



# Setting up an LGBTQI+ Straight Ally Alliance Group in an Educational Setting

A document of Intercom Trust

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual & trans people in the South West  
Registered Charity 1072772

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## What is an LGBTQI+/Straight ally alliance group?

Also known as a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) - in USA especially.

A student or staff-run club, typically in high schools and colleges which provides a safe place for students to meet others like them, socialise, support each other, talk about issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and if it feels appropriate, work to end homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in their learning environment. Often (but not always) facilitated by a staff member or external resource (school counsellor etc.)

## What is the need for such a group?

The Intercom Trust has twenty years' experience of supporting LGBT+ young people across the rural South West and has identified several key issues from the 11-18 age range which a group in a school setting could resolve quite simply:

There are very few LGBT+ youth groups in rural areas which are often hard to reach and rare on Saturday. (and if the young person is not 'out' to parents, become impossible to reach), therefore LGBTQI+ young people experience **high levels of isolation**:

*“Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people are **more likely to self-harm or to attempt suicide than other young people.***

*More than half have deliberately harmed themselves, and nearly one in four lesbian, gay and bisexual young people and more than one in four trans young people **have tried to take their own life at some point.***

*However, when schools provide the right support, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans young people are much more likely to be safe, happy and able to fulfil their true potential. “*

*([www.stonewall.org.uk](http://www.stonewall.org.uk))*

Young people are more likely to feel safe, happy and fulfil their potential if they:

- Feel able to be themselves and valued for who they are
- Feel included and part of the school community
- Have access to resources and information relevant to them
- Feel they have people to talk to and know how to access support services

Facilitating an alliance group removes these isolation barriers for LGBTQI+ young people and creates an inclusive school environment

*“55 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual young people have experienced homophobic bullying at school (The School Report). 75 per cent of trans young people have experienced name-calling and 28 per cent physical abuse at school.”*

*(Metro Youth Chances)*

## Why is an LGBTQI+ /Straight Ally group important?

A LGBTQI+ /Straight Ally group can:

- Reduce risk of young people engaging with inappropriate adult social environments
- Provide one of the few safe spaces for students to express themselves and explore their emerging identity with peers
- Reduce the isolation that LGBTQI+ students might otherwise experience (particularly in rural communities where access to community provided groups is limited or costly or where a young person may be reliant on often non-accepting adults to facilitate access)
- Offer students who have LGB or T parents to seek support, and for those who might be questioning or not yet out to attend as well as those who are simply supportive ‘allies’

## The Law

The law is clear that schools must meet the needs of young people with diverse sexual orientations, (i.e. lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual) and the needs of young people with gender diversity (ie: transgender, gender-fluid, non-binary) to tackle homophobic, bi-phobic and transphobic bullying.

### EQUALITY ACT 2010

The public sector Equality Duty requires all schools in England, Scotland and Wales – including academies and Free Schools – to:

- Eliminate discrimination, including discrimination **on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender reassignment**
- Advance equality of opportunity
- Foster good relations between different groups of students

### OFSTED

The Ofsted framework directs inspectors to look at a school's efforts to tackle homophobic, bi-phobic and transphobic bullying and how the school supports the needs of distinct groups of students, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans students, *and those with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans parents/carers.*

## The Role of LGB or T staff

*“Openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff can be important role models for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans students, and are a good indicator of an inclusive environment.*

*Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans staff are sometimes unsure how much they're allowed to share about their personal life or identity in school, but the same rules should apply to all staff. For instance, if a straight teacher is open about their relationship status, lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers should be able to be as well.*

*Equally a trans member of staff ought to be able to talk openly about their experience growing up as trans, just as a non-trans member of staff might talk about their experiences growing up.*

*However, no member of staff should feel under pressure to share information they'd rather not, and young people should be aware of what is inappropriate to ask staff, regardless of their sexual orientation”*

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

## Three typical functions of a LGBTQI+ /Straight Ally group: Support, Social, and Activism

### SUPPORT

Many LGBTQI+ /STRAIGHT Ally's groups function as a support group and provide safety and confidentiality to students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning and for those who may be experiencing harassment at school or home because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.

