Stonewall

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is produced by Stonewall, a UK-based charity that stands for the freedom, equity and potential of all lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, questioning and ace (LGBTQ+) people.

At Stonewall, we imagine a world where LGBTQ+ people everywhere can live our lives to the full.

Founded in London in 1989, we now work in each nation of the UK and have established partnerships across the globe. Over the last three decades, we have created transformative change in the lives of LGBTQ+ people in the UK, helping win equal rights around marriage, having children and inclusive education.

Our campaigns drive positive change for our communities, and our sustained change and empowerment programmes ensure that LGBTQ+ people can thrive throughout our lives. We make sure that the world hears and learns from our communities, and our work is grounded in evidence and expertise.

To find out more about our work, visit us at www.stonewall.org.uk

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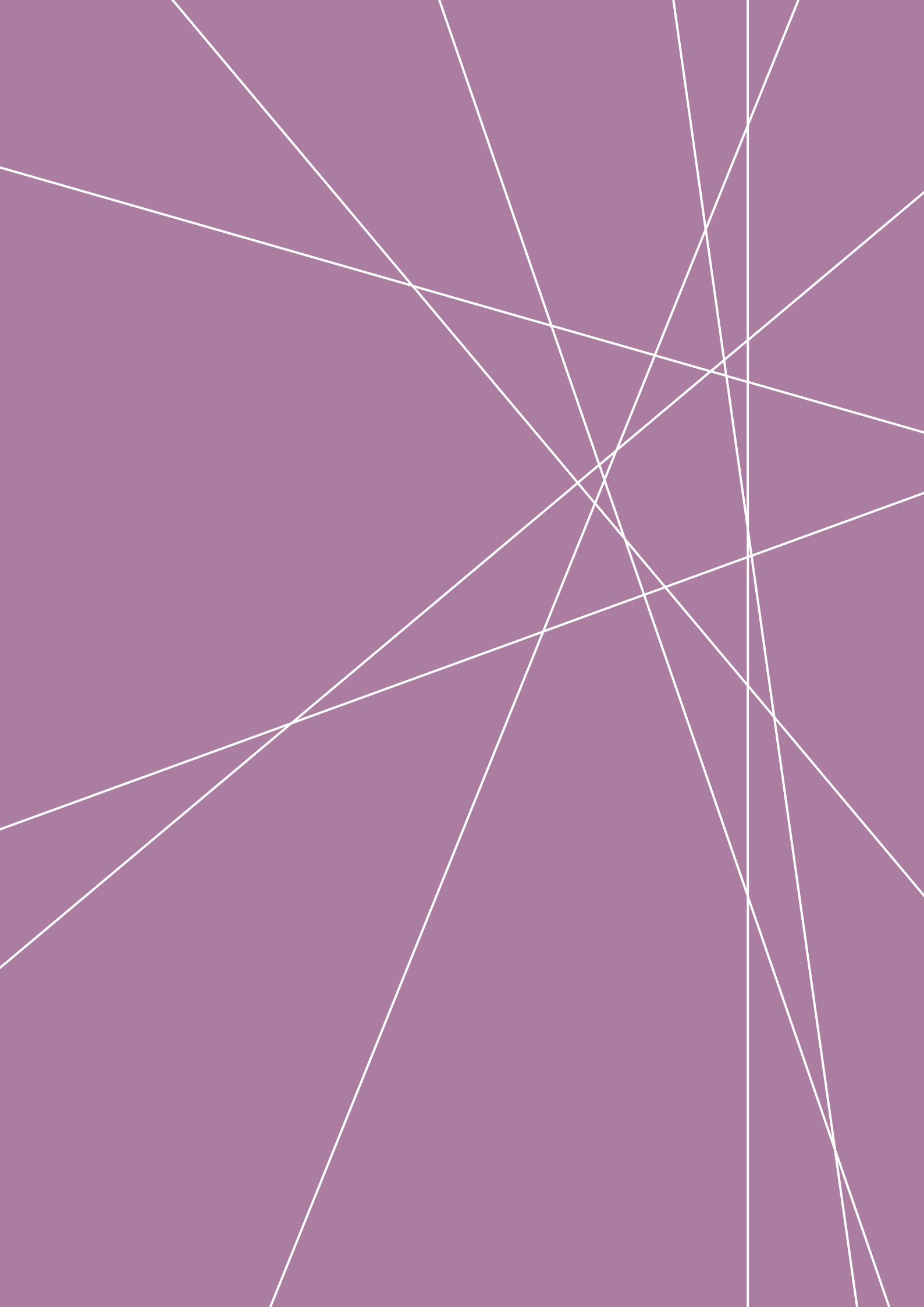
Role Models

Being lesbian, gay, bi and trans in Wales

Stonewall Cymru



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Being lesbian, gay, bi and trans in Wales

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Stonewall
Cymru

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Introduction

Iestyn Wyn, Campaigns, Policy and Research Manager, Stonewall Cymru

At Stonewall Cymru we talk a lot about role models and believe that in every walk of life, it's easier to be yourself when you see others like you.

