



Bisexual Life in Manchester

A Needs Assessment

By Gina Roberts and Jen Yockney
For BiPhoria and Manchester LGBT LSP



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Researched and written for BiPhoria and Manchester Lesbian,
Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Local Strategic Partnership

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Welcome

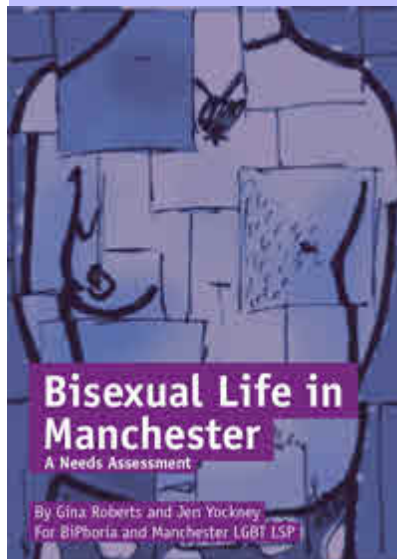
Manchester has a fine reputation as a leading city for lesbian and gay equality, built through the hard years of the 1980s - in the face of tabloid hysteria over HIV, the introduction of Section 28, and James Anderton as local chief of police.

But over the past two decades **as identity politics has evolved, Manchester has not kept pace.** In an era of 'LGBT' rights and organising, our public, private and voluntary sectors all need to look at how they engage afresh, to ensure they are reaching and supporting bisexual people, whose needs may be distinct and different from those of lesbians and gay men.

This report is a first step in that process, the result of engaging with bisexual people from across the city and doing in-depth interview work to highlight some of the challenges they face - and pleasingly some of the positive aspects of bi life in the city.

Thanks to the Manchester LGBT Local Strategic Partnership for initiating this piece of work as part of their wider overview of lesbian, gay, bi and trans experience in the city.

Jen Yockney
Convenor, BiPhoria



Overview

Needs and Challenges: Manchester

The bisexual community in Manchester is hard to find and under-promoted.

Health care provision in Manchester is aimed at either homosexual or heterosexual people and doesn't cater for the specific needs of bisexuals.

Organisations in Manchester may not be responsive to reports of abuse despite having equal rights policies.

Young bisexual people need a dedicated, bi-friendly space. There is currently no bi-specific youth service provision in Manchester.

Manchester City Council does not provide an option for bisexual people to accurately identify their sexuality on equal opportunity and best value monitoring forms. This results in inaccurate data about the numbers of bisexual people in Manchester being generated.

There is no service available to support the family and friends of bisexual people in Manchester.

Bisexuality is rarely visible in culture, leisure and art and the marketing of these in Manchester often excludes bisexual people.

Wider Needs and Challenges

Biphobia is commonplace in employment and can have a negative effect on income and career development.

Biphobia is commonplace among the mainstream and lesbian and gay communities.

Bisexual people do not identify as homosexual or heterosexual and they resent being expected to fit into those categories.

There is no legal recognition of same sex partnerships.

There is no legal recognition of polyamorous relationships.

Bisexuality is rarely visible in academic institutions and biphobia can restrict the development of support for bisexuals in an educational environment.



Positives

The bisexual community in Manchester is a diverse and welcoming community and is highly valued by the people in it.

The Manchester police's procedures for reporting hate crime are inclusive of bisexual people.

The next sections of this report will look at findings in specific areas in more detail

Young People

The study found that there is currently no youth service provision that caters for young bisexual people in Manchester.

Youth service provision for the gay and lesbian communities is, by its very definition, not addressing the needs of young bisexual people and these environments are often biphobic.

Young people who are, or think they are bisexual need an environment in which they are free to talk openly about their feelings and experiences without fear of prejudice.

“When I started going to youth groups, it was before Bi Youth happened and it was very much a “this is a lesbian and gay space and officially there’s policy we don’t tolerate biphobia, but the way that we work totally marginalises bisexual people.”

Bi Youth provided a much-needed space for young bisexual people in Manchester that was free from the prejudices found in both mainstream and gay and lesbian youth services.

“The bi youth group... was the best thing for me... It’s just a shame it’s now closed”

A proportion of young bisexual people will not access lesbian or gay youth services.

