

Scene BUT Unseen

Guidelines for organisations working with migrants to enhance service provision for gay and bisexual men

Gay, bisexual and transgender men, as well as men who identify as straight but have sex with men, often migrate to the UK in search of a more liberated life, a place to be 'out' about their sexuality, while staying safe from homophobic abuse. But what they face when they arrive can lead to a very different story from the one they had hoped for.

Newly found liberation can lead to an outburst of sexual encounters and an increase in sexual risk taking, and with it, increased exposure to sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Survey data has shown 9.4% of migrant gay men tested positive for HIV, compared with 5.9% of UK-born gay men.¹

There are other factors that make these men vulnerable to STIs and HIV infection. The gay community is reported by men as offering few supportive social contacts. Perceived as over-sexualised, the gay 'scene' does not necessarily help men build on their social or personal capital.

Poor English language skills can hamper finding work or even socialising. Men may well also have uncertainties surrounding their immigration status. It is not uncommon for men to find themselves relying on sexual partners to provide accommodation and food. Both poor language skills and an unequal balance of power in such relationships can make it difficult for men to negotiate safer sex.

Men are often unaware of where to turn to for support, or what they are entitled to in terms of healthcare, immigration advice, social security benefits and so on.

However, these are similar issues faced by many immigrants to the UK, gay or not. So, what makes gay migrant men especially at risk? Why are they not benefiting fully from existing support services?

When living in a foreign country many naturally turn to expatriate communities for support and advice, and there are many grass-root community organisations in existence. However, homophobic views within such communities towards gay men are often the reason why men have migrated in the first place. Men have regularly suffered abuse, violence and even torture from people in their home countries, including family members. It is easy to understand why men feel unsure about turning to their communities when looking for support in their new lives in the UK.

Additionally men will be unused to, or even afraid, of discussing their sexuality because of how dangerous that was in their home countries. The resulting evasiveness and inconsistencies can sometimes appear dishonest.

But their practical needs must still be addressed. Learning English, increasing employment skills, finding accommodation and understanding rights and entitlements are fundamental to the men's ability to survive in the UK. Some men might prefer stronger links with the gay community, and turn to gay community organisations to meet their needs. However, migrant organisations, with their knowledge and expertise, also have an important role to play in supporting migrant gay men.

¹ Sigma Research. *On the Move. Findings from the United Kingdom Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2003*

Despite the fact that agencies offering support to migrants would not discriminate towards people accessing their services, it is quite possible to be unaware of how unwelcoming services can appear to gay men. Lack of information or resources aimed at gay men can reinforce the perception of hostility, making them feel excluded.

It is not necessary for migrant organisations to start offering specific programmes targeting gay and bisexual men, but small changes in service delivery could have an impact on the men accessing, or wanting to access, your services. Having gay resources available, being aware and knowledgeable about organisations available to support gay men and having staff that are aware of sexual diversity issues can create a more inclusive environment.

The following page offers some guidelines for migrant organisations to ensure the services available are welcoming to gay and bisexual migrant men.

Be aware and understanding of issues facing migrant gay men

- Be aware of the reasons why gay men come to the UK from other countries.
- Be aware of how different countries and cultures view homosexuality.
- Be aware that homophobic attitudes can mean men often disengage with communities from their home countries, including family members.
- Understand that even if in contact with family members, they might not offer any form of support.
- Understand the reasons why some men will not want or be able to seek support from their expatriate communities and be knowledgeable of suitable alternative referral networks.
- Be knowledgeable of support groups and services available to gay men.
- Be knowledgeable of asylum and immigration issues facing gay men and same sex couples.

When communicating with clients

- Use gender neutral terms such as 'partner' and other inclusive terms to facilitate communication.
- Support disclosure of sexual identity, orientation and behaviour especially when they have an influence on an individual's situation, eg asylum issues.
- Ask open ended questions to ascertain what support structures men have available to them.
- Assure your service user of confidentiality.

Have an open and welcoming attitude

- Be non-judgemental.
- Avoid the assumption of heterosexuality.
- Avoid the assumption that men have or access support from their communities and/or family.
- Avoid common assumptions and stereotypes about gay and bisexual men.
- Be open and supportive of disclosure of sexuality.
- Be willing and open to involve same sex partners where their input would be valuable.

Make your organisation's environment welcoming

- Train staff in gay and bisexual diversity issues.
- Develop, implement and display an equality statement which explicitly mentions sexual orientation.
- Challenge homophobic behaviour and language from staff and service users.
- Display, and make available, posters and materials relating to gay and bisexual service users.
- Design service forms to be inclusive of gay men by using inclusive language.
- If your organisation develops and produces materials, include information relevant to gay and bisexual men.
- Acknowledge and promote relevant days of observance and celebration, such as World AIDS Day and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) Pride.

These guidelines are supported by an accompanying document, *Welcoming Diversity*, an informal audit tool to help you assess your current service provision for gay and bisexual men.

The HIV and sexual health charity for life

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