Young people in particular can gain great value by obtaining knowledge of the experiences of those that have come before them and from having someone else to look up to. In order to promote kinder communities and a more accepting society, we need to learn about and value the experiences of others.

We have the privilege of working with employers, universities, colleges and schools across Wales, and they are united in their commitment to creating inclusive environments where LGBT people feel safe, included and empowered to reach their full potential. Yet, unfortunately not every organisation shares our aims and not every community is inclusive, leaving far too many people still believing they have to hide who they are in order to be accepted. This is unacceptable and recognising LGBT role models helps to counteract this.

The coronavirus period has been challenging for many LGBT people and has certainly exacerbated existing inequalities. At a time where kindness and coming together is more important than ever, I want to particularly highlight the need to support and stand with trans people. The last couple of months have seen trans people continuing to face an ongoing unsupportive media climate and the UK Government's climbdowns on much-needed Gender Recognition reform.

Furthermore, this year, the acute discrimination black people face has been brought to the forefront, with black LGBT people being severely affected by the global pandemic, as well as the trauma of systemic racism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia experienced by the entire community. Now more than ever is a time for LGBT people and allies to come together to support those who need it. Role models can play an important role as valuable support systems for their peers.

The role models assembled in this guide display a variety of experiences and intersectional identities. It is vital that we do all we can to provide representation for a range of different identities. The diversity of our role models attempts to reflect Welsh society and reminds us that no one's journey is the same. The stories of our role models exemplify this.

In Wales, we are often humble and modest, which makes the idea of being a role model often sit uncomfortably. The reality is that as in our society, most of our role models are not celebrities or people sitting on high pedestals, but are colleagues, friends, partners and community members. This guide brings together a selection of people from across Wales who step up every day as role models, by simply being themselves – and to those role models, thank you. In this, our second Role Models Guide, you will read a selection of powerful stories from just a small number of individuals that we consider to be role models. We hope that these will not only move you, but inspire you to take action to be a role model or an ally in everything you do, to embody the principle of acceptance without exception.

Numair Masud

Bioscience Researcher

I moved to the UK to study Zoology in Bristol on a student visa and this is when I first openly expressed my sexuality. However, I under-estimated that when you've experienced repression all your life, as I did – expressing your sexuality can be a daunting and confusing process.

So, my experience in Bristol was actually quite isolating. I'm a gay man from Karachi, Pakistan. I wasn't able to express my sexuality back home where the law criminalises homosexuality and coming out would mean a real threat to my life.

A few years later, whilst studying for my master's degree at Cardiff University I actively engaged with the LGBT community. It was during this time that I met my ex-partner, who was also an international student from Nigeria. We fell madly in love. Because his student visa was going to expire, we decided to apply for asylum as a couple.

My asylum interview went very smoothly, and the application was processed quickly. Although I appreciate, I am quite outspoken which made the process easier for me. My ex-partner is from Nigeria and his application was more difficult, particularly because he was suffering from anxiety and depression. That is a problem with the UK immigration system, because it means vulnerable people who can't speak up for themselves get treated differently. Home Office interviewers, who have the power to decide an individual's fate, need to consider the trauma that many asylum seekers have faced.

For me, a role model and an ally is somebody who does not let the challenges of our world extinguish their love, passions and beliefs. They resist the trap of becoming a victim of their circumstances. Above all, they accomplish this, whilst maintaining a sense of kindness and love towards themselves and others around them.

In June 2016, I helped a friend of mine create a social support group called "Glitter Cymru" which is for people who identify as both LGBT and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic). People within the BAME LGBT community with multiple identities do face amplified discrimination because they are a minority within a minority. Initially, I was sceptical about the impact that our support group may have. Now, Glitter Cymru has broken new grounds within Wales LGBT activism and firmly established itself as a force for positive change.

While many challenges remain within the BAME LGBT community, a major frustration I find is in making people understand that we are more than our labels. I understand that labels can initially help provide us with a sense of belonging. In my ideal world, however, I would wish to do away with the labels and focus on our humanity instead which I truly believe is common to us all.

Growing up, one of my role models – as cliché as it may sound – was Madonna. She explored expressions of sexuality, religion and love which is largely taboo in a conservative country like Pakistan. Now, I can pinpoint people that I interact with on a daily basis that can be considered role models.

Other times, ironically, we act as role models and allies by doing very little. One of my best friends recently came out as gay after staying in the closet for a long time. And although I had suspected it, I tried to simply provide him with a safe, non-judgemental space, where he could share his thoughts and feelings if and when he wanted – rather than pushing him or making assumptions. Often, just the act of being there and listening is most important for people to feel accepted.

