Coming Out at work guide

A guide to support staff identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and other identities (LGBT+) and their colleagues when choosing to come out at work.

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

“People perform better when they can be themselves.”

Stonewall

www.nelft.nhs.uk
INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the NELFT Coming Out at work guide

Every day at work and in their personal lives LGBT+ people are forced to choose between being open and honest about their circumstances (and encountering possible harassment and discrimination), avoiding the issue, or lying to their colleagues and friends. This can cause a huge amount of stress to the individual, both at work and in their personal lives.

NELFT employs circa 6,000 staff, from the NELFT 2018/2019 Annual Equality, Diversity & Inclusion report only 1.5% of staff declared their sexual orientation as gay and 0.3% as bisexual. This would suggest a significant under reporting and under representation of LGBT+ staff within NELFT. The purpose of this guide is to empower LGBT+ staff who would like to come out; to be supported, have a good experience of coming out at work and to ensure that colleagues have the appropriate information to support one another.

NELFT has a LGBT+ staff network with visible LGBT+ staff and have launched a LGBT+ Allies Scheme. You can contact the LGBT+ network via our equality and diversity lead, the NELFT intranet site or via our dedicated email lgbtnetwork@nelft.nhs.uk
What is coming out?

‘Coming out’ means telling someone something about yourself that isn’t immediately obvious. In relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, this means sharing with others that you are lesbian, gay, bi and/or trans (LGBT). The process of coming out can be very different for everyone and it can take some time to get to a point where you feel comfortable and confident enough to have those conversations with people. (Stonewall)

What affects a person’s decision to come out?

Coming out is not a one-off event, LGBT+ people have to make decisions about when to be open or ‘out’ about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in every setting, including in the workplace. This can cause a lot of stress to the individual, who will be weighing up the benefits of being ‘out’ versus the fears they may experience of possible harassment and discrimination.

Whether you have come to terms with your sexual orientation or gender identity, or you are still questioning, it can be difficult dealing with this on your own. You may get to a point where you want to talk about it with someone to get support, or simply get it off your chest. To hide your sexual orientation or gender identity from other people often means not being able to fully ‘be yourself’ at work.

Stephanie’s story

My story was quite a revelation for me as whilst I had never hidden my sexuality I had also never made any public statements. It took place during an Equality & Diversity conference probably some 4-5 years ago. I was asked to speak at the conference and so determined to pick on a variety of life experiences where I felt discriminated against on the basis of age and gender. In the back of my mind I was mulling over whether I also brought sexuality into my delivery. During the presentation it remained in the back of my mind until I made a decision there and then, and declared my personal circumstances to over 150 people! ‘...the number of positive messages I received was quite humbling.'
What might influence your decision to come out?

There are a number of ways to approach coming out (bearing in mind that it is not a one-off process) that have been tried and tested by LGBT+ people. Not all will be right for you but some of these ideas may help you with the process:

- Come out first to those people you think will be most supportive and accepting of you to build up a support network before disclosing to others, though don’t be put off if their reaction isn’t what you expect.

- Consider how supported you feel to be ‘fully yourself’ in your workplace both by your colleagues and by the organisation.

- Consider what the general culture of sharing personal information within your work place is like.

- Test out tolerance levels by discussing current LGBT+ issues that are prevalent in the media or on TV with LGBT+ themes, and use the opportunity to gauge people’s reactions to issues such as LGBT+ adoption/ surrogacy/parenting.

- Talk about other cultural issues that are pertinent to LGBT+ communities.

- Look for opportunities to bring it into the conversation in a routine way e.g. when someone asks you what you did at the weekend, telling them you visited your boyfriend’s /girlfriend’s/ partner’s parents or that you had a dinner party for a group of LGBT+ friends.
How to respond helpfully when someone ‘comes out’ to you

• Rejection is usually the main fear of anyone who is coming out, so take the person seriously and reassure them that you will do all you can to support them. Be positive, listen; and check whether the person wants you to do anything specific to support them.

• Don’t be tempted to give advice unless the person asks you for it. Coming to terms with one’s sexuality or gender identity is a very personal journey.

• Thank the person for trusting you enough to come out to you, remembering it may have taken them a long time to get this far and is not a decision they are likely to have taken lightly.

• Don’t make assumptions. For example, if someone comes out as trans don’t assume how they will choose to dress.

• Don’t confuse gender identity with sexual orientation as they are separate things. For example, not all trans women are attracted to men and not all trans men are attracted to women.

• Maintain and respect the person’s confidentiality, remembering that unless you have their explicit permission, this is private confidential information and should not be shared any wider.

