



# DEVELOPING A GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION ALLIANCE



A TOOLKIT FOR YOUNG  
PEOPLE AND TEACHERS



# Contents

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What is this Toolkit?	3
What is a GSA?	3
<b>Information for young people</b>	<b>4</b>
Getting support	4
The role of parents and carers	4
Working with your school's policies	5
Planning your GSA	6
Creating a statement of purpose	7
Creating group guidelines	8
Identifying your priorities	9
Encouraging participation from other young people	10
Young people's voices	11
Running your meetings	12
Activity ideas	13
<b>Information for schools and teachers</b>	<b>15</b>
Why are GSAs important?	15
Legislative landscape	16
<b>Appendices</b>	<b>17</b>
Appendix 1: Checklist for setting up your GSA	17
Appendix 2: Our GSA	18
Appendix 3: Example young person's voice questionnaire	19
Appendix 4: Cultural calendar	22
About LGBT Youth Scotland	23
The LGBT Schools Charter	23

## What is this Toolkit?

This toolkit has been written primarily for young people and contains practical tips and ideas for setting up GSAs in Scottish schools. It includes some information for teachers and can be a useful resource to work directly with students in setting up a GSA.

## What is a GSA?

The term GSA comes from America and originally stood for Gay Straight Alliance. Nowadays, the term 'gender and sexual orientation alliance' is thought to be more inclusive of all identities and so is more widely used. These groups provide safe spaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people. They also provide opportunities for LGBT young people and allies to assist in creating inclusive learning environments.

**“Now there is  
a GSA I have a safe  
place in school where  
I can be myself.”**

# Information for young people

## Getting support

You will need to find an appropriate teacher, or teachers, who will assist in your goal of setting up a GSA.

We recommend informally approaching teachers you get along well with. This does not have to be a member of the guidance staff, but often guidance staff have had the most training in supporting young people, so may be the best equipped to help you. At the first informal discussion, share why you think having a GSA is important. Don't ask for commitments straight away; ask them to think about if they want to be involved or, if they can't, which other staff member might be a good alternative.

Some teachers proactively promote their commitment to LGBT inclusion in schools. Teachers who do this could be a good place to start, as they have already demonstrated they are supportive of the LGBT community.

## The role of parents and carers

If you think there are parents or carers who would be willing to support you in setting up a GSA, you could ask them for a letter of support or ask them to contact the head teacher directly. Most schools and teachers are keen to ensure good parental engagement.

If parents are going to contact the school, it is useful for them to have read this document too, so that they have a clear understanding of the key issues affecting LGBT young people in schools and the purpose of GSA. Remember, not all young people will be willing to involve their parents or carers in the GSA so this should be considered on a person-by-person basis.

## Working with your school's policies

Schools have numerous policies and frameworks which guide the day-to-day running of the school. These policies should be available to all members of the school community, including young people.

The policies which will be most beneficial for you to read are:

- The policy which covers the setting up of 'groups'
- The equalities and inclusion policy (or health and wellbeing policy)
- The pupil handbook

The exact titles will change depending on the school, but the ideas and contents should be similar. It is best to ask informally at the school reception for these policies. It can take some time to get them printed and given to you, so be patient. You can also put the request in writing and address it to the head teacher.

Once you have received the policies, start with the one that describes how to set up a 'group' in school. You will need to follow these instructions carefully. This is something that a supportive teacher can help you with. If there is anything which suggests you wouldn't be able to have a GSA in the school, discuss with a teacher or a member of the leadership team to identify a way forward. You may also want to review the Equality Act (2010) and the UNCRC (see '*Information for Schools and Teachers*' for more information) to identify your rights.

## Planning your GSA

Before you start your group, it is useful to create:

- A group statement of purpose
- Group guidelines
- An initial action plan

This will enable you to present something to the head teacher and school leadership team. It should be a simple one-page guide that will support people to have a good understanding of why your school has a GSA. *A blank template can be found at the back of this guidance, in Appendix 2.*

**“Our GSA has made me feel like there is an LGBT community in my school. Having supportive teachers has been great.”**

## Creating a statement of purpose

While the reason for having your group may be obvious to you, it is useful to have it written down for adults and peers who may not know why a GSA is being set up in the school.

This statement does not need to be long or exhaustive; it could be just a couple of sentences.

