



# A Literature Review of Sexual Orientation in Sport

## Summary



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Review conducted by Celia Brackenridge, Pam Alldred, Ali Jarvis, Katie Maddocks and Ian Rivers  
Centre for Youth Sport and Athlete Welfare, Brunel University

# Foreword

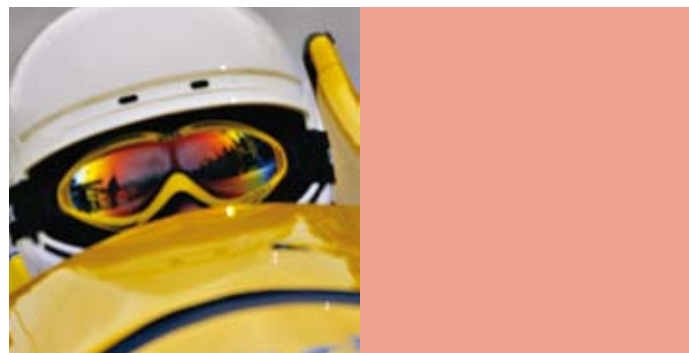
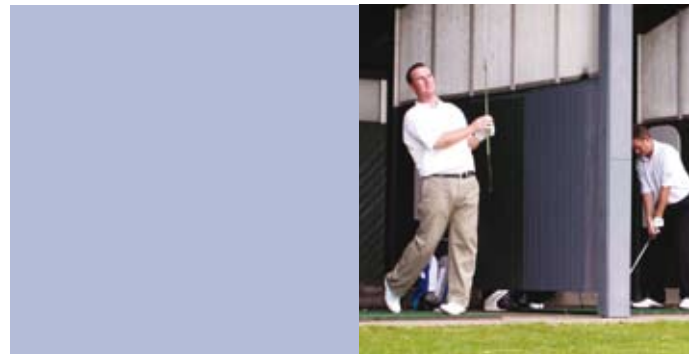
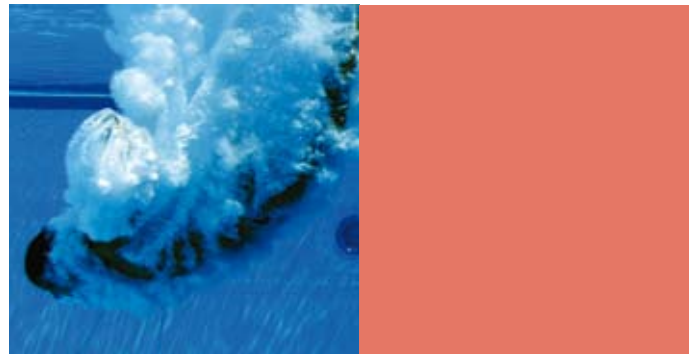
The sports councils in the UK have recognised the social and legal imperatives for sports bodies to support participation among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual<sup>1</sup> (LGBT) people and to oppose homophobia and related discrimination in sport.

This issue has not previously had the priority that has been accorded to other equality strands, such as gender, disability or ethnicity, and only in recent years has the process started of giving sexual orientation equal importance to the other equality strands. However, the forthcoming Single Equality Bill (expected to be passed early in 2009) is likely to require all equality strands to be given equal importance.

The process of implementing effective policies to ensure LGBT people are not subject to discrimination and harassment in a sports context has been hampered by two factors: social attitudes and lack of information.

- > **Social attitudes have meant that there has been a reluctance even to recognise that sports participation by those whose sexual orientation is anything other than heterosexual can be problematic. Discrimination can run deep: it may be implicit through 'heteronormative' attitudes<sup>2</sup> as well as explicit through homophobia, and does result in self-censorship by LGBT people.**
- > **Information gaps are substantial. Whilst non-inclusive attitudes, homophobia and self-censorship are well documented, they remain anecdotal – we cannot quantify how prevalent they are. We cannot even do the simple analyses – as we can for women, older people, those with a disability or from a minority ethnic background – that would tell us to what extent LGBT people undertake different levels of sports participation<sup>3</sup>. Such information would underpin the more in-depth understanding that qualitative investigations can provide and also ensure that sexual orientation is given a more prominent place in the sports policy agenda.**

In order to improve and develop their policy advice, the sports councils commissioned Professor Brackenridge and colleagues to review what is known about sexual orientation in sport and to draw out implications and practical recommendations. The welcome result is this thorough analysis of a wide range of research and policy documents, summarised with a combination of academic rigour and strong advocacy for the issues raised.



