



# Guidance for Researching Domestic Abuse in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender + (LGBT+) Communities

# Introduction

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In this guidance, we use the term domestic abuse to reflect the definition in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which includes physical or sexual abuse; violent or threatening behaviour; controlling or coercive behaviour; economic abuse; psychological, emotional or other abuse in intimate partner and family relationships.<sup>1</sup> In LGBT+ relationships, it is also important to recognise that victim/survivors may experience specific forms of abuse that are enabled by the cis gendered and heteronormative assumptions in the society within which we live, such as identity abuse (for example, a perpetrator threatening to out a partner to their family, employer, faith community, Donovan and Barnes, 2020).

This guidance is focused on domestic abuse which includes sexual abuse within an intimate partner and/or family relationship. This guidance does not address sexual abuse more broadly. However, researchers with an interest in this area – including historic child sexual abuse, sexual abuse as the result of sex work and/or trafficking, corrective sexual violence – might find this guidance useful when thinking about research with LGBT+ communities.

## **This guidance is for:**

- researchers considering conducting research on domestic abuse in LGBT+ communities;
- researchers considering approaching specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services for support (including recruitment) in their research;
- researchers considering research in areas with no specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services<sup>2</sup>
- specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services and other domestic abuse services considering supporting research on LGBT+ domestic abuse.

# Background

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## Research Context

It is only in the last 20 years or so in the United Kingdom (UK) that concerted research attention has been paid to LGBT+ people's lives and relationships when they experience domestic abuse from an intimate partner and/or family members and/or themselves cause harm.

During those 20 years, the world has changed. In the UK, despite the enduring impact of homo/bi/transphobia, the representation and recognition of LGBT+ lives has nonetheless radically altered. There is also a legislative framework that provides protections for LGBT+ people to live their everyday lives in their relationships and families free from discrimination and homo/bi/transphobia.<sup>3</sup>

These changes have had a knock-on impact on the representation of LGBT+ domestic

abuse in the curriculum in higher education, both as a topic to be covered specifically on courses on violence and abuse and/or sexuality but also more broadly too, including as part of professional training. An increasing number of students are also showing an interest in this topic, including researchers from LGBT+ communities who have an interest in and are committed to researching LGBT+ domestic abuse.

### Specialist LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Services and Sector

Mirroring wider social changes, efforts to provide services for victim/survivors of LGBT+ domestic abuse have also been developed.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite an increasing recognition of the importance of led-by-and-for services (Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2024), there is, as noted earlier, a postcode lottery of specialist LGBT+ provision (Donovan, Magić and

West, 2021; Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022), which means that there are large areas of England and the whole of Wales with no specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse service.<sup>5</sup> This means that existing mainstream, as well as other specialist led-by-and-for domestic abuse services (e.g., for racially minoritised people) or wider VAWG services, might also be the only service available for LGBT+ victim/survivors. Some of these mainstream services may also have LGBT+ IDVAs (Independent Domestic Violence Advisers) and/or ISVAs (Independent Sexual Violence Advisors).<sup>6</sup>

A significant barrier to the development of the LGBT+ domestic abuse sector and its capacity to support research is its precarity. First, short-term funding affects organisations' ability to retain experienced frontline staff, develop services, and plan for the long term. Second, services also have to (repeatedly) undertake credibility work to build professional relationships

with statutory<sup>7</sup> and/or third sector services<sup>8</sup> so that the latter respect and recognise the expertise that the led-by-and-for sector brings (Donovan and Butterby, 2020).

One of the impacts of precarity is the time taken up by services in preparing funding applications and then in monitoring and reporting for funders (Field and Rowlands, 2020). Funders often do not want to provide core costs which means that those employed to undertake domestic abuse frontline work can also find themselves overstretched, either to meet their caseloads, or because they are required to support a range of other functions within services (Donovan and Butterby, 2020).

