriously. Homophobic hate crime seems to be marginalised."

What's more, homophobia has direct implications for housing: for example, Home Office statistics show 53.3% of victims of homophobic harassment and violence experience it in or around their home. Stonewall HA argues many housing providers don't even know how many homosexual tenants they have, let alone if their sexuality has led to other problems such as isolation or homelessness itself. They hope their training will start to redress this.

Ask – but be careful

The first thing housing workers should look at, says Deborah Gold, who runs Stonewall's training scheme, is how much they already know about the sexuality-related issues that could impact on tenants' housing needs. For example, a gay person may have suffered general harassment or abuse during their ordinary lives – school, work, socially. "A lot of Stonewall's tenants have depression and need far more support," Gold says. It's important to have a background understanding of these issues so housing officers can identify people with extra support needs.

An important part of Stonewall's training is making sure housing workers are comfortable discussing clients' sexuality. This is important, she explains, so that tenants feel they can tell their officer they are gay. She recommends organisations should monitor sexuality as part of other diversity questions when tenants have their first interview.

"In many cases their sexuality would be relevant to the person's housing and if you ask, you're making it easier and passing on the message that your organisation is positive about helping," she says. But if you're going to ask a tenant if they're gay, you need to do it sensitively because you're asking them to come out to a stranger – no easy thing, especially if they have faced homophobia in the past. Don't make a joke of it, and never assume the person you're asking is straight. "Some people will say, 'I have to ask you this: I'm sure you're not, but are you gay?'" says Gold. The best way to do it is to make it clear this is a question asked to everyone in order to monitor the service delivered to different groups, and be matter of fact.

Once you know someone's sexuality, you can be more alert to potential problems they could be facing that might impact on their housing. For example, Stonewall's housing services manager, Patricia McCann, says the

likelihood of homophobic harassment can be reduced by housing gay or lesbian people away from potential conflict hotspots. "There are specific areas in London where you know there's a history of homophobic abuse towards people." They also recommend that victims of homophobia are not housed on large estates where antisocial behaviour levels are known to be higher than usual, as they could easily become a target. Workers in youth housing projects need to be particularly conscious of issues faced by lesbians and gay men. Young gay tenants



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COLLEEN HUMPHREY, STONEWALL

may be at higher risk of depression and need extra emotional support if they have been thrown out of home – and knowing a person is gay could explain why they claim to be homeless even though other areas of their life seem stable.

Stonewall's advice workers are used to dealing with cases where homelessness has led young lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people to fall into drug addiction or sexual exploitation. Vulnerable LGB people who have just come out may turn to the entertainment scene, with its focus on clubbing, drugs and alcohol, for support, Gold says. While they start out having fun,

some begin to rely on meeting people to stay with for the night, and young men in particular may fall into the sex trade, she explains. These dangers could mean some young people, even though not under 18, could be in need of higher prioritisation for emergency housing than they currently get.

The impact of sexuality on problems that affect housing does not just apply to young people. Staff in sheltered or supported housing for older people also need to be aware of possible problems. "Of all the areas in which lesbian and gay people are invisible, it's older people," Gold says. Gay or lesbian older tenants are even less likely than younger people to have family support networks. Staff need to be armed with this knowledge and awareness that homophobic harassment could be a problem, because while society in general is seeing more acceptance of homosexuality, older people can be more outwardly homophobic than younger residents. If backed up by strong organisational policies, they can then be not only sympathetic but confident in challenging conflicts, Gold says.

Violence in the home

The final main area where a tenant's homosexuality can impact on their housing is same-sex domestic violence. Stonewall research shows that 33% of LGB people have experienced violence in the home, and 62% of these described this as domestic violence.

"There are no suitable services if someone needs to get out of that situation in an emergency," Gold says. Most same-sex violence is between men, but there are currently very few equivalents to women's refuges for men. Currently, the only place for male victims of domestic violence to flee to in an emergency would be supported housing that prioritises drug and alcohol abusers, or a homeless hostel – which in London at least would prioritise only people who are actually sleeping on the street. "If someone goes to a council and says, 'I am experiencing domestic violence and I have a job and am not vulnerable in other ways,' it's difficult to put them in emergency accommodation," she adds. Until there are more refuges for gay men, those in charge of the referral process to emergency housing need to recognise domestic violence among gay people as a higher priority, she suggests.

Meanwhile, John is still waiting for his transfer, but there is no guarantee yet whether the new place will be any more suitable. In the meantime, he wants his housing officers to accept he is gay and make an effort to show him they are concerned about his situation. "I think if they had some sort of LGB training they might know how to acknowledge people who are gay and show a little more sympathy," he says. **HT**