

Living together

British attitudes to lesbian
and gay people



Stonewall

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British attitudes to lesbian and gay people

written by Katherine Cowan

The culture of the country has changed in a definable way as a result of civil partnerships. And here is what I think is really interesting, that the change in the culture and the civilising effect of it has gone far greater than the gay and lesbian community. In other words, by taking a stand on this issue and by removing a piece of prejudice and discrimination, and by enabling people to stand proud as what they are, it has had an impact that I think profoundly affects the way the country thinks about itself.

Tony Blair

Stonewall Equality Dinner
22 March 2007

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This research was carried out by YouGov for Stonewall

Introduction



Life for lesbian and gay people in this country has changed immeasurably in recent years. Four decades after steps were first made towards partial decriminalisation of homosexuality, Britain is now constructing a framework of rights and fair treatment for gay people matching that taken for granted by so many others. Civil partnership is just one example of startling legislative progress in the last five years alone. But at Stonewall we recognise that changing the law, however tough that might seem at the time, is often the easy part – changing hearts and minds is much harder.

Progress has been made, however, against a backdrop of significant and sometimes extreme unpleasantness. The campaign run by a number of fringe religious groupings protesting at recent protections against discrimination in the provision of health care and commercial services suggested a nation not yet at ease with itself over fair treatment for gay people. Resolved to establish whether those shrill voices were representative, Stonewall commissioned an investigation into how British people really feel about lesbians and gay men and the objective extent of prejudice against them.

This report outlines the results of that YouGov survey, based on a sample of more than 2,000 adults. Its clear, and welcome, conclusion is that Britain is a tolerant country with a widespread acceptance that prejudice has no proper place in civil society. Not only do almost nine in ten voters support the new protections introduced for gay people in 2007, but a similar number think that legal protection should be strengthened further with the introduction of a criminal offence of incitement to hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation.

However, while a significant majority of Britons don't appear prejudiced against gay people, millions have witnessed the corrosive damage done by the few who are. More than a third of adults, some 17 million people, say they've witnessed homophobic bullying in schools. One in six has witnessed anti-gay bullying in the workplace. Perhaps most important of all, the majority of British people demonstrably don't want to live in a society that allows prejudice against any group of people, including lesbians and gay men.

That remains a huge challenge for Britain's entire public domain, from politicians to policymakers, to rise to. We now need to move from changing the law to changing the world.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Summerskill". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ben Summerskill
Chief Executive
Stonewall

Summary and key findings

In October 2006 Stonewall commissioned YouGov to survey a nationally representative sample of 2,009 adults. The survey canvassed opinion on:

- lesbian and gay people and their legal rights
- gay people as family and friends
- gay people in public life, including politics and the media
- awareness of anti-gay prejudice and discrimination
- causes of anti-gay discrimination
- responsibility for tackling prejudice against lesbian and gay people

The aim of the research was to understand the nature of feelings towards lesbian and gay people in Britain today.

Contrary to some claims, the data reveals that a majority of Britons are comfortable with gay people.

- More than a third of people say they have a high opinion of lesbians and gay men, while only a quarter say they have a low opinion.
- Three out of four people would be comfortable if their child's teacher was gay and more than three-quarters of the population would feel comfortable if their doctor was gay.
- Almost everyone (92 per cent) would be comfortable if a footballer on the team they support was gay, and close to nine in ten people would not mind if a member of the royal family was gay.

Most people support the equal legal treatment of lesbians and gay men, and want to see anti-gay discrimination addressed.

- Nine out of ten people want anti-gay bullying in schools to be tackled.
- Over half of people think that lesbian and gay people experience public prejudice in Britain and a significant majority (73 per cent) think that anti-gay prejudice should be tackled.
- Nine out of ten people support laws to protect gay people from discrimination in the workplace.
- More than four out of five people, including 'people of faith', are in favour of gay people being protected from discrimination in areas including health care and social services.
- The vast majority (89 per cent) of people are in favour of laws which would make it illegal to incite hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation.

However, the data also uncovers a widespread perception that public bodies, employers and the media do not always reflect these attitudes, and people see significant pockets of discrimination remaining.

- Almost 17 million adults witnessed homophobic bullying at school.
- Almost 4 million people have witnessed homophobic bullying at work.
- A significant majority (83 per cent) of people believe that the media relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes of gay people.

1

Are attitudes changing?

- Nine out of ten people say that homophobic bullying in schools should be tackled.
- The vast majority (93 per cent) of people support laws to protect gay people from discrimination and harassment at work.
- More than four in five people and 83 per cent of 'people of faith' are in favour of protection from anti-gay discrimination in areas including health care and social services.
- Almost three-quarters of people believe that public expression of prejudice against lesbian and gay people should be addressed.
- Nearly two-thirds of people (60 per cent) believe that gay people should be able to be open about their sexual orientation, no matter what.

1.1

A change for the better

The majority of people believe that attitudes towards lesbian and gay people have become more positive over the past decade.

The last ten years have seen a major shift in the legislative landscape for lesbian and gay people in Britain. Section 28, which banned the so-called 'promotion' of homosexuality in local authority activities, has now been repealed. Gay and straight people now have equal rights at work, equal rights as parents and equal rights as partners. *Tuned Out* (Stonewall, 2006) revealed that heterosexuals wished to see more coverage of gay issues in the media. Heterosexual people interviewed for *Tuned Out* argued that achieving empathy between the gay and heterosexual communities is the most effective way to challenge bigotry and prejudice.

