

Video: meet the authors of CC Inform's gender and sexuality guide (transcript)

Alex Greenchester: Hi I'm Alex Greenchester. I am a social worker and I'm also an AMHP and a Best Interests Assessor as well. Oh sorry, AMHP stands for Approved Mental Health Professional. I currently work in the NHS working as one of the managers in community mental health teams in an NHS trust

Jason Schaub: I'm Jason Schaub, I'm an academic at the university of Birmingham. I'm a social worker by background and have current registration for social work. My practice background is children and families, and a little bit of mental health. I originally qualified in the United States, worked there and in the Republic of Ireland. I came across to the UK and practiced here before I moved into academia. My research focuses on LGBTQ people, predominantly LGBTQ young people and the way professionals, in particular social workers, work with them. So that's one of the reasons I've been quite keen about this publication. And my pronouns are he and him

Alex Greenchester: Do you know, I forgot to give my pronouns? I am they and them.

What did you think when you were asked to write this guide?

Alex Greenchester: So yeah, I was really excited to be asked to talk about this. I suppose for me the main reason I was so happy to be invited is because it's so necessary, it's so needed, this guide is so important. I've been a social worker for, well, quite a number of years and there've been so many cases that I've worked with and so many colleagues I've had conversations with around how we work with LGBTQIA+ people - including ourselves and colleagues, as well as the people we're serving. And I feel like both from a gender identity and kind of sexuality basis as well and just wanting to be involved in making it a less kind of scary thing to have to think about, and it's not a tick box it's about genuinely being able to engage with people so trying to get that message and that kind of frontline perspective a little bit across.

Jason Schaub: Some of those things resonate with my own experience. I think the timing is right for a compendium of knowledge like this because we've had a developing set of knowledge over the past probably few decades in the UK but it's been sort of patchy and inconsistent and trying to pull it together and suggest that social work might want to really start paying attention to LGBTQ people as a broad sort of group of people. And also how they might be able to work with them more effectively and be able to help them, support them with more knowledge and to understand how the profession is sort of struggling with some of the knowledge and unsure about these things. And trying to pull together some of that knowledge so people are able to access it easily is going to be an important part of it. I was pleased in particular about being able to do it from both a practice and academic perspective, so having a current practitioner who's using this sort of knowledge in their day-to-day work was really important, balancing the academic perspective, research knowledge,

the theoretical knowledge against what is currently being used in practice, was an usual but also incredible necessary part of undertaking this.

Alex Greenchester: I think one of the things from being mainly in practice now, I've dipped my into kind of going back into university and doing the odd day here and there, but I'm very much a practitioner and the opportunity to work with a leading academic whose speciality is this has been a really fabulous opportunity. I don't have to worry about my referencing or anything like that. I can just talk from my experience really and have that sort of backed up in the research that you're doing. But it's also you know when you're going to assess a child or family or person under the mental health act, or whenever you meet someone you're working with, that this is actually, this helps demystify some of the things we worry about, when I'm off to see someone who's one of the LGBTQ+ people, y'know?

Jason Schaub: The other thing I was going to say was how I thought that whilst this is both very necessary and useful, I think we had a lot of conversations about how to construct this, what was going to be included, what we wanted to focus on, what we wanted to make sure to concentrate on. So there was quite a bit of...not negotiation but discussions back and forth particularly the topics and sort of making sure what we included were the most timely, current topics and things where we felt that the knowledge base of social work might need something to lean on. Would that be, is that what you felt as well or am I putting words in your mouth?

Alex Greenchester: No I absolutely agree, and I think some of the areas that we've explored as part of our compendium of knowledge, really speak to some of those dilemmas right, some of the difficult conversations that you have that really meet people with where they're at in their lives with things that are not, there's not one fixed idea about right. So thinking about one of the case studies, about a young person who's trans for example, how do we ensure that we have the language around that? And how do we meet people where they're at but feel confident having conversations with people that there's not one answer to and how I might engage with that young person might be very different to how my colleague in the next room might engage with them. And you know, what do we expect, what's the expectations and how does that fit within our broader values as social workers? I think the kind of back and forth discussion that you and I held was very much: we don't want this to be a prescriptive thing, we don't want people to think 'well as long as I've asked someone what their sexuality is, I've said are you straight or gay and I've asked them their pronouns, y'know? But that kind of sense of you need to try and engage with this topic and be open to some nuance around communication around difference. Some of this might challenge your own kind of perception, your own world view, you know: how does your kind of cultural competence if you're not somebody [who is LGBTQ], not to say that people have the same views if they're from the community as well.