Think about:

- Who can be part of the GSA?
- Why do you feel a GSA is needed?
- What do you hope to achieve?
- How are you going to achieve your goals?
- Is homophobic/biphobic/transphobic bullying an issue in your school? Are LGBT people safe, supported and included in your school?
- Are there positive representations of LGBT people in your school? For example, are there inclusive posters displayed? Are LGBT people and experiences embedded in the curriculum?

You don't necessarily need to answer all of these questions, but they are useful discussion points to help draft your GSA's statement of purpose.



## Creating group guidelines

It's important to establish guidelines and have these displayed in every meeting. It's also good practice to ensure that new and visiting members are made aware of them.

These should be designed to ensure that people attending your GSA are treated equally, with respect and are made to feel confident and comfortable.

Here are some suggested guidelines, adapted from real world examples, to get you started:

- "Members don't have to declare or define their sexual orientation and/or gender identity."
- "Everyone must respect each other; remember we're all learning about the issues together."
- "Meetings and discussions are private. Young people's identities, personal issues, and comments made at meetings shouldn't be discussed outside of the group, unless participants specifically agree."
- "Adults participate on an equal basis with young people; they may facilitate discussion or participation, but they are not there to lead or teach."
- "There is to be no gossiping about anyone, either in the group or elsewhere."

It's important that your guidelines establish a clear course of action for young people who come to your GSA seeking emotional support. The responsibility for providing care to young people lies with the school and not with your group. Where there have been allegations of serious incidents like bullying or self-harm, your group should be aware of which school staff member these should be reported to.

It is also good practice to make your group members aware of support organisations like those listed below. This could also be done using a poster or on social media.

Childline: 0800 1111 [childline.org.uk](https://www.childline.org.uk)

Breathing Space: 0800 838587 [breathingspace.scot](https://www.breathingspace.scot)

Samaritans: 116 123 [samaritans.org](https://www.samaritans.org)



## Identifying your priorities

In order to help decide your first priorities for your new group, your GSA may want to fill in this questionnaire. Think about each statement and tick a box between 1-5, where '5' means 'definitely in place' or 'no issue here' and '1' means 'yet to start' or 'immediately needs to be addressed'.

	1	2	3	4	5
1. We have approached the head of PSHE, Head Teacher and other key staff members (guidance staff, etc.) about the creation of the GSA and discussed our group purpose.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. There is a room or specific area that we could use to hold our meetings that is fit for purpose. (Does it meet the needs of privacy your group has agreed upon?)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. We know how we are going to ensure confidentiality and discretion for members who require it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. There are methods available for the group to advertise the group's existence and details about when and where it meets.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. We have posters and/or leaflets ready to go up around school.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. We have a rough outline of future events.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. There is an anti-homophobic/biphobic/transphobic bullying policy, or a specific section within an anti-bullying policy which covers incidents of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
8. We have a system to record homophobic/biphobic/transphobia incidents in school and in the group itself.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Look at which of these statements have the lowest numbers? What can you do to change that?

Choose three or four priorities and set a time scale for completing these tasks. Record these and share them with your teacher support and the senior leadership team so they are aware of what your GSA will be working towards.

When ready, you should arrange a meeting with the head teacher to share your thoughts and formally request to set up the GSA. Your Head Teacher may ask for some time to talk to colleagues and get advice. It may also be helpful to share this toolkit with them or they can contact LGBT Youth Scotland directly for more information. *See back page for contact details.*

## Encouraging participation from other young people

By this point you should have agreed your statement of purpose, guidelines and an action plan, and have a teacher supporting you. Now, you'll need to arrange a time and place to hold your GSA meetings. Your supportive teacher(s), will be able to help with this, as your GSA will most likely meet in one of their classrooms during lunch or after school. It's now time to spread the word about your group to the rest of the school community. There are a few really good ways of doing this.

- **Newsletter** – If your school has a newsletter, write a short piece about the formation of the GSA and let people know how they can attend.
- **Display board** – Schools have a multitude of display spaces around the corridors. Your GSA should ask to use one of these boards to display LGBT inclusive information and let other young people know where and when the group is on. Make these details bold and clear, as some young people will not want to stop and study the board to find information.
- **Assembly** – You may choose to ask to speak at school assemblies. If you do this, you should prepare a short presentation about LGBT identities and explain your group purpose and guidelines, stressing the private and sensitive approach your group will take. Your teacher(s) should be able to help you with this and they should introduce and close any presentations so all young people know the GSA has teacher support.
- **Conversation** – Talk about the group with other people in your year group(s). Ask them to share the information with their friends and peers too.
- **Social Media** – If your school has a Twitter or Facebook page, you could write a tweet or post, sharing information about the new group.

