

Engagement Report May 2022

Engagement with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer/ questioning + victims and survivors



Disclaimer

This engagement report has been prepared at the request of the Inquiry's Chair and Panel. The views expressed are those of the authors alone. This report does not include formal recommendations by the Inquiry's Chair and Panel and is separate from formal evidence obtained in the Inquiry's investigations and public hearings, and also separate from the Inquiry's research strand.

This report contains descriptions of child sexual abuse. Reading the report can have an emotional impact. There are some support organisations that it may be helpful to contact if you have been affected by any of the content in the report: www.iicsa.org.uk/help-and-support-0.

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Emily Gibson, Russell Knight, Annie Durham
and Imran Choudhury

IICSA Engagement Team

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Controlling Chemsex	Off The Record – Bristol
Coventry Rape and Sexual Abuse Centre (CRASAC)	Over the Rainbow
East Midlands Children and Young People's Sexual Assault Service	Quest – pastoral support for LGBT+ Catholics
ELOP	Rape & Sexual Violence Project
FFLAG	Service Six
Galop – the LGBT+ anti-abuse charity	The Speak Out Project
Hidayah LGBT	Stonewall
Intercom Trust	Stonewall Housing
Into the Light	Survivors' Network
Just Like Us	SurvivorsUK
LGBT Foundation	Survivors West Yorkshire
	Trust House

Executive summary



Behind each statistic is a real person. These stories need to be heard and accepted.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

The Inquiry has heard that LGBTQ+ children face specific challenges that make them vulnerable to child sexual abuse. We also heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors can face barriers which make it difficult to disclose child sexual abuse, access support and form adult relationships.

Society's views of LGBTQ+ victims and survivors are often built on harmful myths and stereotypes. Although social and political attitudes have improved, we live in a heteronormative and cisnormative culture, with a deeply homophobic history.

We heard that many people, including professionals, continue to believe and act on harmful myths and stereotypes about LGBTQ+ victims and survivors.

For example:

- Some victims and survivors were told that their gender identity or sexual orientation resulted from the child sexual abuse they experienced, which severely damaged their self-identity and mental health.
- Some victims and survivors were told that they were sexually abused because of their sexual orientation or gender identity ('you brought it on yourself'), including vulnerable LGBTQ+ children using online spaces to explore their sexuality.
- We also heard the myth that 'people who have been abused go on to abuse' can stop both gay and straight men from reporting or disclosing having been sexually abused because they fear being thought of as 'paedophiles'.

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors experience distinct barriers to disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse. We heard that because LGBTQ+ people are seen as 'different' from the norm, it can be more difficult to disclose and report child sexual abuse, which has led to under-reporting of child sexual abuse by LGBTQ+ victims and survivors.

We also heard about barriers such as:

- The continuing trauma of past criminalisation of homosexuality, Section 28, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and societal homophobia, which has particularly affected gay and bisexual men.
- Internalised homophobic shame and stigma, preventing victims and survivors who were sexually abused as children from disclosing to anyone.
- Victims and survivors being forced to explore and understand their sexuality or gender identity before they were ready, and being deeply traumatised through being forced to come out (as LGBTQ+) under pressure.

Relevant support services are hard to find, and LGBTQ+ victims and survivors often have to rely on personal recommendation rather than professional referral. Many victims and survivors told us how essential professional support is, especially in cases where victims and survivors cannot depend on traditional support networks such as family, friends, religion or work colleagues, due to being excluded or hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity.

We also heard that professionals who work with LGBTQ+ victims and survivors need specialised, high quality training and education in order to overcome cultural myths and stereotypes which can prevent victims and survivors from disclosing sexual abuse and accessing services. This training and education needs to specifically focus on being trauma informed and LGBTQ+ affirming.

Introduction

“ Despite huge progress in the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people, this has primarily been among the liberal sections of society, and alongside this there remains a very large number of people still instinctively hostile to anything outside the heterosexual ‘norm’.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse ('the Inquiry') was set up by the government to consider the extent to which state and non-state institutions in England and Wales have failed in their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse and exploitation, and to make meaningful recommendations for change.

Along with evidence taken through the Inquiry's programme of public hearings and the Inquiry's research programme, **victims and survivors** of **child sexual abuse** have shared over 6,000 experiences of child sexual abuse with the Inquiry through the Truth Project. The Truth Project offered adult victims and survivors the chance to share their experiences and to be heard with respect.

Through its wider work, and by listening to participants from the Victims and Survivors Forum and the Truth Project, the Inquiry has heard that disclosure and access to support can be difficult for victims and survivors who identify as LGBTQ+.

In 2021, the Inquiry's Forum consultation on protected characteristics found that *"being sexually abused as a child had led to difficulties in accepting or understanding their sexual orientation"* and that *"victims and survivors received poor responses from institutions due to stereotypical attitudes about sexual orientation"*.

We heard that LGBTQ+ children and young people face specific challenges that can make them vulnerable to child sexual abuse. They can also face additional barriers which make it more difficult to disclose.



The bisexual feelings I experienced as I approached puberty made me vulnerable. My abuser recognised this and took advantage.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

The engagement team was asked to explore these topics from the perspective of support organisations which work with LGBTQ+ individuals, and with victims and survivors who identify as LGBTQ+. This report summarises what the engagement team heard.

Engagement activities are not formal evidence-gathering sessions or research, and this publication is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of all the views we heard, nor does it make general conclusions about children who are victims of child sexual abuse in the wider population. This report reflects what we heard during these engagement activities.

About the engagement project

The engagement team supports the ongoing work of the Inquiry. It engages with victims and survivors through the Victims and Survivors Forum ('the Forum'), and with professionals who are responsible for keeping children safe.

We know that many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors of child sexual abuse have had negative experiences of professionals and service organisations. This is why the Inquiry's engagement and support and safeguarding teams worked together to create a bespoke support and training model for this project. We created inclusive **safe spaces** through **LGBTQ+ affirming practice**, which values diverse **sexual orientations** and gender identities while respecting, valuing and supporting the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals.

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors

The Forum is the Inquiry's network for victims and survivors, and those who represent them. Forum members are encouraged to ask questions, make suggestions and meet other members. Over 1,700 victims and survivors have contributed to the work of the Inquiry through the Forum.

We invited Forum members who identify as LGBTQ+, or who have expressed an interest in LGBTQ+ experiences, to take part in this project. Forum members could choose to take part via a phone call, video conferencing call or by answering the questions via a Google Form, and all those taking part were offered support. All Forum members whose experiences are included in this report have given their consent for publication.

We heard from 31 victims and survivors, who described their identity as shown in the following tables:

Gender identity	No. of participants
Male	13
Female	6
Non-binary	1
Transgender	1
Not disclosed	10

Sexual orientation	No. of participants
Gay	12
Lesbian	8
Bisexual + Demisexual	1
Asexual + Panromantic	1
Asexual + Biromantic	1
Bisexual/questioning	1
Questioning as a teenager	1
LGBTQ+	1
Not disclosed	5

Engagement with victims and survivors took place between November 2020 and February 2021. Participants were asked the following questions:

1. What do you feel are the barriers LGBTQ+ people face when disclosing and or reporting child sexual abuse?
Follow up: If you have reported or disclosed child sexual abuse, was there anything that helped you to disclose or report and you feel could be taken up more widely as an example of best practice?
2. How do you feel society responds to LGBTQ+ people who are victims and survivors of child sexual abuse? Examples of what we mean by society are the general public, the media, employers etc.
3. Have you engaged with support services and if so what was your experience of these services? Did you find the service accessible and valuable?
Additional guidance given: Services may provide specialist or general support. Services could include GPs or mental health services provided by the NHS. They also include justice support such as victim support and SARC (sexual assault referral centre) or voluntary sector support such as counselling.
4. Do you have any suggestions on what would make support services more open and accessible for LGBTQ+ people?
5. Is there anything further you would like to add?