Jason Schaub: Thinking about some of the things you've just been talking about around the case studies, one of the things we wanted to make sure that came across was that it was ok to be uncertain and not know everything and even if we pull together some knowledge there's going to be changes to that over time and instead what we know from talking to service users is that what people respond to is being asked, engaged with from the position they come from. That sort of person-centred approach about treating the person as an individual, you know saying to them - what is your sexuality, how would you describe yourself? And then working from that sort of position, drawing on social work values of anti-discriminatory practice, making sure that people's lives are improved and ensuring that we improve LGBT equality under the sort of Public Sector Equality Act, those sort of ideas. The

other things around the case studies that I wanted to pull out and talk to you just a minute, because that was really where your practice experience came through really impressively for me because you were quickly able to identify case studies that were going to be reasonable. Were there key elements from those that you thought of where you thought: 'I want to make sure they do these certain things, or these types of issues come through in these case studies'?

Alex Greenchester: There definitely were. I think the thing that I was really struck by was how quickly examples came to mind. So if we thought about the need to talk about someone's gender identity, I could give you three or four cases where actually this would exemplify what we mean in terms of this and very similarly in terms of sexuality as well. I don't know if it is, well I have a sense that my own identity and my, the fact that I wear my rainbow lanyard and my trans flag lanyard, it kind of unpicks the opportunity to have conversations around gender and sexuality. But it happens all the time in my practice. There was a stage in mental health act assessments where myself and the one particular section 12 doctor who also happened to identify as LGBTQ+, we would often have people coming out to us, people who'd not spoken to anyone, about it. And it was almost like are we kind of turning the population we're assessing, in terms of the Mental Health Act. It was striking. And there is something around is there an over representation of LGBTQ+ people in contact with social workers in general so you know, minority stress theory.

(Minority stress theory is discussed in the guide! In brief, it offers insight into the ongoing, long-term experience of prejudice and discrimination and the different ways this lived experience affects physical and mental health and other aspects of a person's wellbeing.)

In fact I'm not going to label all the kind of academic reasons for this. But in terms of that kind of minority stress theory and stuff, around how you know impact of mental health, for example, or higher rates of homelessness. You could throw stats around this all the time, well you can, Jason, I couldn't, I don't have them to hand in the way that you do! But yeah, so I was really struck at how many cases really displayed what we think social workers need to know. So it's almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy really isn't it - we didn't come up with them, they are there anyway. And I think that's my worry is - if they're there for me as someone who's quite awake to the ideas, then if I'm someone who's not, are we missing that key opportunity to try and engage with that person or really get to know them, right? How can we do social work unless we really know the people we're engaging with, you know?

Jason Schaub: I think one of the things when we were talking about the case studies was around the fact that there might be incomplete information that would appear in various places... so that's why one of the case studies there are several different engagements across the sort of different circumstances. And then the other one was around multi-agency working where a variety of professionals might have different portions of that information. And then the last one comes to mind and you mentioned it earlier was when a service user has not already been identified as LGBTQ and in fact that's going to be a significant portion of the work we would be encouraging people to be thinking about is when people aren't pre-identified to them and how they then engage around issues around sexuality and gender identity when the service user hasn't disclosed, hasn't told them, hasn't come out to them and they then have to engage with that and I think maybe that's what you were sort of mentioning when you were talking about you and the other colleague who you were working with, because you're so open and so engaged with it, that means you're likely going to get a

greater number of people coming out to you than maybe some of your other colleagues - is that fair?

Alex Greenchester: Absolutely yeah, but there's something about then what do we do with the unsaid, what is left unsaid when you're working with people. And it's not, I would argue it's not just people's sexuality or gender identity – it's people's ideas, people's experience of being parented or their experiences of trauma for example, how confident we are around really engaging with that person as a whole person will be the difference between, well, an assessment that is kind of useful in and of itself and not, really, and all the things that then come, then follow from a social work assessment.

We've given some sort of, we would hope after reading this that might this be what you think about and I'm thinking particularly around the case study around kind of colleagues and in teams and kind of how power works within teams and I'm thinking about as you were talking there I was really thinking about my responsibilities as a white person to kind of own that. To know that my job in working within teams, working with people I'm working with, my job it to ensure that I'm an anti-racist practitioner. So I have to be able to create space for people who will have experienced racism in a way that I haven't experienced racism, for example, and I say that because I think there is a kind of a parallel around where the emotional labour maybe sits. So if this is something you maybe feel quite uncomfortable with, I'm really happy that you're reading this compendium because I really hope this is kind of a friendly way of understanding that there is a need to explore this area of practice further. And I think social work's moved on so much that actually it's not ok just to be like: that's hidden that's someone's private life. Because actually, I know we've talked about this as well: people's marriage is their private life if they're heterosexual so - what's the difference?

Jason Schaub: Yeah and I think that the timing for something like is really right, given all the sort of changes around legislation, policy as well as health and social care needs as well as the availability of it. So from me, my perspective of it is I hope that people find this useful, that they engage with it, that they understand it is a sort of starting point because you know we had to make an awful lot of decisions about what we included and what we didn't include knowing that there was going to be not enough space for all the information we thought was important, but for people to start here and feel a little bit more confident with this topic, and that they look for further ways of engaging with this topic both within this compendium and also knowledge outside of here.