The review describes the gaps in our knowledge and identifies further research needs. It also makes policy recommendations, including the following which should be achievable given the information we now have:

- > **Practical and policy guidance on assuring inclusive sport for LGBT people, especially for clubs, governing bodies and elite sport organisations. Such guidance is beginning to emerge, for example *Transsexual people and sport: guidance for sporting bodies*<sup>4</sup> published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 2005, and this review should inform the preparation of more.**
- > **Development and dissemination of advice and guidance materials and systems for athletes dealing with sexual orientation issues.**
- > **Case studies to illustrate how processes and practices in different sport contexts can be adjusted to include LGBT athletes and sport personnel.**
- > **Preparation of advice sheets on service and facility provision for trans<sup>5</sup> people in different sports.**
- > **Development of leadership training about sexual orientation equality and impact assessment guidance, delivered to all lead sport body chief executive officers and key public officials working in sport.**

We strive for tolerance and adherence to standards by sports bodies and participants. However, as the authors conclude, we also need to go beyond that to achieve genuine inclusiveness for the benefit of sport as a whole.

Our thanks go to Celia Brackenridge, Pam Alldred, Ali Jarvis, Katie Maddocks and Ian Rivers for producing this important review which we hope will improve understanding and influence the development of policy and practice for sexual orientation in sport.



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<sup>1</sup> Transsexualism or transgenderism is not a sexual orientation; but given the commonality of equality issues and of some of the available documentation it was appropriate to commission a review that addresses issues relating to both LGB and transsexual people in sport.

<sup>2</sup> Attitudes that view heterosexuality as the normal sexual orientation.

<sup>3</sup> In 2008 for the first time national data are being gathered through the Scottish Health Survey on both sports participation and sexual orientation. As there are no obvious reasons why these should differ significantly north and south of the border, they should provide a yardstick for the UK. Information is also beginning to emerge from equality surveys of their members by governing bodies of sport.

<sup>4</sup> [www.uk-sport.gov.uk/assets/File/Generic\\_Template\\_Documents/Standards\\_in\\_Sport/transsexuals.pdf](http://www.uk-sport.gov.uk/assets/File/Generic_Template_Documents/Standards_in_Sport/transsexuals.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> 'Trans people' is a term that describes a complex range of overlapping individual circumstances. Broadly - and necessarily simplistically - trans people include transgendered people and transsexuals: transgender is a matter of identity and thus part of the queering process; transsexualism is medically determined.



## Summary

The purpose of this study was to review and critique the literature on sexual orientation in sport in order to inform equality impact assessments, support the implementation of the sports councils' equality schemes and inform the advice given by these agencies on developing sports participation among those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual and on tackling homophobia in sport.

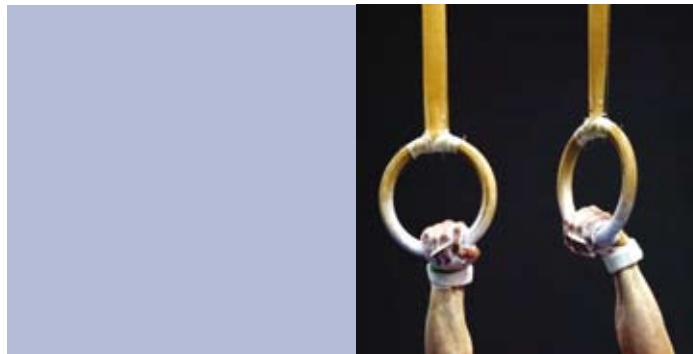
The review focuses mainly on the UK context and English language sources but also draws on materials and policy references from other countries where these are relevant. All levels of the sport performance ladder are addressed, from recreational to elite.

