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Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: the Role of English Local Government

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Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) people are minority social groupings whose rights and interests are unrecognised by substantial sections of the UK population. They are subject to hate crime and discrimination (Dick 2009) and face specific issues in relation to accessing welfare provision (Mitchell *et al.* 2008). Whilst there is a normative argument for the protection of LGB people against discrimination, there are also strong business and social justice cases for LGB equalities (see HM Government 2010, Ashworth and Davenport 2011).

This article aims to examine the role of English local government in supporting equality and equitable welfare provision, and local democracy, with regards to the LGB¹ populations that local governments serve. In so doing the article also explores some of the implications of the LGB case in relation to justifications for local government. In its focus on LGB equalities in relation to supporting equality, welfare provision, and democracy at a local level, the article contributes to debates concerning the role of the state in the context of local government contraction (Barnett 2011, p.275), as well as shifting welfare regimes and changing democratic structures, complementing the scholarship that has emerged concerning LGB people as employees of public sector organisations (Colgan and McKearney 2012, Colgan and Wright 2011).

We build on the modest body of literature about LGB equalities and local government internationally (for example Hekma and Duyvendak 2011). In the UK, Cooper (1994) and Carabine (1996) focused on developments in the 1980s and early 1990s, and Cooper and Monro (2003), Carabine and Monro (2004), Monro (2005, 2006, 2007), Cooper (2006, 2007), Colgan *et al.* (2007, 2009) and Colgan and Wright (2011) address subsequent developments. The paper contributes to the literature on the role of the state more broadly (e.g. Cooper 1994, Tremblay *et al.* 2011). We demonstrate in this article that the state at a local level can support LGB peoples' interests and equalities, in its policies, mechanisms and practices; however we do not seek to evaluate the effectiveness of these here.

The nature of the state in neo-liberal democracies has changed in recent years in relation to LGB people, with a trend towards the state taking an active role in implementing LGB equalities in countries such as the UK, including the development of LGB work at a local government level (Richardson and Monro 2012a). In England, this process began at a local level in the 1980s, initially via piecemeal efforts by activists and local government employees (Carabine and Monro 2004), then, since 1997, via initiatives driven by central government as well as LGB community groups. During the New Labour period², English local authorities³ developed their work in relation to LGB people, particularly in terms of democratic representation of LGB people and community leadership regarding diversity and equality, as well as welfare functions such as the provision of social housing. These developments that have taken place in the context of the shift towards the fragmented institutional arrangements associated with governance (Newman *et al.* 2004) and New Labour's (1997-2009) modernisation agenda for local government which included an emphasis on strong individual local leadership, a strengthening of performance/inspection culture, concern with public engagement and democratic renewal (see Barnett 2011). Whilst Monro (2006) suggested that modernisation facilitated LGB equalities work, Colgan and Wright (2011) discuss difficulties

with the implementation of equality policies (see also Ahmed's (2007) critique of race equality policies) as well as more fundamental contradictions concerning the way in which modernisation is tied to a neoliberal agenda of efficiency, whilst equalities work provokes social restructuring and potentially the redistribution of resources. These tensions, as well the changes associated with the recession and the post 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition⁴ (henceforth referred to as 'the Coalition') raise challenges concerning the local government and the LGB equalities agenda.

The Coalition has built on a number of features of the New Labour administration, including an emphasis on local decision making and budgeting, a shift of responsibility from the state to the citizens, and the promotion of private and some voluntary sector provision (Sinclair 2011). Whilst the Coalition has demonstrated commitment to LGB equality (see HM Government 2010), the changes relating to austerity have profoundly affected equalities initiatives. The new Public Sector Equality Duty which was created under the Equalities Act 2010 is regulated by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (Equalities and Human Rights Commission 2011) is threatened (Ramesh 2012), whilst 'Local Government has faced a disproportionately high share of the cuts' (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012, p. 23, see also Conley and Page 2010)⁵. There is, therefore, a contrast between rhetorical commitment to equalities, including LGB equalities, and cutbacks; contradictions are also evident in relation to other equality strands, for instance Conley argues in relation to gender that 'the role of the state remains contradictory, ultimately thwarting legal enforcement of equality when its economic authority and the interests of capital are threatened' (2012, p. 349).