• Use the pronoun the person uses in their conversation to you. For example, if they use ‘she’ or ‘they’ then mirror this in your language back. If you don’t know which pronouns to use, it is okay to ask the person. If someone has newly come out to you, you may get their pronouns wrong occasionally through an honest mistake.

• Don’t avoid the person or not talk to them out of fear you will offend them. After coming out it may be the time that person needs to feel most included and supported. Give them their own space, but do not isolate them.
• Create an accepting environment. Putting up a rainbow flag is a positive step but this has to be backed up by positive attitudes in the workplace. For trans people, support needs may include things such as changing names on records and in computer systems. If you need any guidance or support in how to do this, please refer to the NELFT policy and contact your human resources (HR) department or your equality and diversity lead.

• Past experiences of coming out to people can affect confidence, positively or negatively, and influence future decisions. Conversely for some, the workplace can be a safe space. Even in the teeth of rejection from friends or family, a supportive workplace can provide an environment for someone to be themselves.

Transgender awareness

If you’ve known someone for many years as a different pronoun, it may be difficult to make that change instantly. Trans people understand this and may correct you if you slip, but are unlikely to be offended if the slip is a genuine mistake.
If you decide to come out, what are your rights?

If you decide to come out, but are unsure how others might react, you could consider making contact with a supportive person or group first. There are helplines, community groups and agencies across the country that are able to provide support and advice.

The NELFT equality and diversity leads and LGBT+ Staff network chairs are able to signpost you to support. In addition NELFT has a staff well-being service- the Employee Assistant Programme (EAP) who can be contacted 24hrs a day, 7 days a week via 0800 014 2382.

Fairness in the workplace is a vital part of a successful business or public body. It is supported by the law - the Equality Act 2010 - and also makes good business sense in running and developing an organisation. It is the responsibility of everyone; employers, employees, colleagues, patients, and the public. Successful organisations are ones that reflect the richness of diversity that exists in society and will include people of different genders and sexual orientation.

Under the Equality Act 2010, it is unlawful to discriminate at work against the nine protected characteristics which include:

- Sexual orientation
- Gender reassignment
- Marriage and civil partnership
Discrimination can come in the following forms:

- **Direct discrimination** is when you are treated differently and worse than someone else for certain reasons.
- **Indirect discrimination** is when you may be treated in the same way as everyone else, but it has a different and worse effect because of who you are.
- **Harassment** is when someone behaves in a way which offends you or makes you feel distressed or intimidated. This could be abusive comments or jokes, graffiti or insulting gestures.
- **Victimisation** is treating you unfairly because you have complained about discrimination or harassment.

This act applies to all aspects of employment, including training, recruitment, promotion, and dismissal.

NELFT is committed to this Act, promoting equality, valuing diversity, and eliminating discrimination against the protected characteristics.

**If you think you have been unfairly discriminated against:**

- You should try and sort things out informally with your line manager or, if this is not possible, the NELFT freedom to speak up guardian.
- You could use someone else to help mediate your discussions, for example mediation through HR / workforce or the equality and diversity lead.
- You could also choose to talk to a trade union representative for support and advice.
USEFUL RESOURCES

Stonewall
www.stonewall.org.uk
Information and support for LGBT communities and their allies. Contact Stonewall’s Information Service Tel: 0800 0502020 Lines are open 9:30 - 4:30 Monday to Friday.

LGBT Foundation
https://lgbt.foundation/
A national charity delivering advice, support and information services to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) communities. Advice Support & Information line Tel: 0345 3 30 30 30

Lesbian and Gay Switchboard
https://switchboard.lgbt
Provides support 24 hours a day about love, life and safer sex Tel: 0300 330 0630

FFLAG [Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays]
www.fflag.org.uk
A national voluntary organisation and charity dedicated to supporting parents and their lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans children.

Mind Out
www.mindout.org.uk
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer Mental Health Service

NELFT Freedom to Speak up guardian
Kate Pollock
freedomtospeakup@nelft.nhs.uk.

Email: lgbtnetwork@nelft.nhs.uk
Twitter: @NELFT_LGBT
This guide has been adapted with kind permission from Lincolnshire NHS Trust.

NELFT provides community and mental health services for people of all ages in Essex and the London boroughs of Barking & Dagenham, Barnet, Havering, Redbridge and Waltham Forest, as well as Kent and Medway.

NELFT NHS Foundation Trust
CEME Centre – West Wing, Marsh Way, Rainham, Essex RM13 8GQ.

Tel: 0300 555 1200

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