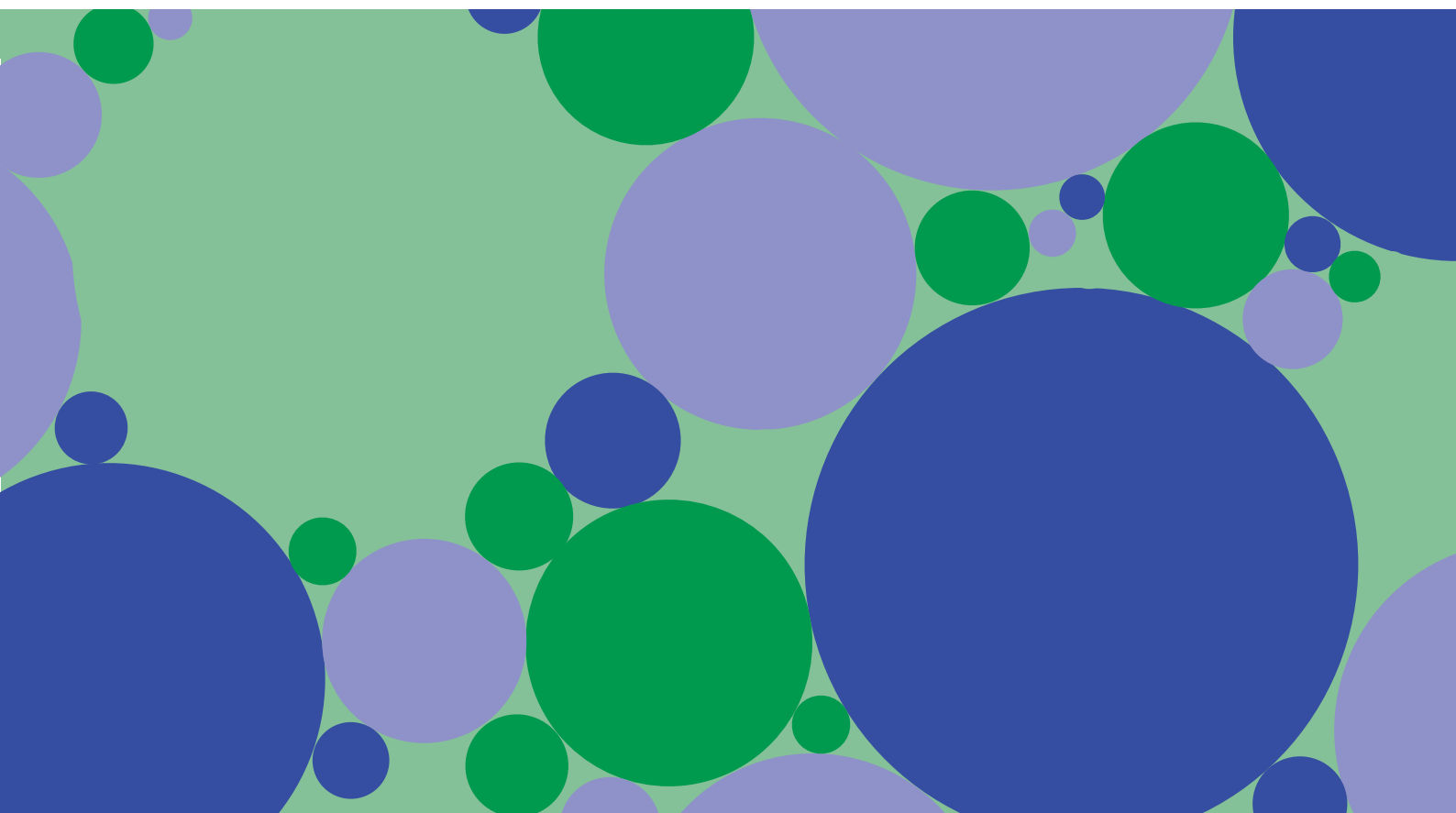


Briefing 13

# Disabled lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people



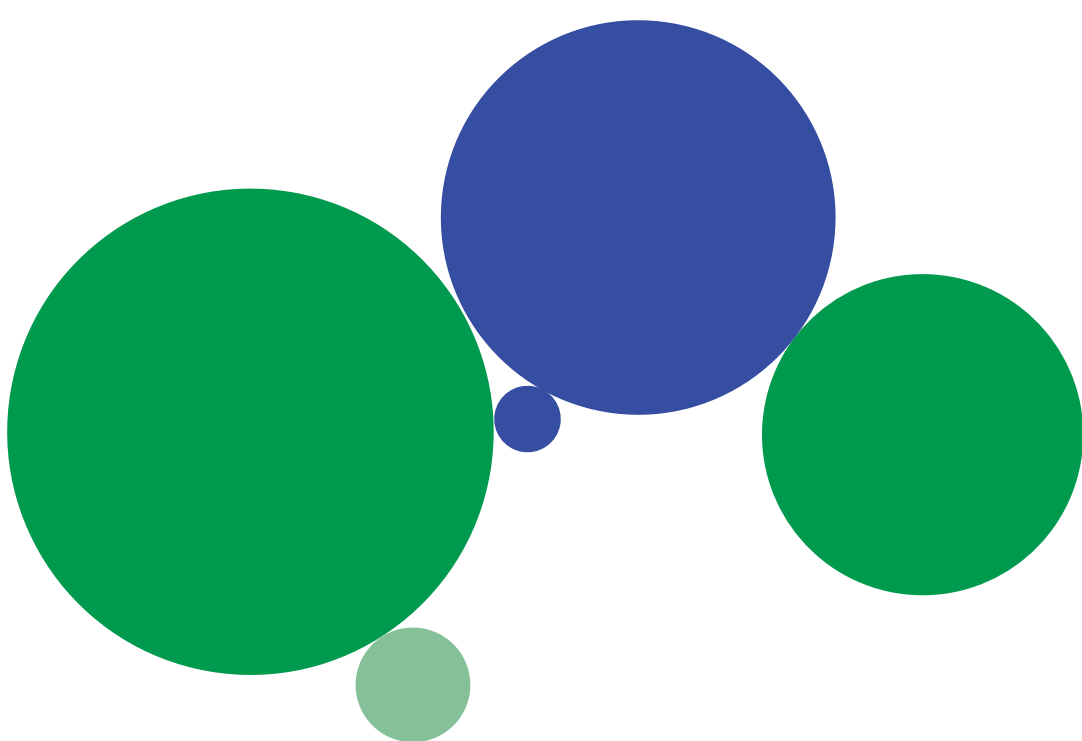


## (a) What are disabled LGB people's health needs?

The rights of people who are disabled to engage in everyday activities that the rest of society take for granted (for example, taking part in leisure activities, getting a job and falling in love) are severely curtailed. Their rights to sexual relationships are not widely accepted; moreover, the fact that some may wish to have a same-sex relationship is largely unconsidered.<sup>1</sup> Same-sex relationships are more likely to be seen as a potential danger and rarely as a source of pleasure or fulfilment.

Current practice in work with people with learning disabilities is more likely to restrict opportunities for sexual relationships rather than support people to have relationships that are satisfying.<sup>2</sup> As with heterosexual relationships, there are issues about consent, mental capacity and risk. But while parents, carers and professionals are concerned about protecting disabled people from exploitation, this often means that disabled people are not empowered to lead the lives they would choose.<sup>3</sup> One LGB research participant remarked that they were unable to explore their sexual orientation and were kept under parental control until they were in their fifties when their parents died.<sup>4</sup>

Many disabled LGB people have not received relevant sex education in schools; as adults they lack appropriate information about sexual health and do not have access to information about fertility issues. They may also encounter difficulties in accessing mental health services<sup>5</sup> (see Briefing 8).