The article addresses the New Labour¹ period, partially because LGB equalities work developed considerably during the 1997-2010 era and because New Labour's policies shaped subsequent developments (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). The devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland has impacted unevenly on local government (Williams and Mooney 2008); this article addresses the English situation in order to gain some depth of analysis. We begin by outlining the methodology, before addressing the role of local government in implementing legislation, delivering welfare, and fostering local democracy.

Methodology

The empirical content of the article is based on anonymised findings from a large Economic and Social Research Council funded study of local authorities in Northern Ireland, Wales, and Northern and Southern England, conducted between 2007 and 2010. The study employed qualitative research methods, including a Participative Action Research (PAR) approach (see McNiff 1998). Qualitative PAR approaches can be included under the 'action research' umbrella to describe 'approaches to enquiry which are participative, grounded in experience, and action-orientated' (Reason and Bradbury 2001, p. xxiv). The English strand of the study tracked the implementation of sexualities equalities policies in two local authorities in Northern England and Southern England. These sites were purposely sampled to include authorities of different types according to political party, type of authority (size and structure), levels of deprivation, location (urban/rural) and levels of performance via Comprehensive Performance Assessment.⁶ Authorities were also sampled using Equality Standard⁷ grades 1-5 (with 5 being the highest); we purposefully selected one with a low Equality Standard grade. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with strategic level and frontline local authority officers and councillors⁸ and their partners in statutory sector and voluntary or LGB community sector agencies, focusing on two different service areas for each authority to enable examination of policies through different levels. We conducted nine interviews in the Northern Authority, in which LGB equalities work was well established,

and eleven in the Southern Authority which had a low Equalities Standard rating. Interviews with eight key national stakeholders (infrastructure representatives and a range of LGB community organization representatives) and five councillors from localities other than those of the case studies were also conducted. In quoting individuals who took part in the case study interviews we have listed their organisational role and the part of England where they worked.

The PAR aspect of the research involved conducting Action Learning Sets⁹ in each of the two case study areas. In our study, each ALS met four times over a period of six months, eight group meetings in total, with members of the ALS representing local authorities, LGB community organisations and partner agencies across each region¹⁰. The ALS helped us to obtain distinctive empirical material in two key respects: the inclusion of participants from local authorities where very little work was being done concerning the LGB agenda and where there was widespread localized antipathy or ignorance, and the observation of processes of organizational change and resistance as participants implemented LGB related actions within their authorities during the course of the ALS. Qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on both interview and ALS data (Boyatziz 1998); core themes included drivers of change regarding the LGB equalities agenda and community engagement.

Local government and legislation

There was a major shift in England in the 1997-2010 period regarding sexualities-related legislation, which was driven by wider cultural changes, LGB activism (see Kollman and Waites 2011) and European directives, including the European Commission Directive on anti-discrimination and sexual orientation (2000/78/EC). Legislative changes culminated in the Single Equality Act 2010 which replaced existing equalities legislation (Equalities and Human Rights Commission 2012), outlawing discrimination in the provision of goods, services and facilities and requiring public and private organisations delivering services to act to prevent discrimination. The Single Equality Act differs from previous LGB-related legislation in its reflexivity; public authorities are framed as responsible for equalities (see Conley 2012).

The impact of legislation on LGB equalities was discussed widely by our research contributors. Some contributors suggested that the legislation was ineffective, even in localities that purported to be good at LGB work. However, the majority of contributors to the research emphasised the importance of legislation in relation to LGB service provision. For example a leisure manager noted that it ‘focuses people’s minds and makes people think about the issues’. In some local authorities, there was commitment from the top to ensure that the council played a community leadership role in preventing discrimination and supporting the LGB communities. However, the research also indicated that the legislation was increasing the legitimacy given to LGB equalities work and providing ‘handles’ which could be used strategically in order to implement work (McNulty *et al.* 2010, see also Conley and Page 2010); this was particularly evident in local authorities where there was resistance to the LGB equalities agenda, as was the case in the Southern Authority:

‘...although you try and persuade people, you’ve also got to use some of the stick around the law, and around inspection regimes, so it’s only very recently that we’ve had sufficient law on LGBT issues that we’ve really felt safe to start to do things. And that might sound like a bit of a cop-out, but I’ve always had to be able to say “Well, we’re doing this because...”, and that’s not saying that all officers in the council have got really appalling views. It’s more the sort of political structure of the organisation,

and so you have to work in a sort of pragmatic way...’ (Equality and Diversity Manager)

The majority of contributors to the research thought that the legislative changes had raised the profile of LGB equalities initiatives in the context of local authority service provision and partnership work. However, our findings did demonstrate a very wide variation in the extent to which policy statements were implemented; some of the contributors to the Action Learning Sets came from local authorities where virtually no LGB-related work was taking place, whilst others had sophisticated and multifaceted strategies and implementation mechanisms supporting work in this area. There were a range of reasons for this including differences in size and location, and variations in perceived population composition and political commitment. In Richardson and Monro (2012a) we explore the range of ways in which local actors resist LGB equalities directives; via overt refusal to comply, marginalisation, or ‘soft’ blocking mechanisms. These patterns of resistance were especially evident where particular local authorities had entrenched cultures of heterosexism, often reflecting heterosexist aspects of their constituent communities. A few contributors also discussed frontline resentment of the legislation where LGB equalities work was already an established part of a directorate’s remit (especially in areas such as social care), or where legislation was being brought in fast, without the necessary provision of resources to implement it. Some of these trends, for instance the issue of an ‘equalities hierarchy’, are reflected elsewhere in the literature (Colgan and Wright 2011) and appear to be entrenched in a long term fashion (see Monro 2006).

Implementation mechanisms

Local government modernisation provided the context for the development of implementation mechanisms to support the new sexualities legislation; including Best Value which was replaced with the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2002-3 and then the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA) until 2010. The Equality Standard was introduced in 2001 as a benchmarking tool and replaced in 2010 by the Equality Framework for Local Government (Improvement and Development Agency (I&DeA 2009)). The research findings indicated that these implementation mechanisms, along with other factors such as political will, effective partnerships and robust leadership, were important in embedding LGB equalities within local authority practices. Whilst there were discussions of the difficulties associated with these mechanisms, specifically the issue of initiative overload and the way in which people tended to ‘box-tick’ in order to meet targets, statutory sector contributors still argued that the implementation mechanisms provide a means of change, particularly in recalcitrant authorities, for example:

‘In any business what gets measured gets done and actually if you can align the principles of equality and diversity to your performance management framework then again that’s about embedding it into the mainstream. So the Comprehensive Performance Assessment you know did have the sort of thread of equality and diversity sort of running through the various key lines of enquiry.’ (Manager, Southern Authority)

Post-Coalition there has been a reduction of the structures aimed at implementing equalities policies. The Audit Commission, which is an independent national corporation charged with auditing public bodies including local authorities, is to have many of its functions transferred

