

Impact of Covid-19 and the UK response for LGBT+ members

Support, advice, and links

Being able to be open about who we are, and our experiences is an important part of good mental health. Being out about our LGBT+ identities at work, and in wider society can provide protected/safe space, support and solidarity that are crucial for that openness. Space and protection for being out at work, supported by hard won rights such as in the Equality Act, can enable pride and wellbeing that may not be found elsewhere, including at home.

Impact of social restrictions

Whilst the UK follows lockdown and social distancing measures people may find themselves cut off from the people and places where community and confidence are found.

The pressure to conform to societal norms such as nuclear families and co-habitation which may have more benefits for heterosexuals and people who identify their gender with the sex assigned at birth may be so much greater as the space we inhabit daily shrinks.

Condemnation of mass gatherings and social interaction outside the home may become a stronger norm which could operate outside these times where social distancing is necessary to stop the spread of the virus. Alongside any development of condemnation an environment that does not tackle hostility could manifest in homo and Trans phobias as being LGBT+ may not be considered acceptable or a norm by some people including a vocal and perhaps violent minority. This could negatively impact on people whose social interactions, large or small, take place outside a single home unit, such as LGBT+ Pride events which usually take place in various locations across the UK between April and October, LGBT+ clubs and bars.

LGBT+ people have specific mental health challenges that amongst other causes can arise from being different to the majority heterosexual cis-gendered lifestyle, not being accepted/understood, and hostility towards LGBT+ people. This can be exacerbated by the measures in response to the virus. Many LGBT+ relationships are not based in a single home and the restrictions on people being able to go to another home, and restrictions on non-essential travel have significant impact on these relationships. Some of these may be in other countries so perhaps even more affected than those within the UK.

Waiting lists for gender identity clinics

A major issue for Trans people is waiting times for medical appointments. This is something that is always an issue but all the more so now as appointments are put on hold.

Now is not the time to be looking up gender identity clinic or surgeon waiting times. They are on hold and are completely out of our control. It is catastrophically unfair that transitions cannot be progressed now. After long waits some people find that their scheduled slots are now not available. Also those on waiting lists find that the already long wait is further extended. Waiting times for appointments need to be addressed as a matter of priority, particularly with the hugely negative impact that is experienced now in the time of the coronavirus pandemic.

Tran's people may find that the Trans Resilience in Isolation (<https://www.galop.org.uk/trans-resilience-in-isolation/>) slideshow on the Galop website, listed below, is useful in the current situation.

HIV

LGBT+ people are still disproportionately affected by HIV. The Government sent out incorrect information that people with HIV are subject to shielding as they are at high risk of serious infection, shielding only applies to people who in the previous 6 months have had a CD4 count under 50 and/or had an opportunistic infection.

The impact/memory of the hugely negative experience of HIV before effective antiretroviral drugs were widely available may be very challenging for many LGBT+ people at this time.

This may be a memory that is difficult to talk to people about but is very understandable for those who have had similar experience. In the 80s whilst HIV was tearing the LGBT+ community apart and seeing the death of many, the Government of the day left much of the responses up to the LGBT+ community, didn't do much to tackle the negative stereotypes of people living with HIV and dying from AIDS and introduced the notorious section 28 of the 1988 Government Education Reform Act. Listed below are ways of reaching into the LGBT+ community now where others can be contacted who may be experiencing/aware of similar challenging emotions and memories.

Living in isolation and or difficult situation

Access to wider relationship structures than those that exist at home are likely to be greatly reduced. Many LGBT+ people live in single person households and at this time may experience this as unwelcome isolation and lack of support. It is useful at this time to reach out in whatever ways are open whether to friends or beyond. This may be

particularly for those with underlying health conditions who are informed that they should be shielded, that is not go out at all for 3 months.

Some LGBT+ may find themselves in situations or times that are isolating, not accepting, or hostile, perhaps violent. There will be times for people in these situations when the only time they can access support is when taking daily exercise. It is important that there is no judgement of people taking time outside where it does not compromise vital social distancing to prevent the spread of the virus.

Online support and challenges

Access to sources of support from fellow trade union members, LGBT+ networks, and supportive friends and work colleagues can be reduced when no longer meeting in the workplace or social settings. It is crucial that LGBT+ people reach out to keep connection with work colleagues, and usual sources of social support, whilst perhaps finding new sources of support. The Government has announced vital support for the charity sector as key workers. This means that to some extent they are able to maintain their vital services. Helplines can be an important source of information as can online chat.

Working at home

It is important to recognise that as vital as face to face contact on screen can be at times it can also be very tiring, this is a broad TU issue and it should be recognised that this time can be one of stress for people who do or do not have caring responsibilities so it is important to communicate what one's situation is. Perhaps first with people who may understand and then in more formal contexts. This is also the case regarding supply of equipment that is really effective in enabling effective home-working, it may be that providers were unprepared for this dramatic and sudden change. UCU has guidance on working at home: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10830/UCU-guidance-on-working-from-home-and-teaching-online/pdf/ucu_workfromhome_guide_mar202.pdf

LGBT+ histories/stories

Stories of the lives and struggles of other LGBT+ people, organisations and rights are important sources for pride, connection and confidence. There are films, websites, books and various other media that feature LGBT+ histories. There are powerful inspiring stories and the activism is our history. Now is a good time to learn where our rights have come from. We are part of a big community with a rich, fascinating history and proud stories.