1.2

Evolving attitudes

Public attitudes towards lesbians and gay men appear to be changing. People in Britain know more gay people, either from their social networks or as well-known figures in public life. A large majority of people (an average of 86 per cent) say their opinion of celebrities such as Sir Elton John, Will Young and Martina Navratilova did not change when they found out they were gay.

Almost two-thirds of people believe that gay people should always be open about their sexual orientation, but people recognise that this is not always possible. They understand that there are a number of areas where gay people cannot be themselves. People in Britain acknowledge there is a difference between how things should be, and how things are.

1.3

Not tolerating intolerance

Most people are supportive of laws to protect lesbian and gay people from discrimination. Almost three-quarters of people believe that prejudice against gay people should be tackled. People are generally positive about recent and possible future legislative changes. They believe that laws make a difference, but most feel that further steps must be taken to prevent anti-gay prejudice; 92 per cent believe that homophobic bullying in schools should be tackled.

The views of some religious leaders, widely reported in the media, sometimes suggest that there is intolerance of gay people among faith communities. The evidence suggests that they are wrong. The vast majority of religious people (83 per cent) believe that gay people should not be discriminated against when accessing services such as health and social care. Along with the overwhelming majority (89 per cent) of Britons, most religious people say they would support laws against inciting hatred towards gay people. People from ethnic minorities are more supportive of this than white people.

I came all the way from Torquay for this. I thought it was well worth the effort. It was a big day for him – the biggest of his life – and I wanted to share it.

Elton John fan

One of hundreds gathered for Sir Elton John and David Furnish's civil partnership
Windsor
December 2005

Law	Impact	Level of support
Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003	Protection from discrimination and harassment for gay employees	93%
Civil Partnership Act 2004	Partnership rights for same sex couples, similar to civil marriage	68%
The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007	Makes it unlawful to refuse people services, such as health care, on the grounds of their sexual orientation	85%
Incitement to homophobic hatred (not yet a criminal offence)	Would make it unlawful to incite hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation, similar to existing laws for race	89%

1.4

Gay people in public life

People in Britain are increasingly supportive of equal legal treatment for gay people, and are increasingly comfortable having gay people in their lives (this includes people who say they are very comfortable, comfortable or neutral about this). They would feel comfortable if a range of different people were gay, including their children, their GP, or their local religious leader.

Even in a sport like football, where there are no openly gay premiership players, almost all people would be comfortable having a gay player on their team. Among those who would feel uncomfortable about this, the majority would not change teams as a result.

Attitudes are changing. Previous research commissioned by Stonewall (*Profiles of Prejudice*, MORI for Stonewall, 2003) showed that people felt less comfortable about GPs, teachers and managers being gay compared to 2007.

We asked what people would do if they were uncomfortable about someone being gay. In almost all cases, people would not do anything differently. They would not change jobs if they were uncomfortable with their boss being gay, and they wouldn't change teams if a footballer was gay.

The general public is increasingly comfortable having lesbians and gay men in their lives. This does not just apply to people they don't know personally, such as MPs or members of the royal family. It also applies to close friends and family, the people who they work with, and people who provide public services.

When people go into an office they don't have to be subjected to discrimination whether they are homosexual, fat, black, thin, tall, small. It's not going to happen to somebody in an office so why should it happen on the pitch?