to the private sector (see Audit Commission 2012a). In its only mention of equalities issues, the Commission on the Future of Local Government (2012, p. 20) states that, 'Councils need to find a way to safeguard risk and equalities issues but not constrain action for those who can make a difference but who are not able to deal with bureaucracy'. In addition, the new Equality Framework for Local Government is based on self-assessment rather than external audit (Local Government Association 2012) and may be less effective than the Equality Standard. This weakening of equalities performance management mechanisms and regimes may be very problematic for the LGB equalities agenda, and for equalities more generally, for example Conley and Page (2010) argue with respect to gender that 'changes to the specific duties in the Equality Act 2010 that weaken the imperative for impact assessments could seriously undermine achievements' (2010:323). Our research findings indicated the importance that externally imposed inspection regimes have in the implementation of local government initiatives, as a complement to reflexive legislation (see Conley 2012) which authorities can implement in minimalistic ways. Those research contributors who were concerned with policy development, implementation and compliance emphasised the pressures that local authorities are under to deliver services and to prioritise those initiatives with the strongest drivers. LGB peoples' needs may be squeezed out if there is no compliance attached to LGB-related initiatives, especially if there is vocal local community antipathy to the LGB equalities agenda. As Lowndes and Pratchett (2012, p. 26) note, 'Local authorities and other public bodies will be expected to develop their own performance and reporting mechanisms, which will focus on those issues which their communities want rather than centrally defined or prescribed metrics'. In addition to this general reduction in equalities implementation mechanisms and the introduction of a form of localism which may obscure the interests of minority groups, the Public Duties are focused on race, gender and disability (Local Government Chronicle 2009) and sexual orientation may therefore be overlooked. Therefore, whilst the implementation mechanisms developed under New Labour have perhaps helped foster LGB people's inclusion in local authority service provision, the situation under the Coalition is more problematic. The situation can be compared to the 1980s because of the public service retrenchment (see Cooper 1994), but the Equalities Act 2010 and the Coalition stance provides a different context.

Local government as welfare provider

The provision of welfare has historically been a central role of English local government, and in recent years, there has been a move towards a mixed economy of welfare (Cochrane *et al.* 2001), in which welfare is provided not only by the state but also by a range of private and voluntary and community sector agencies. Under New Labour, there was a fundamental change in welfare regimes, from top-down redistribution to 'social investment' where state responsibilities should be met by individuals taking responsibilities and fulfilling obligations (Prideaux 2005). Local government was still seen as a service provider, but was increasingly an advocate of service users' interests, and also fulfilled 'a new state-centred role in facilitating the "joining up" of service delivery at a local level' (Barnett 2011, p. 176). This change in the role of local government has been recently emphasised, with discussions about the need for inclusive, flexible networks (Commission on the Future of Local Government 2012).

Whilst work concerning LGB equalities has taken place in some local authorities since the 1980s in areas such as social services and housing, (see Cooper 1994), the terrain changed considerably during the New Labour period, and the post 1997 legislative changes meant that LGB related service provision became somewhat consolidated. Our research indicated a number of ways in which local government played an important role in LGB-related welfare

provision during the 2007-2010 period, including service user monitoring and consultation, policy making, planning, and service coordination and commissioning. For example a contributor said that:

‘...last year I commissioned a very small service level agreement with them [voluntary sector organisation] to try and set up a consultation network of lesbian, gay, bisexual people so that we can start to explore locally what their issues are and how we need to change services.’ (Manager, Southern Authority)

Discussions within the Action Learning Sets indicated that commissioning was seen by some research contributors as being problematic because of the extent to which potentially homophobic faith-based organisations are being contracted to provide services. Since the research was carried out, developments have taken place which may ameliorate this. As Ashworth and Davenport note, some local authorities have specifically built equalities into commissioning, for example Leeds City Council’s 2011 *Equality and Diversity Policy 2011-2015* (unpaginated) states that ‘Key policies – such as those relating to employment, service delivery, community engagement, commissioning and procurement – are specifically designed to promote equality of opportunity and protect people against unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation’.

Local government has been a central partner in the delivery of welfare to LGB people. Whilst implementation mechanisms concerning LGB welfare provision cut across the different service areas, their effects were most pronounced in the services that deal with the more personal aspects of LGB people’s lives: social care, education, youth work, adoption and fostering, community development, community safety, health, and culture and leisure. In the Northern locality, good practice was demonstrated, for example:

‘...we get quite a few people referred to us who’ve experienced problems within hostels, so sometimes, that might be verbal abuse, that might be not being able to leave their room, all the way up to assaults, and the amount of the protection that those people get is not always ideal. It’s something we’ve raised with [housing partnership] and the [LGBT network] is going to convene a special meeting so the hostel providers can come and talk about what they perceive as the issues.’ (Officer)

Sexualities equalities work provides a particular slant on key debates within welfare analysis, as it involves dealing with issues traditionally seen as pertaining to the private realm, and with forms of sexual identity which run counter to heterosexist traditionalism. We found that some employees in local authorities experience difficulties concerning the perceived sensitivity of sexual identity issues, heterosexist perceptions of worthiness, affective barriers, and specific difficulties with monitoring (Richardson and Monro 2012b). These issues cut across authorities, although there was a more nuanced understanding amongst actors in authorities with more evolved provision. Arguably, service provision to LGB people challenges the public/private divides built into welfare regimes and wider society in specific ways.