LGBT+ studies is important

Online learning may negatively impact on the number of people who take up LGBT+ studies, this may also be one of the areas that learning providers do not prioritise. The lack of this can be devastating to people who find confidence from engaging in such study,

and to the wealth of knowledge/community that has emerged amongst LGBT+ academics and researchers. UCU is committed to the importance of LGBT+ studies so if this is an issue it should be raised within the union.

Supporting LGBT+ learners

UCU members who are learner-facing may be the people LGBT+ students turn to as they may be just coming out, feeling scared, alone or personally compromised in the situations they experience at this time. Many LGBT+ learners in both FE and HE find their first supportive friends/groups amongst other learners, it is important that they know they can reach out online and find some support. Directing learners to the NUS website might be helpful: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/liberation/lgbt-students>

Provided at the end is a list of useful online sites covering struggles that may be faced by LGBT+ people now.

Communication

This time can be one of finding out more and engaging with others online. Some organisations that run helplines, tele friending etc. are still open, though they may have reduced hours.

In addition to facilities provided through the workplace and communication with colleagues there are online groups of LGBT+ people and sites that are providing information and connections.

The online LGBT+ news site Gay Star News has a list of LGBT+ podcasts (<https://www.gaystarnews.com/article/gay-queer-lgbti-podcasts-digital-pride/>)

What the Trans!? Is a regular podcast (<https://whatthetrans.com/category/pods/>) that also now has an online community (<https://twitter.com/WhatTheTrans/status/1240058308972732422>) on Discord.

Coming out of lockdown

Appropriate monitoring of the needs and concerns of LGBT+ people should be happening, that includes non-binary people. There needs to be recognition of the specific impact of the virus on LGBT+ lives and community. Monitoring of LGBT+ presence, needs and concerns within society and within individual institutions and services needs to happen so that LGBT+ are recognised and supported.

Going back into heteronormative work settings having been at home is likely to be highly stressful for a significant number of LGBT+ people. Issues caused by lack of acceptance, not fitting in and having to encounter any level of anti LGBT+ feeling will make change from homeworking to working in offices particularly difficult.

Online meetings using facilities such as skype can be great sources of support at this time. Whether that be with work colleagues, fellow union members through for example branch meetings, or individuals/groups of other LGBT+ people. It is important to reach out and join in order to keep, and even build, the connections that support, provide solidarity, and enable us to be out and proud.

Links

The following links provides a range of resources

Age UK (www.ageuk.org.uk/)

Age UK has specific guidance (<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/information-advice/coronavirus/>) for this time and a daily support line (<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/services/age-uk-advice-line/>) (8am – 7pm) for people over 60

AKT (www.akt.org.uk/)

Albert Kennedy Trust supports young LGBT+ people facing or experiencing homelessness, or who are living in a hostile environment. AKT which has an extensive list of links (<https://www.akt.org.uk/covid-19>) covering housing, body mind and spirit, and mutual aid.

Galop (www.galop.org.uk/)

Galop supports LGBT+ who encounter violence of any kind. There are numerous links and resources some of which are isolation/coronavirus specific

Gendered Intelligence (www.genderedintelligence.co.uk/)

A support service for Trans and gender variant young people which has adapted some services (<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/support/trans-youth>) so that they can provide online support and group space.

LGBT Helpline Scotland (www.lgbthealth.org.uk/)

The helpline (<https://www.lgbthealth.org.uk/services-support/helpline/>) is open Tuesdays and Wednesdays (phone, email 12pm to 9pm and live chat from 3pm) and Thursday (phone only 12pm – 6pm)

Opening Doors London (www.openingdoorslondon.org.uk/)

ODL provides a tele friending service to the over 50s in London and beyond

Stonewall (www.stonewall.org.uk/)

Stonewall provides an extensive list of links (<https://www.stonewall.org.uk/about-us/news/covid-19-%E2%80%93-how-lgbt-inclusive-organisations-can-help>) about LGBT+ inclusive services during coronavirus

QueerCare (<https://queercare.network/>)

This organisation provides forms

(<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeobSg0--C19YQtDmnrHxxRiipS-ybUWtL6Z-qc-GRuOu7TQw/viewform>) to help match up immunocompromised, asthmatic and elderly people, particularly those who are queer and Trans, with those who can provide support during isolation within the UK

Switchboard LGBT+ (<https://switchboard.lgbt/>)

Switchboard continues its phone, chat and email support during this time

Terrence Higgins Trust (www.tht.org.uk/)

THT provides lockdown and social distancing specific advice about sex and sexual health and for people who are living with HIV (<https://www.tht.org.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19>)

What the Trans?! (<https://whatthetrans.com/>)

Regular podcast (<https://whatthetrans.com/category/pods/>) and a new community space (<https://twitter.com/WhatTheTrans/status/1240058308972732422>) for Trans people.