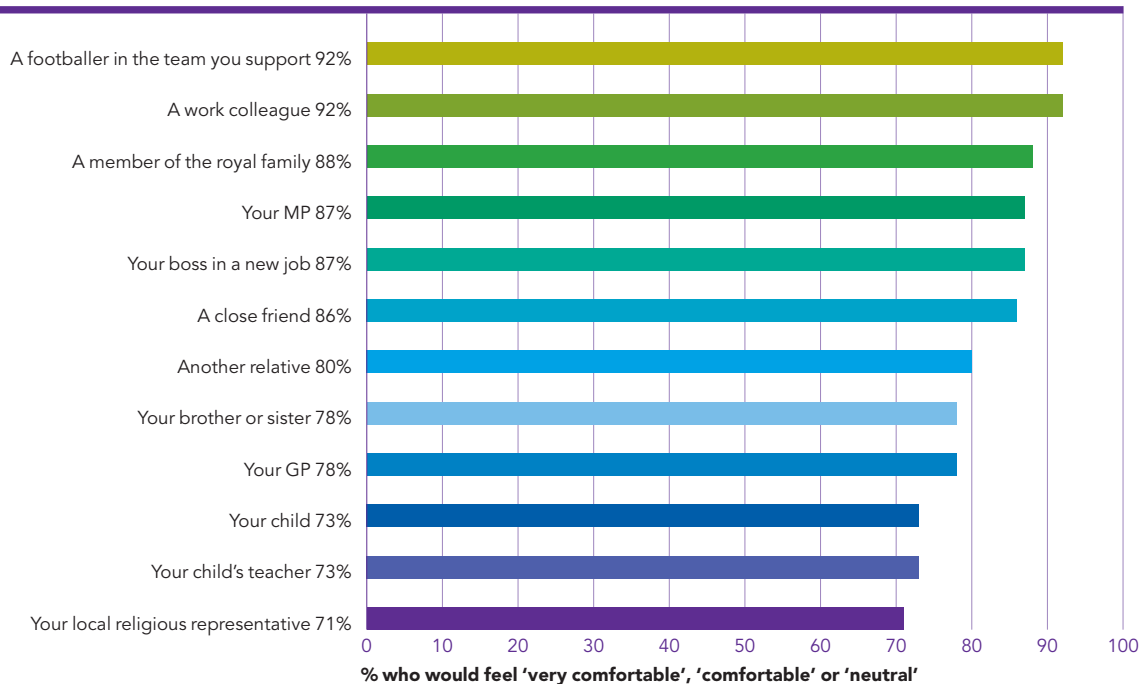
Ian Wright
2006

Gay person	Uncomfortable	
	2003	2007
Your GP	26%	14%
Your child's teacher	20%	18%
Your boss	18%	7%

Football, it seems, is one of the last professional environments where you can't be out and proud. In every other entertainment industry we have gay stars. Why should football be different? Are football fans really so incapable of watching a gay player without abusing him?

David James
2007

How comfortable would you personally feel if each of the following were gay?



1.5

Lesbian and gay relatives

Nine per cent of people say they have family members who are gay men, 4 per cent are related to lesbians and another 4 per cent have bisexual relatives. Of the people who would be uncomfortable if their child was gay, more than four in five would not love them any less. The majority would not love any of their family members less for being gay. People also have gay friends: two-fifths of the general population say they have gay male friends, almost a quarter have lesbian friends and 15 per cent have friends who are bisexual.

2

How much public prejudice remains?

- Only a quarter of people say they have a low opinion of lesbians and gay men. However, more than half of all people (55 per cent) think there is general public prejudice against gay people in Britain today.
- 4 million people (13 per cent) across the national workforce have witnessed anti-gay bullying at work.
- Almost 17 million adults (36 per cent) say there was anti-gay bullying in their school.
- Two-thirds of people say that the cause of anti-gay prejudice is a general lack of acceptance by institutions and organisations such as workplaces and schools. They also think that religious and parental attitudes have a negative impact, as do tabloid newspapers and the media in general.

2.1

Is there public prejudice against gay people?

People acknowledge that there is general prejudice against lesbians and gay men in Britain. Although they say they are not prejudiced against gay people themselves, the majority feel that society in general treats gay people differently from the way it treats straight people.

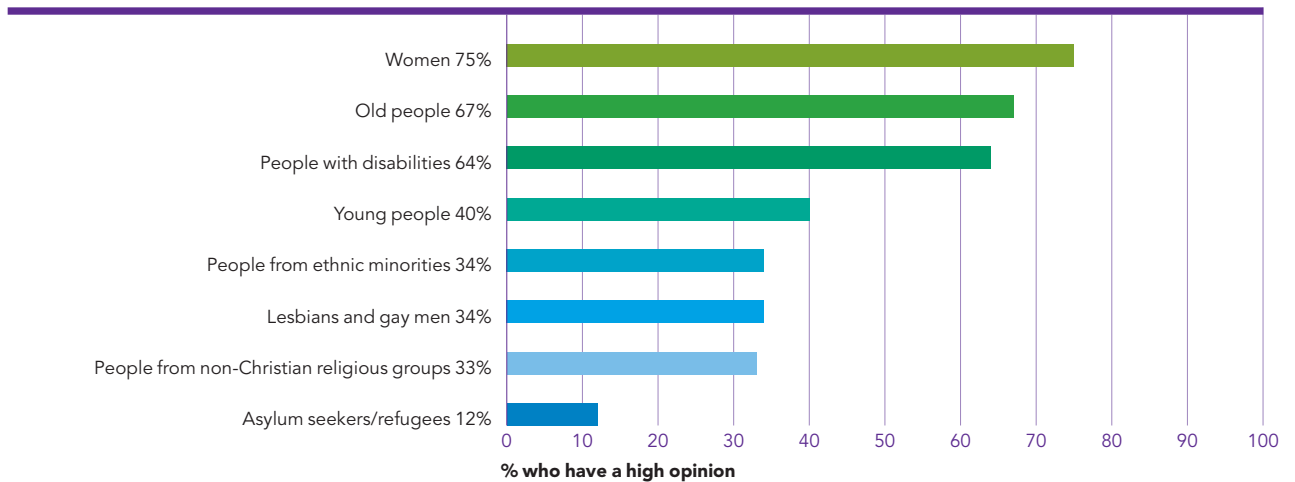
A significant number of British people – gay and straight – have witnessed or experienced anti-gay harassment and bullying, particularly in schools and workplaces. Straight people who are thought to be gay can experience harassment too. People who have gay family or friends can also experience discrimination. People feel the media makes this worse by portraying gay people in narrow and stereotyped ways.

2.2

Attitudes towards minority groups

We also asked how people felt about particular groups.

What is your overall opinion of the following groups of people?