LGBTQ+ support organisations

For this project, the Inquiry engaged with LGBTQ+ support services and organisations that provided child sexual abuse and sexual violence support services. Some organisations provided specific LGBTQ+ tailored services or had clients who identify as LGBTQ+.

Professionals provided us with a broad overview of the issues and barriers LGBTQ+ people face when disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse, and when accessing support. Open discussions ensured that professionals were able to share their knowledge and experience.

The engagement team identified a range of organisations across England and Wales and prioritised meeting those with relevant experience of providing support and services to people who identify as LGBTQ+. We spoke to 31 organisations between December 2020 and February 2021.

Type of organisation	No. of organisations	Overall (%)
Sexual violence/SARC	6	19
Mental health support	4	13
Housing support	1	3
Ethnic minority support	1	3
Youth	5	16
Victim and survivor support	2	6
Child sexual abuse support	3	10
Sexual health	3	10
LGBTQ+ general	5	16
Individual (trans issues)	1	3

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, meetings were held virtually, over video conference or over the phone, with one organisation providing written answers. Each virtual meeting was an hour long and followed a conversational format. All organisations were asked the same questions:

1. In your professional experience, what are the barriers specific to LGBTQ+ people in disclosing and or reporting child sexual abuse?
2. In your experience, how do support service professionals respond to LGBTQ+ people when they make a disclosure of child sexual abuse or look for support?
Additional guidance given: By professionals, we mean support workers in either statutory, specialist or voluntary services.
3. In your experience, how do institutions respond to LGBTQ+ people when they make a disclosure of child sexual abuse or look for support?
Additional guidance given: Types of institutions could include the NHS, police, social services, etc.
4. Do you have any suggestions for the Chair and Panel on what would make it easier for LGBTQ+ people to report or disclose child sexual abuse and to access support services?

A note on terminology

We recognise that language associated with sexual orientation and **gender identity** can be complex and potentially exclusionary. In addition, not all readers will be familiar with these terms and people will have different preferences as to usage.

The Inquiry's project team analysed the language used by 50 leading LGBTQ+ support organisations to identify the most common terms used by organisations working with people who identify as LGBTQ+. At the same time, we recognise the limitations of using 'LGBTQ+' as an umbrella term, as well as the limitations of specific categories within that acronym.

We have also used participants' and organisations' own words when describing their sexual orientation or gender identity. There is a full glossary at the end of this report.

Society's views of LGBTQ+ victims and survivors: myths and stereotypes

“ Stigma and myths have been very prominent ... There is far too much emphasis on the survivor and victim blaming, and little understanding of LGBTQ+ lived experiences. This leaves the survivor feeling unheard and disheartened which makes seeking help much harder.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Victims and survivors and support organisations told us that although society’s views of LGBTQ+ people have, in general, become less negative over recent years, there is little understanding of the unique impacts of child sexual abuse on LGBTQ+ victims and survivors.

Victims and survivors of child sexual abuse who identify as LGBTQ+ told us that they experience specific barriers of suspicion, mistrust and negative stereotypes when disclosing child sexual abuse, seeking justice and accessing support.

Although social and political attitudes have improved, we heard that harmful stereotypes of LGBTQ+ victims and survivors still exist in the workplace and in the media, in particular in sports and schools, and in news reporting, TV programmes and online.

We were told that many professionals in the health sector, schools, police, religious institutions and counselling services continue to believe and act on misunderstandings about LGBTQ+ victims and survivors.

We heard that sexual orientations and gender identities, such as **queer**, bisexual and transgender, are poorly understood by society, media and professionals across a variety of sectors, and that this makes it more difficult for victims and survivors with those identities to disclose, seek justice and access support. For LGBTQ+ victims and survivors of child sexual abuse, knowing that they will be believed if they disclose, is vital.

“ **NHS and police posters usually portray victims of sexual violence as young white women in nightlife environments, leading people who do not fit this stereotype to fear that they will not be believed if they disclose.**

LGBTQ+ support service

Sexual relations between men were illegal in England and Wales before 1967, and the men we spoke to who were teenagers in these years told us about how, as child victims and survivors, they were at risk of being arrested themselves. People have also told us about the destructive legacy of **Section 28**, a law which between 1988 and 2003 made it illegal to ‘promote homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material’ and which resulted in homophobic bullying and a lack of support and role models for younger LGBTQ+ people.

Some females who were sexually abused by women told us that their experience was not acknowledged as abusive, for example a girl living with an older woman was instead considered a 'relationship'. We heard that there was general reluctance to see women as **perpetrators** of child sexual abuse.

“ The act of sexual violence between women ... [is] not rape by the law. Subtle messages you get that what has happened to you is not as important. That has a direct impact on women.

LGBTQ+ support service

The following sections explore these myths and stereotypes, and the impact they have on LGBTQ+ victims and survivors.

Myth: Victims and survivors adopt a sexual orientation or gender identity because of the child sexual abuse they experienced

“ I feel like society is quick to label a victim of child sexual abuse as LGBTQ+ based on nothing more than whether the abuser was the same gender as the victim.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

One of the most common and damaging myths that we heard about from both victims and survivors and organisations is that someone's sexual orientation or gender identity has formed in response to the child sexual abuse they experienced. We heard that many people were told, and often believed, that they wouldn't be gay, transgender, asexual, etc. if they had not been sexually abused as children.

“ People might say 'she is the way she is because of the abuse'.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Nearly every organisation and victim and survivor that we spoke to emphasised how common this attitude is, not only in wider society but also among professionals, including specialist support organisations. We heard that some support professionals spent more time focusing on victims and survivors' sexual identities, neglecting individuals' distress.

Victims and survivors told us that when their sexual orientation or gender identity is treated as a response to child sexual abuse, it can severely affect their self-identity and their ability to seek help. It also prevented victims and survivors from accessing and benefiting from mental health or other support for the abuse they suffered.

“ It took me a while to come out as I attached my child sexual abuse with being gay.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We also heard that some victims and survivors have the ‘LGBTQ+’ label applied to them as a result of the gender of their abuser, rather than being allowed to define themselves.

“ People think that you are gay because you’ve been sexually abused.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Lesbians and bisexual women in particular said that they have been told their sexual orientation was a direct result of being abused.

“ If we are LGBTQ because a man abused us and ‘we are blaming all men’ or if we got abused by a woman we ‘are confused’.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We also heard from individuals and organisations that **trans** victims and survivors’ gender identities were frequently explained as the result of sexual abuse.

“ I’ve been asked whether I’m non-binary specifically because I experienced child sexual abuse, and whether I’m turning my discomfort with my body from the sexual abuse into a gender issue that isn’t really there.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Victims and survivors told us that these messages and beliefs are extremely damaging, and no victim and survivor should hear that their self-identity, their gender identity or sexual orientation have resulted from the child sexual abuse they have experienced.