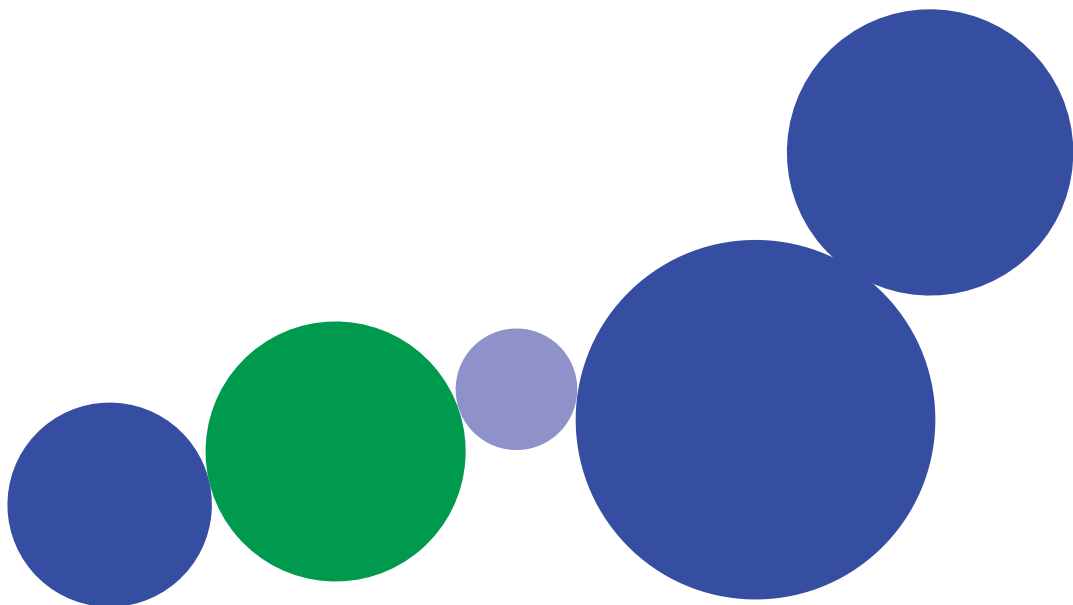




## (b) Communicating and engaging with disabled LGB people

Disabled people often face the challenge of a double coming out: as disabled and as LGB.<sup>6</sup> Many disabled LGB people pass as heterosexual and do not come out to professionals because they fear being refused services or treated in a derogatory manner. Health and social care professionals often attend to medical or functional requirements and fail to acknowledge personal and emotional needs. Findings suggest that health and social care services have made little effort to take account of the life experiences of LGB disabled people.<sup>3</sup> Assessing levels of prejudice is difficult because of the subtlety of prejudicial behaviour: some healthcare workers do not consider gossip or jokes about patients to be a form of prejudice.<sup>3</sup>

One study of people with learning disabilities found that in most instances they had known from an early age that they might be LGB, but had waited until they found a member of staff that they felt safe being open with. Unlike their non-disabled peers, they were more likely to be open about their sexuality with professionals (in day or residential centres) than with family and friends.<sup>2</sup> Because LGB people with learning disabilities often live at home with their family and rely on them for financial or practical support, they may be more likely to fear rejection from their family than other LGB people. The possibility of disclosure to a social care worker requires that relevant training be provided so that staff are able to offer appropriate support.