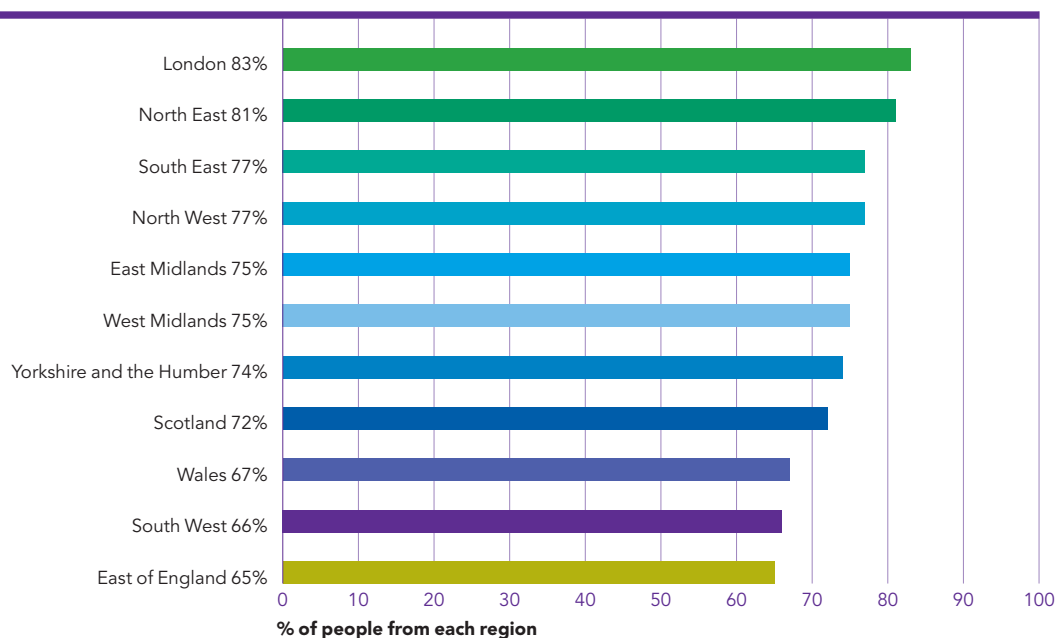
2.3

Who is prejudiced against gay people?

Contrary to what is sometimes believed, only a small minority of people express an intolerance of lesbians and gay men and disagree with their right to legal equality. For instance, only one in 20 people say they don't like lesbians and gay men, fewer than one in ten people disagree with legal protection for gay people at work and under one in ten think that anti-gay bullying in schools should not be tackled. Women, people from ethnic minorities and younger people are most likely to acknowledge that anti-gay prejudice exists, and to want it addressed. There are also regional differences in attitudes towards anti-gay prejudice.

In general, older white British men are least likely to support legal equality for lesbian and gay people. They are more likely to believe that anti-gay prejudice is not an important issue and should not be tackled. This reflects patterns described in studies, including *Profiles of Prejudice* (MORI for Stonewall, 2003) and *Understanding Prejudice* (Stonewall, 2004).

Anti-gay prejudice should be tackled

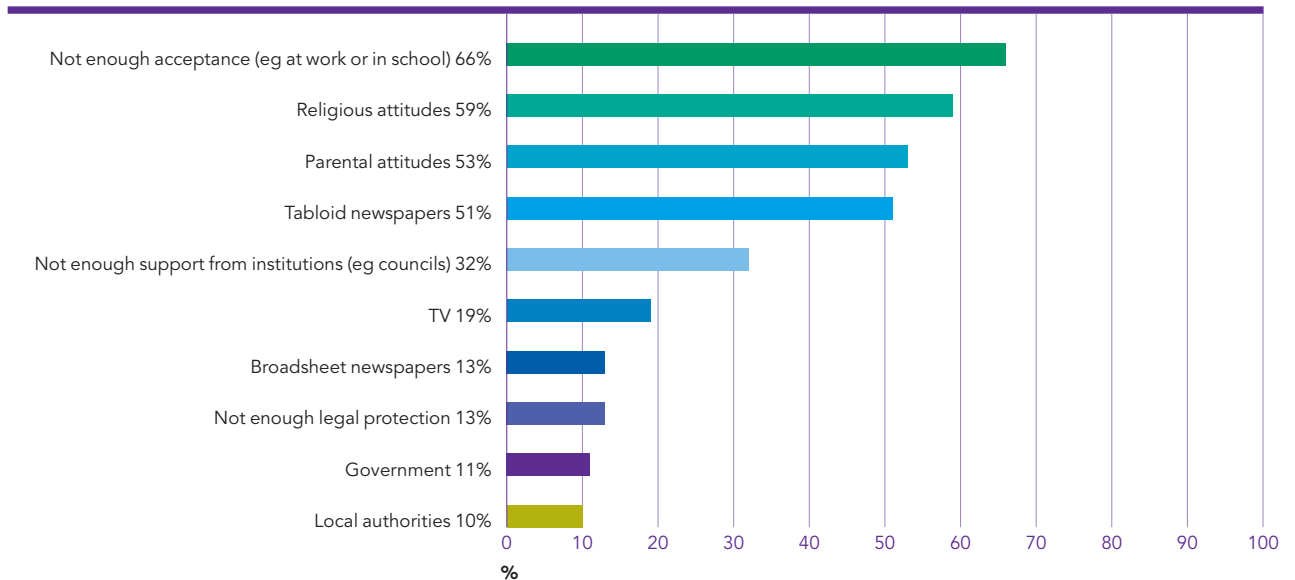


2.4

The causes of anti-gay prejudice

People are clear about the causes of public prejudice against lesbian and gay people. Two-thirds think that it is due to a general lack of acceptance, for example in schools and workplaces. More than half of the population thinks that public prejudice is caused by religious attitudes, despite the fact that this research demonstrates that 'people of faith' are no more likely to be prejudiced than anyone else.