You may have other ideas about how to get your message out in a manner which works for your school; these should be developed in partnership with teacher(s) and the leadership team in the school. They can help you get your message out effectively, so make sure you involve them.

In the beginning, it's wise to manage your expectations about the number of people who will attend your group. It is important to persevere though, as many young people can be nervous about attending anything LGBT-related and may be waiting to see what reaction it gets. If a core group of young people can maintain the group and continue to advertise it as a safe, supportive and inclusive space, numbers will grow.

Don't forget... offering tea/coffee/drinks and biscuits or snacks usually helps!

## Young people's voices

One of the first things you may want to do as a group is gather information about what other young people think about LGBT inclusion in the school as well as their experiences of any incidents of homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying. This can help the school meet their self-evaluation requirements and will enable the GSA and the school to identify if any action needs to be taken.

You may want to use an online tool, like Survey Monkey, to create your questionnaire or do it the old fashioned way and print paper copies. The GSA should work with their supportive teacher to decide on which questions to ask. A suggested list of questions you could ask can be found in *Appendix 3*. Remember not to ask for names or information that could identify young people. Their contribution must be **anonymous**.

It will be useful for you to spend a couple of GSA sessions discussing the results of the survey and what you, as a group, could do to support your school in tackling any issues raised. If you have any questions after looking at your results data and are looking for support, get in contact with LGBT Youth Scotland.

## Running your meetings

Your group, in collaboration with your teacher(s), will find the best way to run your GSA meeting. At the beginning, however, you may find it useful to follow these steps:

- Welcome everyone to the start of the group.
- Go over the group guidelines – stress the importance of privacy, especially to any visitors.
- Spend time on introductions – don't assume everyone will know each other.
- Go around the group with everyone sharing their name and pronoun (he, she, they) – this should be respected during the meeting.
- Ask if anyone has anything they'd like to share or discuss.
- Introduce whatever the activity is the group is doing that day.
- Gather everyone together at the end of the group.
- If there's time, discuss the session and see what people thought about it.
- Remind everyone about when the next meeting is and where.
- Thank everyone for coming.

This is only a suggested list. Your group will decide how best to run things.

# Activity ideas

When deciding what activities to do at your GSA it is always good to discuss this as a group and plan in advance what you'll be doing from week-to-week.

Below is a list of suggested activities for your GSA. If you complete a session not on this list and want to let us know how it went so we can share it further, please get in touch with us at LGBT Youth Scotland.

## Social activities:

- **Chill out session** – sometimes, it's good to plan in a session where nothing specific is happening and people can just sit around and chat.
- **Watch LGBT films and TV programs** – films may have to be viewed over several sessions, so try not to plan too many.
- **Book club** – share a relevant book around and when everyone's read it, discuss in the group.
- Invite GSAs from other nearby schools to visit yours – it's a great way to get ideas for future groups, make new friends and share information.
- **Play board games.**
- **Arts and crafts** – here, someone can lead a session on their hobby, or a specific skill like photography.
- **Have a picnic** – get everyone to bring something to snack on and have a picnic. If it's nice weather, you can even do this outside.
- **Outside activities** – parachute games, frisbee, rounders, football... whatever the group decides.

## Information sessions:

- **Coming Out** – what it means, why people do it, best ways to support each other.
- **Learn about LGBT awareness days** – for a full list, see *Appendix 4, the cultural calendar*.
- **LGBT voices and role models** – share which LGBT people are our inspirations.
- **Gender stereotypes** – Make a list of all the gender stereotypes and expectations placed on 'boys' and 'girls' and what happens when people break these stereotypes.
- **Unpacking heteronormativity** – discuss all the ways in which society (including the school) reinforce the expectation that people are cisgender and heterosexual. What impact does it have on young people?
- **LGBT History** – read about and share interesting facts and stories from our nation's LGBT history and fight for LGBT equality. Be sure to look at current equality campaigns. This is a great session to run during February, which is LGBT History Month.
- **Bi-visibility** – discussion about bisexual identities, ways in which mainstream straight and gay cultures ignore them, and how to change things for the better.
- **Question box** – everyone writes questions that they are too embarrassed to ask and puts them in a box. They are read out the following week at the group and everyone tries to come up with an answer. Any question you don't know the answer to can be researched later.
- **Understanding trans identities** – spend time researching all the identities under the trans umbrella, including non-binary identities.