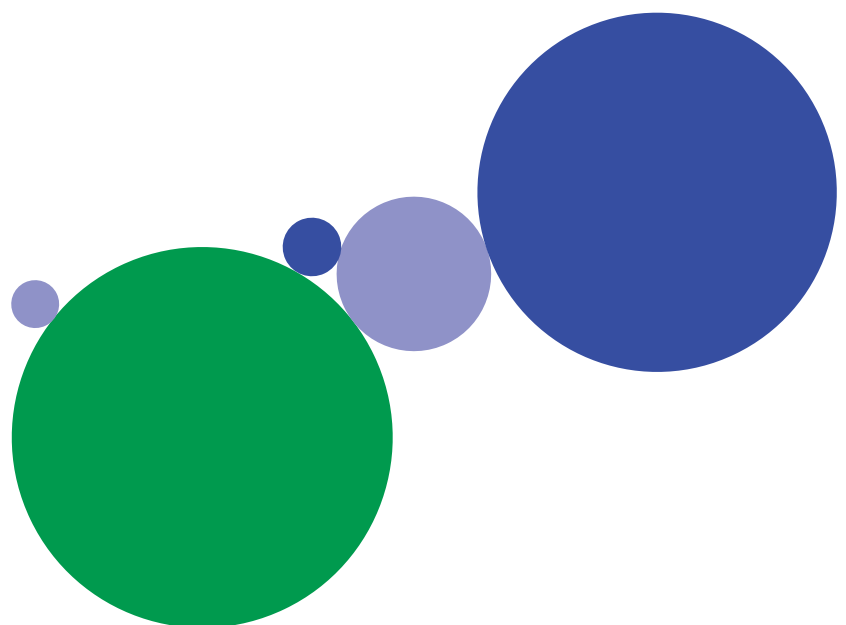
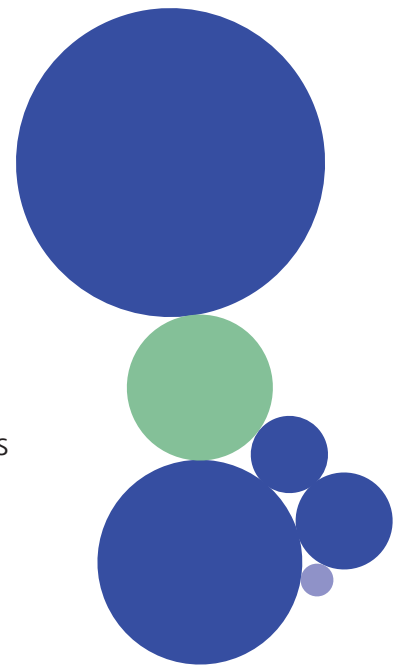


Education for disabled people has often been segregated from mainstream schooling; disabled people say that they received little or no sex education. They lack access to appropriate guidance about safer sex and little support in accessing LGB social spaces.<sup>7</sup> The language of health promotion materials is inappropriate for people with learning disabilities, and targeted materials are likely to be restricted to heterosexual sex.

### **LGB people who are deaf**

Unlike gay communities in the UK, there is not a broad-based disability community, but rather a movement in which disabled people come together for campaigning rather than leisure purposes.<sup>6</sup> The deaf community is an exception to this; local deaf clubs provide an important cultural and leisure resource.

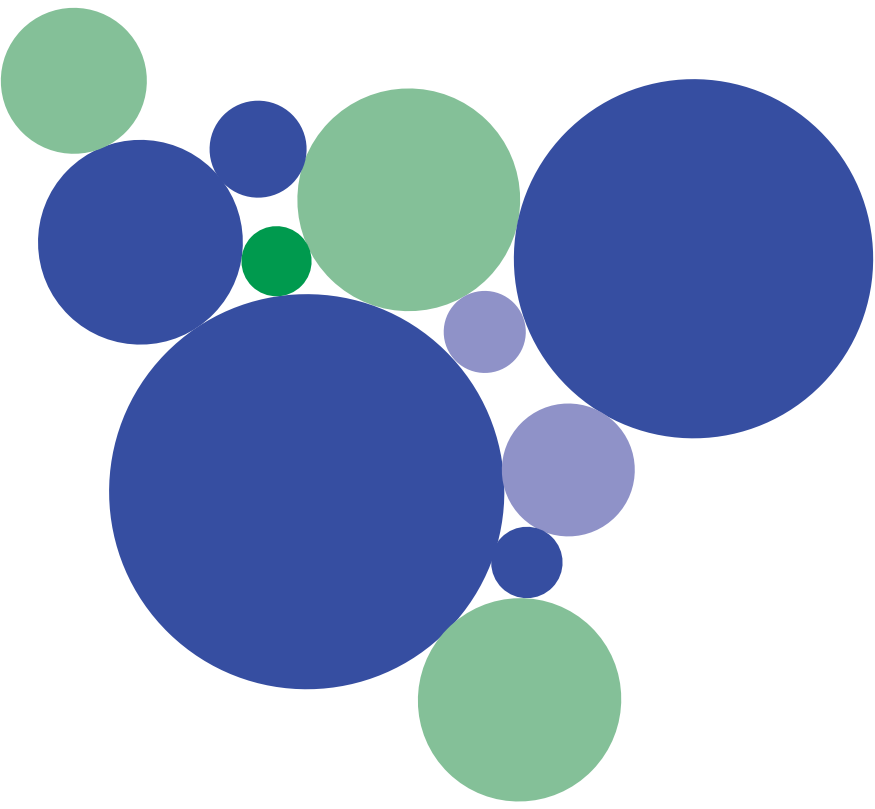
Deaf LGB people have lobbied the national organisation, the British Deaf Association, to include LGB people in their equal opportunities policy. They have organised workshops in HIV and sexual health, counselling and befriending, where deaf LGB people themselves have acted as trainers.<sup>8</sup> Despite their relative politicisation and visibility, however, virtually no research has been conducted into deaf LGB people's health and social care needs.<sup>9</sup> A person who is deaf has no statutory right to a sign language interpreter for health appointments.<sup>1</sup>