Myth: Victims and survivors were sexually abused because of their sexual orientation or gender identity ('you brought it on yourself')

“ I think society as a whole often feels that people (other than heterosexuals who were abused by people of the other sex) are more complicit in their abuse somehow.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many men told us that when they were younger they had been accused of 'inviting' sexual abuse because they showed an interest in other men by being stereotypically 'effeminate'. They told us this made them afraid of not being believed, or even of being blamed for being sexually abused. We also heard that LGBTQ+ people who are extroverted or openly proud of their identity are particularly susceptible to allegations of 'attention-seeking'.

“ People who 'subscribe' to any form of so-called 'alternative' lifestyles - whether that be in dress, lifestyle or whatever, seem to be blamed more for any abuse they receive, as if they are somehow either getting what they 'deserve', or asking for abuse by the way they dress or live their lives.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that, often, gay men are stereotyped as sexually 'mischievous'. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that some people do act out sexually in response to having been sexually abused as children, and that this underage sexual behaviour by young gay men is often seen as a 'rite of passage' or 'normal'. We heard that this is made worse by limited and stereotypical representations of LGBTQ+ people.

“ I feel society sees all LGBTQ+ people as being promiscuous and that all must be leading a hedonistic lifestyle, thus deserving of abuse suffered in the past and reason enough to treat them like second class citizens generally.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Whereas **cisgender** heterosexual young people can more openly seek out relationships and test sexual boundaries with their peer group in schools, LGBTQ+ young people may only be able to do this in adult spaces, where they are more vulnerable. We heard that young people, in particular those who are **questioning** their sexuality, can struggle to find role models, peer partners, and support networks. This may cause them to look online for guidance, support, friendship and space to explore their sexuality or gender identity.

“ Young people are exploring their sexuality and gender on forums where there are predators.

LGBTQ+ support service

Adult dating apps and websites have age restrictions, but we heard that it is easy for children to get around these. We heard that young people are blamed by their perpetrator and others for abuse because they have chosen to pose as an adult and engage in sexualised conversations with adults. Vulnerable young LGBTQ+ people may view going into online spaces, which app/website controllers know are unsafe, as their only option for exploring their sexuality.

“ Gay and bisexual boys in particular use dating apps where there is lots of access to sex but less emphasis on relationships. They may view this as normal/acceptable because being socialised in the heteronormative world means they don't have the opportunity to learn about healthy same-sex relationships.

LGBTQ+ support service

Myth: People who have been abused go on to abuse

“ The experience of being under suspicion is like another abuse, being suspected is horrible and horrendous particularly when you have been abused.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

One of the most damaging myths for all victims and survivors, and one which is felt by many gay men that we spoke to, is that adults who were sexually abused as children will go on to sexually abuse children.

This myth is harmful to victims and survivors in general and when combined with attitudes (that still exist today) that gay men are predatory and more likely to be child sexual abusers, it can have a devastating effect on gay men. Some men we spoke to talked about being afraid to hug or take care of children in their own family. We heard that this myth stops both gay and **straight** men from reporting or disclosing having been sexually abused. They fear being thought of as ‘paedophiles’.



Gay = paedophile is still a big mindset in society.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors still suffer the effects of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, a law that stopped councils and schools ‘promoting the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. One of the key arguments for passing the law was because gay men were considered to be predatory and a danger to children. The law was only repealed in 2003.

Inevitably, we heard that many young people growing up during this period were prevented by law from learning about LGBTQ+ relationships. They grew up in a society that taught them that being LGBTQ+ was something to be ashamed of, and that homophobic bullying was acceptable. Many children who were sexually abused during this period did not tell anyone about what happened to them because of a very real fear of homophobic backlash, not only from peers but also from people who had a duty of care to protect them, such as teachers.

Many victims and survivors spoke of how they did not talk about their experience of child sexual abuse, and even did not seek help, because they did not want to be perceived as a ‘predatory gay man’. We also heard that many LGBTQ+ people choose not to disclose, even to close family members, and struggle to seek appropriate support for fear of living under suspicion of being ‘paedophiles’. Although this was felt more strongly by men, we did hear this from both men and women.

The impact of society's lack of awareness or understanding of LGBTQ+ issues on victims and survivors of child sexual abuse



There is sympathy but there is also disbelief.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Most victims and survivors and support organisations told us that people in England and Wales have limited understanding of what being LGBTQ+ means. We heard that there is still a lot of stigma and mistrust of LGBTQ+ people, and that people who identify as asexual, trans, queer or questioning are even less understood.

Some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that myths and stereotypes meant they were less likely to be believed when disclosing childhood sexual abuse. We heard that few people understand the impact of child sexual abuse on adult victims and survivors. However we also heard that some victims and survivors were positively supported when talking about child sexual abuse as an LGBTQ+ adult.

We heard that LGBTQ+ people are seen more frequently in the media and are portrayed more positively, and that the portrayal is normalised. Victims and survivors told us that they recognised that society's attitudes and understanding have improved since the 1990s. Several gay male victims and survivors told us that when they were younger they had to hide their sexual orientation because homosexuality was illegal, and institutional and societal homophobia were common.

Male rape was not recognised in law until 1994; before this a male victim of rape could be prosecuted under the same gross indecency laws as his rapist. A number of organisations told us that, because of this, many male victims and survivors of child sexual abuse have never told anyone that they were sexually abused as children. We also heard that some male victims and survivors of child sexual abuse who did disclose, were criminalised in response.

Victims and survivors also told us that schools were openly hostile places for anyone outside of the heterosexual ‘norm’, in particular in the years before the 2000s. Younger victims and survivors talked about how society and many schools were, on the whole, becoming more supportive for LGBTQ+ children. They did highlight that sex education in schools is taught from a heterosexual perspective and that the spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities is rarely talked about or understood by teachers. We heard that schools and children’s services need to do more to ensure that LGBTQ+ children are not treated as a ‘safeguarding issue’. This is especially true for trans children.

“ Institutions seem to have an approach which treats young trans people as being deviants and in some way sexualising themselves.

LGBTQ+ support service

Most support organisations and victims and survivors told us that society needed to become much more aware, understanding and accepting of LGBTQ+ victims and survivors. We heard that although it is no longer acceptable to be openly homophobic in most of England and Wales, there is still a level of suspicion and mistrust that LGBTQ+ people are not ‘normal’. We also heard that there is a need to raise the profile of LGBTQ+ within communities and different cultures.

“ Trans people within the LGBTQ+ spectrum face more discrimination as do LGBTQ+ people who come from ethnic minority communities.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that there is a ‘double stigma’ for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors: the stigma associated with being LGBTQ+ and the stigma that comes from being a victim and survivor, which can make it more difficult for people to find the help and support they need. One LGBTQ+ victim and survivor described this as *“like pouring petrol on a fire”*.

“ Stigma against LGBTQ+ people still exists and coming out as a survivor adds further layers to this.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Negative public perceptions of LGBTQ+ victims and survivors intensify the shame and stigma so often felt by victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. We heard that for some victims and survivors, the impact of society’s attitudes and negative messages about LGBTQ+ people has caused internalised shame and, especially, internalised homophobia. This has resulted in issues with family and sexual relationships, work–life and employer relationships, and the ability of victims and survivors to report child sexual abuse and to access support services.