As indicated above, there has been a contraction of welfare provision since the New Labour period. However, research and policy work concerning the welfare of LGB people has developed in recent years. This work comes primarily from the community and voluntary sector and some of it addresses the needs of specific sections of the communities, and

intersectional disadvantage (see Monro 2010). For instance the bisexual community representative described the ways in which the equalities legislation is less pertinent to bisexual people, who have varied relationship forms (monogamous, single, and multiply-partnered). One major issue is a lack of resources to enable engagement with service providers; however there is some good practice taking place:

I do a lot of training...the training you do on bisexuality is quite different [to that about lesbians and gay men] because it's more about opening people up to diversity and variation...there's two really different ways of doing it...one way is this small minority group and 'here's how you, what you need to understand about them' and the other...says 'hey we all need to question these boxes because we don't really fit into them (Bisexual Community Representative)

Other groups also have specific concerns, for example invisibility is a major issue for Black and Minority Ethnic LGB people, and they are being failed by many service providers due to assumptions that they are heterosexual (Guasp and Kibirige 2012), whilst there are reports of failings in service provision to disabled LGB people (Rembis 2010) and older LGB people (Taylor 2012). Whilst much of the work has been done by LGB community and voluntary sector organisations, other organisations are also developing policy and practice in this field as demonstrated in the following quote:

'Age Concern have done a really good piece of research about older people and LGBT issues, and so I share that with services...there are issues that older people, it was illegal and they'd have had to keep it hidden and they'd be much more scared, and people just assume that all old people are heterosexual, and that people are scared about care services coming into their home' (Equality and Diversity Manager, Southern Authority)

The development of richer, more inclusive and more nuanced knowledge about LGB people and welfare needs can be interpreted in relation to the development of a mixed economy of welfare; a range of organisations are actively engaged with this agenda. However there are concerns about the exploitation of LGB community and voluntary sector organisations, for instance *The Bisexuality Report* (Barker *et al.* 2012) was produced by a group of committed volunteers from an under-resourced community (Monro 2012). These concerns reflect wider difficulties with the Coalition notion of the Big Society (Alcock 2010) in which responsibility for social inclusion, justice and welfare is placed on individuals and community groups. As the Commission on the Future of Local Government (2012, p. 17) reports, 'in terms of community engagement, the evidence revealed an anxiety about the capacity of different communities to take on new responsibilities and opportunities in the absence of well-functioning public services'. There are also issues concerning the enforceability of the Equality Duties across a range of public and private sector organisations, given the reduction in compliance mechanisms. Lastly, some of the challenges that have affected local government welfare provision to LGB people will also affect private and voluntary sector organisations engaged in service delivery to these communities, notably homophobia and biphobia, and the perceived sensitivity and 'privacy' of sexual identity issues.

Local government and democracy

Three main types of democracy exist in English local government: representative, via councillors and leader/deputy leader who represent the interests of the local electorate; participative, in which local people participate in service provision planning and delivery via a range of mechanisms such as community fora; and deliberative, in which space is provided for the discussion and mediation of different local interests. Our research showed that councillors play a key role in initiating and driving forward equalities initiatives as well as shaping the culture of their local authorities regarding sexual diversity. There were wide divergences in councillor attitudes towards LGB equalities across local authorities, ranging from a normalising acceptance to active resistance. It is worth noting that councillors were involved in direct advocacy work as well as service planning, as demonstrated in the following interview excerpt with a councillor in a Northern Authority:

Respondent: A young woman came to us and said she was suffering... hate crime because of the neighbours next door, for obvious reasons of her sexuality.