Caroline Bovey

Dietician

My wife and I have been together for 20 years. Originally, we met in a small town in West Wales, where I am originally from. Growing up there – it wasn't the most gay-friendly place.

I guess that historically, it was just quite isolated and inward looking. Educating yourself in a private way, pre-internet, pre-Amazon and when you live in a small town, was difficult. So, it took me a while to figure things out.

Last year a relative came out just after their 13th birthday. Their experience – while not entirely unproblematic – has been largely supported by their school, extended family and friends. Some people might say that they are too young "to know". However, I would argue: "Nobody questions a 12-, or 13-year-old if they start feeling heterosexual attractions: if they have a first girl-/boyfriend; a first kiss. Why should it be any different for them?"

In 1999, my wife and I moved to Cardiff. This was partially to pursue our careers here. I work as a dietitian for NHS Wales. In 2004, I helped to setup and chair an LGBT advisory group. We focus on both staff and patient well-being, which is important because LGBT patients often feel vulnerable and alone. They also find it difficult to stand up for their rights, because they are worried it will impact their care. We scrutinise our policies for language and LGBT inclusivity. We also act as patient advocates, when they are treated unfairly.

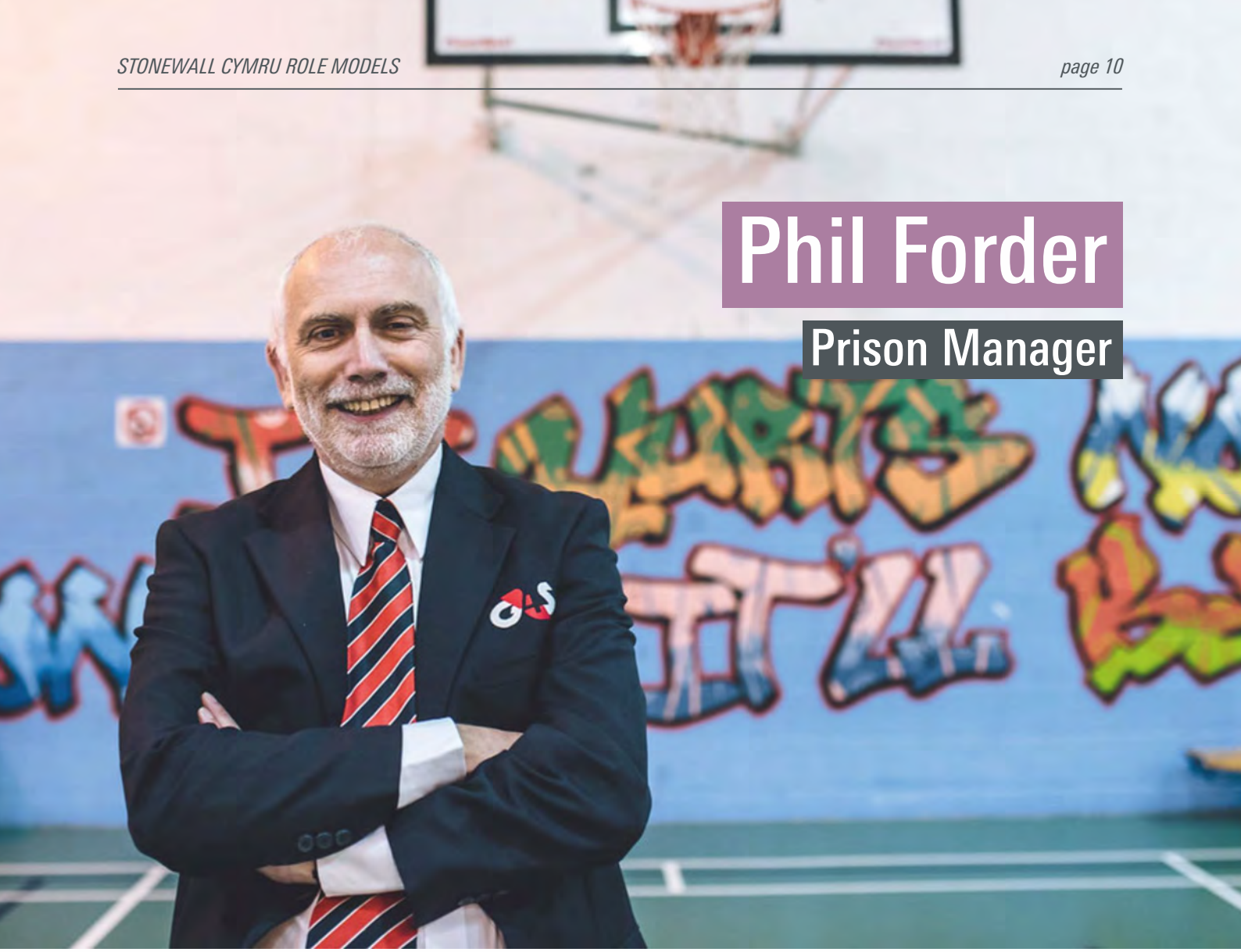
Our Equality Officer is very pro-active and is constantly challenging the status quo. To me, she is a role model. She doesn't put up with nonsense. I think I've learned from her how to stand up, to be my-self and to subtly challenge things through sharing stories and winning over people's hearts and minds.