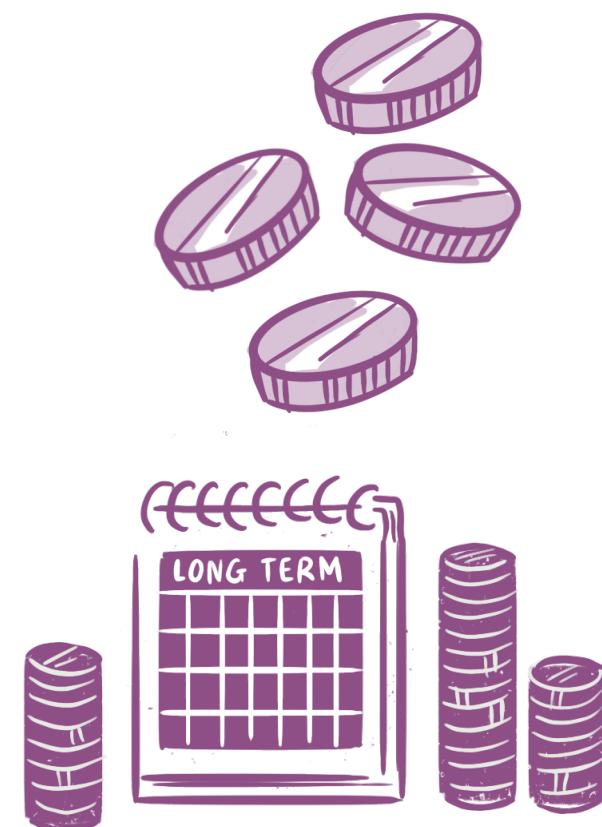
Credibility work also demands attendance at meetings and being visible in local strategic and practice settings to keep LGBT+ domestic abuse on the local agenda. In addition, specialist services also take time to provide training and awareness raising for local partners – often for free (Donovan and Butterby, 2020).

Taken together, this means specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services are under pressure because of funding constraints and the demands of credibility work. This pressure is made ever harder to manage given the postcode lottery described above and by the increasing numbers of service users approaching them for help.

As a result, pressure of time is a crucial factor for specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services and there is often very little time available for staff to respond to emails requesting help with research.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, there is a need for rigorous and ethical research into research on LGBT+ domestic abuse, particularly where this also intersects with other experiences of minoritisation (including the experience of racially minoritised and/or disabled LGBT+ people) and other challenges (such as substance use or mental health issues). Where possible, specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services also want to be able to support such research and have their own research priorities too.

The challenge is how to facilitate this research in an ethical way.



## A Changing and Increasingly Challenging Context

In recent years, debates about gender and sex have become increasingly politicised, particularly with respect to:

- The recognition of trans lives, including pathways for trans people to achieve legal recognition of their gender identity, both in terms of the Gender Recognition Act (2004) and more recently proposals for the Act's reform and self-identification.
- The provision of and access to women only spaces, including provision of safe single sex spaces and exemptions within the Equality Act (2010).

This changing and increasingly challenging context has and continues to impact trans people – with trans women increasingly being painted as a threat, while trans men are often invisibilised – along with non-binary people. Cis LGB people have also been affected, as they may be unsure whether they can trust a service that does not have a trans inclusive policy.

The recent Supreme Court ruling on *For Women Scotland v Scottish Ministers* has, for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, defined 'woman' as based on 'biological sex'. This will also have significant impacts, especially given the Equality and Human Rights Commission's interim guidance and proposed changes to the code of practice for services, public functions and associations.<sup>10</sup>

This changing and increasingly challenging context can be a factor in the decision-making of specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services, other domestic abuse services and LGBT+ people about whether and in what capacity they can respond to requests for help with research. Finally, it is also very important for the bigger picture that research on LGBT+ domestic abuse is conducted in a way that does not cause harm to LGBT+ communities by (potentially inadvertently) contributing to negative and/or harmful discourses about LGBT+ people.



# How the Guidelines Were Developed

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These guidelines have been written by Prof Catherine Donovan and Dr James Rowlands from Durham University in response to and in conversation with services, practitioners and researchers in the field of LGBT+ domestic abuse.

The guidelines are based on a series of events that have been run to improve relationships and communication between LGBT+ domestic abuse researchers, policymakers and practitioners at Durham University and the University of Westminster between 2019 and 2025. A focus of these events has been knowledge exchange, ethical research practice, and the development of an LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Practice Network.

## The Importance of Institutional Approval

Any research should be rigorous and ethical. Researchers should design their research based on appropriate institutional and disciplinary guidance<sup>11</sup> and secure institutional ethical approval. In doing so, researchers should also consider any subject specific guidance. For example:

→ There is a growing methodological literature that addresses research into violence and abuse (Westmarland and Bows, 2019) or specifically with LGBT+ communities (Brett, 2025).