## Youth activism:

- **Fundraising for your group** – have a bake sale, do a sponsored event or host an entertainment evening to raise funds and help support your group and the school.
- **Review the school's anti-bullying policy and ensure it is LGBT inclusive** – does it mention homophobia, biphobia and transphobia specifically?
- **Explore the school library to find books with LGBT voices and identities** – if there are none, ask to have some added (a list of books can be found on the LGBT Youth Scotland website). If there are books, make sure they are easily identifiable – you could even offer to create a display of them for LGBT History Month.
- **Offer to talk to staff about key issues and messages coming from the GSA.**
- **Plan whole-school awareness-raising events** – assemblies, workshops, lesson activities.
- **Invite speakers in from the wider LGBT community and other equality groups** – race, people of faith, people with disabilities, women's groups etc.
- **Identify opportunities to meet with other GSA groups around Scotland** – LGBT Youth Scotland might be useful in helping to facilitate this.
- Plan an event to coincide with an occasion in the cultural calendar – *See Appendix 4 for the full list.*

# Information for schools and teachers

## Why are GSAs important?

LGBT Youth Scotland's **Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People**<sup>1</sup> research found that:

- 69% of LGBT young people have experienced homophobic or biphobic bullying in school
- 77% of transgender respondents experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying in school
- Less than half of LGBT young people feel confident reporting homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying in schools
- 14% of LGBT young people left education as a direct result of experiencing of homophobic or biphobic bullying
- 10% of LGBT young people left education because they felt their school was non inclusive environment

This can clearly have a negative impact on LGBT young people's academic performance as well as their health wellbeing; with evidence showing that those LGBT young people that experience bullying are more likely to have poor mental health<sup>2</sup> and have an increased risk of absenteeism<sup>3</sup>.

Young people who attend a GSA are more likely to report that they feel safe in school and are less likely to be absent<sup>4</sup>. They can also be useful spaces to help them identify the support available to them. So setting up a GSA is a good first step in insuring LGBT young people in your school feel safe, respected and included.

Importantly, supporting a GSA gives the school an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to equalities and inclusion, and to fulfil its legislative responsibilities to ensure that no young person is treated less favourably because of their identity or 'protected characteristic' and to promote equality of opportunity.

1. Lough Dennell and Logan (2012) *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People: Education*. LGBT Youth Scotland

2. Lough Dennell and Logan (2012) *Life in Scotland for LGBT Young People: Health*. LGBT Youth Scotland

3. GLSEN (2007). *Gay-Straight Alliances: Creating safer schools for LGBT students and their allies*. (GLSEN Research Brief). New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network

4. Ibid



## Legislative landscape

Guidance and legislation which supports the creation of a GSA:

- **The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 15**, gives children and young people the right to meet with other children and young people and to join groups and organisations, as long as this does not stop other people from enjoying their rights. This is backed up by the **Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014** which places a duty on the Scottish Government and Scottish Ministers to take account of the UNCRC and children's rights.
- The **Equality Act (2010)** details that schools have a duty to ensure that no member of any 'protected characteristic' – which includes sexual orientation and gender reassignment – suffer any direct or indirect discrimination, or be treated less favourably because of their identity. If young people request a GSA, to deny them this could be discriminatory, especially if there are other social or activism-based clubs in the school.
- The **Curriculum for Excellence** has health and wellbeing as one of the three central themes to help children to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. It is the responsibility of all teachers to ensure their learners' health and wellbeing needs are met. As noted previously, setting up a GSA can contribute directly to improving young people's wellbeing and support their capacity to attend and attain.
- Finally, **Getting it Right For Every Child (GIRFEC)** requires schools to ensure that all children and young people are safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included. For some LGBT young people, this will involve having a space in school where they know their sexual orientation and/or gender identity will be respected and where they are made to feel welcome and included. GSAs can also be a useful mechanism to support young people in becoming more active by identifying ways for their school to become more inclusive.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Checklist for setting up your GSA

### Action



1. Gather together a group of young people who want to set up a GSA



2. Make sure you are all clear on why you want to set up a GSA in the school



3. Decide how often you would like to meet



4. Decide what type of activities do you want to do in the GSA and why



5. Informally discuss setting up a GSA with teacher(s)



6. Review policies and frameworks which support setting up a GSA



7. Create your 'group purpose'



8. Create your group guidelines



9. Formally approach the head teacher about setting up a GSA



10. Hold your first meeting and agree a strategy to advertise the new GSA



11. OR: Agree a strategy to advertise the new GSA and, once completed, hold your first meeting



12. Create a plan for future GSAs which can be shared with teachers and the head teacher



# Appendix 2: Our GSA

Name of school:

Name of group:

Teacher(s) support:

Group purpose:

Group guidelines

Priorities and activities

## Appendix 3: Example young people's voices questionnaire

Please answer these questions to help this school's Gender and Sexual Orientation Alliance (GSA) to understand how life is for young people, and to identify how we can help to improve things at school. We won't be able to identify you from your responses, so please be as honest as possible. Thank you!