Stereotypes in the media and online



We can't win. LGBTQ+ people are expected to conform to safe archetypes.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that the way LGBTQ+ people are portrayed in the media is a powerful tool for both advancing and entrenching society's views. We also heard that nearly all LGBTQ+ people have been exposed to homophobic, biphobic or transphobic content online.

We heard that media coverage of LGBTQ+ people has mostly improved over the past 10–15 years and it is now more inclusive. Twenty years ago LGBTQ+ lives were often portrayed as scandalous. We heard that representation is more positive but can still revert to old-fashioned stereotypes, such as gay men are flamboyant or attention seeking.

News reporting was an area where many victims and survivors and organisations told us that improvements were needed. This particularly applied to the language used around reporting of child sexual abuse and child sexual abusers. Terms such as 'gay paedophiles', for example, link sexual orientation and child sexual abuse and entrench dangerous myths and stereotypes.



[Tabloid] media outlets ... report on CSA using terms such as 'gay paedophiles', even though a lot of CSA of boys is perpetrated by self-defining heterosexual men.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that most people don't believe that women can be perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Most people also believe that victims and survivors are cisgender boys and girls, because this is what is shown on the news and in TV programmes. We heard the way that child sexual abuse and LGBTQ+ relationships are portrayed in the media means many LGBTQ+ children do not realise until they are much older that what they think of as a 'relationship' is actually child sexual abuse.



Media coverage about male survivors can reinforce binary narratives which normalise the cis-male perpetrator, cis-female survivor equation.

LGBTQ+ support service

Many victims and survivors also told us the way that child sexual abuse is reported often comes across as blaming the victim, and that this is even more common in cases where the victim and survivor is openly LGBTQ+.

How LGBTQ+ victims and survivors can be affected at work

While most victims and survivors do not talk about the child sexual abuse they experienced at work, we did hear from several LGBTQ+ people who had negative experiences when telling their employers. Some victims and survivors told us that they needed to tell their employers about being sexually abused, for example, when requesting time off for support to deal with the impacts of trauma or ill health. We heard that responses included not being believed, and one employer said that they ‘just cannot deal with you’.

Some victims and survivors told us that often employers don’t understand LGBTQ+ issues, and often only in a ‘box ticking way’. Victims and survivors also told us they worried that employers would not keep their personal data private and secure if they told them about being LGBTQ+ and victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

We also heard that other victims and survivors had good experiences when disclosing abuse to their employers, such as being allowed to take time off work for support, when needed.

Child sexual abuse can affect LGBTQ+ identity

“ It took me a long time to realise I was a lesbian because I just kept thinking that if I worked through my issues with men that relate to my abuse that I would suddenly not feel a complete lack of sexual connection.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Most victims and survivors we spoke to told us that as a result of child sexual abuse they experienced confusion, frustration or difficulty with understanding their own sexual orientation or gender identity. For many this was made much more difficult because of the myths, stereotypes and attitudes in society.

We heard that young people who are heterosexual, and who are born into the gender that they live, can more easily seek support from school, family and church. By contrast, many LGBTQ+ people who are questioning or **coming out** lack support and role models.

Some victims and survivors told us that ‘coming out’ raised complex emotions because people who knew they had been abused immediately wanted to link their sexual orientation or gender identity to the abuse they had experienced.

“ Victims and survivors may have still been figuring out their sexual identity at the time the abuse took place and be worried about how their experience of CSA figures into their perception of their own sexuality.

LGBTQ+ support service

Some victims and survivors told us they had internalised the homophobia they had experienced and had even at times blamed themselves for their abuse. Others talked about having suppressed their true sexual orientation or gender identity because of how they felt about their same-sex abuser and feelings of disgust or discomfort with their own body.

One man told us that it took him a long time to understand why he had a physical response to being sexually abused. He spent many years wondering if this meant he was gay when in fact he was not.

Another person explained that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors who experience shame, self-loathing, hypervigilance and anxiety may attribute these feelings to being LGBTQ+ rather than to having been sexually abused as a child. We heard that it may take years for victims and survivors to recognise this.

“ Some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors described growing up in homophobic environments. One individual, who is a lesbian, said they felt it was ‘disgusting’ to be gay due to their mother’s homophobia.

LGBTQ+ support service

Victims and survivors told us about their struggles throughout teenage years and adulthood to form successful relationships. Some had succeeded in getting help and support to deal with the abuse they had suffered, but others spoke about choosing to stay away from romantic or sexual relationships altogether because of the unresolved issues they had around the abuse and their sexual orientation or gender identity. Some organisations told us that victims and survivors they supported had rejected their sexual orientation because of the shame they felt about being sexually abused as a child.

“ I didn’t want to be gay because of what happened to me at a young age. Instead I hated myself more and those around me. I supported people who had views that were against LGBTQ+ people. I could be invisible amongst them.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Barriers to disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse: isolation, secrets and threats

“ When I did tell, I was not believed. I was silenced by my own family – so why would a stranger believe me, and it was all my fault. One of the biggest barriers I found was feeling the isolation of being gay at such a young age ... There was no LGBT education back then or support groups so it was extremely isolating. Being in the closet led me not to disclose due to my sexuality being found out ... back then this was such a threat in my mind that everything had to be kept quiet.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Victims and survivors and support organisations told us that people who identify as LGBTQ+ experience additional barriers to disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse. Victims and survivors also shared a number of suggestions for change that may help to improve the disclosing and reporting process.

Some victims and survivors told us that we live in a **heteronormative** and **cisnormative** society, where everyone is assumed to be heterosexual and cisgender by default. We heard that because LGBTQ+ people are seen as ‘different’ from the norm, it can be more difficult to disclose and report child sexual abuse.

We heard that the impact of inaccessible or non-inclusive reporting processes has led to LGBTQ+ victims and survivors resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms. These may involve addiction to drugs or alcohol and risky sexual behaviour.

We heard that some people who were sexually abused as children felt that they were forced to explore and understand their sexuality or gender identity before they were ready. We also heard from LGBTQ+ victims and survivors who chose to keep their sexual orientation or gender identity confidential when disclosing child sexual abuse because they were afraid they might be judged for being LGBTQ+ or that they would be ‘outed’.

“ Some victims might be married or no one might know of their sexuality. If they report, during the investigation, their network might get to know. If families do not know about the victim’s sexuality, it would risk them being abandoned by the family.

LGBTQ+ support service

Some people we spoke to were sexually abused as children but had never reported it. We heard that this was often due to internalised homophobic shame and stigma, and that many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors thought that social workers or police would make wrong assumptions about them or their experience based on their sexual orientation or gender identity.

A number of victims and survivors, in particular gay and bisexual men, told us about the continuing trauma of past criminalisation of homosexuality, Section 28, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and societal homophobia.

“ The scars from the 70s are visible today and the damage can’t be repaired, even if the police were to eradicate homophobia within their service.

LGBTQ+ support service

Younger LGBTQ+ victims and survivors said they had not been supported by generic services and institutions. They also told us that having to disclose and explain their gender identity or sexual orientation as well as their experience of child sexual abuse, before accessing support, can be particularly distressing.

“ GPs often do not know what to do when families seek support for gender non-conforming children.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors are much more likely to report or disclose child sexual abuse if they are offered specialist services, where there is no need to educate professionals about their sexuality or gender identity, but that these services are not common or easily accessible in England and Wales.

Disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse

A few victims and survivors told us that their sexual orientation or gender identity did not affect how they were treated when reporting abuse, but the majority who had reported or disclosed had at least one negative experience.

