

A Guide to Running LGBTQIA+ (Heritage) Projects

By Friday Schoemaker, Wiltshire Museum

General:

Don't assume people's gender, pronouns and sexuality.

Ask for people's pronouns so you do not misgender them, and add your own pronouns to your email signature. Create a space where participants feel comfortable sharing with you, and do not assume their identity or the labels they feel comfortable using (this also applies to historical figures).

Think carefully about the language you use.

Acknowledge the wide spectrum and intersectionality of queer identities and experiences, and use inclusive language, e.g. "queer" and "LGBTQIA+". While gay people are part of the LGBTQIA+ community, not every LGBTQIA+ person is gay.

If possible, have your LGBTQIA+ project be run by a queer person.

In running an LGBTQIA+ project and doing queer research, an understanding of and connection to the queer community and culture is important. Queer-led projects centre queer perspectives and will make participants feel more comfortable opening up and attending events.

Join the Queer Heritage and Collections Network (<https://queerhcn.org/>).

The QHCN offers valuable resources, including recordings of panels and seminars from previous symposiums, events and an LGBTQIA+ Good Practice Guide. Membership is free and a great way to show your commitment to LGBTQIA+ representation and research.

Queering your museum takes time, don't be discouraged if things are slow. LGBTQIA+ stories are all around us, you just have to find them.

Planning your project:

Create a survey ahead of your project.

Creating an online survey for LGBTQIA+ visitors while planning your project will help you better understand the needs of your LGBTQIA+ audience, plan activities and promote your project. Ask participants what events, activities, etc they would be interested in, and encourage them to leave their contact details for updates about the project.

Be realistic in planning your activities.

Queer research takes a lot of time, as there is not a lot of information available. The majority of historical letters, diaries, documents, etc in archives and collections were created by and about wealthy white people. Lesbian and sapphic relationships can be hard to find, as historic perceptions of lesbianism were very different, and these relationships were often dismissed as “romantic friendships”. These factors can make queer research, and diverse queer research, really difficult. In planning an LGBTQIA+ heritage project, setting aside enough time for research is incredibly important.

Mental health:

Protect your mental health.

In running an LGBTQIA+ project, doing queer research and recording queer oral histories, you will explore some very sensitive and difficult topics. Having a system in place, including regular check-ins and mental health resources, will help protect your mental health.

Protect your participants and readers by including content warnings.

Include content warnings when sharing your queer research, listing any topics (e.g. homophobia/transphobia/biphobia, outing and HIV/AIDS) that might be upsetting to readers. Examples of content warnings can be found online. It can also be helpful to include a list of resources such as Switchboard and MindOut that readers can refer to.

Dealing with negative comments:

Have a statement prepared.

Ahead of your project, prepare a statement emphasising the importance of your project, and your commitment to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion. If relevant, explain

the language you will be using as part of the project. For the *Queer in Wiltshire: Queering Wiltshire* project, we wrote a statement addressing the complicated history of the word “queer” and explaining that for us it “is the most inclusive term we can use, and we use it as a positive word, not seeking to erase or disregard anyone’s identity and history but instead aiming to reflect the diversity of the LGBTQIA+ community”.

Protect the LGBTQIA+ participants and social media users engaging with your project.

LGBTQIA+ identities and initiatives are still subjected to a lot of homophobic and transphobic abuse. It is important to protect the wellbeing of LGBTQIA+ social media users engaging with your queer content, and to create a safe online space. The Queer in Wiltshire Instagram account is carefully monitored. Abusive comments are deleted to protect other users, and any queries and comments are swiftly addressed. In the *Queer in Wiltshire: Queering Wiltshire* booklet, only participants’ first names were used, even in articles that included pictures, to protect their safety and wellbeing.

Be confident in showing that your project is supported and backed by your institution.

Promote your project and encourage the visibility of LGBTQIA+ identities on your museum’s social media and within your museum. If necessary, refer negative comments to your line manager or director to demonstrate support from senior staff.

Finding queer stories:

Research famous LGBTQIA+ historical figures, do they have connections to your area?