### 1. Please tick any of the words below that you have heard of:

- |                                      |                                       |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian     | <input type="checkbox"/> Intersex     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gay         | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBT         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual    | <input type="checkbox"/> Heterosexual |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender |                                       |

### 2. If you have heard of any of the words listed above, where did you first hear about them? If you know of more than one, where did you find out about the majority of the terms you know?

- |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Friends      | <input type="checkbox"/> TV/films                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family       | <input type="checkbox"/> Social media                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher      | <input type="checkbox"/> Books/magazines                      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Youth worker | <input type="checkbox"/> Somewhere else: <input type="text"/> |

### 3. Do you identify as any of the following (please tick all that apply):

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lesbian               | <input type="checkbox"/> Intersex                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gay                   | <input type="checkbox"/> LGBT                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bisexual              | <input type="checkbox"/> Rather not say              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Straight/heterosexual | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: <input type="text"/> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Transgender           |  |

### 4. If you have heard people talking about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people in school, was it mainly:

- Positive
- Negative
- Please explain:

5. What do you think it would be like for lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender young people to come to our school? (please tick all that apply):

- |                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Great     | <input type="checkbox"/> Scary     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Good      | <input type="checkbox"/> Lonely    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Safe      | <input type="checkbox"/> Dangerous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Supported | <input type="checkbox"/> Bad       |

6. Please tell us how you would feel if your friend or relative told you they were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender:

7. If you saw a young person being bullied because they were lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender, what would you do?

8. Have you ever been bullied by anyone who has known (or thought that) you are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Tell us more if you want to:

9. In our school, have you ever heard the word 'gay' being used as an insult, or to mean something bad, or uncool?

- Yes
- No
- Tell us more if you want to:

**10. Have you ever used the word 'gay' as an insult, or to mean something bad or uncool?**

- Yes
- No
- Tell us more if you want to:

**11. Have you seen any information available in our school to support lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) young people?**

- Yes
- No
- If yes, where did you see it?

**12. What do you think would be the best way of providing information to support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young people? Please tell us your ideas:**

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

## Appendix 4: Cultural calendar

The following is a list of UK (and some international) events, campaigns and significant days which could link into your work around LGBT awareness and inclusion.

27th January	Holocaust Memorial Day
February	LGBT History Month
Last Friday of February	Purple Friday
8th March	International Women's Day
31st March	International Transgender Day of Visibility
May	Mental Health Awareness Week
17th May	International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBIT)
June	Pride Month
24th July	Parents' Day (including LGBT parents)
23rd September	Bi Visibility Day
11th October	Coming Out Day
26th October	Intersex Awareness Day
8th November	Intersex Day of Solidarity
14th-18th November	Anti-Bullying Week
16th November	International Day of Tolerance
20th November	Trans Day of Remembrance
1st December	World AIDS Day
10th December	Human Rights Day



## About LGBT Youth Scotland

Our vision is that Scotland is the best place to grow up for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex young people.

**Our mission is to play a leading role in the provision of quality youth work to LGBTI young people that promotes their health and wellbeing, and to be a valued and influential partner in LGBTI equality and human rights.**

## The LGBT Schools Charter

The LGBT Youth Scotland Schools Charter is a programme to support and guide Schools and Education Authorities on their journey to LGBT equality and inclusion.

By displaying the LGBT Charter, you will send a positive message to LGBT staff and pupils in your area that they are included, valued, supported and will be treated fairly when they attend your school.

For more information, go to [lgbtyouth.org.uk/charter](http://lgbtyouth.org.uk/charter)

LGBT Youth Scotland  
40 Commercial Street  
Edinburgh  
EH6 6JD  
[info@lgbtyouth.org.uk](mailto:info@lgbtyouth.org.uk)  
[www.lgbtyouth.org.uk](http://www.lgbtyouth.org.uk)



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