

## Chris Wills

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**PARTICIPANT:** Okay, so my name is Chris Wills. I work at Manchester Metropolitan University as an administrator. I've lived in Manchester since 2011, I grew up in Folkestone which is smallish seaside town in Kent, right down in the south east corner. Wasn't a fantastic place to grow up if you're gay, still isn't I don't think especially, although they did have their first ever Pride earlier this year. I guess things must have moved on a bit since I stopped living there. I moved to Leeds in 2003 from Folkestone and then lived in Leeds for eight years before coming to Manchester.

As well as working at the university I am also a councillor on Manchester City Council representing residents in a part of South Manchester. In terms of my involvement with the LGBT community I'm an active member of LGBT Labour which is an organisation that is affiliated to the Labour Party and which focused on advancing LGBT equality. I personally say, and it's true, that nearly all of the advances in LGBT rights that we've seen in the last fifty years, starting with the act that led to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales in 1967 have happened under Labour governments. So I am extremely proud of the advances that have been made but there's still an awful lot to do and that is why I remain involved in trying to keep pushing for further advances in LGBT equality.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** Could you tell me a little bit more about Folkestone, growing up there and what it was like when you first started to have a sense that you were gay and how that was?

**PARTICIPANT:** So as I say, Folkestone not the most amazing place to grow up gay. I mean, as an example, when I was growing up my MP, my local MP was Michael Howard who was part of the Thatcher government that introduced Section 28. Never a friend of the LGBT community at all. And just generally there was that small town mentality there where there was very little tolerance, there was very little opportunity. By the time I was in my early 20s, which was around about when I came out because I'd never felt much great encouragement to come out growing up there... although my mother was very supportive, she was very happy for me when I came out and in fact when I told her the first thing she said to me was 'oh, that's nice darling, would you like a cup of tea?' So she was absolutely fine. But you obviously, you're a little bit more cautious about telling other people.

In the early noughties, sort of towards the end of the time I lived there before I moved to the North of England, there was one gay bar/gay friendly bar in Folkestone which was only really a gay bar a couple of nights a week and it was tacked on to a restaurant as well, and it was owned by this guy called Lee who was Welsh and he and his partner ran it. He was quite friendly although he did once say to me, one evening when I was in there: [in a Welsh accent] 'so tell me Chris', and I apologise to all Welsh people at this point for my terrible Welsh accent, 'so tell me Chris, have

you ever tried a threesome?' And I said 'no', and he said 'oh, you've got to try a threesome'. I passed up on that opportunity but...

Yeah, it was, that was the extent of it in Folkestone and elsewhere in Kent you would struggle to find anywhere, there were maybe one or two places in Canterbury which tended to be... they tended to deploy subterfuge in order to advertise the fact that you could go there, be openly gay and not get beaten up.

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So there was one club night called 'girls and boys' where the G of 'girls', the A of 'and' and the Y in 'boys' were all capitalised and you'd look for little rainbow stickers in the windows of pubs and bars as sort of a signal that it was alright to go there and you'd be scouring online to see where was listed as being gay or gay-friendly. And I remember you'd go in with friends to this place that was a country club out in the middle of the sticks where again it was only a Saturday night maybe once or twice a month that it did a gay night and because it was completely off the beaten track, unless you went with someone who was the designated driver you ended up driving there yourself and that meant that you couldn't drink all night because you'd have to drive yourself home again.

So yeah, it was very limited in terms of scope and opportunity in Folkestone which is why once I was out in my early twenties, I was itching to move away and move somewhere where I could be more open, basically, and feel that there was more opportunity.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** So is that the point that you moved to Leeds or was that later on?