Use websites like <https://outstoriesbristol.org.uk/people/biographies/> and <https://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/lgbt-royal-histories/#gs.kluagu> and Wikipedia (e.g. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_LGBTQ_people_from_London) to find queer people that might have connections to your area and your museum. In the *Queer in Wiltshire: Queering Wiltshire* booklet, I connected “first modern lesbian” Anne Lister to our collection through her links to Stonehenge, Ramsbury Manor and Sir Richard Colt Hoare. Use your knowledge of queer culture and history to find items in your collections with previously unidentified queer context. This is how I discovered and queered a biography of the Ladies of Llangollen in our archive.

Research queer authors/artists, do you have any of their works in your collections?

An essential part of queering your museum and running an LGBTQIA+ heritage project is identifying the queer context of objects in your collections. Wiltshire Museum has several books and documents related to LGBTQIA+ authors/artists Siegfried Sassoon, Cecil Beaton and Stephen Tennant (including a signed copy of his poetry collection). While their links to Wiltshire had been recorded, their queer context was unexplored and not tagged in the Museum's database. Identifying LGBTQIA+ authors and artists within your collections is a great way to explore queer (hi)stories.

Find queer history in newspapers.

Historical newspapers can be a great source of local queer history. In exploring newspapers, look at court cases and historical LGBTQIA+ events (e.g. the Sexual Offences Act 1967 and Section 28). The Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre shares helpful advice and resources for queer newspaper research here:

<https://wshc.org.uk/lgbt-history/>

Create your own queer history.

In recording and sharing LGBTQIA+ history, individual queer histories are invaluable. The oral history interviews in the *Queer in Wiltshire: Queering Wiltshire* booklet capture a wide spectrum of identities and experiences. These personal LGBTQIA+ histories include an account of life as a gay teenager in the 1950s, the first Pride marches, the legalisation of gay marriage, growing up queer and trans in the early 2000s, and more. By recording these stories, and in running LGBTQIA+ projects and events, you are creating queer history.

Place a call out for LGBTQIA+ acquisitions.

Acquiring objects, documents and photographs with an LGBTQIA+ history is an essential part of recording and preserving queer history, and queering your museum. Queer Britain, the UK's first LGBTQIA+ Museum, demonstrates the incredibly wide range of LGBTQIA+ objects that can and should be recorded within the museum sector.

Finding participants:

LGBTQIA+ Facebook groups are a great way to promote your project and find participants.

Building a queer audience on platforms like Instagram and Twitter (X) can take time. By joining local LGBTQIA+ Facebook groups (e.g. Swindon LGBT+ Social Group, Chippenham LGBTQIA+ Community and Southwest LGBTQ+ Community), you can communicate with an established local LGBTQIA+ audience. It is a great way to get the word out about your project, find participants, promote events and receive feedback.

Contact and collaborate with local in-person LGBTQIA+ groups.

Working with local LGBTQIA+ social and support groups will help you build connections with the local LGBTQIA+ community, better understand your LGBTQIA+ audience, and find participants for your project. By collaborating on events with local LGBTQIA+ groups, you are also providing them with a free venue for queer activities.

Word-of-mouth promotion is essential.

Encourage LGBTQIA+ participants and groups, and your team, to share the project and your contact details with their queer acquaintances. This is a great way to expand your network, find new participants and encourage participants to attend events with queer friends and family members.

A lot of LGBTQIA+ people are eager to share their stories. Show them your museum is a safe space to do so by using inclusive language, creating an accessible and welcoming environment and demonstrating your commitment to LGBTQIA+ representation and community.

Events:

Queer events are a great way to get more participants, find stories and provide a safe space for local LGBTQIA+ people. These events can take a while to plan and promote, as they are aimed at a specific audience.

If possible, have an LGBTQIA+ person run your events.

Having a queer member of staff run your LGBTQIA+ events will make participants feel more comfortable in attending and sharing. Visibility of queer identities is important in heritage spaces.

If this is an LGBTQIA+ focused event, use queer imagery and language in your promotional materials.

This will help ensure your event is an approachable safe space for LGBTQIA+ people, and further promote queer visibility on your social media and within your museum.

Social media:

If possible, create social media accounts for your project.

Creating social media accounts for your LGBTQIA+ project will help LGBTQIA+ visitors easily find and share information about queer events and activities at your museum. It is also a great way to promote your project and share participant/artist/acquisition call outs.

Promote your project on your museum's social media accounts.

Increase engagement with your project and the visibility of queer identities and experiences by tagging or collaborating with your museum's social media accounts, and sharing your LGBTQIA+ initiatives across several platforms and on your website.