What do you think is responsible for public prejudice against gay people in Britain today?



2.5

Where does anti-gay prejudice occur?

A large number of people from across Britain are aware of, or have witnessed, anti-gay prejudice in action. People recognise that anti-gay prejudice exists in a range of different sectors, from schools to workplaces and from the media to politics.

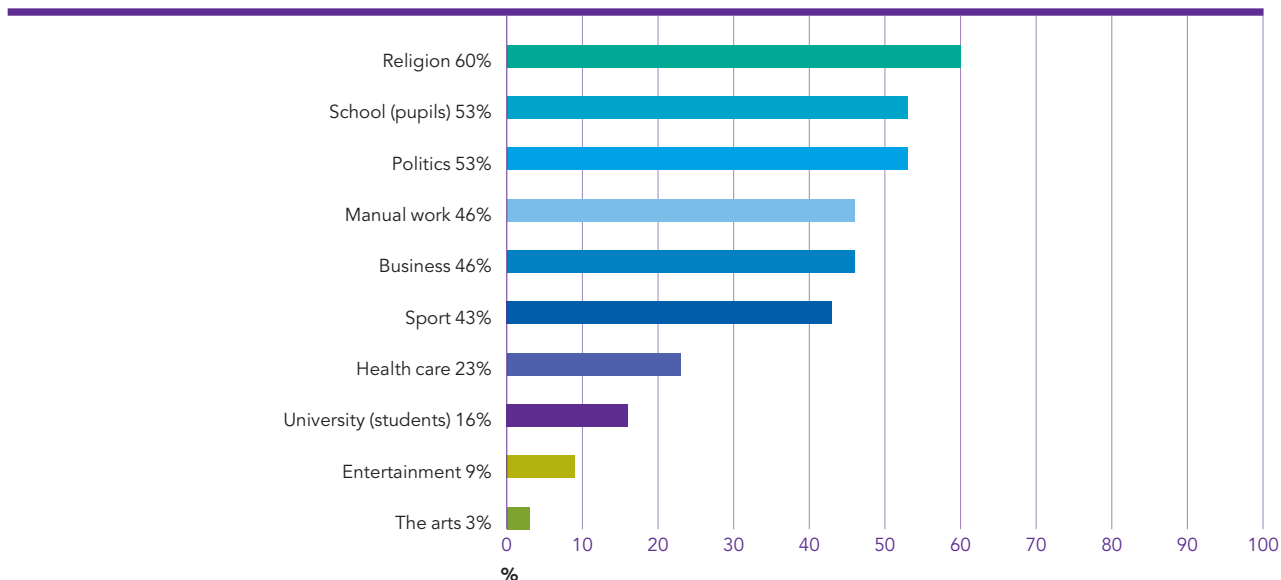
Almost a fifth of people think TV is responsible for anti-gay prejudice, while just over half blame tabloid newspapers. Nearly three-quarters of people feel that the media frequently uses gay people as the subject of jokes. Eighty three per cent also believe that the media relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes of gay people. This supports findings from Stonewall's 2006 *Tuned Out* report, which documented the use and impact of gay stereotypes broadcast on BBC television.

In Britain, almost 17 million people have witnessed anti-gay bullying in their school, either of gay children or children thought to be gay. Younger people are even more likely to say they have seen this happening. More than three in five (64 per cent) of 18–29 year-olds say there was anti-gay bullying in their school. People from ethnic minorities are 7 per cent more likely than white people to have been aware of homophobic bullying at school.

Anti-gay bullying at work is also widespread. Thirteen per cent have witnessed verbal anti-gay bullying at work. This amounts to almost 4 million people across the national workforce. Physical bullying also occurs at work, and has been seen by 4 per cent of workers – over 1.2 million people.

People also suggested where they felt lesbian and gay people were unlikely to be open about their sexual orientation. The results reflect which fields are thought to be gay-friendly and which are thought to be discriminatory.

In which of the following sectors do you think gay people are most likely to conceal their sexual orientation?