→ Sector specific guidance also exists. For example, to promote best practice in domestic abuse research in the UK, in partnership with academics, the English, Northern Irish, Scottish, and Welsh Women's Aid Federations developed the Research Integrity Framework (RIF). The RIF sets out an ethical framework build around five pillars: safety and well-being; transparency and accountability; equality, human rights, and social justice; engagement; and research ethics (Women's Aid et al., 2020).

# How Can I Use This Guidance?

Researchers working with LGBT+ domestic abuse should use these guidelines in developing, delivering and reflecting on their research.

For specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services, and other mainstream or specialist led-by-and-for domestic abuse services (or wider VAWG services), providing services for LGBT+ victim/survivors and perpetrators, these guidelines can be used as a tool when being approached about research, including to inform decisions about whether and how to support a research proposal.

The guidelines also include a template agreement (see [Appendix 1](#)) between researchers and organisations. This can be amended as necessary and signed to confirm agreement.

# Structure of the Guidance

## Should I do this Research?

It's important that researchers consider why they want to conduct research in this area and whether they are the best person to carry out this research.<sup>12</sup> This could include considering what it means to be an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in relation to research topics and the pros and cons of both. Researchers should ensure that they have a robust rationale for why they are conducting the research.<sup>13</sup>

In this document, guidelines are structured around three principles of **relevance**, **appropriateness**, and **respect** and address the following areas:

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Research Methods</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Community and Stakeholder Engagement</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Ethical Approval</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Data Analysis</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Reporting Findings</b>	<b>13</b>

# Research Question

Evidence that the research question(s) are **relevant, appropriate, respectful** and will lead to an improvement in understanding and/or best practice and/or inclusive policy.



## Relevant

Relevant means that the questions are informed by existing research and accumulated knowledge (from academic research, grey literature and/or communication with key stakeholders in the field) i.e., they are grounded in what is already known and builds on a solid knowledge base.



## Appropriate

Appropriate means that the questions are easily associated with the topic of LGBT+ domestic abuse and come from a researcher position that understands the existence of LGBT+ people and communities as humans with rights the same as their cis heterosexual counterparts.



## Respectful

Respectful means that questions asked are articulated in ways that are not judgemental and invite openness in responses. Prospective participants should be able to trust that their lives and experiences will be honoured in how questions are asked and any answers reported, either individually or as summary findings.

# Research Methods

Evidence that the research methods – i.e., the tools used to collect data – are **relevant**, **appropriate**, and **respectful** and will provide the knowledge needed to answer the research questions.



## Relevant

Relevant means that the methods are the correct ones for the job. The use of incorrect methods can mean that data collected is not fit for purpose which will waste the time of participants and possibly leave a negative experience of participation in research. For example, surveys will usually provide a 'snapshot' sense of the scope or range of views/reports across a large sample. While such descriptive data is useful, it will not typically illuminate why respondents agreed or disagreed with questions, or what things mean to them. In contrast, interviews and/or focus groups can provide data on why people behave the way they do and/or what behaviours mean to people but usually with much smaller numbers of people participating, making generalisation problematic.



## Appropriate

Appropriate means that the researcher understands that different research methods produce different kinds of data e.g. interview data is different to survey data and these methods answer research questions in different ways. Knowing what data is appropriate is important so as to respect and honour the participants' time and account given.



## Respectful

Respectful means ensuring that asking about sensitive topics such as domestic abuse is done in a way that enables participants to feel safe and trust that the research process is being managed to ensure their safety. This will include practices like confidentiality and anonymity, and meaningful choices in this respect e.g. decisions about naming practices.

# Community and Stakeholder Engagement

**Services:** Working with specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services and inviting their input into the shaping of research can help ensure that research is of relevance to the sector; will encourage greater buy-in of the organisation into helping recruit participants; and will provide an audience for dissemination that will improve the impact of the research in real-world contexts.

Evidence that the researcher has engaged with services in **relevant, appropriate** and **respectful** ways:



## Relevant

Relevant means that the researcher has done some 'homework' and know that the services they approach for help with research have relevance to the research question(s).



## Appropriate

Appropriate means that the researcher has attempted to find out from the service whether the research is of interest and, before the research is designed, entered into a dialogue about the research project to ensure that the organisation can see what benefits the research might have for their service and for their service users.<sup>14</sup>

This might also mean that the service is invited to comment on research question(s) and methods to ensure the research is both relevant and appropriate.



## Respectful

Respectful means that the researcher has communicated any outcomes of the research in a timely and appropriate way.

This might include an early show of findings/recommendations with an invitation to comment on and agree with recommendations and/or an agreement about the best way to share findings/recommendations so that they can meaningfully inform the service's work.