“ Institutions can be slow to change with the times and there can be a lot of ‘traditional’ or outdated views in some institutions such as the police, especially amongst older officers.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that a negative experience of disclosing or reporting can result in a victim and survivor taking years to talk about their experience again. This delay can impede access to justice and also to support services and counselling.

Support organisations have told us that additional barriers have led to under-reporting of child sexual abuse by LGBTQ+ victims and survivors.

Heteronormative and cisnormative environments

“ I’m in my late 50s ... My generation grew up being told to keep quiet. As a younger person I was told the abuse was a result of being homosexual along with all the negative language being used at the time. This has resulted in a psychological barrier due to indoctrination which in turn results in internalised homophobia.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors and the organisations that support them have told us that society is still, in general, heteronormative and cisnormative. In other words, unless told otherwise, they believe most people assume that everyone is heterosexual or straight, and LGBTQ+ perspectives are often neglected. LGBTQ+ people have historically been treated differently and many have experienced prejudice, discrimination or worse. We heard that in heteronormative and cisnormative environments, non-straight sexuality and transgender identities can sometimes be treated as mental health or safeguarding issues, which can create an enormous barrier to disclosure and reporting.

“ Some teachers think being transgender is a safeguarding issue, this shows the lack of awareness and risk of confidentiality being broken.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that many people feel shame, guilt or embarrassment when telling someone that they were sexually abused as a child, but for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors it is made worse due to a lack of acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ+ identities.

“ Disclosing abuse or LGBTQ+ in the 1990s was difficult because all parts of society raise children with the expectation that they will follow a heteronormative life path.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Same-sex relationships have historically not been treated as equal in law and there is a lack of relevant education about LGBTQ+ relationships. We heard that many LGBTQ+ people who disclose child sexual abuse have experienced feelings of shame, guilt or embarrassment about their gender identity or sexuality. We heard that older people are more likely to have grown up in environments where it is considered shameful to be LGBTQ+ and they may find it more difficult to disclose their identity and talk about being sexually abused as a child.

LGBTQ+ support organisations and victims and survivors told us that some environments are particularly hostile to LGBTQ+ identities, making it more difficult for them to disclose. These include religious settings and schools, sporting clubs and families who hold strong religious or cultural beliefs. We heard that this is doubly difficult when the sexual abuser is a close family member or has a position of ‘standing’ in the community. We heard that some victims and survivors who are ‘out’ to some friends but not to families, or who have needed to sever family and community ties, often do not disclose child sexual abuse in case people discover their gender identity or sexuality.

We heard that some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors do not disclose because of existing vulnerabilities caused by homophobic bullying or discrimination.



One individual, who is LGBTQ+, said that there was an ‘added fear of homophobia’.

LGBTQ+ support service



I grew up in a culture where non-heterosexual identities were ... ignored and discounted. I was abused by an adult male in my early [teens] ... and the culture at school removed my only obvious avenue to even ‘consider’ disclosing it, even when I recognised the relationship was inappropriate. There was a second chance when I was 14/15 and we had sex education ... but abuse by males on males wasn’t even mentioned.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Some victims and survivors told us that teachers will sometimes treat a young LGBTQ+ person’s sexuality as a safeguarding concern because they presume the young person is sexually active. We also heard that some teachers think being transgender is an automatic safeguarding issue (for example, questioning use of sporting or toilet facilities).

We also heard that if a school talks about LGBTQ+ inclusion, and if appropriate safeguarding is in place, a young person may have more confidence in seeking support to report or disclose child sexual abuse.

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors and support organisations told us that schools remain heteronormative and overlook personal development in an LGBTQ+ context. For example, ‘boy crushes’ are not normalised, and there is a stigma that if a boy says another boy is attractive, he’s gay. We heard that this can lead to bullying and homophobia. Bullying, homophobia and transphobia are barriers to disclosure which are made worse when pastoral teams at schools do not have experience with disclosing and reporting child sexual abuse. We heard that most staff are not trained in, and often don’t even have the vocabulary to deal with, child sexual abuse in an LGBTQ+ context.

Many LGBTQ+ people told us that as young people they don't feel comfortable or welcomed by child sexual abuse support services aimed at the general public and will instead seek out services specifically targeted at the LGBTQ+ community. They said that LGBTQ+ specialist services feel safer. They told us that it is much easier to disclose or report child sexual abuse when using a specialist LGBTQ+ service; however these services can be difficult to find. We heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors were more likely to disclose or report child sexual abuse where services offered an option to speak to an LGBTQ+ counsellor or staff member.

Coming out

“ When speaking about disclosing you are not just speaking about authorities, but also friends.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

'Coming out' means telling someone about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or questioning. We heard that coming out is a process, not an event, and is unique to each person. We also heard that people usually don't come out just once and that it is common to be out in certain areas of life but not in others and this may be due to considerations about safety.

Although some people know their gender identity or sexual orientation from a very early age, for other LGBTQ+ victims and survivors it is not this simple. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that being in a state or phase of 'questioning' can last for many years (sometimes for a whole life). Some people prefer never to use a label such as 'gay' or 'lesbian' to describe themselves; some may move fluidly between identities and sexualities.

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that sometimes it can take a very long time to be comfortable in themselves and confident enough to talk about their gender identity or sexual orientation. We heard that coming out is a profoundly personal experience, and it can be deeply traumatising if someone is forced to come out under pressure or not on their own terms.

“ From an LGBTQ+ perspective, a bigger barrier exists because many have issues around a sense of self and as a result many have not reconciled that sense of self. Coming forward to disclose creates a situation where they have to find a new way of dealing with unresolved trauma.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that victims and survivors who were in the process of exploring and questioning their sexuality or gender identity at the time the sexual abuse took place can worry about how their experience of child sexual abuse may have affected their understanding of their own sexuality or gender identity.



I feel there's too much blame on the abused.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors and the organisations that support them told us the common myth that child sexual abuse determines someone's sexual orientation or gender identity can seriously damage a victim and survivor's sense of self. Some victims and survivors told us that they did not tell anyone about being sexually abused as a child in order to protect themselves and their identity from this type of external interrogation.

Some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us they are so used to keeping their identity private that secrets become 'safe spaces'. This coping mechanism can lead to the suppression of emotional experiences such as child sexual abuse, which can be a barrier to reporting or disclosure.



LGBTQ+ victims/survivors are so used to keeping their identity a secret from others that they sometimes feel that it's ok to suppress emotional experiences.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors may not talk about their sexual orientation or gender identity when reporting abuse because they are concerned about being outed or judged. In some circumstances, coming out is physically and emotionally unsafe; for example, in families, employment, communities or cultures where being LGBTQ+ is taboo. An example given is that some victims and survivors are married to someone of an opposite gender and worry that if they disclose, or come out, their network might learn about their gender identity or sexual orientation. In these cases they fear they risk being abandoned by their family and community.

We were told that sometimes when LGBTQ+ people choose to keep their sexual orientation or gender identity private, the abuser may use this knowledge to further exploit them. In some cases, the victim and survivor may be exploited by the person they have disclosed child sexual abuse to, if that person knows about their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Organisations that support LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us some support services require parental or guardian consent for children aged under 16 years as part of the disclosure and reporting process. This may force some young people to come out before they are ready, or it can be a barrier to them disclosing or reporting child sexual abuse.