“When Bi Youth was going, about fifty per cent of the people who used it were very clear they wouldn’t use lesbian or gay youth provision”

Employment

The focus group found that in a work environment it is not possible to avoid biphobia in the management structure when it is present and many employers are biphobic. If an employer is prejudiced then there is little an employee can do to challenge it without fear of losing their job.

“In an employment context you don’t have the choice of who you’re dealing with, and you don’t have the option of failing to deal with someone who is prejudiced.”

Employers who are lesbian or gay are often as biphobic as mainstream employers.

“An awfully large proportion of the gay community want to put you in a box and tell you that you’re gay or you’re straight. They won’t accept that there’s a bigger world than these two boxes.”

Manchester Council

The focus group found that the council currently avoid catering for the needs of bisexual people by expecting them to use either mainstream or lesbian and gay provision.

Their 'best value' and equal opportunities monitoring forms do not cater for people who do not identify as male or female, or heterosexual, lesbian or gay.

"They don't think that we have any issues... because we can blend in"

"[They have] actually put in writing several times to the bisexual political group in Manchester um, that bisexuals are either gay or straight and therefore covered by those sections of equal opps policies. They do best value monitoring which fantastically has a gender box are you male box, female box, and then asks are you er, heterosexual box, lesbian box, gay man box."

Manchester Council

The focus group believed that by failing to provide a space on their equal opportunities monitoring forms for bisexual people to accurately identify their sexuality, the council is preventing the bisexual population from making themselves known.

By denying the existence of bisexuality the council then collects inaccurate data that reinforces the invisibility of bisexual people across the city.

“[The council’s] needs assessments for...running services [are] based on an idea that you are gay or straight so there’s never going to be, you know, funding through for bisexual work when all the statistics confirm that there are zero per cent of the population bisexual in the city. And they’re doing a pretty good job of keeping that figure as low as they can!”

“What it’s saying is that you can pick which box you want to live in and you can change boxes whenever you want but you can’t live outside the box.”

Visibility & Representation

The study found that bisexual people are often isolated and find it difficult to identify other bisexual people and access the bi community.

“I didn’t know there was a bi community and I found it by accident.”

Bisexuality is rarely talked about and embraced outside the bi community.

“Discovering the word bisexuality... I didn’t know that word existed. So I didn’t even realise it was a valid orientation.”

The gay and lesbian scene in Manchester is a mono-sexual culture that assumes people are either homosexual or heterosexual.

“[In the gay village] people do assume that you’re gay, most people, if you’re there, and if you’re there say in a mixed sex couple they assume that you’re tourists.”

Families

The focus group found that the families of bisexual people are often unaware of the issues their bisexual relatives face, or even of bisexuality at all until their family member comes out to them and they often have no idea how to respond.

“My family are great... But they are quite confused. They don't really know what it's about, I don't think they really heard of bisexuality before I came out to them.”

“Unless they're bisexual themselves they've not got the emotional guide that you've got... that tells you how to behave and what bisexuality is about.”

There is currently no support available for the families and friends of bisexual people in Manchester.

“[There could be more support out there in the form of] information provision, because a lot of it is lack of knowledge and the family don't necessarily know how to act or what the right questions to ask are or other things they can't yet envisage...As well as support groups for those themselves who are bi there's also friends and family for those who are bi.”

Diversity

The focus group found the bisexual community in Manchester to be relatively diverse, but to be less appealing to younger people than to those who were slightly older.

“[The Manchester bi community is] probably the most diverse one in the country.”

“It is quite middle aged.”

The Manchester bisexual community was criticised for diverse to the point of possibly excluding people who considered themselves more mainstream.

“The bi community is a very diverse community in that sense but sometimes er, you’re made to feel that because you’re not diverse, if you see what I mean, you don’t fit.”

The bisexual community has the potential to act as a bridge between the gay and lesbian communities and the mainstream (heterosexual) community.

“At least part of what we do involves lesbian and gay people and at least part of what we do involves us with straight people and that can act as a way of you know, anchoring the communities together.”

Best of Both Worlds?

The focus group found that the gay and lesbian community in Manchester was rarely welcoming of bisexual people.

Many of the bisexual people in the study had personal experiences of being denied entry to gay or lesbian bars or clubs.

“With door staff of clubs they find out that you’re bi then they tend to assume that you’re straight and then they don’t let you in.”

“Manto’s as it was then used to, the bouncers when they asked if you were gay or straight they would allow in bisexuals on week nights but not on the weekend.”