3 Opportunities for change

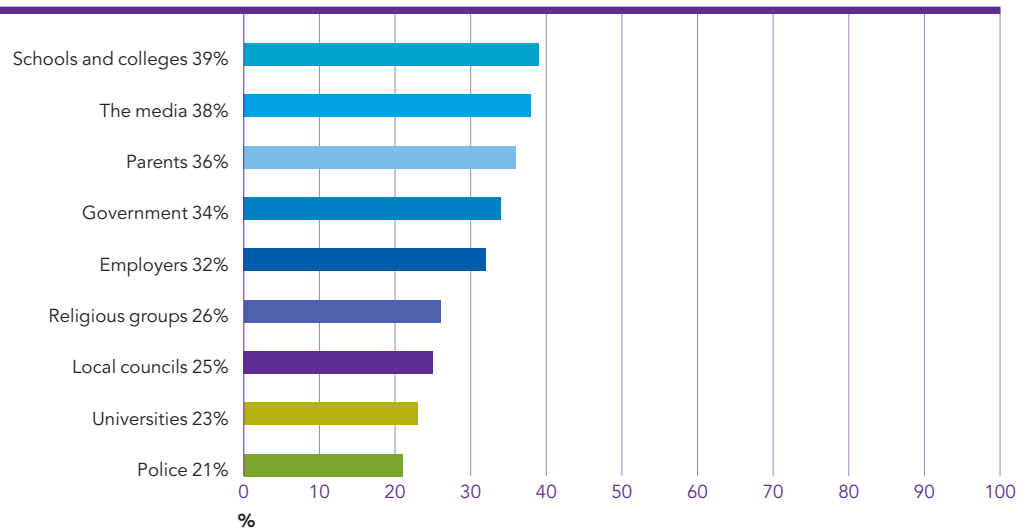
- People believe that schools and the media have the greatest responsibility to address anti-gay prejudice – more than parents, government and the police.
- Almost all people want anti-gay bullying in schools tackled. This includes the vast majority of parents of children aged 18 and under, and nearly all religious people (91 per cent).
- A third of people think employers should be responsible for tackling anti-gay prejudice.
- Almost nine out of ten people would be comfortable if their MP was gay, yet just over half of people believe that gay people are unlikely to be 'out' in politics.
- While religious attitudes are considered to be a cause of anti-gay prejudice, 'people of faith' agree that anti-gay prejudice should be addressed and are as accepting of gay people as non-religious people are.

3.1

Tackling institutional prejudice

The general public thinks that more could be done to tackle prejudice and discrimination against lesbian and gay people. They feel that organisations and institutions, including employers, schools and the media, should take responsibility for reducing prejudice. However, people feel that this is not happening to the extent that it should.

Which of the following should be responsible for reducing the level of prejudice against gay people?



3.2 Schools

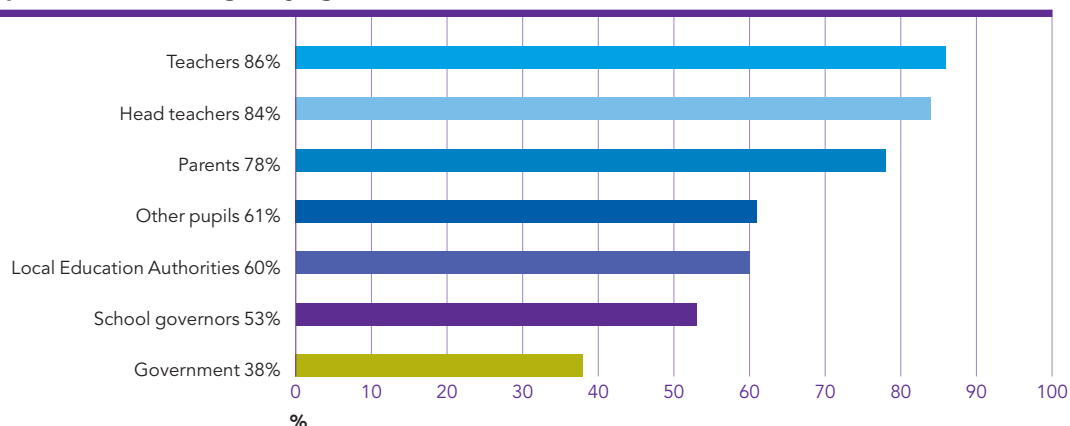
People think schools and colleges have a key responsibility to tackle anti-gay prejudice and bullying. Most people (73 per cent) would be comfortable if their child's teacher was gay, but have a strong belief that gay people do not come out when at school or university.

Almost 17 million people (36 per cent) have seen anti-gay bullying at school. The vast majority (92 per cent) – including parents of under-18s – believe that homophobic bullying in schools should be tackled. Nine out of ten 'people of faith' believe it should be tackled. The majority of people think teachers, head teachers and parents have a responsibility to take the lead.

Unless these specific kinds of bullying are explicitly included in anti-bullying policies, we believe there is a danger that they will not be adequately addressed. As a result of the evidence we have taken, we believe the Department [for Education and Skills] should require schools' anti-bullying policies to specifically mention disability-related, race-related, faith-based and homophobic bullying. Schools should ensure staff feel confident in dealing with prejudice-driven bullying and are consistent in their approach.

House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee Report 2007

Who should be responsible for tackling bullying in schools?



I was coming out of the girls' toilets when a group who had been giving me grief [for being a lesbian] for ages started shouting things at me. I had had enough and turned to tell them to leave me alone. But one of the girls then punched me in the face. I felt I finally had to report it to the teachers, but the school didn't seem to sort out the problem completely so I had no choice but to report what had been happening to the police.

Hannah
14
London

3.3

At work

More than nine in ten people support laws, introduced in 2003, protecting lesbians and gay men from discrimination at work. Most people would also be comfortable with a gay boss or colleague.