Interviewer: Right okay, and who did she come to? Did she come to you as a councillor, or did she come to (-)?

Respondent: She came to me, yeah... and then you've got to put some support in, and you know support that individual.

Interviewer: Yeah, so what did you do? Did you send someone from the team along, or did you get the police involved, or what?

Respondent: We have a Community Safety Team, but I've got another officer who works with vulnerable women to go along, and to meet her in the café and to get that support away from her door.

Whilst representative democracy and advocacy work by councillors remain central to the role of local authorities with respect to LGB people, participative and deliberative forms of democracy are also important. New Labour's local modernisation agenda supported measures to increase citizen participation in local government and structures within which deliberative democracy could take place (see Leach and Wingfield 1999, L. Richardson 2005). There is a long history of local government-LGB community partnership working (see Cooper 1994, Monro 2006) and work has continued, including the involvement of LGB people via local partnerships, service-specific partnership boards and networks, and consultation with LGB groups. Contributors said for example:

'We've got an LSP [Local Strategic Partnership], we've got a Community Strategy that talks about inclusion, social cohesion, there are elements in there that they recognise the need to reach out to those groups [LGBT]...we've got quite a strong organisation that represents that group in the town, and they're fully included and seen as part of, seen as a key stakeholder along with other groups...they sit on the LSP as well.' (Councillor, Northern Authority)

Our research findings suggested that in some localities – typically urban areas with large LGB populations – national and regional LGB community groups engaged successfully with their local authorities to improve LGB equalities, establishing as well as representing interests. This influence was in some cases linked with the work of Stonewall and their

Diversity Champions scheme (Stonewall 2012) which pro-LGB equalities authorities were engaging with in a competitive fashion, but took place via consultation with local LGB communities around issues such as the management of the local pub and club scene, healthcare provision, and community safety. In some localities, typically rural areas with low numbers of visible LGB people, there was much less evidence of participative democratic processes and outcomes concerning LGB issues.

Deliberative democratic processes were also evident in our research findings, particularly concerning the way in which local authorities sometimes provided space for different sections of the community to debate and influence service planning and provision. The research indicated that inter-community tensions were most pronounced around the intersections between sexual minority, race and faith groupings (although, of course, there are LGB people who are of faith and/or those who belong to non-white heritage groups). There was discussion of the ways in which local authorities deal with these tensions via the use of community fora representing diverse interests, and the establishment of boundaries regarding the extent to which different groups can impose their rights claims on each other, as illustrated in the following quote:

‘I suppose, you know, there are going to be areas where there are clashes between...or perceived clashes between the beliefs and rights of different groups...I think that in practice if that kind of clash was to come up you can always be clear about, you know, where we’re involved as the local authority it’s not acceptable to, that one person’s rights lead to discrimination against another group, I think that’s where the, you know, the line is drawn, you hold your own beliefs fine but if that leads to you to try and discriminate against somebody else then that’s where we draw the line.’
(Northern Authority, policy and research manager)

Whilst participative and deliberative democratic structures and processes provided some opportunities for LGB people to influence the work of their local authorities, there were limitations to this; not just in the generic ways described above but also in LGB-specific ways. The findings indicated that where LGB people were engaged, representatives from the more established equality groupings (race, gender, and disability) tended to dominate democratic fora, and in some cases, community and voluntary sector funding provided by the statutory sector to support engagement. There were also differences within the LGB communities, with gay men tending to predominate and bisexual people being the most marginalised, and those people experiencing intersectional disadvantage (for example impoverished, rural, or disabled LGB people) faced particular barriers to participation.