It was felt that mainstream society was equally unwelcoming of bisexual people.

“So long as you don’t go in gay or straight spaces... hang on that’s everywhere!”

Relationships

Some of the people in the focus group were facing similar issues to the gay and lesbian community with regards to getting legal recognition for their same-gendered relationships.

“I’m bisexual and I’m in a long term relationship with somebody of the same gender and even that, the fact of the recognition, they’ve just started talking about it and it could be another ten years before or even if it actually hits the statute book.”

It was also believed that the gay and lesbian and mainstream cultures often considered all bisexual people to have or to desire multiple partners.

“Poly relationships are like the visible tip of the iceberg of the bi community.”

There was significant concern within the focus group that there was no official recognition of relationships involving more than one partner. It was believed that polygamy is way of life that is commonly misunderstood by the majority of non-bisexual people and for those bisexual people that live a polyamorous lifestyle, having some kind of formal recognition of their relationships would give them some sense of validity that is currently lacking. It was recognised that achieving a recognised status for multiple relationships would be a highly complex and sensitive process.

“They’re still struggling with legal recognition of nice neat two person gay relationships. Getting beyond that to recognise multiple relationships is going to be extremely difficult.”

Personal Finances

The focus group believed that within certain areas of the world of employment, how open one chose to be about their bisexuality could have a direct negative correlation to how much they were able to earn.

“As you go to spaces which are more small l liberal in their employment mentality and staff mentality you’re also moving into the sector of employment, working in voluntary and community organisations, that kind of stuff, and you are sliding down the pay scale and trading off how out and relaxed and so on you’re going to be with how skint and what sort of hovel you’re going to be in when you’re old.”

For some, there was the fear that coming out at work might result in them losing their job.

“My finances would be shit if I came out. Or could be in the potential loss of work.”

Lifelong Learning

The experiences of bisexuality in education among the focus group were mixed, but more were negative than positive. Homophobic and biphobic staff within academic institutions had been known to prevent support for LGB students from being set up and other institutions had provision for lesbian and gay students but nothing for bisexual students.

“I was forbidden by my college to set up an LGB group because [at the time] the age of consent was 18. [The college said] there were going to be young men who were under 18 therefore it would be illegal for them to come to an LGB group - as if they were all going to be having sex with each other.”

“I haven't recognised any sort of bisexual stuff at my uni, I know there's a lesbian and gay group but I've never noticed any openly sort of bisexual things going on at uni at all. And I've been there for nearly three years, so I would have noticed by now.”

There were some positive experiences of support for bisexual people within the education system, but these came from people who had been education outside Manchester.

Health

The focus group found that some health care providers were unaware of the intricacies of life as a bisexual and in one case this ignorance lead to disbelief and the service user found themselves excluded from the service.

“My first counsellor tried to dump me and said I was telling all sorts of lies when I told her about currently going out with a woman and a man. I went to her for help, not to be slagged off.”

It focus groups' perception was that health care providers believed that bisexual people could 'fit into' existing health care provision for lesbian, gay or heterosexual people, depending on their needs at the time. What this belief fails to acknowledge was that some bisexual people need access to elements of all these services and more simultaneously in order for them to receive appropriate health care, particularly within a sexual health setting. Expecting a bisexual person to alternately identify as heterosexual and homosexual denies the validity of their bisexual identity.

“Going into a sexual health clinic for gay men doesn't cover it, for gay women doesn't cover it, for heterosexual people doesn't cover it, and actually having the acknowledgement there that yes you might be having sex with men and women and therefore, everything that comes with that.”

Community

The focus group's feelings about the bisexual community in Manchester were mostly positive. Concerns lay in the extent of its promotion and how easily it could be identified and accessed by people who might be in need of its support.

"The bi community in Manchester is great but it's hard to find out about. It should be more widely advertised or funded to grow or improve access."

It was acknowledged that there had to be a recognised need for increased funding into the bisexual community before it could be made available.

"It's a catch 22, you don't get funding without being recognised and you don't get recognised without being funded."

Due to the difficulty in finding out about the bisexual community, many people had felt isolated. Some had spent years knowing no or very few people who were also bisexual.

"It took me over four years to find a bi community or more than a bunch of people I knew that thought they might possibly be bi."