**PARTICIPANT:** No, I moved to Leeds in 2003. I mean, that was part of the reason. I think overall I got to the stage where... because the other issue with Folkestone for many years is that, like a lot of these smaller coastal towns, you have quite high older population there and for anyone who was young, once you reach a certain age then you're looking to move away somewhere where there's going to be more opportunity for you generally career-wise and so on. I moved to Leeds mainly because I couldn't afford to live in London and Brighton was also getting very expensive at this point. I mean, this was 2003 and it was already getting expensive. And I plumped for Leeds because it's a city, a lot bigger than Folkestone but at the same time it looked to be a manageable size. I think that was the other reason I didn't want to move to London, aside from the expense, it's that London's such a big city and it just seems to go on forever and you can feel a bit lost and swallowed up in it, whereas Leeds, it seemed a decent size but also a manageable size.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** Okay. So you were in Folkestone up until the point you moved to Leeds, is that right?

**PARTICIPANT:** Yes.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** So could you say a little bit more what it was like being a teenager, in your twenties, in Folkestone?

**PARTICIPANT:** I basically kept the thoughts and the feelings that I was developing very much to myself. Maybe sort of dropping the odd, I don't know, hint or suggestion to my mother, sometimes maybe acting a little bit camp about the place. I think maybe by the time I finally told her it probably didn't come as much of a surprise because she'd probably recognised the signs earlier on. The other thing is that I was home schooled so I wasn't going to school every day and so I wasn't having that peer interaction. Possibly if I had done, I don't know, the way I was dealing with it... well it would have had to have been very different. And I may have run more directly in to a lot of that prejudice if I had done and would have had to try and navigate that.

I think my decision to come out, it was precipitated by, I went on a week's holiday to Edinburgh, I think it was the summer of 2002 and the Festival was on at the time which was my main reason for going, but there is also a gay scene there and so I took the opportunity to explore that and had a couple of experiences and I came back and decided 'I'm 24', which I was at the time, 'I think, you know, it's time to come out', basically. And so I did.

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So I'd also, for a year, '99-2000, I'd spent that time out travelling New Zealand so again that was very much a time where I had the opportunity to, without wishing to sound all hippy or anything, discover myself. Or at any rate have that time away from where I'd been growing up to... you know, when you're in your early 20s it is the time you sort of try and work out who you are, what your place is in the world, that sort of thing. What your identity is.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** I'm just wondering, you said you were home schooled. What was your education like about the LGBT community, or as you didn't have the peer interactions you didn't have other people talking about things like that necessarily. Did you have to do your own research to find out information on yourself?

**PARTICIPANT:** I would say my education on the LGBT community came primarily, via if there were any documentaries or dramas on the television. And you know, my mother, you know I think this is why she had no issue accepting me, she's sort of very tolerant, open-minded person herself. So when I was a teenager, in the Nineties, there would be these documentary strands usually on BBC 2 or Channel 4, and dramas about people in gay relationships. So I suppose that was it, it was latching on to those points of identification. I suppose a lot of those dramas, they tended to be very angsty and people were mentally tortured trying to juggle their secret identity as a gay person with the closeted self that they presented to the rest of the world. I suspect like a lot of people in my generation, when Queer as Folk came along at the end of the Nineties, it was quite revolutionary because there'd

never been a drama that was focused around the gay community and which was completely unapologetic about the lives that we lead, that made no apology at all for the fact that casual sex is a big part of the lives that a lot of gay people live, and going out and partying a lot of nights, and living in a city like Manchester where it's very easy to do that because there's so much on offer. So I think that was a massive eye opener to me and that was probably as well, by the time that was first broadcast I'd just turned 21 so again that was probably one of the things that started to plant the seed of me needing to start moving out in to the open. Obviously it took a few years but I got there.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** I was going to ask, when did you first hear... do you remember how you first heard about this thing, HIV or AIDS?

**PARTICIPANT:** Growing up as a child in the Eighties I do remember - I'd have to have been eight or nine at the time - those public information films where you had John Hurt intoning 'don't die or ignorance' and the tombstones and the icebergs. So that was how I, like a lot of people, became aware of HIV and AIDS. I mean I'm fortunately too young to remember the absolutely horrific way the tabloids approached the subject and too young to also remember film of people, these emaciated patients wasting away in hospital wards. I suppose my awareness increased as a teenager. I remember watching Blue, Derek Jarman's last film when it came out just before he died, I think that was one of the things that really increased my awareness of, you know, he made this film that was effectively... well, it was just a blue screen with him speaking over it because one of the effects of AIDS was that he'd lost pretty much all his vision.