The wider difficulties associated with local government and participative democratic structures are well rehearsed in the literature. For example, Wilson (2003) contends that although local actors participate in policy networks they rarely have major influence on policy outcomes. The research findings indicated a number of problems associated with the engagement of LGB people in local participative democracy, which were also present during the New Labour era (see Monro 2006, Colgan and Wright 2011), and which are relevant more broadly across the voluntary and community sector. These include a lack of capacity and resourcing the domination of certain individuals and groups over others (Michels and De Graaf 2010), and the rhetorical nature of some engagement processes. Contributors said for example:

I go to the quarterly LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] group's forum and it's completely useless because it's effectively a reporting structure, everyone reports back from the work they're doing, the mayor doesn't actually talk about what work he's doing, if he did then we'd know how little he's doing and all these idiots in a room just seem to be quite happy with the fact that they get a free supper or something.' (Southern England, Muslim LGB organisation representative)

The Equalities Duties introduced by the Single Equality Act 2010 oblige public authorities to 'Foster good relations between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it' (Equalities and Human Rights Commission 2011, p. 6). These duties support participative and deliberative processes within local authorities, by encouraging them to develop mechanisms to support deliberation. However, the Coalition has moved away from participative and deliberative democratic structures, towards aggregative devices which aim to ascertain the public will by adding individual preferences together and reaching a majority decision (see Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). The reduction of public sector structures and engagement mechanisms tied in with this move, and it is problematic for LGB people, because they are a marginalised minority whose voices and interests are likely to be lost in majoritarian political processes. Electoral representation is important at a local level, but with the exception of a few localities with substantial 'pink votes' LGB people are unlikely to make a significant positive electoral difference. The changes concerning LGB issues in local government therefore provide an example of the kind of erosion of local democracy discussed by Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) as being due to the aggregate approach. The Commission on the Future of Local Government (2012) provides a cogent argument for strengthening and broadening participative democracy at a local level, which could potentially offset the risks that aggregate approaches pose for minority groupings.

Conclusion and discussion

This article provides a discussion of the changing roles of local government in relation to supporting equality, LGB welfare provision and local democracy, focusing on the English case. It presents an overview of the developments that took place during the New Labour period, and goes some way towards analysing current trends and challenges. The article, in its examination of LGB work in local government settings, identifies issues that are of relevance more broadly in the context of far reaching policy reforms and financial retrenchment, highlighting concerns about the reforms in relation to minority groupings and equalities.

LGB people's interests were advanced, to a degree, during the New Labour period, partially in response to the introduction of a raft of sexualities equalities legislation, and welfare provision to LGB people was in evidence across a range of areas. LGB people were also democratically engaged at a local level, via participative and deliberative, as well as representative, democratic structures and mechanisms. However, our findings support the criticisms of New Labour and modernisation that have been raised by authors such as Colgan and Wright (2011). Advances were far from uniform; even in those authorities where work is established, barriers remained in relation to capacity, commitment, and institutionalised prejudice. Some of these barriers relate to longstanding tensions around the supposedly private nature of sexuality, and heterosexist attitudes about the primacy of certain types of relationship and family form; these tensions will continue to play out in political and policy arenas. However, the LGB equalities situation is currently being shaped by another set of forces, following the onset of the recession and the formation of the Coalition in 2010. These

forces, in combination, have led to a shrinking of the state; a reduction of the structures ensuring the implementation of legislation and the provision of welfare. With respect to local government, this does not only mean a further shift towards partnership arrangements between public, private and third sectors, but also a rethinking of the role of local government itself.

It appears that a collision of different forces is taking place within the arena of local government and governance. The legislation supports the protection of the LGB communities, as do a range of political and policy actors, and our findings indicate that legislation and performance-related implementation mechanisms appear to be particularly important in supporting equalities amongst less advanced authorities. However, this support is undermined by the recession-related and ideologically driven public sector cuts (see Conley and Page 2010) which render public authorities less able to meet the needs of LGB people. The push towards marketisation has meant a reduction of the structures which facilitate the implementation of the equalities legislation, in line not just with the tightening of the public purse but with ideological support for a reduced state. This ideological drive to reduce the state and related mechanisms (see Kelly 2011) is problematic when considering minority rights, which will not be protected by market mechanisms. It also overlooks the way in which 'welfarism is structured by the wish to encourage national growth and wellbeing through the promotion of social responsibility and the mutuality of social risk' (Rose and Miller 2010, p. 289). The LGB case therefore illustrates broader dynamics concerning local government and equalities, and underlines the importance of this layer of government, as a provider and commissioner of services to marginalised social groups, as well as the crucial leadership role that that local government can play (see Commission on the Future of Local Government 2012).

