



## Sexuality, Equality and Local Governance

### Background to the research

The report presents findings from a two and a half year research project, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The research involved comparison of Welsh, Northern Irish and English situations in the context of the Local Authority Modernisation Agenda introduced by the New Labour government. Local authorities are required to involve local communities in strategic partnership with other agencies, to improve well-being and work towards cohesive and sustainable communities.

The research focused on the implementation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans equalities in this context.

Qualitative research methods were used in Northern Ireland, Wales and North-East and South-East England.

- Four councils, one in Wales, one in Northern Ireland, one in South-East England and one in North-East England, volunteered to be case study areas. In each of the four areas at least eight people working in different local authority directorates and positions, and in some cases in other statutory sector, and voluntary sector, organisations, took part in a one to one interview. In total thirty-seven people took part in case study interviews.
- In each of the four areas a group of people formed an Action Learning Set, meeting four times over a period of between four and six months. In each Action Learning Set participants shared successes and frustrations in taking the sexualities equalities agenda forward, and ideas for next steps.
- Fifteen people, each from an organisation working at national level, took part in one to one interviews.
- Five councillors, from Northern Ireland, North East England and South-East England, took part in one to one interviews.

## Summary of research findings (in no order of importance)

Interview data show that the research participants:

- Viewed the legislative and policy changes introduced by the New Labour government as significant drivers of the sexualities and trans equalities agenda.
- Identified factors that can support organisational change, including leadership, working in partnership where appropriate, and working across the equality strands in an integrated way.
- Assessed the implementation of sexualities and trans equalities policies as uneven within their own organisations. A similar picture emerged of inconsistent performance across local authorities, despite an overarching national legislative and policy framework.
- Had different perspectives, developed in their respective statutory, voluntary and community sectors, and at their national (infrastructure) and local levels. This misalignment of 'view' potentially undermines a shared agenda.
- Perceived that there has been significant progress in building the importance, and vocabulary, of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans equalities into the local government modernisation process. However, the general sense is that organisational cultural change is slow.
- Experienced difficulty in taking the LGBT equalities agenda forward, because of the backward pull of (some people's) lack of understanding, discriminatory views, discomfort, fear, embarrassment and resistance to change.
- Understood the management of work across equality strands as a complex task because of a perceived hierarchy, with LGBT equalities talked about as being "way at the bottom", "the new kid on the block", "the latest strand in the pecking order", "the area where you really have to put your head above the parapet", "the most sensitive area ... people tiptoe around it".
- Found that there is added value in partnerships between people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans and service providers, managers and commissioners. Developing trust through working together can lead to a useful unpicking of the tensions between the equality strands, between the L, G, B and T in the LGBT cluster, and between the range of experiences and "voices" within each of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans communities.
- Valued practitioner groups / multi-agency forums, to share ideas, success in LGBT equalities work, and strategies to responding to forms of resistance.

**The initial research report, and more information about the project, is available at: <http://research.ncl.ac.uk/selg/index.html>**