### SOCIAL

A LGBTQI+/Straight Ally group can, where other local resources are limited or out of reach, provide a sense of community and a space for LGBTQ and straight ally young people to build a social network where their identity is respected

### ACTIVISM

A LGBTQI+/Straight Ally group can work on educating themselves and the broader school community about sexual orientation and gender identity issues. They may bring in outside speakers to cover particular related topics (ie LGBTQi+ history month, educational workshops, panels, and pride celebrations) to not only their group, but to the whole school /year groups.

## We want to have a group – what next? 8 Steps

Establish a LGBTQI+/Straight Ally group the same way you would establish any other group or club:

1. Identify a 'champion' – speak to a school counsellor, pastoral worker /lead to arrange a meeting with your principal
2. You or your staff lead/champion can liaise with your local LGBT support organisations for support and other schools who have set one up & arrange sharing of information – so you can learn about what worked well/less well

3. Agree the basic format of your group and who will facilitate (but not too 'structured')
4. Get feedback from other groups if possible.
5. Agree a location and timings. (Considering safeguarding concerns, you may want to find a meeting place initially that offers some level of privacy or confidentiality.)
6. Advertise your inaugural meeting (Work out the best way to advertise at your school. It may be a combination of school bulletin announcements, flyers, and word-of-mouth, noticeboard, LGBT+/diversity noticeboard etc.) Also get food and tell people there will be food: people always come to meetings when you provide food! If your flyers are defaced or torn down, do not be discouraged. Keep putting them back up. Eventually, whoever is tearing them down will give up.
7. Advertising for your group and having words up such as "gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning" or "end homophobia" or "discuss sexual orientation" can be part of educating the school and can actually make other LGBTQI+ students feel safer -- even if they never attend a single meeting.
8. Ensure your flyer gets the message across that's is safe, it's fun, and there is no pressure to 'come out' just because they attend the group

**Your first meeting** (you won't achieve all the following at your first meeting!):

- You may want to start out with a discussion about why people feel having this group is important.
- Many groups have ground rules in order to insure that group discussions are safe, confidential, and respectful. Many groups have a ground rule that no assumptions or labels are used about a group member's sexual orientation or gender identity. This can help make straight allies feel comfortable about attending the club.
- Decide how often you want to meet up
- What you want your group to be called
- What you want to achieve in your meet ups (maybe, and likely, it's just being social!)
- If your group chooses to be more than a social group, consider how to manage group meetings (who will chair? how will you ensure all voices are heard? how to manage time when people are talking? how to decide on things- voting?)

- Develop an action plan with goals-future social events, mini projects (a social exchange with another school group? attending pride?)

### Encouraging people to attend:

- Provide food at your meeting! (bring & share?)
- Put an announcement in the daily bulletin or assembly
- Advertise at open days - have a table and pass out ribbons or stickers with the name of your group
- Participate in school pride/diversity week at your school
- Set up an info table at lunch or special events in a visible place
- Make flyers or posters about specific meetings, topics, or events and post around campus (*Example: Make flyers defining what a straight ally is with information about your group at the bottom*)
- Ask teachers to permanently post your group's general flyer in their classroom
- Get an article about your group in the school paper
- Hold regular "bring-a-friend day" at your meetings
- Have an open meeting where you show a movie or have a speaker or invite teachers and staff to meetings
- Make presentations at other clubs' or groups meetings about your group; invite these groups to make presentations at your meeting.
- Put together a panel of speakers for a conference or similar event
- Set up a time to speak to teachers at staff meetings or help conduct an in-service/teacher training
- Create a display in your library (i.e. for LGBT History Month) or display case in a hallway
- Spread the word! Tell others about your group
- Take notes at meetings and then send them out. People are more likely to come back if they stay updated on what's going on
- Make business cards with location, time, and dates of your meetings. Pass them around or just drop them in random places wherever you go.
- Remember how it felt to go to your first LGBT event? - Go out of your way to be nice to new people and make them feel really welcome! (you could have a 'welcomer' rotating role in the group)