Role models work for me when they are being themselves and genuine. I struggle with people who alter their personality to live up to a "role". I value authenticity. Some people still think all lesbians are the same, but we aren't and that's good. If you asked me about the "lesbian scene", I would have no idea. Don't ask me to pretend to be someone I am not. All I can be is me.

In 2014, we adopted our two daughters. That was a major decision. There is a tendency to believe that social services and adoption agencies will be biased or prejudiced against same-sex adopters and it would be easy to attribute any difficulties we have had to homophobia. Obviously, I can only speak about our experience, but I don't believe we have been discriminated against because of our sexuality.

We live in an increasingly complex world where people are generally just trying to make sense of things. Sometimes they get it wrong. That doesn't mean that they are deliberately unkind – just that they don't always understand. My wife and I are doing our best to be positive role models to our children and to other same-sex parents. We hope to do so with integrity and compassion.

Me and my wife's job is to nurture our girls, to help them to reach their potential, to give them a happy childhood and to support them to grow into strong and independent women. Is that any different to any other parent?



Phil Forder

Prison Manager

I grew up in a working-class strictly Catholic family, as one of six kids on a council estate in Essex. I always knew I was gay; it has always been there.

This was at a time when gay relationships were criminal, so I automatically felt 'damned' from the start. Also, my family was definitely homophobic, which made my childhood extremely difficult.

At school the most common forms of insult were 'poofter' or 'homo'. I avoided many people and felt extremely lonely, unable to be myself. I would often 'get off my face' in my teens. As my friends began to explore their sexuality, I would lock myself in my room to avoid parties or become inebriated – it was a form of escapism.

As a teenager, I felt increasingly trapped and isolated. It seemed that the only path open to me was to join the church and become a priest. I started at a religious boarding school in Bournemouth to prepare for entering the priesthood at 18 but I soon became very unhappy and left.

During my college years in Carmarthen, I met an American guy called Russell, and we began a relationship. We weren't out to anyone, so it was totally secret. But, once his scholarship ended, he returned to the States, and I was alone once again. I eventually married my wife and we had a son together. I told her all about my relationship with Russell. So, I guess I thought I was bi. And for the first time, my parents thought this was better because I had a partner.

Years later, Russell randomly came to visit – he had contracted HIV which tragically took his life. AIDS at the time, was the 'Gay Plague' and many people felt justified to be openly homophobic.

I stayed in contact with Russell's mum for 10 years after he died, she never knew the nature of our relationship, but I always suspected that she did. Towards the end of her life Russell's mother sent me a box containing some of his stuff, including a shirt and tie, which she asked me to keep so, I kept them. It was painful to look at them. I just kept them in a box.

Years went by and it wasn't until I saw the film Brokeback Mountain, in which, one of the characters visits his dead lover's mother and is given a keepsake – a shirt – that I had the realisation: this is me. At that moment, I knew I was going to have to come out.

After a lifetime of struggle, hiding behind numerous masks, the subsequent feeling of relief to be yourself is indescribable, it is beyond words. For anyone who finds themselves in this situation, I can only say: no matter what age you are – it is never too late.

By then, I was 54 and times had moved on. Gay people were seemingly everywhere but most support available was for teens; the older generation had been overlooked. There was nothing about how to tell your adult kids you are gay.

Many might say: 'why did you not come out sooner?' – but everyone must come to it in their own time. For those who have already lived a large part of their life, there is so much to sort out. You cannot just change the law and 'hey presto!' suddenly it's all fine.

Samantha Carpenter

Semi-Retired

The first feelings of there being a tension between my gender identity and other people's expectations of me to behave like a boy was when I was seven, in 1975. I knew nothing about the term 'trans' back then and I simply tried to fit in as best I could.

When I was 16, I joined the Royal Navy. I hoped that by immersing myself in a male dominated environment (it was at the time) I could figure out what was going on with my gender identity. When I left, eight years later – it hadn't worked. Throughout my 20s and 30s, I tried to suppress the growing realisation that my gender is female, but it just got stronger as time went by.

About 10 years ago, I started expressing my true self. I dressed as a woman at home... it just felt right! But outside, I needed to hide; and so I cross-dressed as a man. This suppression became harder and harder to deal with, and eventually I severely self-harmed in late 2012. At this point, the small group of friends whom I'd confided in convinced me to go get medical help.