## (c) Evidence and statistics

Because of the specific needs of disabled LGB people and the challenges posed by researching a hidden population, there are no large-scale surveys of disabled LGB people's health needs. Rather, evidence is provided by a number of small-scale qualitative studies. Particular issues include:

- difficulties in meeting and knowing other LGB people (there are few groups for disabled LGB people);<sup>2</sup>
  - lack of validation for same-sex relationships;<sup>2</sup>
  - lack of acknowledgement of LGB people (eg few images of LGB people displayed in service provision);<sup>2</sup>
  - lack of acceptance in the non-disabled LGB scene;<sup>2</sup>
  - lack of privacy;<sup>2</sup> and
  - few policies, meaning that staff do not feel supported to do proactive work.<sup>2</sup>
- 

## (d) Policy and legislation

### Human Rights Act 1998

Article 8 gives the right to respect for a private life (including the right to sexual expression).

### Valuing People 2001

Government policy for people with learning disabilities that seeks to address their sexuality and relationship needs, including opportunities to form sexual relationships and access to sex education.

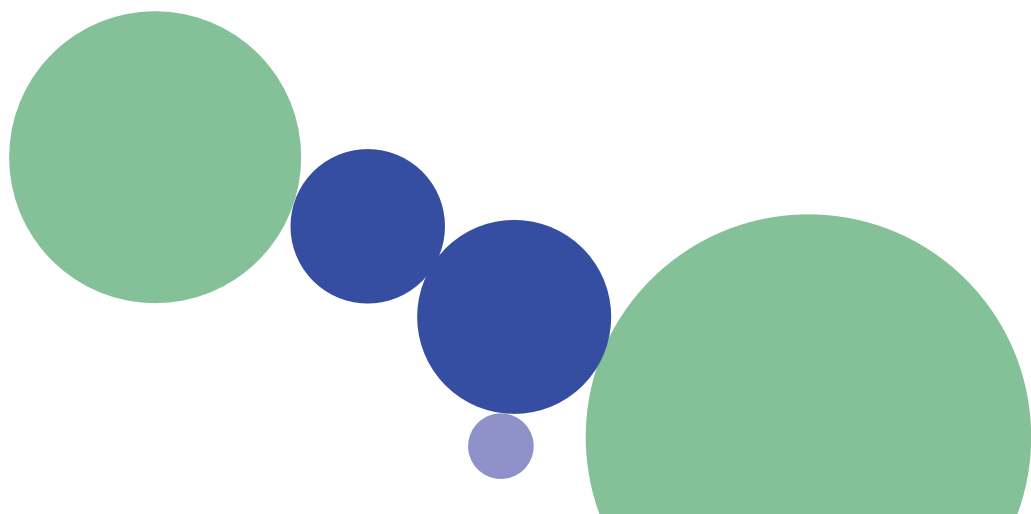
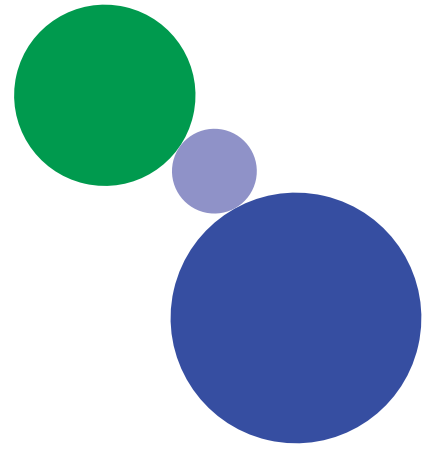
### Disability Discrimination Act 2005