## LGBT+ individuals

Inviting input from potential research participants in designing the research, questions, and taking part in the analysis and identification of key findings and recommendations, can encourage greater buy-in from those whose views you are seeking to research. There are a range of ways of conducting research that attempt to keep those with lived experience at the centre of research, including participatory action research. This might not be possible for all kinds of research but even having some of those with lived experience on a steering group can be invaluable. Evidence that the researcher has engaged with LGBT+ people with lived experience in **relevant**, **appropriate** and **respectful** ways:



### Relevant

Relevant means that the researcher has done some 'homework' to ensure that the research topic resonates with the lived experience of LGBT+ people.



### Appropriate

Appropriate means that the research attempts to find out from LGBT+ people with lived experience and/or specialist services whether your research is of interest. Before the research is designed, enter into a dialogue about the research project to ensure that they can see what benefits the research might have for themselves and others with similar lived experience.

- This might also mean that LGBT+ people with lived experience or specialist expertise are invited to comment on research questions and methods to ensure the research is both relevant and appropriate.
- LGBT+ people with lived experience or specialist expertise could also become part of a steering group to oversee the research.



### Respectful

Respectful means that research outcomes are communicated to participants and LGBT+ people with lived experience who have helped with the research in a timely way. This might include an early show of findings/ recommendations with an invitation to comment on and agree with recommendations.

Subject to the requirements of your institution, this might include providing compensation for participant's time in the form of vouchers, travel expenses, refreshments etc.

# Ethical Approval

Evidence that the research project has been given ethical approval by the relevant institution. All research that involves humans must:

- Secure ethical approval of the research questions, methodology, recruitment, questions asked and purpose for the research.
- Provide information for participants to consider before they consent to take part, with opportunities for them to ask any further questions before giving consent. This should include recognising how research can potentially impact on all those involved, particularly when researching a sensitive topic like domestic abuse.
- Understand consent as continuous so that participants can withdraw at any time and/or request their data to be withdrawn within certain time-frames. This could also include recognising that consent can include different aspects of the research, from participating in interviews to options around anonymisation.

→ Have a data management plan that participants can access that explains what will be done with their data and how long it will be held. This will distinguish between identifying and non-identifying data.



## Relevant

Relevant means that the researcher has specifically identified the ethical issues that might arise when researching their chosen research question. Examples include identifying and mitigating the possibility of participants' concerns about being inadvertently outed by taking part; seeking to address the risk of re-traumatising participants; providing time out during interviews and continuous check-ins about consent to continue; providing sources of help for participants to contact and or check-ins with participants following the interview.



## Appropriate

Appropriate means that the researcher has included appropriate mitigations to address issues that might arise when conducting their research. This includes considering both support for participants and self-care for researcher(s).



## Respectful

Respectful means that the researcher ensures that their approach to research is informed by an awareness of LGBT+ peoples' lived experiences.

## Data Analysis

Evidence that data analysis will be approached, and is then conducted, in ways that are **relevant**, **appropriate** and **respectful** so that the participants' accounts are protected and research question(s) answered:



### Relevant

Relevant means that the analysis focuses on answering the research questions, i.e. that the data is collected and used in the ways agreed with participants.



### Appropriate

Appropriate means that participants' identities are fully protected and that the particularities of the consent form agreements are honoured.



### Respectful

Respectful means that the analysis is rooted in the accounts participants have given. In some cases, this could include finding ways to check data or explore findings with participants (sometimes called 'respondent validation').

## Reporting Findings

Evidence that the findings will be reported in ways that are **relevant**, **appropriate** and **respectful** so that participant's experiences are centred:



### Relevant

Relevant means that the findings focus on answering the research questions and, in doing so, LGBT+ people's lives are not exploited or sensationalised.



### Appropriate

Appropriate means that participants' identities are protected and that the particularities of the consent form agreements are honoured.



### Respectful

Respectful means that presentation of the data honours participants' understanding and accounts of their own lives.

# Guidance Summary

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## 01

Researchers should do no harm to research participants in their questions, their methods, their analysis, their write-up – researching ethically is intended to provide a process to safeguard research participants and researchers.

## 02

Specialist LGBT+ domestic abuse services are overworked, underfunded and under resourced.