Navigating the medical system as a trans person is very difficult, slow and intrusive. In November 2016, I entered a very dark place and I thought to myself: "I have to make a choice between two options: transition; or end it all". I chose the former.

This is when I told my parents and gradually came out to my friends and started discussing my social transition at work. In March 2017, an email was sent out to 1,865 staff announcing that I had changed my name and was transitioning. At work, everybody was incredibly supportive and wonderful.

Being visible can also become incredibly tiring. Since starting my transition, not a single day has gone by where I've not had to talk about being trans. Sometimes you think: "Is this all people see me as?" People often just see the label: "Look, a trans person." The media is also constantly talking about the "trans debate". But my existence is not up for debate… nor am I an object.

It takes courage and inner strength to walk with your head held high, but it can be done. It's important to occasionally give yourself a pat on the back. Transitioning isn't easy and anxiety is often my biggest demon. You can see why some people self-harm. The suicide rates of trans people are horrendous, and it's incredibly sad when we lose someone. We need to create both social changes and institutional reforms – and fast!

Immersing myself within the trans community has been of paramount importance. I've found so much strength through my trans sisters and brothers, non-binary friends and our allies. Sometimes people ask us awkward and inappropriate questions… "So, how's the 'change' going?" … "Have you had 'down there' done yet?" But, most of the attention is just inquisitive. People often turn into allies simply by talking to a trans person and hearing their story.

Trans people attract a lot of attention. Some of it is well-natured; some of it is inappropriate; and some of it is hostile and frightening. I had six individual experiences of hate-crime in 2017 alone. But, I'm still here, and growing stronger each day. My name is Samantha Carpenter; I am a trans woman and proud!

Megan Pascoe

Business Engagement Manager

I was born in Leicester but grew up in Cornwall in a tiny seaside village, where our school had a little farm. It was a lovely place to grow up, but as you can imagine it was the sort of place where it was difficult to be "different".

I realised I was bi when I was about 16, but I didn't really come out to anybody except one of my best friends and my younger sister. I spent most of my childhood around groups of girls, having danced in shows since I was 3, and I felt like it would make them uncomfortable if I told them I was also attracted to girls.

Six years ago, I moved to Cardiff, where I lived in a house with all girls and was faced with the same dilemma as I had at home.

It wasn't until I was in a relationship with another girl that I actually came out to everyone, and it ended up being a really positive experience. I was so nervous telling my parents, but they were brilliant; they'd always said to me that it didn't matter whether I was gay, straight, bi or anything else, as long as I was happy. It was also helpful having a trusted group of friends, where we were open about our personal issues with one another and we were able to have open and honest conversations. Once I was truthful with them, they made me feel like it wasn't a big deal.

A few of years ago, I started working at the Intellectual Property Office. Soon after, I helped set up and was the co-chair of our LGBT network iPride, which "outed me" to the entire office almost instantly. I've been able to be a visible role model across the office because of it and even though I'm not co-chair anymore, I'm still able to help make an impact on LGBT+ issues across the office.

Since we started the network, more people have felt empowered to come out in the office. For many people, I think that it's not even about directly participating in the network, but simply about knowing that the network is there if they need it. It makes them feel safe and that the IPO is an organisation which supports them and their identity. It's a place where they can be comfortable, whether they choose to be out or not.

As a bi person, I feel like people try and define who I am by the gender of the person that I'm dating and that shouldn't matter. My sexual orientation is a part of me, but it doesn't define my life and it definitely isn't the most interesting thing about me!

I've had to deal with biphobic and homophobic comments from people who have their prejudices, but I'll always try to educate them even if I might not change their mind. The older I've got, the more comfortable and confident I've become to challenge people on their language. Most people do apologise, they just don't understand and make genuine mistakes, not realising what might be hurtful.

I'm now open and honest with everyone that I meet about my sexuality, in the hope that I can encourage people to feel comfortable with their own sexuality and also become an ally to the LGBT+ community. Allies are so important when it comes to challenging inappropriate behaviour. Anybody can be an ally, but they aren't going to get it right all the time and it's up to us to help support and educate them to be a better ally to everyone.

I knew that […] I would have to put myself in a vulnerable position, to be completely honest: to come out. It was a transformative experience.

Elgan Rhys

Writer-Director-Performer

I'm from the beautiful North-West Wales town of Pwllheli. Like many gay people, I was picked on at school. People would call me 'gay' before I realised that I was.

Sometimes, growing up, it seemed as though everyone around me had similar mind-sets: a fear of difference and seeking safety in what was familiar. With retrospect, I know that this wasn't really the case. But my desperation not to be treated the way I'd seen the few out gay people in my school be treated – to be pushed out of my community or ridiculed – led to years of repression and denial.

I moved to Cardiff a decade ago to pursue a course in Theatre and Drama. I started to see a broader variety of communities, including LGBTQI+ people. This helped me to open up and unlock some of the suppression. Slowly but surely, my denial started dripping away, and I began to accept that it was OK for me to have romantic and sexual feelings towards other men.