But a minority of people are still getting away with anti-gay bullying in the workplace. Almost 4 million people (13 per cent of the national workforce) have witnessed verbal bullying in the workplace. A further 1.2 million people (4 per cent of the national workforce) have witnessed physical anti-gay bullying at work.

In February 2007 Jonah Ditton, a media sales manager at CP Publishing Ltd in Glasgow, was awarded almost £120,000 by an employment tribunal for sexual orientation discrimination. The tribunal found that Ditton's boss 'overtly abused and humiliated him on the grounds of his sexual orientation'.

Bullying has a negative impact on morale and productivity across the workforce, as well as on external reputation. One in three employees, potential recruits, customers and clients think that employers should be responsible for tackling anti-gay prejudice. Employers already have a legal obligation to prevent any form of discrimination or harassment on the grounds of sexual orientation in their workplace.

3.4

Politics

A large majority of people (87 per cent) would be comfortable if their MP was lesbian or gay. This is particularly the case for women, people from ethnic minorities and younger people. More than a quarter of people feel that one of the solutions to tackling discrimination is to have more gay MPs in Britain.

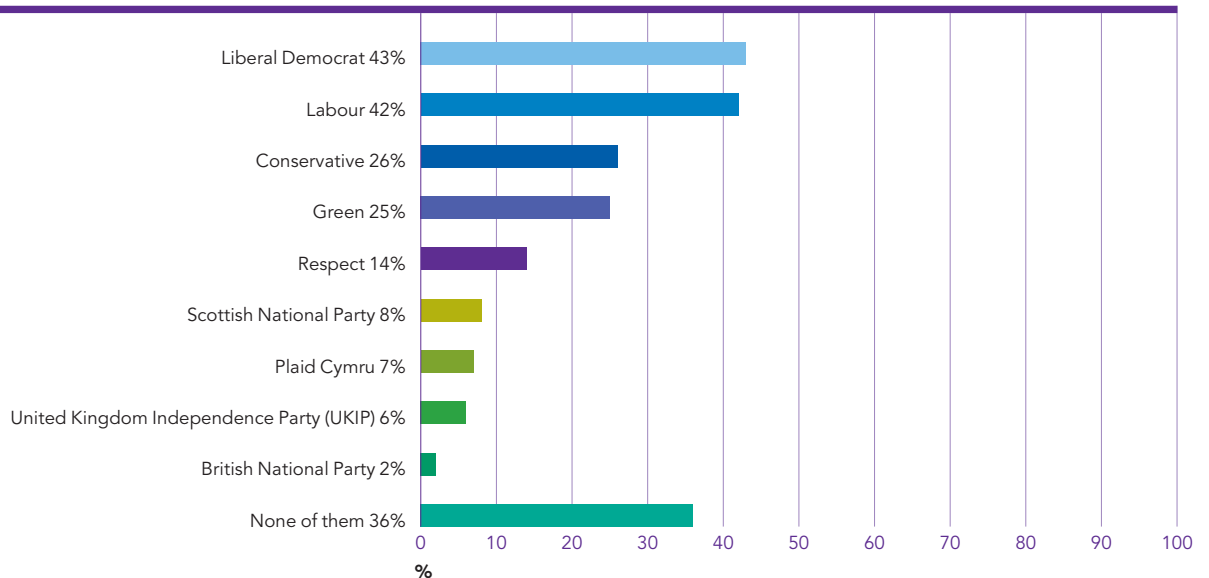
More than half of the British public thinks that gay people are likely to conceal their sexual orientation in politics – Liberal Democrat supporters are most likely to think this. No single political party is seen as gay-friendly by a majority of people. Women, younger people and people from ethnic minorities are the least likely to think of any political party as gay-friendly.

Visible lesbian and gay MPs indicate a political party is progressive and modern, which is likely to appeal to marginalised groups. In 2007 there is only one 'out' lesbian politician in the House of Commons, and none in the House of Lords.

We've been seen for a long time as a party which hasn't been very open to gay people. That's wrong.

Francis Maude
Conservative Party Chairman
2006

Which political parties do you consider to be gay-friendly?



3.5

The media

Many people (38 per cent) feel that TV and newspapers have a responsibility to reduce anti-gay prejudice – more so than parents, government or the police. People believe that the media is not doing enough, and instead relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes of, and jokes about, gay people.