The Act prohibits discrimination in employment, the provision of goods and services, education and transport. It does not explicitly mention sexual orientation. People deemed to be disabled include those with HIV and cancer.

### Disability Equality Duty 2006

Section 49A of the Act says that public authorities (including NHS trusts and local authorities) must have due regard to the need to:

- promote equality of opportunity between disabled people and other people;
- eliminate discrimination;
- eliminate harassment of disabled people that is related to their disability;
- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people;
- encourage participation by disabled people in public life; and
- take steps to meet disabled people's needs, even if this requires more favourable treatment.



## (e) Implications for policy makers and service providers

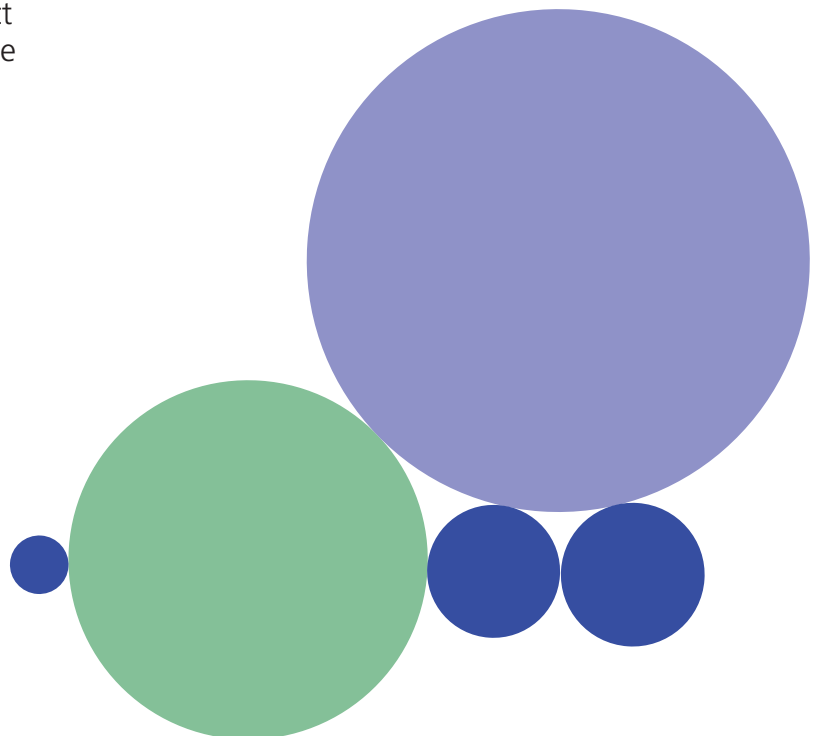
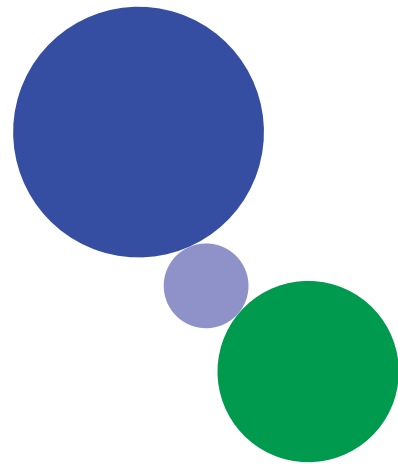
Social care staff, in particular, need clear policy guidelines to enable them to offer support for LGB disabled people in relation to relevant sex education; support for their identities as LGB people, including support to help them to socialise in LGB spaces; inclusion of their identities in person-centred plans; and support for developing intimate same-sex relationships.