My coming out process was fuelled by a theatre piece which I wrote and performed in. It was about finding your own voice and not allowing yourself to be defined by others' perceptions of you. I knew that if I wanted people to genuinely connect with the piece, I would have to put myself in a vulnerable position, to be completely honest: to come out. It was a transformative experience.

When I came out to my family, they were all very supportive. However, they were afraid of other people's judgements, and what I could face in the future. But for me as soon as I told them there was an instant change, a weight that lifted off of my shoulders. My friends and family could see and feel it. My relationships changed for the better. The cards were on the table; the barriers were gone. People could connect with me more authentically, even though in many ways, I've just stayed being me. There are more and more spaces that I feel comfortable in being myself. I can say that about home now.

I mainly work in theatre as a writer, director and performer. My play Woof was staged to sell-out audiences in 2019 at the Sherman Theatre, and was described by The Guardian as "a triumph" for the theatre. Most recently I directed the most ambitious show I've worked on, Frân Wen's acclaimed adaptation of the multiple-prize-winning *Llyfr Glas Nebo*. Almost all of its tour's twenty-eight performances sold out, with the show being described by Othniel Smith of British Theatre Guide as "a bleakly beautiful production." I also recently toured Theatr Iolo's *Chwarae*, which I devised with North Wales families and which led me to being described as "one of Wales' most promising writers." by Golwg. Recurring elements in my work are community co-creation, an interest in multilingualism, the amplification of young people's voices and telling stories of contemporary queer life. I've also been BAFTA Cymru-nominated for my TV work. I'm currently developing several plays with major theatre companies, as well as TV and book projects. I'm excited for what the future holds.

My aim with all my work for stage is to enable people to experience a sense of connection, community, acceptance and freedom. I often work with young people and try to provide them with a space to create and express themselves. Through expression, these young people can create something, feel genuinely listened to and celebrate their individuality – no matter what that means to them. The kind of space that I wish I'd had as a young person growing up in Pwllheli.

Delyth Liddell

Methodist Minister, Coordinating Chaplain at Cardiff University

I'm Rev Delyth Liddell. I'm a lesbian with a beautiful daughter and a crazy dog called Dave, both of whom I co-parent with my ex-wife.

Occasionally, our daughter has asked questions about having two mummies and why some kids also have a daddy. She'll pick-up some hetero-normative views from school. We tend to just explain that all families are different: some people only have only one mummy or one daddy; others have two mummies or two daddies; and some have a mummy and a daddy. We tell her that all of these family constellations are good and OK, and the important thing is that she is loved by both her parents.

I'm the Coordinating Chaplain a Methodist Chaplain based at Cardiff University. As a chaplaincy, we try to be very inclusive, in particular of the LGBTQI society. It's a place where students can find a friend. We have drop-in sessions and £1 lunches. We also facilitate an inter-faith group where people can openly discuss religious and spiritual topics and try to raise awareness about faith.

I also help to run an LGBTQI church called "The Gathering". We meet every Sunday night at Windsor Place in Cardiff (currently meeting online due to the pandemic). The Gathering was founded mainly as an emergency response for LGBTQI people who have been hurt by other Christians. Many LGBTQI people have horrendous experiences at church. They've been intimately questioned about their sex-lives, disrespected and/or even kicked out of their churches.

There are some inclusive churches and religious groups, but there also intolerant ones. The Gathering gives LGBTQI Christians a place to worship God and to heal their wounds.

To me, it is the fear of "the other" that leads to homophobia and other forms of discrimination. Fear turns "different from me" into "not natural, not normal". So, I try to stay aware of my own prejudices. If I judge people who disagree with me, then that makes me just as bad as them.

It's true that there are biblical texts, such as in Leviticus saying: "*a man shall not lie with another man"* – however, that same book also says: "*you shall not eat shellfish"*. I think that the context of the Bible verses is very important. At the core, in the Bible God talks about love. About his love for us and about our love for him and one another. God loves all his children without exception. Relationships – including LGBTQI relationships – are about love. God wants to draw us into relationships of reciprocal love.

However, I have a lot of grace for people who see things differently and who take the Bible literally, saying it's wrong to be LGBTQI. I think that it's essential that we can have open and loving – not defensive or hateful – conversations with one another, especially with those people who have different views to ours. That can be very hard. Especially if you are having a conversation with somebody who believes that you shouldn't even exist. But it's about coming back to that love and grace. This is why The Gathering is holding an Inclusive Conference, for churches, to think about how and why they can be inclusive of LGBTQI folks.

I remember one person who told me: "*When I first met this person, I didn't want to even consider him as a Christian. Because how could he be Christian and gay. But now I have got to know him. I have seen God in him, and I have seen his faith in Christ. How can I say that he is not a Christian?"* So, at the end of the day, it's not our job to change people's hearts and minds – that is God's job. All we can do is to live our truth and love God.