Legacies of shame

“ I put off the reporting for several years because of my fears regarding Section 28.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard from gay men who remember being harassed and mistreated by police, experiencing discrimination, raids and violence, and who feel the police would not respond fairly if they reported child sexual abuse. We heard that homophobia and institutionalised discrimination have undermined many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors' relationships with the state.

Many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us they felt that they would be disbelieved even more than heterosexual victims and survivors, and that their account would be questioned because of their sexuality.

We also heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors who come from ethnic minority communities face additional discrimination, and that these barriers have been under researched.

“ If there are people that have come from a country where being LGBTQ+ is illegal then this would be a barrier for them and that there is also a cultural stigma around it.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that transitioning is a very intimate and sensitive process which can take years. Some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that widespread institutional transphobia means that many trans victims and survivors do not trust **statutory services**. For example, we heard that police often misgender trans people, and that it can be intimidating when people do not understand their identity or use their chosen pronouns. Many trans people reported having very bad experiences with doctors.

“ A great deal is to do with gender identity and you can quite easily bleed your own personal experiences into the problem. Particularly men and men in authority ie police, lawyers and society as a whole – sport, workplaces where power dynamics exist.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that trans people are more dependent on services like the NHS than most cis lesbian, gay and bisexual people. They are therefore more likely to withhold information about their gender identity and child sexual abuse for fear of being seen as ‘raising too many issues’ or being treated as ‘difficult’.

“ I felt as though I had to hide my gender identity while reporting to avoid the additional stigma that comes with being gender fluid.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that within religious environments, LGBTQ+ victims and survivors often contend with both institutionally-sanctioned homophobia and with the difficulty in accusing a sexual abuser who is held in high esteem. Victims and survivors told us that these barriers are very difficult to overcome, particularly for those who want to remain part of their community.

“ The religious clergy were held in high regard and it was hard to speak out against them. And you would effectively be outing yourself if you spoke against them. Or there would be gossip and speculation. I know straight guys who disclose and then there is gossip about them and people suspecting they might be gay.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Religion and faith

We heard that because LGBTQ+ children have fewer opportunities to find support and role models, they can be exposed to adult sexuality at an early age, particularly during the vulnerable coming-out stage. We heard that this is especially true if they are from a faith background.

“ **You can see links between institutions eg in the Catholic Church, a lack of openness about LGBT issues creates conditions and a backdrop against which same-sex CSA can thrive. It promotes stigma and shame and secrecy.**

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Several victims and survivors told us that some people working in religious settings (for example, priests) and religious family members believe that being LGBTQ+ is wrong or sinful. We heard that it is harder to disclose to those family members, and such attitudes make it less likely that they will disclose at all.

“ **I went to a Roman Catholic college, it was very traditional. I went to the student counsellor ... who said to me, you're homosexual, that's against God's law.**

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors are often judged as being partly or wholly responsible for their own abuse. Some victims and survivors were encouraged not to speak out about the abuse they suffered because of their sexual orientation. Two victims and survivors told us about having experienced or been offered **conversion therapy**.

“ **I had someone shout at me 'get off him you evil spirit of homosexuality'. If it didn't happen it was my own fault for not believing enough or praying hard enough.**

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Barriers to disclosure for young LGBTQ+ people today



Online safety is a big issue.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many young LGBTQ+ people said they are pressured to follow a heteronormative and cisnormative life path. They can feel isolated and alone, and many seek community online or in urban areas which can be predatory and unsafe. Because there are few services available where young LGBTQ+ people can meet other LGBTQ+ people online or in real life, they told us they often use meet-up apps and websites that are meant for adults. For lots of young people, the first conversation they have about their sexual identity is online, and often on a dating app. This can make young people vulnerable to sexual abuse.

We heard that young people who turn to online forums and apps to explore their sexuality and gender often do not want to reveal they have done this. As a result, they may not disclose or report child sexual abuse related to online ‘meet-ups’ because they do not want to be questioned about it. We heard that this questioning often feels homophobic, even if it is meant well, and is a considerable barrier to disclosure and reporting. Young people have told us they feel they are being pressured into coming out when trying to disclose, which makes it less likely they will speak out. Young LGBTQ+ victims and survivors also told us that support services often ask victims and survivors questions like ‘why were you on Grindr?’ instead of investigating the child sexual abuse which occurred.



The idea that it is better in schools and better now, is not true.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard from specialist support organisations that young gay men are often targeted by criminal networks, and that lesbians are used to recruit young women for exploitation. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors and support services told us that people who have been sexually exploited often do not disclose or report because of their involvement in criminal activities like ‘**county lines**’. We heard that young victims and survivors who display harmful sexual behaviour fear that disclosing or reporting child sexual abuse will lead to them being treated as a perpetrator rather than being supported as a victim and survivor.

Many LGBTQ+ young people told us they have ‘two lives’: a ‘closet environment’ and a ‘second life’ where they are exploring their sexuality. Many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that they have a strained relationship with their parents, and are less likely to have the support they need in order to tell someone about being sexually abused. It can be particularly difficult for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors who grow up as part of a religious community or attend a religious school where their sexual orientation or gender identity is seen as ‘wrong’.

“ In my particular situation, being gay was wrong and against God’s purpose, so therefore if I were to say something at that point in school, it just goes against the whole culture of the school and I would have ended up being the one under suspicion.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many victims and survivors told us that their family would not be supportive if they learned about their gender identity or sexual orientation. They talked about the possibility of facing abuse or rejection in the home, community or country of origin as a consequence of being LGBTQ+, or if the child sexual abuse they experienced became known to others. We heard concerns that disclosing to a teacher, for example, might result in the teacher telling their parents. LGBTQ+ young people who have been rejected by their families told us that most organisations were not trained to have conversations with parents about sexuality, coming out and acceptance, which left victims and survivors isolated and alone.

Looking forward - what works and suggestions for change

“ Most people want to be treated as individuals and not as special or different.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many of the LGBTQ+ victims and survivors and support services talked to us about how important it is for influential organisations to be active allies to the LGBTQ+ community. We heard how support from organisations that have influence makes a significant difference. For example, Bournemouth football club has launched a Pride range and has a Proud Cherries LGBT supporters’ group.

Several LGBTQ+ victims and survivors said they appreciate the efforts being made to recruit to statutory services, such as police and schools, from diverse communities.

“ Being spoken to by an LGBTQ+ professional can make a positive difference to victims and survivors.

LGBTQ+ support service

We also heard that disclosing to a straight and cisgender person is often a positive experience for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors, if the person is kind, understanding and supportive when sharing their sexual abuse experience and their sexuality or gender identity.

“ Just treat LGBTQ+ people with the same sensitivity and care offered to any other survivor/victim; that would be my broad advice.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We were told about examples of good practice that can help LGBTQ+ victims and survivors to disclose their experience. Having a named and trusted police officer, social worker and youth worker as a single point of contact is essential, particularly in cases of abuse that happened many years ago in which the integrity of police records can be an issue.

“ When I finally decided to report the child rape I experienced, 40 years after it had occurred, I met with supportive police officers, and I found the process reasonably comfortable, even though it was emotionally challenging.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors also told us it was important to ensure that organisations include a range of sexualities and gender identities and that teams should reflect the needs of the person who is disclosing. We heard that it is important to provide choices to the victim and survivor who is reporting.

Some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors also talked about having positive experiences of the reporting process, and expressed their appreciation of how our society has begun to move away from being institutionally homophobic and cisnormative.