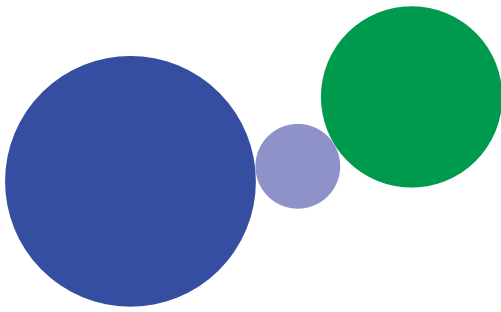
Services need to consider whether it is possible to offer private spaces for people with learning disabilities.<sup>2</sup>

Ensure that resources and training are available to support staff.

View same-sex relationships as being of equal worth and value as heterosexual relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Support for disabled LGB people to use direct payments to employ a gay-friendly home care assistant.





## (f) Links and resources

### **Brighton and Hove Disabled Dykes Club**

The Brighton and Hove Disabled Dykes is a social support group based in Brighton targeting only lesbians. Among other forms of disabilities and illnesses, the group focuses on providing support to members who are affected by mental health issues and/or learning difficulties.

PO Box 5080, c/o Brighton Women's Centre,  
Brighthelm Centre, Hove BN52 8BP

Tel: 01273 204050

Email: [disableddykes@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:disableddykes@yahoo.co.uk)

### **Brothers and Sisters**

The deaf LGBT club – London.

[www.brothers-and-sisters-club.com](http://www.brothers-and-sisters-club.com)

### **Disabled women on the web: lesbians and queers with disabilities**

[www.disabilityhistory.org/dwa/library\\_k.html](http://www.disabilityhistory.org/dwa/library_k.html)

### **GEMMA**

A friendship network that aims to lessen the isolation of disabled lesbian and bisexual women. They produce a quarterly newsletter and organise socials. The newsletter is available in standard print, large print, tape and Braille. Membership is for disabled and non-disabled women aged 16 and above.

BM Box 5700, London WC1N 3XX

Tel: 020 7485 4024

Email: [gemmagroup@hotmail.com](mailto:gemmagroup@hotmail.com)

### **Outsiders**

A community of disabled people who work together to campaign for the acceptance of disabled people as sexual partners.

[www.outsiders.org.uk](http://www.outsiders.org.uk)

### **Rainbow Ripples Project**

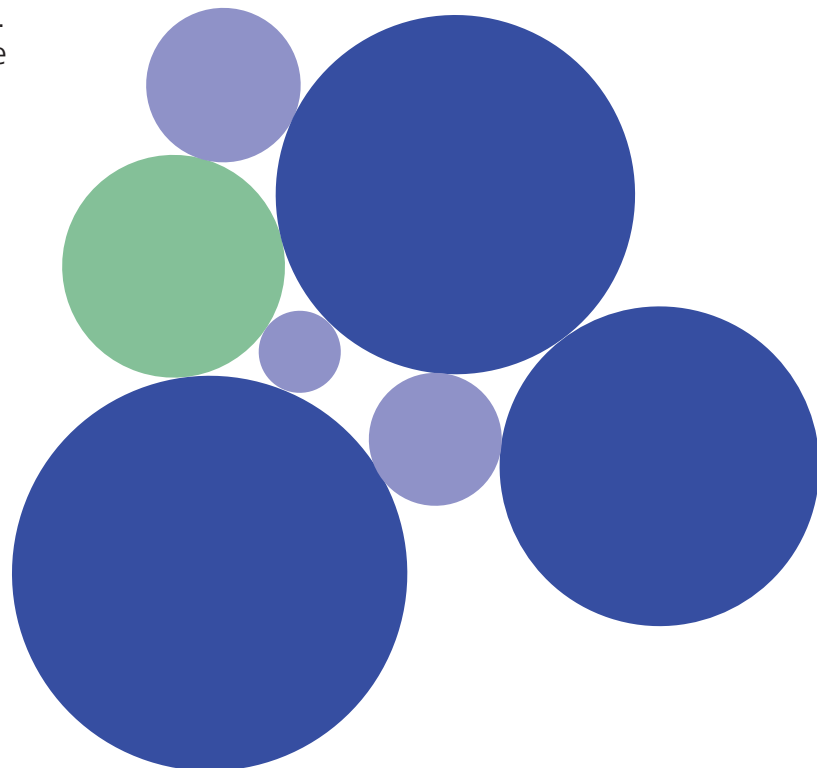
Lesbian, gay and bisexual disabled people's group based in Leeds.