Marc Rees

Artist

I grew up in the Swansea valley. My connection to the natural environment of my childhood is intimately related to my sexuality as a gay man.

My first sexual experience was with another boy from my neighbourhood, and our relationship was linked to the landscape where we used to go off to hide and seek each other. It was very exciting. So, exploring and accepting my sexuality is linked to that feeling of freedom in nature.

Already at an early age, I knew that I wanted to work in the arts. I think many LGBT people feel drawn to the arts because self-expression is often an important part of our journey, and because we are more likely to find like-minded people, who are more accepting about sexuality.

For a time, I was bullied at school for being 'weird' and people used to suggest that I was gay. In order to 'prove' my masculinity, I trained for and won a 10 km road race, and became school champion in arm wrestling through channelling an inner belief of strength. After that, the bullies left me alone because I beat them on their turf within their traditional realms and stereotypical notions.

Nonetheless, I was often seen as the odd one out, the outsider which in retrospect is better rather than conforming. I didn't become an artist so that everyone in society would accept and validate me. Part of me also enjoys being a little bit quirky, left-field and marginalised. Rather than society imposing an identity on me from the outside-in, I choose to express myself from the inside-out.

I never told my father that I was gay – although he might have suspected it before he died. I only came out to my brother last year, at the age of 52, he and his wife came to my wedding and it was brilliant to have them there, especially seeing them laugh with glee at Divina De Campo (Ru Paul's UK Drag Race runner-up) who hosted our wedding reception.

My mother found out I was gay by accident and was horrified. Normally, a quiet, calm and loving person – she reacted very strongly: "I think it's disgusting. What have we done to deserve this?" – she said. I was about 20, and so shocked by her response that I've never spoken to her about being gay since. My sister is the only family member whom I can openly talk to.

So, I guess that one important step of being a role model – coming out to your family – though I have only partly done that. But the truth is that some families just can't accept it. Every story is different, and every LGBTQ+ person must make their own choices.

For me, accepting my sexuality was through the English language, not through the Welsh language. So, trying to merge my connection to the Welsh language and culture with my sexuality was a struggle. And I think that struggle is felt by many people. I can remember about 10 years ago there was the first gay presence on the Maes – the field of the Eisteddfod. They had a tent, and it was hugely controversial, someone broke in and defecated in the tent. We have come a long way since then.

Stonewall and Iris have done lots to help change this, as have social media, television and film. Bridging the gap between LGBTQ+ and Welsh is also what we aim to do with the *Mas ar y Maes* events at the Eisteddfod.

We want to show Welsh speaking LGBTQ+ people that they can be both; Welsh and LGBTQ+.

Being gay is part of my identity – but it's not the quintessence of who I am. My identity is interwoven with the Welsh language and culture, my relationship to nature and my sexuality; and art is a way for me to express that identity. Once you fully accept your sexuality, it becomes a non-issue, because it's part of the fabric of who you are.

People often feel attacked when you talk about race, sexuality and disability because they're afraid of getting things wrong. I often use poetry to open up unthreatening pathways of communication. People can think about their actions independently and come to their own conclusions.

Selena Caemawr

Activist, Entrepreneur and Writer

Shwmae! I'm Selena Caemawr, a writer, activist and owner of Aubergine Café, an innovative business owned and operated entirely by Autistic people. While I identify as non-binary, I've been leaning towards a transmasculine gender presentation.

When I was younger, I did tend to dress more femininely, but as I've grown in confidence, I feel less pressure to conform to feminine gender standards. Nowadays, if I do put on a dress and some make up, it's for me, and ditto if I want to rock my suit and tie.

I feel like in our society, the identities of LGBTQ+ BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) people are often illegible; people are seen as either LGBTQ+ or BAME (and individuals from both communities are seen far too rarely), and we often seem unable to recognise a person as both. This is why I feel not only honoured, but also beholden, to be out loud and proud as non-binary, queer and mixed race.

Visibility leads to acceptance. Some people live in circumstances where it is not safe for them to be open about all the aspects of their identity, so I try to be out there, representing our community, so they can see there are others like them.

In 2006, I was diagnosed as Autistic. I think because autism isn't something you can see, most people remain unaware of our experiences and don't understand our needs. I am also engaged in being out and representing Neurodiverse people, especially those who are Autistic. I am an activist and advocate for disability inclusion and I have spoken throughout Wales and England, as well as internationally, about rebuilding our world to embrace and empower disabled people. This is also the founding mission of my business.

Sarah Lynn

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Project Manager

I identify as bi and non-binary. I'm originally from South Africa, but I grew up in various countries, including France, Vietnam and Malaysia – now Cardiff is home.

