Sexual orientation and gender identity style guide

Language about sexual orientation and gender identity has developed as the visibility and awareness of different sections of the community has increased in recent years. It is important to be sensitive to these social changes.

This means that **different communities and age groups often describe their sexual orientations and gender identities differently.**

We recognise different organisations will have different approaches and that people may have individual perspectives on how best to describe their own identity. We will use the terms an individual prefers when referring to that individual.

Where we are working closely with partners, we may have a conversation about the language that we will use. This is also true of limitations with data sets that we report on (see below).

Sexual orientation

Sexual orientation refers to sexual, emotional or romantic attraction to another person, which can manifest through self-identification, behaviour or social affiliation.
Broadly, sexual orientation includes sexual attraction to those of the same sex/gender (homosexual), a different sex/gender (heterosexual), any sex/gender (pansexual, bisexual) and no attraction to others (asexual).

In legal contexts, such as anti-discrimination laws and policies, sexual orientation is used to cover majority and minority communities.

Sexual orientation versus sexual identity

Sexual orientation refers to who you are attracted to (e.g., heterosexual, gay, bisexual), while sexual identity is a related but distinct concept. Sexual identity is the term you use to label yourself/ identify as and might include elements of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Sexual identity can change over the course of someone's life and in different situations. It's understood to be a spectrum instead of a series of mutually exclusive categories.

Gender identity

Your personal sense of your gender is your gender identify. This can be the same or different to the gender you were assigned at birth. The umbrella term used for people whose gender is different to that assigned at birth is "trans"

Some people have a gender identity that isn't simply 'man' or 'woman': the word for this is non-binary. This is another umbrella term, meaning there are lots of different ways of being non-binary.

Talking about sexual orientation at Ageing Better

We follow the below principles when talking about sexual orientation

1. Use the LGBTQ+ acronym

Examples: LGBTQ+ people, the LGBTQ+ community

Whilst there are many different variants of this acronym, and there isn't an agreed consensus about which one is the 'best' to use- LGBTQ+ is our preferred choice for the reasons below.

YouGov asked almost 1,000 queer Britons to write directly what acronym they tend to use, with most common answer being LGBTQ+, at 29%.

The Q stands for Queer and/or Questioning, while the plus represents those who don't identify with one of the letters in the acronym.

The plus acknowledges the vast diversity of the community and allows for the inclusion of all identities, recognising that language evolves and cannot capture every nuance all the time.

2. Terminology for sexualities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella

- LGBTQ+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning (see more on the word queer in the section below).
- For additional definitions within the LGBTQ+ umbrella, refer to this page.
- None of these identities should be capiatalised when written in full e.g. bisexual people, trans man.
- Gay, straight and bi should be used as adjectives rather than as nouns: a gay man, bisexual people, gay men - not 'gays' and 'straights'.

- Lesbian is a noun (so use lesbians, not lesbian women).
- Avoid medicalised terms (e.g. homosexual/practising homosexual)

We do not use queer to describe someone whenever possible

- *Current definition of queer is generally understood to be:* An umbrella term synonymous with the abbreviation LGBTQ+ and its variation, denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.
- Unless someone has explicitly described themselves as queer, don't describe people using this word.
- This is because queer was originally a pejorative substitute for gay. This term can still offensive when used as an epithet and might be offensive to many LGBTQ+ people regardless of intent **(especially amongst older LGBTQ+ people)**.

3. Avoid imprecise terms

Avoid imprecise terms such as *sexual preference or sexuality*. Sexual preference implies a choice; sexuality generally refers to sexual activity only, rather than broader elements of that individual's identity.

4. Reporting on data

Finding statistics on sexual orientation and gender can be difficult. Disaggregated data is often not available, or sample sizes are not sufficiently large for us to analyse in a more detailed way. Data on sexual orientation and gender identity is more often missing or incomplete in datasets compared to other equality characteristics.

Data on the prevalence of trans identities is particularly contentious. This is partly related to the issue with finding a question on this that is not open to misinterpretation among the general public. As a result, Census 2021 data on trans identities has been downgraded to "official statistics in development" and should be used with care.

Note that when separate questions are asked on sexual orientation and gender identity (as in the Census) it is not possible to add statistics together to provide an "LGBTQ+" statistic as this would result in double counting of people who identify as both LGB+ and trans.

Terms used when reporting data should match those used in the dataset, for example "LGB+" is the term used in the Census for questions related to sexual orientation, and queer identity is incorporated into the plus.

However, when dealing with limited data, we will always state the limitations of such data and analysis.

5. **We do not use 'non-heterosexual' or 'not straight',** since the first term defines LGBTQ+ people in relation to a majority group.

6. **Only refer to people's sexual identity if it is relevant to the context in which you are writing.**

If you are writing about an individual, only refer to people's sexual identity if it is relevant – for example, in research that is specifically exploring the experiences of older LGBTQ+ people, or our Ageing With Pride photo collection.

7. **Respect how the person (or group) describes their identity, and don't assume their identity based on how they look or sound.**

It may not be apparent and should not be inferred from appearance, relationship history, or community involvement. When relevant, ask respectfully how an individual identifies, and make sure they understand how their identity will be represented in the story **(this includes their pronouns, if relevant)**. Use the names, pronouns and language individuals use for themselves. Be cautious about assuming gender based on appearance, voice or name. **If you're not sure and its relevant for you to know, it's okay to ask, just do so with care.**

If you are unsure/ nervous about asking for this information, check in with your project lead or your line manager about the most appropriate way to ask the individual. Including the context of why you need to know and then asking how they would like their identity to be represented is a good place to start.

Homophobia and transphobia

Homophobia, transphobia and biphobia are terms used to describe the fear or dislike or someone, based on prejudice or negative attitudes, beliefs or views about people who are or are perceived to be LGBTQ+.

This kind of behaviour can take many forms such as name-calling, derogatory jokes, intrusive or hostile questioning, threatening to 'out' someone, as well as unwanted physical contact and violence. It can happen verbally, in writing, in person or virtually (e.g. by email, messages, social media). Whatever unlawful form it takes, it is always unacceptable.

Homophobia and transphobia is systemic as well as interpersonal. It's also important to recognise the severity of the discriminatory behaviour and systems older LGBTQ+ may have experienced throughout their life. For instance: consider homosexuality wasn't legalised until 1967.

Intersectionality

We recognise that protected characteristics such as sexual orientation intersect with others, such as gender, ethnicity or age. When these difference forms of inequality and discrimination combine, they create 'intersectional' effects.

The Equality Act 2010 makes it against the law to discriminate against someone because of any of the protected characteristics:

- age
- disability
- gender reassignment
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

Sources:

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