## Intercom Trust client comment examples:

*“I’m moving from secondary school to a senior school, I was really anxious, but when I heard they had an LGBT+ group at the senior school, it made the move feel so much safer, and I won’t be the only one (with gender diversity)”*

*“It would be good to meet with others of my age to talk about how to respond to negative comments and how to come out to my mum” (young person exploring diverse sexual orientation, age 13, not out to parents)*

*“it’s been great to have all years as I’ve gained confidence as I’ve matured and can share support ideas with the younger students which helps me feel like I’m offering something back too “ ( year 11 in an ‘open to all year’s group)*

## One School’s Experience

In 2015, Okehampton College set up a group, their experience came about as the logical next extension to some earlier work– it was suggested by a student but was already under discussion by staff as they had already been working on various initiatives- tackling homophobic language, awareness training for staff, and dedicated Assemblies for all.

Intercom Trust started to deliver one to one support sessions for pupils and it was as a result of this that the idea for the alliance group came about. A survey on attitudes to homophobic bullying that showed still lots of work to do.

They took a dual approach, advertising the Intercom sessions, and setting up the alliance group. The initial idea was to invite ‘known’ students’, but on deciding to produce posters, they were surprised by the number of attendees

*“It has encouraged other students to be more open about their sexuality and hopefully got LGBT+ students to feel that staff are supportive of them. Two*

*students came out to me (the project lead) in one week as a result the LGBT+ survey with classes”.*

Students involved are Y10 and mainly Y11, they have had four sessions to date and attendance ranges from 10 to 22 in number. Three Y9s came to one meeting. There have been some straight supportive allies – mainly from the LGBT+ pupil’s friendship groups. They named the group themselves (‘Alphabet Soup’)

*“Meetings very overly excited as for the first time they are openly meeting other LGBT+ students. This has meant that although lots of good ideas (too many ideas!) not that much practically achieved on the ground. They would like to do a drop in, assemblies etc. The project lead is looking to utilise the personal experiences garnered for staff training and assemblies. There was a group initiative to do LGBT History display but very few completed the work they said they would do.”*

Safeguarding – we had a closed venue for the first meeting – by invite only. Now more open. Some students wanted to do an assembly – the staff argued that experiences should be anonymised as may lead to some students being targeted...still working this one out.

Keeping SLT support – been run by project lead and the Assistant Principal. They discussed the possibility of parental complaints and how to manage those appropriately. (Intercom note: refer to Ofsted requirement as mentioned earlier)

One of their students says: *“the school now has a LGBTQ+ group and I think that this has helped bring the school together because it is bringing people who want to be involved with the LGBTQ+ community and help raise awareness of the impacts of bullying on the students that are part of this community... in my opinion the group has helped and continues to help people who are LGBTQ+ throughout the school”*

It is clear that the young people have been excited to be involved in the group and it has helped to make the learning environment feel safe for these students.

Although initially it was thought they would be a more active group, it is clear that the social element is serving an incredibly important tool for reducing isolation (particularly important for students in rural areas) and creating an accepting atmosphere.

Intercom's case experiences include statements from LGBT+ students highlighting that when considering the step from year 6 to year 7, they would feel safer and less anxious if there were an established group such as this in place - particularly for young gender diverse students who may be choosing this educational transition as the point at which they socially transition to their internally experienced gender

## Local Resources

### Intercom Trust

<http://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/> Helpline, Advocacy, Support, Information for LGBTQI+ people and their families and networks across Devon, Cornwall, Dorset and Wiltshire: 0800 612 30 10 (confidential Helpline) . Intercom Trust also delivers training to schools, colleges, police, government agencies etc.

### Schools Transgender Guidance Document

[http://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/resources/cornwall\\_schools\\_transgender\\_guidance.pdf](http://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/resources/cornwall_schools_transgender_guidance.pdf) - a guide for schools and parents on dealing with transgender student's interests within educational settings – adopted as national guidance by Government Education Department.

### LGBT local directory

<https://www.intercomtrust.org.uk/directory/>- Lists groups and activities across the SW peninsula, including youth groups