### The review involved:

- > literature searches of major electronic databases related to sport and the social sciences;
- > a desk study of available information on sexual orientation in sport, including examination of the policy infrastructure of a small number of international sport and sport advocacy organisations; and
- > telephone/email interviews with a small number of stakeholders in voluntary sector sport, non-sport and public sector bodies.

Sexual orientation usually refers to the direction of someone's erotic or sexual desire, and is usually expressed along a continuum from exclusively heterosexual (only being attracted to people of the opposite sex) to exclusively homosexual (only being attracted to people of the same sex). The researchers conducting this review began from the standpoint that sexual orientation (SO) is a dynamic rather than fixed set of statuses; that interpretations of SO are socially constructed; and that treatment of SO within sports organisations is politically and historically contingent.

To help analysis of the literature and policy search, a 'change model' was employed to illustrate the various stages of action and expertise that influence progress in this area. From the analysis of interview transcripts, policies and research, gaps and priorities for further research were identified.



## Key Findings

- > Research focusing on identity and experience is the dominant theme in the literature, with considerable additional contributions from the literature on women/femininities and men/masculinities.
- > Bisexuality and transsexuality are underrepresented in sports research and policy.
- > Whilst there is a basic awareness among stakeholders that there are issues relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual people that have to do with participation, discrimination and homophobia in sport, there is a lack of expertise (and in some cases desire) to do what is required to address them.
- > Lack of data and evidence means these issues can be ignored or remain hidden.
- > Equality issues around sexual orientation and gender identity are still seen differently from comparable issues on race, gender or disability and the underlying prejudices are different.
- > Much of the prejudice and negativity around LGBT issues in sport can be traced back to the application of gender stereotypes and perceptions of masculinity and femininity.
- > Attitudes within sport both reinforce and are underpinned by wider social attitudes. It would be unfair to judge sports organisations by higher standards than those demonstrated elsewhere.
- > Young people are seen as key to effecting change because they often express more enlightened attitudes to diversity than older generations. Sport can be a powerful influence both on young people's own personal development and on their attitudes to others, so young people's openness to diversity is likely to continue even after their personal involvement in sport ceases.
- > There are many different dimensions to sport: team vs individual, elite vs recreational, health and social benefits of participation, sport's influence on fans and spectators. Each of these brings about different challenges and opportunities for LGBT inclusion and equality.
- > In relation to effective service delivery, there is little evidence of integrated policy or thinking in the context of sport, health, education and social inclusion. Bringing these elements together more effectively could create a step-change in some of the issues relating to LGBT participation and equality, and help to add value to governments' efforts to work in a more 'joined up' way across health, sport, education and industry.
- > Homophobic discrimination and gender stereotyping are not just damaging to those who may be LGBT but risk affecting performance and participation amongst far wider groups.
- > There is no clear leadership on this issue and even some in government positions appear to be hesitant to take a stand on policy.

# Recommendations

## RESEARCH

Quantitative research to identify patterns of representation.

Targeted qualitative research on the experiences of bisexual sports people, coaches and other support roles.

Research into the impact of queer/ing<sup>6</sup> on individuals and organisations in sport and implications for policy.

Inclusion of SO-related items within all standard public survey measures in sport.

Embedding of SO as a criterion within all publicly-funded sports research agendas on age, race, disability, religion and class.

Qualitative retrospective research to assess the types, extent and impact of homophobia on LGBT sports people and their entourages at the elite/performance level.

Relational studies of the interactions of LGBT and heterosexual sports people, coaches and other support roles.

Comparative analyses of LGBT equality in sport and other areas such as health and education.

Replication of studies on SO diversity management in the public sector such as Munro (2006)<sup>7</sup> and Colgan et al (2007)<sup>8</sup>.

