Greater Manchester

GM=EqAl

Equality Alliance

Inclusive Language Subgroup

Sexual Orientation

Preamble

- This guidance is the product of discussion and research by members of the GM=EqAl Inclusive Language Subgroup.

- It is part of a series created to help GM=EqAl members and staff be respectful and consistent in how we talk and write about the issues we work on.

- It sets out our agreed definitions and terminology around **SEXUAL ORIENTATION** and explains key concepts in line with the values of GM=EqAl.

- GM=EqAl is keen for others to share and adopt our language guidance, and welcomes dialogue with partners in order to keep evolving the documents along with our understanding.

- This guidance has been generated through a robust process but does not claim absolute authority on any topic.

Short version

DO USE

- Gay man/woman/person; Lesbian
- Bisexual (or bi) woman/man/person
- Heterosexual (or straight) man/woman/person
- Queer man/woman/person (when appropriate*)
- Partner (or spouse if relevant), unless you know the gender of a person's significant other
- LGBT+ or LGBTQIA+ or QTPOC as appropriate

DON'T USE

- 'Gays', 'bisexuals', 'heterosexuals', 'homosexual(s)'
- 'Lesbian woman' / 'lesbian women'
- 'Sexual preference' or 'sexuality' when you specifically mean 'sexual orientation'

Defining sexual orientation

- In this guide we focus on **sexual orientation**, as distinct from **sexuality** (which goes beyond sexual orientation), **sexual identity** (referring to a person's self-conception of their sexuality), and **sexual preference** (which suggests an element of choice which may not always be present, and also may indicate degrees of attraction to a particular gender).

- Sexual orientation refers to a person's emotional and/or physical attraction to other people (or lack thereof – such people may use the label **asexual**).

- Everyone has a sexual orientation, but it relies on self-definition and can be complicated. For example, someone might identify their sexual orientation one way, but experience attractions (and perhaps act on them) that don't match the label they are using. Sexual orientation can also change over time for some people.

- Although some people like having words to describe their sexuality, others do not like to label themselves and never do. No one should feel pressure to assign a label to their sexual orientation. Thus, current best practice in sexual orientation monitoring is for the question to be voluntary. [See **bit.ly/3cUeayu** for more information on monitoring].

Definitions

- **Straight** or **heterosexual** ⟹ attracted to people of a different gender than oneself.

- **Lesbian** or **gay** ⟹ attracted to people of the same gender as oneself

- **Bisexual**' ⟹ attracted to more than one gender

- Gay, straight and bi should be used as adjectives rather than as nouns: a gay man, bi 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)

Definitions

- **Pansexual** ⟹ typically used by people who are attracted to more than one gender and who feel that other terms do not include people whose gender identity or gender expression does not match their sex assigned at birth.

- **Queer** ⟹ a collective term used by people who don't identify as straight; sometimes considered a political identity and sometimes used by people who feel other terms don't quite describe their experiences.

- Being a 'reclaimed' term of abuse, queer still has negative connotations for many people, so should be used with care.

- There are many other terms in use – the Proud Trust lists few more here: theproudtrust.org/young-people/exploring-identity/sexual-orientation-lgb

Evolving language

- 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 differently

- The way that communities talk about sexual orientation continues to change, because that's how communities work – it's a feature, not a bug!

- The important thing is to take your lead from the people or person you are addressing / referring to, and to accept correction if needed. If you are making an effort to use respectful language and be inclusive then it is ok to make mistakes.

Acronyms

- Sexual orientation is distinct from **gender identity**, but historically communities who are minoritised by homophobia and transphobia have organised together as one **LGBT+** community.

- The first three letters (**LGB**) refer to sexual orientation: lesbian, gay or bisexual. The **T** stands for transgender or trans - a term for people whose gender identity is different from expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

- The acronym **LGBTQIA+** is increasingly being adopted as best practice, where **Q** stands for queer or questioning; **I** for intersex and **A** for asexual.

- The plus sign (**+**) is included to encompass other identities that fall under the sexual orientation / gender identity umbrella. For example those who identify as demisexual, non-binary, gender fluid, pansexual, polyamorous and so on.

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Acronyms

- Stonewall now uses the term **LGBTQA+** without the I for intersex, after intersex groups expressed a desire to organise themselves autonomously.

- However, we understand that this is not a universal preference among intersex groups, so GM=EqAl follows the lead of LGBT Foundation in recommending **LGBTQIA+**.

- Nevertheless, it shows the impossibility of a static 'one size fits all' acronym!

- Different communities have different preferences e.g. Black-led groups and organisations will often use QTIPOC (Queer, Trans and Intersex People of Colour) as opposed to variations on LGBT+

Further language tips

- Avoid language that suggests a degree of voluntary choice, as this is not everyone's experience of sexual orientation.

- Use language that does not assume heterosexuality as the norm.

- Recognise diverse family formations.

- Avoid assuming the gender of someone's partner in advance – if unsure, use 'partner' (or 'spouse' if you know they are married) rather than 'girlfriend' , 'husband' etc.

- Do not use 'straight' as the opposite of 'LGBTQIA+', as trans people can have any sexual orientation, including straight.

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