Community

Others had felt less isolated and had known several people who were also bisexual, but had not been aware of the existence of a bisexual community.

“I think a lot of people I know would say that there wasn’t a bi community, they just wouldn’t know of it’s existence, I have a lot of bisexual friends who just have no idea there is a community out there as far as they are concerned there’s just, they are a bisexual person and they don’t fit into a community. I felt very much like that until very recently”

Once an individual has found the Manchester bisexual community, their experience of it tends to be very positive.

“The bi community when you find it is very open, it doesn’t expect anything from you, it accepts you for what you are and all it asks you to do is accept other people for what they are. And that’s what a safe space is supposed to mean. In fact that’s the definition of a safe space – it’s a space where you’re accepted and you feel comfortable and the bi community is one of the not very many places where I do feel safe and comfy like that. “

Business

The focus group was unaware of any specifically bisexual businesses, but did wonder how such an enterprise might be supported by the council if it did exist.

“If there was a bi business would the council let them use its lesbian and gay mailing lists the way gay businesses do?”

There was criticism generally for the number of lesbian and gay organisations that fail to include the word ‘bisexual’ or the letter ‘B’ in their titles in Manchester.

“The council’s web site has a links section to lesbian and gay support organisations in the city. It’s very good, it links to lesbian and gay organisations in the city, there’s one organisation on there which includes the b word in its name.”

Safety

There were no specific experiences within the focus group of bisexuality causing a safety issue, although some people had been harassed or beaten up due to not being heterosexual. The police's flexibility within the reporting procedure were acknowledged as being appreciated.

"I had no problems [reporting being queerbashed]. Went to the police station, they were fine. They asked the open ended question, how would you define your sexuality. Rather than, which of these, it was an open ended question."

Questions were raised about the reduced visibility of the police within the lesbian and gay communities.

"Lesbian and gay police thing still exists but did I read somewhere that the police don't bother attending it any more or something"

Housing

The focus group's experiences of housing associations were disappointing. Of the experiences discussed, they had been unresponsive to reports of abuse despite having equal opportunities policies.

"I had neighbours who were giving me abuse and eventually, after about twelve months they moved out of their own accord but that was about ten months after I'd put documented evidence in saying to the housing association saying what was going on."

Culture, Leisure & Art

The lack of visible bisexuality within the worlds of culture, leisure and art was of concern to the focus group. There seem to be no apparent moves by the council to address this issue despite their support of events that look at the future of rights for lesbians and gay men.

“EuroPride, huge lesbian gay bisexual transgender cultural event thingy... with a whole week before it and absolutely no bisexuals anywhere really in the programme and things like – surprise surprise, the city council funded an event or were funding an event at EuroPride which is about, um, the future of lesbian and gay rights, which is open to anyone who is lesbian or gay from the city, and anyone involved in lesbian and gay campaigning, and organisations.”

This can lead to a situation in which other groups and organisations involved in the development of cultural events such as Europride feel no obligation to cater for bisexual people.

“It was going to be that easy for EuroPride to put B in its title and do nothing about it.”

The focus group also found that the way culture, leisure and art events are marketed can also have a direct effect on how inclusive they are felt to be of bisexual people.

“When you look at Queer Up North or any of those sorts of things... it’s all neatly demarcated into the lesbian bits and gay bits so you know not to go to the wrong film and inadvertently see a willy by mistake that might frighten you.”

Where Next?

This study has highlighted a number of areas that need to be considered by Manchester City Council and other organisations in the city if they are to provide services in the future that reach its diverse community.

Very little work has ever been done on the specific needs of bisexual people in Manchester and this needs to be addressed if the council is to move forward.

This study clearly indicates a need for further work to cater for the needs of the bisexual people of Manchester, but it is based on a small sample and was completed on minimal funding.

The funding of a larger study of the bisexual community in Manchester over a longer period of time could develop on the themes raised in this report and provide a framework on which the council could base future service provision.

Bi Directions

Bi Community News

Bimonthly magazine

BM Ribbit, London WC1N 3XX

www.bicommunitynews.co.uk

International Celebrate Bisexuality Day:

Annual events worldwide.

www.september23.bi.org

Journal of Bisexuality

Academic research quarterly.

www.haworthpressinc.com

Everything you always wanted to know about bisexuality but didn't know who to ask

*Introduction to bisexuality and to the
UK bi scene.*

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