.As a kid, I was constantly focused on reinventing myself to fit into new environments. It was a difficult experience at the time. Looking back, it was liberating to be able to be a different version of myself, to make new friends and find new ways of fitting-in. But it also meant that each time this happened, I lost a life. I identified as a loner, feeling like: "There is no one else like me, no one gets me because no one has been through what I've been through." Feeling so different from everyone else in so many ways, I didn't have the space or time to explore and discover who I really was or even consider my sexual orientation or gender identity.

At University, as many people do, I started to discover more about myself. I eventually came out as bi, which helped me make sense of so many things I had felt, but not allowed myself to acknowledge growing up. I called my family to tell them soon after and they were fantastic. My friends, however, were not. Although I found support and friendship in the Uni's LGBT society and in student politics, I also found that there wasn't much room for learning, for exploring or making mistakes. It was not a space where I felt secure to explore my gender identity or sexual orientation.

Soon after leaving University, and student politics, I was lucky enough to join Stonewall. There, I found this acceptance, and this culture of celebrating difference and diversity. It taught me the value of a workplace, or of any space, where we could all just be ourselves without the pressure of having to get everything right all the time. It was there that I first felt able to acknowledge that I might not be cisgender.

Volunteering in the LGBT Youth Group has helped me to be more myself. Watching the kids' courage to go through that process of discovering who they are. It's helped me to allow myself to explore that and come out as non-binary.

Volunteering with my local LGBT Youth Group is an absolute passion for me. One evening a week we spend time talking, having workshops on topics from sexual health to emotional wellbeing – anything that interests them. But, most importantly, we give the young people a safe space to be themselves and to try new things. For some, it's the only place where they're out because they know they'll be respected. Last year, we took 15 of them on a camping trip. Seeing the change in them over the week, how they grew in confidence and self-assurance, was amazing. By the end of the week they were so relaxed and energised. They had all bonded and were so much more themselves. It just re-inforced the importance of safe, supportive spaces where we can be ourselves. I've learnt as much from them as they have, hopefully, learnt from me.

Since January, I've worked at Samaritans as the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Project Manager. It is a big change from working at a place like Stonewall, but the support and security are still there. I have to be a lot more open about my identity, because non-binary is still something not a lot of people know about. But my colleagues and all the volunteers I have worked with have been so open-minded. When people make mistakes, they aren't trying to be offensive or disrespectful, they are still learning, it takes them some time to adapt. And the fact that they are willing to try is huge!

The importance and impact of role models

1. **Visible role models help show the way for others.** As an LGBT person, it's much easier to imagine that you can be successful in whatever you want to do, if you can see that others have achieved that already, and if there are visible LGBT role models. Many LGBT people still fear that they will face discrimination in the workplace and in day-to-day life, and so it makes a difference to know that others have overcome those barriers.

2. **Role models matter.** For organisations, having visible LGBT role models demonstrates that you take diversity seriously and that your staff feel able to be themselves. That sends an important message about your ethos and can attract new talent, and loyalty from both staff and your service users or customers.

3. **Effective role models demonstrate self-awareness and the confidence to be themselves.** They think about who they are, the values they stand for and the way in which they want to impact on others. This is a continuing process which will look different when studying, in work, and in your personal life.

4. **People will have a range of role models, and everyone's role models will be different.** People rarely want to emulate a single person – they want to pick and choose qualities they admire from a number of role models.

5. **Organisations need role models at all levels.** People at the top can champion and set direction. Managers can create a welcoming and supportive workplace. Those at the beginning of their careers can role model the benefits of being out at work from day one.

6. **Good role models encourage and develop others.** They like contributing to high performance among their peers and never see it as a threat. They appreciate people being themselves and don't want to create clones – they get a kick from helping others to develop their own voice and talents.

7. **If you're openly LGBT, you might well be a role model whether you like it or not.** The only real choice is how good you want to be at it. Acknowledging your potential to influence those around you means you're better placed to make informed choices about using that influence constructively.

8. **Good role models are courageous and take risks.** They're willing to step out from the crowd rather than playing it safe. That doesn't have to be a grand gesture – sometimes it's more about being themselves.

9. **Good role models don't want to be defined just by being LGBT.** They think it's an important part of who they are – just like other dimensions of their identity such as gender, ethnicity, disability and culture.

10. **No-one's perfect!** Really good role models don't edit out the bumps and scars they've acquired along the way. It is easier to relate to someone who is fallible, is open about their mistakes, and learns from them. If you sit on a pedestal you may well fall off.





Role Models

Being lesbian, gay, bi and trans in Wales

The reality is that as in our society, most of our role models are not celebrities or people sitting on high pedestals, but are colleagues, friends, partners and community members. This guide brings together a selection of people from across Wales who step up every day as role models, by simply being themselves.

– Iestyn Wyn, Campaigns, Policy and Research Manager, Stonewall Cymru

Stonewall Cymru