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So I became increasingly aware of what it was doing to the community and then also towards the end of the decade was aware of the fact that things were starting to become more hopeful, that advances in medical treatment were happening which meant that even though there was no sign of a cure for AIDS, various combinations of drugs could at least extend people's lives to the point where they'd hopefully live for just as long as if they'd never become HIV positive. So that is how my awareness developed over that time, so I grew up with a decent awareness and understanding and also an understanding of how you can catch AIDS and also how you can't catch it. So you're not going to get it from sharing a bath towel from somebody or kissing somebody or somebody sneezing, that sort of thing.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** So growing up in Kent as you were saying, you went to some parties and some, maybe once every two weeks or something. Was there any stigma around HIV and AIDS within that gay scene even though it was very small? Was there any stigma around it?

**PARTICIPANT:** Thinking back... I don't recall anything specifically at all. And certainly not stigma towards people with HIV. I think the scene was so small where I

was from that there was no room for any of that prejudice to be expressed really, because we all needed to support each other because it wasn't a large group of people. I think I heard and found that prejudice more after moving to Leeds and to Manchester, you sort of hear casual prejudice of all sorts going on a night out whether it's in the Village here or going out in Leeds, and whether that's towards people with HIV, towards lesbians because the scene wherever you go tends to be very dominated by gay men. Towards bi people, trans people. But no, I don't really recall anything from when I was down in Kent.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** Did it influence how you negotiated your relationships and the sex that you had?

**PARTICIPANT:** I suppose the thing that was kind of foremost in my mind is that if it got to the stage of having anal sex then it was important to use a condom because that safer-sex message is something that I'd grown up with. So that tended to be at the forefront of my mind, and also not to feel pressurised in to having sex without using a condom.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** Were you aware of any services in Leeds, any kind of outreach or when you went to bars and stuff, were there condoms and safer-sex packs?

**PARTICIPANT:** Yeah, they were there and also there's an organisation called Yorkshire MESMAC which you probably heard of. And they were promoted quite heavily. There's a newsletter that tended to appear in all the bars in the scene in Leeds and in West Yorkshire generally and that would have contact details of various support organisations and so on. So yeah, that was something that was always there and kind of visible to everybody, so there was that message always there in the background.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** As you're part of LGBT Labour, which is the side group but still affiliated with the main Labour, what do you think Labour is doing now to bring awareness to HIV and AIDS within the LGBT community? Or do you think that they're not doing enough?

**PARTICIPANT:** Not really doing anything specific at the moment. If there's anything to do with sex it's the campaign around PrEP, so one of the things that LGBT Labour has been campaigning on and a lot of people in the Labour Party are supportive of this, is ensuring that PrEP is readily accessible on the NHS throughout the whole of the United Kingdom. I mean, we're quite a long way along the road to that in Scotland and Wales, then after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing within NHS England we're now starting to get there certainly on a trial basis in this part of the country.

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At the moment there's no specific bit of work that's being done around prejudice around HIV but certainly we absolutely support the efforts of organisations like the LGBT Foundation for instance in raising awareness around HIV and combating the stigma and improving education as well about safer-sex and safe with people who are HIV positive but are also undetectable because they've been taking medication for so long that their viral load is at normal levels and so... that certainly, we support tackling stigma certainly, but at the moment no, sorry to rabbit on there. There is no specific bit of work going on. We had a work plan at the beginning of the year and then it got a bit derailed by the general election so we're trying to get things back on track at the moment.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** Are you at the point now maybe where you think that HIV and AIDS within the LGBT community is no longer the main issue and that you're focusing on other things?