[www.rainbowripples.org.uk](http://www.rainbowripples.org.uk)

### **Regard**

The national organisation of disabled LGBT people.

[www.regard.dircon.co.uk](http://www.regard.dircon.co.uk)





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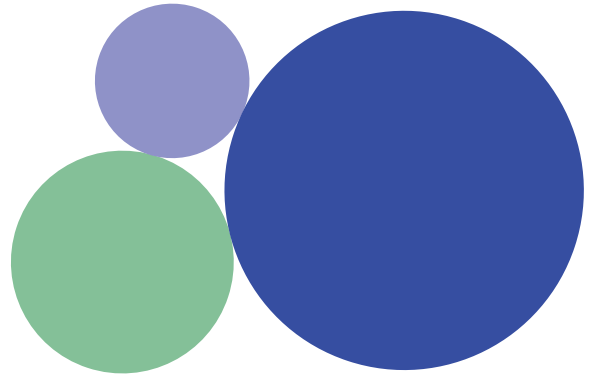
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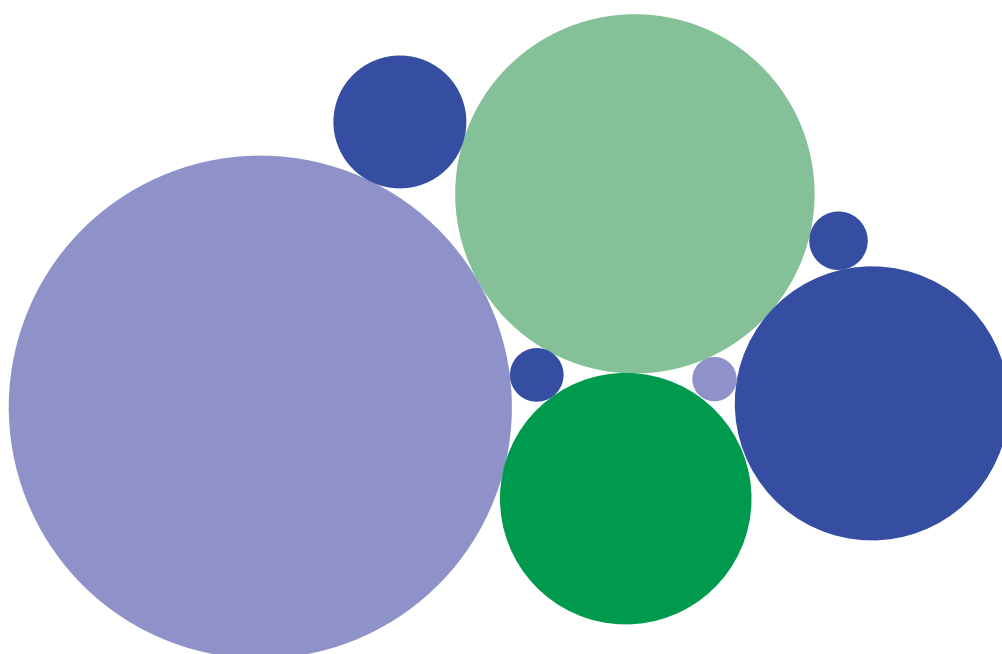
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## (h) Further reading

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