- They cannot respond to every email asking them to circulate recruitment information for researchers
- They have an idea of what research would be useful, relevant, respectful: working with organisations might result in more relevant, respectful and appropriate research
- Agreeing a 'contract' of agreement for how a researcher(s) and organisation(s) can work together could ensure a mutually beneficial research relationship (see template for contract of agreement in [Appendix 1](#))
- Providing a clear outline of the research idea including a proposed role for the organisation might be a more positive way of asking for and receiving help.

# References

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**Suggested Citation:** Donovan, C. and Rowlands, J. (2025) *Guidance for Researching Domestic Abuse in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender + (LGBT+) Communities*. Durham University.

# Endnotes

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- 1 For more information on the definition and the relevant statutory guidance, go to: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62c6df068fa8f54e855dfe31/Domestic\\_Abuse\\_Act\\_2021\\_Statutory\\_Guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62c6df068fa8f54e855dfe31/Domestic_Abuse_Act_2021_Statutory_Guidance.pdf)
- 2 The existence of such services is geographically uneven (Donovan, Magić and West, 2021; Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022), with vast areas of England, Wales and Scotland having no such services
- 3 This includes the Equality Act 2010; Hate crime legislation; Adoption Act, Civil Partnership Act, Gender Recognition Act, Same Sex Marriage Act, Relationships and Sex Education Act etc. See [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40743946](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40743946) for a summary of changes
- 4 Currently, no specialist LGBT+ service focuses on LGBT+ people who cause harm. The Drive Partnership is overseeing a pilot LGBT+ specific perpetrator intervention which finishes in May 2026. See here: <https://drivepartnership.org.uk/publication/the-drive-partnership-partners-with-by-and-for-organisations-and-experts-to-co-design-specialist-responses-to-domestic-abuse/>
- 5 Nationally, Galop provides a helpline and an IDVA service providing case work to service users across England and Wales. See here: [www.galop.org.uk/domestic-abuse](http://www.galop.org.uk/domestic-abuse)
- 6 IDVAs and ISVAs provide independent support to victims of domestic and sexual abuse, with statutory guidance available for IDVAs ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-domestic-violence-adviser-statutory-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-domestic-violence-adviser-statutory-guidance)) and ISVAs ([www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-sexual-violence-adviser-statutory-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-sexual-violence-adviser-statutory-guidance))
- 7 Statutory in this context includes the criminal justice, health, and local government (including children, adult and housing) services
- 8 Third sector in this context includes VAWG and other charitable domestic abuse services such as those run by housing associations
- 9 This can also be an issue for mainstream, as well as other specialist led-by-and-for domestic abuse services (e.g., for racially minoritised people) or wider VAWG services which face similar issues as the LGBT+ domestic abuse sector in terms of capacity when it comes to supporting research
- 10 See here: [www.equalityhumanrights.com/equality/equality-act-2010/codes-practice/code-practice-services-public-functions-and-associations](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/equality/equality-act-2010/codes-practice/code-practice-services-public-functions-and-associations)
- 11 For example, the British Sociological Association's Ethics Code of Practice, see here: [www.britsoc.co.uk/ethics](http://www.britsoc.co.uk/ethics)
- 12 For example, read this and apply it to your own research intentions: <https://phipps.space/2015/09/29/researching-marginalised-groups/>
- 13 For example: Hayfield, N. and Huxley, C. (2015) 'Insider and Outsider Perspectives: Reflections on Researcher Identities in Research with Lesbian and Bisexual Women', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 12(2), pp. 91-106. doi: 10.1080/14780887.2014.918224
- 14 Not all research on LGBT+ domestic abuse needs to be based on participatory action research methods however researchers might consider ways of recognising and querying the typical power dynamic of researcher/participant in traditional research

# Appendix 1

## Template Research Agreement

Researcher name and email:

Organisation name:

Organisation contact name and email

Research Project Topic:

Start date:

Finish Date:

Research Signature:

Date:

Organisation Representative Signature:

Date:

### Agreed activities

(please tick all that apply and complete date in final activity)

Meeting to discuss research aims and questions	
Input on research questions	
Meeting about ethics process and concerns	
Recruitment activity:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Circulate call for participants to electronic networks</li><li>• Post call for participants on website</li><li>• Researcher to speak at meeting/ similar about research</li></ul>	
Regular meetings throughout research project	
Initial presentation of findings to organisation/ team/ service users	
Input/agreement on recommendations	
Activity to share findings from research (e.g. a findings event, briefing summary, and any other relevant publications): <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 6 weeks of finishing analysis</li><li>• Three months of finishing analysis</li><li>• Six months of finishing analysis</li></ul>	