**PARTICIPANT:** Possibly. I mean, I think it's certainly not the issue like it was thirty years ago or twenty years ago or maybe even ten years ago, I think because of advances in medical science and because of various other issues. I think there's a generation for whom, I suppose they've grown up without this concept of HIV and AIDS as being a death sentence so they have a different attitude towards it and I sense that there is a far bigger issue for people in the LGBT community at the moment around self-identity which goes back to the issues around trans rights. Also more and more people identifying as non-binary, genderfluid, genderqueer and so on. And so people, if you like, have moved on to an extent from the debate around HIV and AIDS. Obviously for that older generation who went through the crisis, and you know some people say in their fifties, sixties, even older, who lived through it in the most traumatic way by losing loved ones, who maybe have lived with HIV for decades themselves and never thought they would still be alive now. It is still an important issue.

But yeah, I suppose yeah, that's a reasonable point, that as time goes on, so the focus shifts and people's priorities shift, but HIV as an issue is still there but it'll be there until really it can be cured, until basically it's something that you can, you test positive and then you take medication for a few weeks and then it goes away again. Until then, whilst it is still something that is maybe no longer a fatal disease but a chronic disease that is nevertheless manageable, it is still going to be an issue for people in the LGBT community.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** Do you think that maybe it's becoming a bit of a catch-22 situation because you think that maybe a certain generation don't really see HIV and AIDS with the same fear that another generation saw? And then you have certain apps on phones that have changed the way that gay sex works, if that makes sense, so it's a lot more accessible so if you're not afraid of something because you've not necessarily been educated on it as well as two generations ago, because as you say we've got things that are in place and it's not as prevalent now, that it may become prevalent again because there is a certain level of ignorance towards HIV and AIDS?

**PARTICIPANT:** I think this is why education is so important. I think... well, the sense I'm getting is that HIV infection rates are still going up in some places, some other places they've slowed, some places they're even going down. What is going up quite a lot are rates of other sexually transmitted infections like syphilis and gonorrhoea and chlamydia. I think perhaps there's an extent to which people, younger bi and gay men, may have become a bit more blasé about safer sex and they perhaps forget that, okay you can take things like PrEP and that can help to prevent you from getting HIV, it's not going to prevent you from getting all these other sexually transmitted infections that are out there and which are actually very worryingly becoming increasingly resistant to the treatments that have been available for some years now. So that's why there needs to be a proper comprehensive programme of education.

This actually is something that we are campaigning on at the moment in LGBT Labour that I hadn't mentioned before which is compulsory sex and relationship education in schools, which we now have, but what we don't currently have is an LGBT element of that that is also compulsory. This is the hangover from Section 28, and this will hopefully as well, when it is finally introduced, go some way to combatting the bullying of LGBT people that goes on as well as educating school kids about how to negotiate sex safely when they do come of age and start going out to pubs and clubs and meeting people, or indeed meeting people on apps.

I mean, apps have changed the way significantly that people meet each other, that people have sexual encounters. I will freely admit I've used them myself and I have had a number of encounters off using those apps. And you know, some of them have been good, some of them have been a bit rubbish quite frankly. Some of them haven't even happened because you get a lot of timewasters on these things. But that's the same, you know, fifteen years ago when it was people using more things like Gaydar. There's an element of risk with all of these things, not necessarily so much of a risk of you might end up having with someone who, as a result of having sex with them and maybe not using protection you end up contracting a sexually-transmitted infection. There's an element of risk of, you're chatting to someone online who maybe, pretending to be someone or something that they aren't and then you go and meet them and invite them over to your house and you realise possibly too late that you've made a terrible mistake.

