

Preventing discrimination

All employers should take steps to try to make sure sexual orientation discrimination does not happen at work.

As an employer, you should aim for a culture where:

- everyone knows that sexual orientation discrimination is not acceptable
- people feel safe
- you recognise and promote the benefits of a diverse and inclusive organisation

[Find out more about improving equality, diversity and inclusion](#)

Steps for preventing discrimination

Many ways to prevent discrimination apply equally to all 'protected characteristics'. You can find out more in our advice on [preventing discrimination](#).

Measures that can help to prevent sexual orientation discrimination include:

- stopping inappropriate behaviour
- using appropriate language
- being aware of unconscious bias and stereotypes
- knowing your responsibilities around confidentiality
- checking your policies
- appointing an LGBT+ champion
- setting up a staff LGBT+ network
- recognising the impact of discrimination on mental health and wellbeing

LGBT+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, plus other groups.

If you're a small organisation with limited resources, there's still a lot you can do to prevent discrimination. Making your organisation more inclusive does not have to be costly or complicated.

If you're a public sector employer, you also have legal responsibilities under the [public sector equality duty](#).

Stopping inappropriate behaviour

You should make it clear that homophobic behaviour and language is not acceptable. This includes things some might consider as 'banter' or jokes.

Managers should:

- be a good example of inclusive behaviour for others to follow
- use appropriate language

- look out for discriminatory behaviour
- deal with any discrimination that happens

If your managers allow discrimination to happen, they are also discriminating.

For example, a manager hears some of their team telling jokes that are homophobic. The manager knows this is not appropriate and some people could be offended. But nobody complains so they decide to do nothing about it. By not tackling this, the manager is also discriminating.

A manager might be able to handle a problem informally. For example, talking to someone about appropriate language might be enough. If this does not work, managers should be prepared to take formal action.

As an employer, you should support your managers to tackle problems. If you do not take discrimination seriously, managers will not be able to stop it from happening.

Using appropriate language

It's important to be sensitive and respectful in the terms you use around sexual orientation.

Terms people might use include:

- asexual
- bisexual or bi
- heterosexual or straight
- homosexual
- gay
- lesbian
- pansexual
- queer
- questioning

Some people do not like some of these terms. There's no term that everyone will prefer. Language around sexuality also changes over time.

Be open to talking about the terms your employees prefer to use. Some people might use terms that others do not like. For example:

- some people describe themselves as queer but other people find the term offensive
- some women describe themselves as lesbian and others prefer to say they're gay
- some people are comfortable with the term 'straight' but others find it offensive

Sometimes, people can accidentally cause offence because of the language they use. If they have not done it on purpose, talking to them about what's appropriate might be all that's needed. However, you should not excuse deliberately offensive behaviour in this way.

Find out more about terms people might use:

- [MindOut's sexual orientation glossary](#)
- [Stonewall's list of terms](#)

Being aware of unconscious bias and stereotypes

Discrimination is not always intended. It can happen when decisions or behaviour are based on assumptions. It's important to be aware of:

- [unconscious bias](#) – when someone's thoughts or decisions are influenced by beliefs or assumptions they might not be aware of
- stereotyping – having a fixed view of what someone's like or what they can do because of their sexual orientation

Knowing your responsibilities around confidentiality

Sexual orientation is sensitive personal data under the General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR).

People might want to keep their sexual orientation confidential. You must respect their choice.

Disclosing someone's sexual orientation at work, without their consent, would be a data breach.

Disclosing someone's sexual orientation to their family or friends could be a breach of confidentiality and trust. For example if the employee has not told people outside of work.

These breaches could be very distressing. They could also lead to someone being discriminated against.

Checking your policies

You should check all relevant policies to make sure they do not discriminate. For example, policies around:

- work-related rules or benefits for couples
- maternity, paternity, adoption and shared parental leave

Appointing an LGBT+ staff champion

An LGBT+ staff champion is someone who's committed to promoting equality and tackling sexual orientation discrimination.

They should be:

- willing and able to give time to the role
- senior enough to be able to influence decision-makers and make sure actions are taken

Their role could include:

- chairing a staff network
- keeping up to date with law and good practice
- raising issues that need addressing at a senior level

Setting up a staff LGBT+ network

A staff LGBT+ network is a formal group for LGBT+ staff and their allies to:

- share experiences
- support each other
- raise issues that need addressing

An ally is someone who is not LGBT+ but wants to help make sure that their organisation is inclusive. They can be from any part of an organisation, working at any level.

If you have a staff network, make sure you support it. This includes:

- giving people the time to be involved
- actively listening to concerns raised
- taking steps to resolve issues

Supporting mental health and wellbeing

Sexual orientation discrimination can seriously affect someone's mental health and wellbeing. It can lead to someone feeling threatened and unsafe. It can also have an impact on their attendance and work performance.

If something happens to someone outside of work, they might still need support at work.

As an employer, you have a 'duty of care'. You must do all you reasonably can to support the health, safety and wellbeing of employees.

You do not have to be a mental health expert. But there are resources and support you can offer.

[Find out more about supporting mental health at work](#)

Get more advice and support

If you need help to deal with any challenges in your organisation, you can:

- [contact the Acas helpline](#)
- [get tailored support for your organisation](#)
- talk to your recognised trade union, if you have one