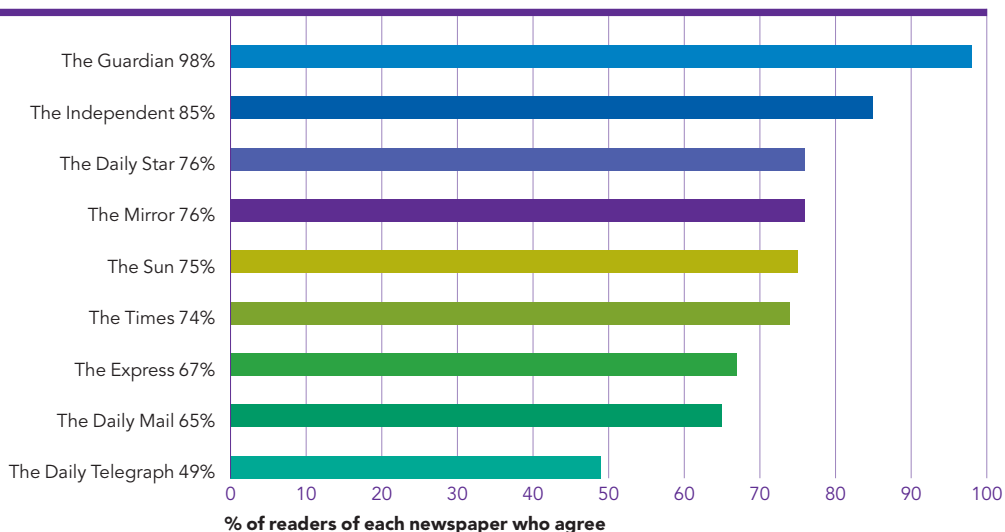
Half of the population agrees that the BBC has an obligation to portray lesbians and gay men accurately, so wider society can understand lesbian and gay issues. Sixty three per cent of people aged 18–29 agree with this. If the younger generation expects this from the BBC in 2007, future generations are likely to have even higher expectations about how their licence fee is spent. *Tuned Out* (Stonewall, 2006) found that many licence payers feel that the BBC has a responsibility to serve and represent lesbian and gay people.

The more accustomed you get to seeing references to gay people and how you should deal with it... I think then our perceptions will change slowly and the BBC and television does mediate that process.

Sabola
Heterosexual interviewee
Tuned Out
2006

There is a significant discrepancy in how newspapers' contribution to anti-gay prejudice is perceived, and their readers' own views of gay people. Tabloid newspapers are singled out by more than half of the people in Britain for fuelling prejudice against lesbian and gay people. However, 39 per cent of *Sun* readers say they have a high opinion of gay people – 5 per cent more than the national average. While almost all *Guardian* readers (98 per cent) think that anti-gay prejudice should be tackled, *Daily Telegraph* readers are half as likely to agree with this (49 per cent).

Do you think prejudice against gay and lesbian people in Britain should be tackled?



3.6

Religion

Contrary to claims made by some religious leaders, the majority of 'people of faith' support laws to protect the rights of lesbians and gay men, and want to see anti-gay discrimination tackled. Eighty four per cent of religious people disagree with the statement, 'homosexuality is morally unacceptable in all circumstances'. Religion, however, is seen by many to be a major cause of anti-gay prejudice and three in five people believe that gay people would conceal their sexual orientation within the religious sector.

I want a diocese which stands in support and solidarity with all harassed minorities, whoever they are. I want a diocese that is able to show everyone, including gay and lesbian people, that they are beloved of God.

The Rt Rev Richard Harries
Bishop of Oxford
2003

The majority (83 per cent) of 'people of faith' support laws allowing gay people protection from discrimination in areas such as health care and social services. More than nine in ten believe that homophobic bullying of children in Britain's schools must be tackled. More widely, the vast majority of them (88 per cent) support legislation making it illegal to incite hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation, similar to existing laws on religion and race hatred.

More than four-fifths of 'people of faith' say they would be comfortable being friends with a lesbian or gay man – they have almost as many gay friends as people with no declared religion. The majority of religious people (64 per cent) say they would be comfortable if their local religious representative was gay. Overall, many religious people believe that lesbians and gay men should be open about their sexual orientation, no matter what.

Recommendations

Schools

Almost 17 million adults witnessed anti-gay bullying in school and nine out of ten people want the problem to be tackled. More than four in five people think teachers and head teachers should be responsible for this. *Schools should develop policies that comprehensively address anti-gay bullying.*

At work

More than nine in ten people support laws protecting lesbian and gay employees from discrimination. Yet almost 4 million people have witnessed anti-gay bullying at work. One in three people think employers should be responsible for addressing anti-gay prejudice. *Employers should ensure they fully comply with the law and tackle all forms of bullying and harassment.*

Politics

Almost nine out of ten people would be comfortable if their MP was lesbian or gay. *Political parties should actively encourage lesbian and gay people to become MPs and councillors.* Nine in ten people want to see legislation against inciting hatred on the grounds of sexual orientation. *Government should now amend the next Criminal Justice Bill.*

The media

Almost a fifth of people think TV is responsible for anti-gay prejudice, and just over half blame tabloid newspapers. More than four in five people in Britain feel that the media relies heavily on clichéd stereotypes of gay people. A significant number of people (38 per cent) feel that TV and newspapers have a responsibility to reduce anti-gay prejudice. *The media should portray lesbian and gay lives realistically.*

Religion

More than four out of five 'people of faith' support laws allowing gay people protection from discrimination in health care and social services, and 91 per cent believe that homophobic bullying in schools should be tackled. Religion, however, is seen as one of the main causes of anti-gay prejudice. *Religious organisations should address the apparent disconnect between the anti-gay statements of some religious leaders, and the attitudes of ordinary 'people of faith'.*

Methodology

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The total sample size was 2,009 adults. The fieldwork was undertaken between 3 and 10 October 2006. The survey was conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc GB panel of over 115,000 individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys. An e-mail was sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample according to the sample definition, inviting them to take part in the survey and providing a link to the survey. The responding sample was weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. The profile is normally derived from census data or, if not available from the census, from industry accepted data. The resulting data was analysed and presented by Stonewall.



Editing: Lorna Fray
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