This work is being taken forward internationally by Dr Kath Browne, who is leading a new project funded by the ESRC as one of its 2014 transformative research projects into what makes a life that is liveable including examining the impacts of equalities legislation in the UK and India.

In Brighton a project called Count Me In Too (CMIT), with lead researcher Dr Browne, worked with the University’s Community University Partnership Programme and has been central to the development of local policies on alcohol, community safety and domestic violence as well as contributing to the city’s LGBT-specific housing strategy being a focus of the city’s housing strategy.

Brighton is home to thriving communities of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Research from the University of Brighton is helping to support their needs, change policy and professional practice, and provide protection for vulnerable people where wider society’s attitudes are adversely affecting their lives.

Since 2003, academics at the University of Brighton have undertaken participatory action research to identify the specific health and wellbeing needs of LGBT people in areas such as mental health, suicide prevention, substance misuse, domestic violence and alcohol. The research has changed local and national policy and helped to develop services to reflect the diverse needs and experiences of LGBT communities.

Participatory action research involves people in the design, implementation and the dissemination of research, not simply as ‘subjects’. This research has produced new knowledge about the mental health, housing and community safety needs of LGBT communities, demonstrating a need for a broader social policy and identifying programmes that include both policy and practice.

In the UK, the research has influenced policy resulting in the first local LGBT housing strategy and the first suicide strategy in Brighton and Hove that focuses centrally on the needs of LGBT people. Recommendations from the research have also been adopted by the Department of Health, the UK Drug Policy Commission, the Cabinet Office and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and this research has been used in the development of local policies in the UK. The research has been influential in shaping national policy in Australia and in the UK.

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CMIT was of fundamental use in helping us to develop the city’s LGBT People’s Housing Strategy. The research provided a vivid insight into the lives and experiences of the city’s LGBT communities that we would not have got from our traditional engagement routes. Whilst CMIT was some time ago, the relationships and understanding developed during this project have remained and LGBT-specific housing needs and action remain a key focus of our new housing strategy.

Andy Staniford, Housing Strategy Manager, Brighton & Hove City Council

Multiple experiences of discrimination leave some LGBT people with a sense of hopelessness that things can never get better. The Suicidal Distress project, led by Dr Katherine Johnson, worked with MindOut, a mental health service, and Allsorts, a youth project in Brighton, to address the needs of this group. The research showed that rejection by families and leaving home without a support network in place can lead to sexual exploitation and issues of personal safety. Bullying at school and workplace discrimination also increase the propensity for isolation, depression and suicidal despair.

The key finding was the importance of creating a safe environment via LGBT-specific services where LGBT people can talk about their mental health, and developing community networks for facilitating connections and overcoming a sense of isolation.

Research continues and the university’s new Transforming Sexuality & Gender research cluster will focus on innovative and creative methods to generate impact and change. “Not everyone wants to sit responding to questions about their lives,” says Dr Johnson. “For young people especially, talking about themselves is not something they’re used to doing. Using creativity, whether it’s photography, art, sculpture or even building with Lego, is a safe and engaging way to begin the process of discussion.”

Another new area of research is focusing on the part that social media plays in the way that a youth service provider reaches and engages isolated, marginalised, vulnerable and at risk LGBT youth in their everyday campaign work and service provision. Led by Dr Olu Jenzen and Irmi Karl from the College of Arts and Humanities, and in collaboration with Allsorts, the project has identified a range of good practice in the use of social media, but has also highlighted shortcomings in the context of outreach communications.

Reaching the hard to reach requires strategies that go beyond creating a social media presence. Early findings indicate that the most marginalised group – transgender and gender queer young people – actively seek out alternative social media platforms with a more open ended structure than for example Facebook. Research is demonstrating that LGBT young people do not rate anonymity as a benefit of using online communication, welcoming the fact that staff and volunteers with whom they are interacting are visible as ‘out’ lesbian, gay, bi or transgender people and that young people can communicate openly and safely is a significant benefit.