“ I didn't feel uncomfortable being a gay man. This was a non-issue as far as I was concerned, and it seemed to be a non-issue to the police staff interviewing me.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Accessing support: depending on luck and word of mouth

“ Sometimes organisations are championed by leadership or by a particular LGBTQ+ member of staff. It should be the responsibility of the whole organisation, not one individual.

LGBTQ+ support service

Many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us how important it was to them to know they were not alone. They, and the professionals who support them, emphasised that there is no 'right' way to deal with trauma.

We heard that good support services provide comfort. They also help LGBTQ+ victims and survivors of child sexual abuse make sense of their thoughts and feelings, and to begin the process of recovery. This is not an easy journey.

“ Many LGBTQ+ people struggle to accept their identity or are shunned by their families and communities or backgrounds which can have a huge impact on their experience of reporting and getting support.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard how essential professional support is, especially in cases where victims and survivors cannot depend on traditional support networks such as family, friends, religion or work colleagues because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

However, we also heard that access to support services, and the quality of these services, for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors is variable and often inadequate and excluding. We were told that it is difficult for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors to find relevant services, and that they often have to rely on personal recommendation rather than professional referral.

“ Going through NHS pathways for help is slow, unwieldy and involves talking to their community pathways which usually ends in CBT which is like applying a sticking plaster to a wound.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors shared their experiences of a wide range of professionals, including police, victim support and counselling provided privately, by the NHS, universities or religious organisations. They told us that good services and institutions were often dependent on one experienced and motivated person within that organisation. We also heard that the quality of treatment often depends on luck and whether victims and survivors are trusted and believed by professionals.

“ You know it from the environment you walk into - if it is a heteronormative environment. The environment needs to show that you have thought about the stuff, and staff also need to reflect this diversity.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors and professionals shared their suggestions for change, including how access to specialist LGBTQ+ support services can be improved. We heard that clear and inclusive language and specialised training for staff are essential. We also heard that organisations must make it very clear that they are LGBTQ+ friendly by demonstrating sensitivity and understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, language, **complex trauma** and child sexual abuse.

Why accessing professional support is important

“ I carry a lot of emotional baggage (guilt, because of my bisexuality starting at the time of abuse).

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

According to Stonewall, in 2018 just over half (52 percent) of LGBTQ+ respondents experienced depression. Just under one-third (31 percent) of lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents had considered suicide, and 46 percent of trans respondents had considered suicide.

LGBTQ+ people live with disproportionately high levels of depression, anxiety, thoughts of suicide, and addiction, as do victims and survivors of child sexual abuse. However, accessing support is more difficult: one-quarter of LGBTQ+ people (23 percent) have experienced discriminatory or negative remarks by healthcare staff.

We heard that many LGBTQ+ people have had therapy to deal with the consequences of growing up in a heteronormative and cisnormative society, and many victims and survivors also have therapy in order to deal with their trauma. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us it can be difficult to assimilate both forms of therapy.

“ I came out to my therapist and had never disclosed to my therapist that I had been abused as a child. When I told the police, I then had to tell my therapist and he was amazed that I had seen him for all these years and hadn't told him this part of myself. I find it really hard to put 'CSA survivor' and 'lesbian' in the same bracket.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many LGBTQ+ victims and survivors talked about the lasting effects of trauma from child sexual abuse, including addiction and physical and mental health difficulties. We heard how it is essential for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors to receive the right support when they need it, and how important it is to find someone they feel comfortable talking to.



Each time a young person discloses, it is like experiencing trauma again and they may feel accountability for the abuse they suffered.

LGBTQ+ support service

Identifying and finding effective support



There should be more visibility of support services available rather than having to 'dig around' for them.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Many of the LGBTQ+ victims and survivors we spoke to had accessed or tried to access counselling or support services. Most told us that there is a very high threshold to access statutory support services in England and Wales.



There is a feeling that one needs to be at the point of wanting to end one's life before there can be a meaningful intervention from mental health services.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard a range of positive and negative experiences concerning the statutory, charity and private sectors. Many people told us that they found it frustrating and difficult to find and access appropriate support.



LGBTQ+ people aren't 'hard to reach' - it's the support services that are hard to reach ... services need to show loudly and clearly that they are open and welcoming and understanding of LGBTQ+ people and their experiences.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Although many people told us that they had experienced prejudiced or homophobic professionals, there were mixed views about whether it was necessary to have counsellors who themselves were LGBTQ+. We heard that no one approach suits everyone and that a range of support options should be available. Most importantly, professionals need to be active, empathetic listeners who are open minded about people who might have different experiences. We heard that organisations with openly LGBTQ+ staff help LGBTQ+ victims and survivors to be more confident in disclosing and less fearful of judgement or misunderstanding.

“ If people don’t see themselves in that situation, they simply don’t engage. The way to make them engage is by having all different types of people represented. A lot of these places are open to these people but they don’t clearly state it.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

There was general agreement that the quality of training in LGBTQ+ support services is inconsistent. Most LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that they received better support from services and individuals who understood what it is like to be LGBTQ+.

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that professionals cannot understand sexual violence without understanding sexual preference, LGBTQ+ issues and inclusivity. We heard that professionals need to continuously update their learning about LGBTQ+ and **intersectional** issues.

“ There is an incompetence in systems themselves and long waiting lists for counselling, lack of sexuality counselling for victims and survivors and no service whereby someone can talk to a counsellor and specifically say ‘can you find out what my sexuality is’.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that professionals who deal with reporting and disclosure of child sexual abuse also need to be trained to understand trauma. However, victims and survivors told us that access to these services is patchy across England and Wales.

“ Whether or not one has access to the right services can be a postcode lottery.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

We heard that the best way to find good support services is via word of mouth. We also heard that news about poor experiences with statutory services, institutions and counsellors travels efficiently within the LGBTQ+ community. Once an organisation’s reputation has been tarnished in this way, it is very difficult for it to regain victims and survivors’ trust.

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors who are from minority ethnic cultures told us that they found it particularly difficult to access appropriate support services. We heard that professionals need better and more consistent **cultural competency** training. We heard that statutory services in particular are still too clinical and process driven. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that all service professionals need better training about the complexities of family, community and culture in relation to child sexual abuse and the LGBTQ+ community.

“ Survivors of colour or from minority cultures should receive counselling, however there are not many counsellors who understand the intersections of being a Muslim migrant gay man.

LGBTQ+ support service

Support for young people

Under Section 28, until 2003 in England and Wales most LGBTQ+ children and young people could not access specific support services in schools and colleges. This has tragically affected many adult victims and survivors. We heard that even now some professionals are clearly uncomfortable and feel ill-equipped to discuss LGBTQ+ experiences.

“ Children’s services are poor with their understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, and their ability to understand the particular LGBT context within which young people are experiencing child sexual abuse.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that support for LGBTQ+ child sexual abuse victims and survivors is inconsistent, but that higher education and further education colleges often respond well.

“ I disclosed in a university environment. I thought the network of support at uni was very helpful. I also accessed a counselling service, which was better suited for the disclosure than other environments.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Young people also told us that some teachers will offer support to heterosexual and cisgender young people but will treat anyone they perceive as LGBTQ+ differently, which makes them feel shut out.

“ Some schools are doing fantastic work but others have not changed in 50 years; this brings about a huge diversity in how schools respond.