And it's you negotiate that really. And you know, the level of honesty that you have from anyone who uses these apps. I mean, people can pretend to be anything they want to be in effect up until the point that you actually meet them in person. Of course they can constantly put off and put off and put off you ever meeting them. So yeah, it's kind of, when I look at those apps and I look at the profiles of users and I think what I've seen in the last few years, and I guess this kind of leads on to the whole thing around chemsex, is the number of people who've got 'HNNH' on their profiles. It actually took me ages to work out what 'HNNH' actually meant. I looked it up and it's like okay, 'high 'n' horny'. And you know, 'open the door, I'll be lying on the bed blindfolded, just come in and use me and then leave'. That sort of thing. There are people who use those apps who are basically just inviting complete strangers to walk in to their house or their flat, do what they want with them and then go, which is something I'd never do.

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You know, I don't judge those people because it's not my place to judge them, but it's sort of looking at that and looking at some people, and it's not just younger people as well, you know, sort of guys I've just described who have profiles like that who are in their forties and their fifties. I think it's apps like Grindr and Scruff and so on, they've changed how we negotiate sex as gay and bi men, and they've changed it in a way that I think we're still trying to understand from a social perspective and as a community as a whole.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** So fundamentally for you, you believe that education is the key?

**PARTICIPANT:** Absolutely.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** But from a certain age? So you think that maybe from primary school, high school?

**PARTICIPANT:** Well yeah, I mean, when we're talking about compulsory sex and relationship education it's age-appropriate. You know, you're obviously not going to go in to really graphic stuff with a class of six and seven year-olds. But what you do want to try and do is, from the start, make it clear that it is a completely normal and natural thing for two men or two women to be in a relationship with each other just as much as a man and a woman. That education of school kids, I think particularly once they get in to secondary school, is vital because children acquire prejudices, homophobic prejudices, they are going to acquire them either at school or they're going to acquire them from their parents at home. So if then, you know, mum and dad are saying things that are homophobic, and actually earlier that day you were at school and there was a class about confronting homophobic prejudice then you're actually giving those kids the tools and the knowledge with which to actually say: 'well, hang on a minute dad, that's not on that you've just got called that guy on the telly a fairy or a poof, that's homophobic and it's disrespectful'. So that's why I think education from an early age is absolutely critical.

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**INTERVIEWER 2:** Just on a side note, you were talking about things like chemsex and Gaydar and Grindr. Where do you think that conforms [?] to the education spectrum? Because although that isn't necessarily prevalent, things like chemsex aren't prevalent within the straight community, they are quite prevalent within the gay community and so if maybe younger gay men were educated in maybe the dangers, essentially the dangers, from an age of like fifteen to sixteen they may not partake in things such as chemsex. Do you think that should be also within the LGBT remit of sex education?

**PARTICIPANT:** I think it's extremely important that it is, like you say, it's becoming a bigger and bigger aspect of a lot of gay men's sex lives, it's not something that interests me in the slightest having worked for a while for a drugs charity. But I can see why a lot of gay men do choose to take part in that and I think it would be extremely valuable. I think that education as well then just needs to continue in to adulthood. I mean, I'm sure the LGBT Foundation has... in fact I know it does, it has information that it gives out to people about chemsex and other organisations do as well. Again, I think it's something that people are trying to understand and get their heads around because it's a relatively new phenomenon.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** I just wanted to ask about whether you have experiences of being tested for HIV, whether you test for HIV or not, and also your perspective on the ways in which technologies like testing have changed over time. So we've had things like PEP and you've mentioned PrEP, and the kinds of impact that might have had.

**PARTICIPANT:** I'm one of these people who is very assiduous, I get myself tested twice a year, once every six months. And I usually go either to one of the GUM clinics in Manchester or a couple of times I've accessed the rapid HIV screening service here. It's interesting, I suppose the thing I notice more than anything else, thinking about it, is maybe the attitude of the health professionals who deal with you.