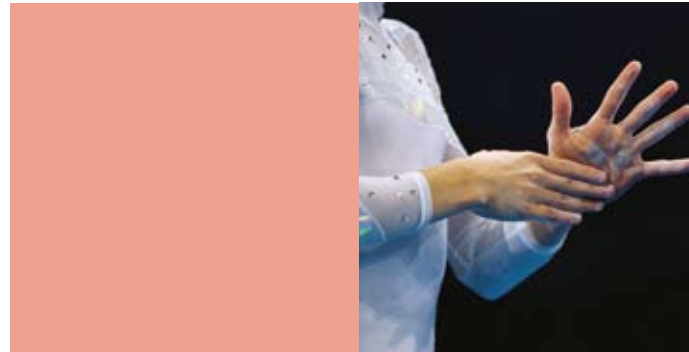
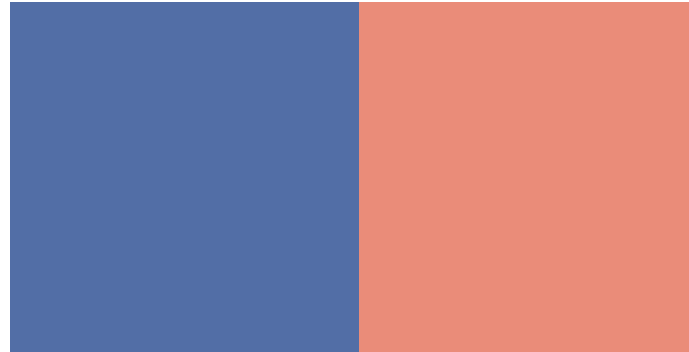
Development of a methodology for conducting a cost-value analysis of SO diversity management in elite sport.

Prevalence studies of SO-related violence and harassment for LGBT sports people, coaches and other support roles.

Development of case management systems to collect and collate incidence data on these themes.

Mixed-method policy research to audit whether, how and why providers (especially governing bodies of sport) do or do not address SO and to collect case studies of good practice.

Development of research and educational materials to support impact assessments.



## POLICY

Provision of lifestyle support expertise for talented and elite athletes, focused on coming out, working with LGBT/heterosexual peers, managing SO in different cultures, dealing with homophobia.

Practical and policy guidance on ensuring inclusive sport for LGBT people, especially for clubs, governing bodies and elite sport organisations.

Development and dissemination of advice and guidance materials and systems for sports people dealing with SO issues.

Preparation of advice sheets on service and facility provision for trans people in different sports similar to that produced by Press for Change<sup>9</sup>.

Case studies to illustrate how processes and practices in different sports contexts can be adjusted to include LGBT sports people, coaches and other support roles.

Adaptation of and/or engagement by sports organisations with Stonewall's Workplace Equality Index<sup>10</sup> and Diversity Champions Programme<sup>11</sup>.

Development of leadership training about SO equality and impact assessment guidance, delivered to all lead sport body CEOs and key public officials working in sport.

## Further Information

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### Main report

The full report, *A literature review of sexual orientation in sport* by Professor Brackenridge and colleagues, is on the websites of the above UK sports councils.

<sup>6</sup> 'Queer' is a term applied to those for whom the very notion of a defined sexual identity is restrictive and essentialist and who therefore perform or 'do' sexuality in a variety of ways designed to test the boundaries of the 'normal' in society.

<sup>7</sup> Munro, S (2006) 'Sexualities initiatives in local government: measuring success.' *Local Government Studies*, 32(1): 19-39.

<sup>8</sup> Colgan, F, Creegan, C, McKearney, A and Wright, T (2007) 'Equality and diversity policies and practices at work: lesbian, gay and bisexual workers.' *Equal Opportunities International*, 26(6): 590-609.

<sup>9</sup> www.pfc.org.uk

<sup>10</sup> www.stonewall.org.uk/cymru/english/workplace/642.asp

<sup>11</sup> www.stonewall.org.uk/workplace/1447.asp