LGBTQ+ support service

Suggestions for change and improvement

LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that instead of relying on local knowledge and personal recommendations, support services should actively and accurately promote their commitment to the LGBTQ+ community. Some LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us they valued the scheme for NHS workers, where those who have had specific LGBTQ+ training wear rainbow lanyards.

“ Services with clear and inclusive language in their publicity and advertising of their service ... would be helpful when LGBTQ+ survivors are looking to access support which for some survivors is already a brave and often difficult decision.

LGBTQ+ support service

We heard that professionals working with LGBTQ+ victims and survivors need to be complex trauma-informed, and that there needs to be a standard benchmark for all support services. They told us there is far too little information available for professionals, and that what is provided is too general. For example, GPs and police should be given specific information about how to help LGBTQ+ victims and survivors find the right local services.

We also heard that language is important and powerful, and that the best LGBTQ+ support services carefully choose their words and terminology. For example, organisations should provide appropriate multiple-choice options so that people are not put in an awkward position or have to give the second-best option on the form.

“ It is helpful to have literature about being LGBTQ inclusive in areas and waiting rooms. There could be an option of having an LGBT counsellor. I had an LGBT counsellor to start with and that was helpful.

LGBTQ+ victim and survivor

Some victims and survivors told us that some organisations use a ‘token’ LGBTQ+ logo but don’t actually understand or listen to LGBTQ+ people, which can result in disengagement or even re-traumatisation.

We heard that some victims and survivors may not have the opportunity to speak to LGBTQ+ professionals, and therefore may find it difficult to talk about their sexual identity. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors told us that they valued peer-to-peer support from people with similar lived experiences, and suggested that professionals without this lived experience should be prepared to educate themselves about diversity and sexual abuse.

Victims and survivors told us that organisations need to advertise that they are welcoming to LGBTQ+ people (for example, by displaying posters and badges). Most importantly, we also heard that the responsibility for providing quality services for LGBTQ+ victims and survivors needs to rest with those providing the services, not with those receiving them. However, too often it is the victim and survivor who has to carry this burden by instructing services how best to interact with, and benefit, them.

Final comments and reflections

The LGBTQ+ victims and survivors we spoke to, and the organisations who support them, shared deep and often personally meaningful insights with us. Although every victim and survivor's experience is unique, we heard that the specific needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer/questioning victims and survivors need to be addressed.

We heard that:

- We live in a heteronormative and cisnormative culture, with a deeply homophobic history. This continues to affect LGBTQ+ victims and survivors in many different ways. LGBTQ+ victims and survivors who are older, and those who are from a religious or cultural background which does not accept the legitimacy of LGBTQ+ sexual orientations and gender identities, often face substantial challenges.
- LGBTQ+ young people face specific challenges that make them vulnerable to child sexual abuse. They can also face additional barriers which make it more difficult to disclose sexual abuse, and often experience complex trauma.
- People who work with LGBTQ+ victims and survivors need specialist, high quality training and education in order to overcome cultural myths and stereotypes which can prevent victims and survivors from disclosing sexual abuse and accessing services. This training and education needs to specifically focus on being trauma-informed and LGBTQ+ affirming.
- It is important to acknowledge that LGBTQ+ people can experience a range of vulnerabilities which increase their risk of harm or abuse, and that being LGBTQ+ itself is not a safeguarding issue.

This engagement project has provided helpful information from LGBTQ+ victims and survivors as well as specialist support organisations.

In addition, it has given valuable insight into the specific barriers that LGBTQ+ victims and survivors may face when sharing their experience of child sexual abuse.

The Inquiry has gathered evidence and information on all the topics covered in this report through its research and investigation workstreams, as well as experiences shared with the Truth Project, for the preparation of its Final Report.

Glossary

Child The Inquiry defines a child as a person under the age of 18.

Child sexual abuse Involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children. (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, statutory definition)

Child sexual exploitation Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, statutory definition)

Cisgender Cisgender describes a person whose gender identity and sex assigned or observed at birth are the same.

Cisnormative The assumption that a person's sex assigned at birth and gender identity are the same.

Coming out 'Coming out' in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity means sharing with others that you are lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans.

Complex trauma The UK Trauma Council defines complex trauma as the experience of a set of severe and sometimes pervasive adverse events that are often protracted and interpersonal in nature. For further information, particularly on the effects, complex PTSD, and diagnostic criteria please refer to [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk) and [icd.who.int](https://www.who.int).

Conversion therapy Conversion therapy assumes that being LGBTQ+ is a disorder or problem which can be 'cured' by treatment, psychotherapy and other practices which attempt to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity.

'County lines' As set out in the *Serious Violence Strategy*, published by the Home Office, a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of 'deal line'. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money, and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons. (*Working Together to Safeguard Children*, statutory definition)

Cultural competency The ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people from different cultures. Cultural competency requires empathy with cultural differences including values, beliefs and feelings, as well as knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews.

Gender identity An individual's personal concept about their gender and how they feel inside, typically self-identified. Gender identity differs from sexual identity and is not related to an individual's sexual orientation. The gender category with which a person identifies may not match the sex they were assigned or observed at birth.

Heteronormative The assumption that everyone is heterosexual, or straight, and where LGBTQ+ perspectives are often neglected.

Intersectional A way of understanding how social and political identities (like race, class, gender, sexual identity or sexual orientation) combine to create different forms of discrimination and privilege.

LGBTQ+ affirming practice Affirming practice appreciates that LGBTQ+ people may not expect to be viewed positively, are likely to have encountered negative attitudes and may have low expectations of interaction with services. LGBTQ+ affirming practice values diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and pronoun usage and recognises that same-gender desire, romantic and sexual attractions, and behaviours are normal, positive variations of human sexuality. Affirming practice also works to respect and value the lived experience of LGBTQ+ people and to support their wellbeing in whatever way is appropriate to each LGBTQ+ individual.

Outing Sharing or exposing someone else's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's permission.

Queer A term used by those wanting to reject specific labels of romantic orientation, sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It can also be a way of rejecting the perceived norms of the LGBT community (racism, sizeism, ableism etc). Although some LGBT people view the word as a slur, it was reclaimed in the late 80s by the queer community who have embraced it. (*Stonewall!*)

Questioning For this project, we have used 'Q' to represent 'questioning', which in this case refers to the process of exploring one's own sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

Non-statutory services Non-statutory services include governmental and non-profit organisations which provide social benefit, including charities.

Perpetrator A person who has committed a harmful, illegal or immoral act.

Safe space A place, online or physical, where marginalised or vulnerable people or groups are safe from harm and where they feel secure and respected.

Section 28 (also called Clause 28) Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 was a law that stopped councils and schools ‘promoting the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship’. It had been passed because gay men were considered to be predatory and a danger to children and was only repealed in 2003 (2000 in Scotland).

Sexual orientation This describes a person’s sexual attraction (or lack of sexual attraction) to other people.

Statutory services Statutory services are set up by law to carry out public activities, for example the police and children’s social care services.

Straight Refers to a person who is attracted to the opposite gender or sex.

Trans A broad term which describes people whose gender is not the same as the sex they were assigned at birth.

Victims and survivors In this report, we use the term to describe individuals who have been sexually abused as children. The words ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ have different personal meanings. Some people identify as victims and some as survivors, we therefore use the words ‘victims and survivors’ together when referring to people who have been sexually abused.