Contradictions concerning the recession, Coalition policy, and civil society are evident with respect to the notion of the Big Society. As Lowndes and Pratchett (2012) contend, this involves a zero-sum understanding of the relationship between the state and civil society, in which more civil society must mean a reduced state. However, a strong civil society is arguably dependent on strong local government, which creates opportunities for community engagement and mobilisation. We argue that the adoption of a community governance role by local government is particularly important with respect to the LGB communities because of the small size of the 'out' LGB population and the vulnerabilities and welfare needs that members of these communities may have. The majoritarian or aggregate approaches to democracy favoured by the Coalition may overlook the interests of these populations despite a commitment to the devolution of power to a local level, because the participative and deliberative structures that would enable the effective community engagement of minority groups have been weakened or abolished. The politically contentious nature of LGB-related initiatives (Monro 2006) renders aggregate approaches particularly problematic with respect to LGB people; councillors in localities with high populations of homophobic and biphobic individuals will be likely to avoid them. In addition, the issue of competing rights claims (specifically sexual orientation and faith or ethnicity-related) will be ongoing, but with a reduced infrastructure to support communities in dealing with areas of tension, it will be difficult for these to be managed effectively via deliberative democratic mechanisms.

Using the example of LGB initiatives, it is argued from both normative and practical perspectives that local government has a key part to play in supporting local communities, in developing and coordinating welfare provision and in connecting communities to service providers and policy makers via democratic mechanisms. Local government lies at the nexus of civil society and the state (see Barnett 2011) and can therefore play a unique role in

planning and commissioning services. The movement towards a mixed economy of welfare may open up opportunities for the advancement of the interests of LGB people and others via procurement and commissioning (see Ashworth and Davenport 2011); however there are risks associated with the fragmentation and reduction of public services. In addition, as Stoker (2011) notes, the sustainability of local government may be questionable if it is to act only as network coordinator (see also Wakefield 2012 not paginated). To conclude, therefore, local government has an important part to play regarding the LGB population and equalities, in implementing legislation, welfare coordination and provision, and the promotion of local democracy.

Notes

1. LGB is used as an acronym, but we recognise that there are divergences and tensions between LGB people. Transgender is not included because their concerns are often different (see Richardson and Monro 2012a).
2. 'New Labour' was the term given to the Labour Party led government which ran from 1997-2010; the 'New' reflected a shift away from socialism towards neo-liberalism and a revised image for the Labour Party.
3. Local Authorities are the local government organisations in the UK and they are also known as 'councils'.
4. The Coalition government has been in place since May 2010 and is formed from the right wing Conservative Party and the centre left (arguably) Liberal Democrats.
5. The issue of public sector cuts was also a major feature of the 1980s period (see Cooper 1994). The Coalition period is different for a number of reasons, notably because of cross-party support for the equalities agenda.
6. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment was the precursor to the Comprehensive Area Assessment; these were means by which the performance of English local authorities was assessed by central government in the period between 2002 and May 2010 (see Audit Commission 2012b).
7. The Equalities Standard was an assessment mechanism used in local authorities from 2001-2010 when they were replaced by Equality Frameworks (see Local Government Association 2012).
8. Councillors are elected local government representatives and they are also known as 'elected members'.
9. An Action Learning Set (ALS) is a facilitated series of meetings between stakeholders, in which stakeholders define the focus of discussions and in which mutual support enables the identification of organisational problems and possible strategies for dealing with them.
10. The majority of participants were drawn from different local authorities to those acting as case studies; they were self-selecting following an open invitation via email networks to Equalities Leads across both Northern and Southern regions; these Leads distributed the call via their networks including with LGB communities. There was considerable representation of front line Local Authority workers and Equalities Officers and less representation of LGB community representatives, Councillors, and partner agencies. LGB individuals unconnected to groups known to Equalities Officers will not have been included; future research could seek to include more LGB people.

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