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I think... I can remember the first couple of times I went to get tested, and this wasn't just necessarily for HIV, it was more of a general sexual health screening. And perhaps a slight finger-wagging attitude that 'oh, you better make sure you don't be a naughty boy', that sort of thing. And then I think as time has gone on I think I noticed the attitude, when the health professionals who have seen me to get the test done has been less judgemental, I think is the right word. And more of an emphasis on, if you have got something, not 'you've been naughty, you've done a bad thing' but 'here's some information and here are support services you can access' and that sort of thing. I suppose the other thing is the timeframes, so the fact that antibody detection is now a much shorter window than it used to be, so it used to be that you had to wait at least three months to be sure of, if there had been an encounter where you were worried that you might have been at risk, you'd have to have waited at least three months to be sure of a test bringing up an accurate result. Whereas now I think it's just about six weeks or something now, isn't it? And obviously when PEP came in you'd start having advice about that.

So I think it has changed and as I say I think attitudes, the attitudes of health professionals have become better and I think that speaks to a better education of them as well, which has helped. I think once I may have had a HIV test done at my GP and that wasn't a great experience. Again, that felt very much as though I was being judged as a sexually active gay man regardless or whatever the outcome of the test might be.

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** So, we're coming towards the end of the interview, is there anything that we haven't covered that you would like to cover? We've talked a little bit about apps. Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

**PARTICIPANT:** I don't think so, no. I think that was the main thing I wanted to talk about. I suppose the other thing is kind of that whole interface between sex and relationships, and the extent to which... I mean, I am very nearly 40 and I've never been in a long-term relationship. And I'm sure there are a lot of other men out there, similar age and older who've also never been in long-term relationships but have had a lot of casual partners, or short-term relationships over the years. And the extent to which... I suppose it's come and gone over the years, I've gone through phases where actually I've thought I'd really... you know, I want a boyfriend, I want somebody I can settle down with and just be completely exclusive with. And other times, where actually I've really enjoyed the freedom of being single and just meeting whoever I want and you know, having the freedom to go with whoever I want. And in a way I feel more relaxed about the latter than I used to in a way, and less hung up about the former. Which you'd think in a way would be sort of the reverse as you get older and you sort of worry about time running out and maybe your options running out, but I suppose it's that thing to consider which it may be something again that other people taking part in this project discuss. It's that element of whether, you know, having lots of casual sex is... is it a substitute for not being able to find someone you can settle down with? Because on the scene, if you're out on your own... I suppose it's not necessarily exclusive to gay men either, but changes are, particularly on a Friday or a Saturday night there'll be lots of other people who are maybe out just to have a bit of fun and not necessarily looking for anything serious.

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And although they're often called dating apps, you can usually be fairly certain that whether it's Grindr or whatever most of the people aren't there, regardless of what they might put on their profile, aren't necessarily looking for dates. So I think there's... I don't know, I think there's still an element of, it can be hard to find someone who is just looking for something longer term. And so sort of that instant satisfaction, that instant gratification, is what a lot of these apps are geared towards. And there's nothing wrong with that and you know, I'm certainly not going to criticise it when I've made use of that myself plenty of times, but...

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**INTERVIEWER 1:** I was just going to ask because that makes me think about the way in which, again it's not exclusive to gay relationships, but there are maybe more different templates and rules for doing relationships. For example, there will be more open relationships within the gay community than you might find within the straight community, but obviously they're not an exclusive sort of thing. Is that something that you'd thought about in terms of having a long-term lover or intimacy with someone, but also maybe not having to be exclusive?

**PARTICIPANT:** I don't know. If, you know, I got in to a relationship with someone and then we'd be going on just the two of us and then one day he said to me 'what do you think about seeing other people whilst still being together?' I don't know how

I'd feel about that. I think, part of me would think I can see the advantages of that, and also I've had friends who've been in open relationships. On the other hand, part of me might be actually, no, this one guy's good enough for me and I don't know that I'd really feel that great about knowing that he was seeing other people away from me. It's a hard one to quantify without actually being in that situation, without ever having been in the situation. I suppose part of me thinks because I've generally always had the freedom to see whoever I like then that part of me would probably welcome the idea. But I don't know, is the honest answer. Again, I don't judge people who are in open relationships because if it works for them and nobody is getting hurt through that arrangement then that is great.

**[00:43:14] End of transcript.**