Guide for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library

Svensk
biblioteksförening

A Guide for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library

Hanna Olsson och Eleonor Pavlov,
Expertnätverket för bibliotekens arbete med hbtq+
('Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library')

Innehåll

Preface

During their annual meeting in 2020, the Swedish Library Association decided to approve the Board's proposal for an answer to a motion from the Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library.

The Board's answer to the motion indicated a desire to support and promote work that libraries do with LGBTQ+ issues and read as follows:

'The Board suggests that the LGBTQ+ issue be made a priority issue no later than 2021 and that the Board, in cooperation with the Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library, prepare a basis for actions on behalf of the target group. This basis can, for instance, consist of recommendations for how libraries can work with this issue'.

Over the past year, the Swedish Library Association Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library has prepared this guide. With its broad range of tips, reflections, and experiences, the aim is that this guide should function as inspiration for those working in the library sector.

Article 2 of the IFLA Code of Ethics for Librarians and other Information Workers reads as follows:

'2. Responsibilities towards individuals and society
In order to promote inclusion and eradicate discrimination, librarians and other information workers ensure that the right of accessing information is not denied and that equitable services are provided for everyone whatever their age, citizenship, political belief, physical or mental ability, gender identity, heritage, education, income, immigration and asylum-seeking status, marital status, origin, race, religion or sexual orientation.'

In this context, the work with LGBTQ+ issues is important in order to facilitate and improve customer service and to provide access to information.
It is my hope that this guide can support the continued efforts of Swedish libraries. The Swedish Library Association will not hesitate to raise these issues in both a national and an international context.

Karin Linder
Secretary-General
Swedish Library Association
March 2021

Introduction

The Swedish Library Act (2013:801) stipulates that libraries in the public library system shall be available to one and all. Achieving this requires work that is carefully planned and that calls for continuous improvement.

Through active and informed work with inclusion and with issues regarding equal treatment, libraries are able to create environments and activities where as many people as possible can feel acknowledged and secure. Working with LGBTQ+ issues is an obvious and necessary prerequisite for reaching these goals. However, how the work is implemented will vary from one library to another. It will be influenced by factors such as the form of the operation, the size of the organisation, and the prior knowledge of the staff. However it is done, common to all work with LGBTQ+ issues is that it enhances the quality of library activities as a whole.

At the 2020 annual meeting of the Swedish Library Association it was decided that LGBTQ+ issues will be prioritised among the activities of the Association. This publication is part of that work, and it can be used to support library staff throughout the entire country when they include an LGBTQ+ perspective in their activities. Working with LGBTQ+ issues is part of a library's work to promote equal rights, combat discrimination, and create more accessible and secure activities.

Hanna Olsson and Eleonor Pavlov,
Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library

We would like to extend our warmest thanks to those who have contributed to the contents of this publication via workshops, network meetings, the mailing list, and in other ways.

Our sincerest thanks to anybody who has shared the events that form the basis for the quotes in the text.

The Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library

The Swedish Library Association Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library works to enhance the LGBTQ+ competence of libraries and promote ways in which modern homo- and bisexuals, trans persons, and queer identities and expressions can be included in a natural way in library activities. The aim of the Network is to endeavour to raise the issue of everyone's right to feel welcome and included, visitors as well as staff. The mission of the public library to promote public education, culture, and democracy includes working for the equal value and rights of each individual and combatting prejudice and discrimination.

Photo: Queer people unite, Greensefa, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

History

The Stonewall uprising in Greenwich Village in New York on 28 June 1969 is usually described as the beginning of the modern pride movement. The uprising grew out of an activist movement that also wished to promote the equal value and liberty of all people, demanding not only tolerance but also acceptance of all LGBTQ+ persons. Two important people during the Stonewall uprising were trans persons Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, both of whom championed LGBTQ+ issues based on important factors such as race, class, and the rights of trans persons.

In Sweden the LGBTQ+ movement has, among other things, worked for political change, such as abolishing homosexuality as a diagnosis of mental disorder (1979), giving same-sex couples an opportunity to have access to assisted reproduction (2005) and allowing them to get married (2009), and abolishing the sterilisation requirement in the context of gender reassignment (2013).

What is LGBTQ+?

LGBTQ+ is an umbrella term that incorporates various perspectives on gender identity, sexual orientation, relationships, and sexual practices. Other variants of the term are used as well, for instance LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQI, and LGBTQIA, which is an indication that this area is under constant change and development. The perspectives included have in common that they in some way break norms and are rendered invisible.

Some of the most common concepts usually included are the following:

Homosexuality and bisexuality: *this refers to sexual orientation, i.e. who someone has the ability to fall in love with or be attracted to.*

Trans: *this refers to with how a person defines and expresses their gender. Trans persons do not at all, or only partially, wish to identify with the sex they were assigned at birth. Non-binary people may also be included under this concept. A person who identifies as in between, beyond, or with both of the gender categories of woman/man may refer to themselves as* **non-binary**.

Queer: *this may refer to sexual orientation, sexual identity, relationships, and sexual practices, and it may also be an expression of a critical approach to prevailing norms.*

Intersex variations: *these are congenital conditions in which sex chromosomes, sexual glands (testicles or ovaries), or the development of the genitals are atypical. It is possible to be intersex and male, female, or something else.*

Asexuality: *this is an umbrella term that may include, for instance, people who never, or who for a period of time do not, experience sexual attraction, but the concept can be used in different ways by and for those who identify with the concept.*

Norms and society

Our entire society is permeated by norms. Some norms can help us function as citizens, but there are also norms that can limit us, and norms that are even damaging to us. Norms may be linked to hierarchies where there is an imbalance of power. This is, for instance, true of norms linked to ethnicity, sex, gender, functional variations, class, age, sexuality, and religion. These norms are not isolated, but interact with each other. Using an intersectional perspective, it is possible to investigate and analyse these power relations and how they affect us. When it comes to LGBTQ+ issues, it is above all hetero and cisgender norms that are addressed. The hetero norm has to do with the assumption that all people are heterosexual. The cisgender norm has to do with deciding a person's sex on the basis of the genitals that are visible at birth. These strong norms are so entrenched in the awareness of many people that they lead to certain perspectives being rendered invisible, something that is also reflected in the library's activities. For this reason it is important to increase knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues, both in libraries and in the rest of society.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a concept that comes from the word 'intersection', which refers to a point where lines, roads, or surfaces intersect. An intersectional perspective refers to making visible and investigating how different power structures are created and maintained relative to each other. This can, for instance, have to do with investigating how people are affected by racism and the hetero norm, instead of focusing on only one of these factors.

The LGBTQ+ movement in both Sweden and the rest of the world has won many victories, but the rights of LGBTQ+ people can unfortunately not be seen as self-evident and permanently gained. Around the world LGBTQ+ people are persecuted and subjected to violent crimes and murder. Homosexuality is still criminalised in many countries, and some of these countries also impose the death penalty.

Also in Sweden right-wing extremist, LGBTQ+-hostile, and reactionary groups threaten, among other things, discrimination protection and laws regulating same-sex marriages, the rights of trans persons, and other LGBTQ+-related issues. Restrictions in asylum policy lead to it becoming more difficult for LGBTQ+ refugees to obtain asylum in Sweden, and the majority of LGBTQ+ refugees say that they experience threats and harassment in asylum accommodation. Many LGBTQ+ persons also experience harassment in other contexts. Prejudice and bias can lead to anything from a lack of understanding and challenges to outright hate campaigns.

Just as in the rest of the world, libraries are also affected by LGBTQ+-hostile currents in society. Library staff in several places in the country can relate incidents connected to the LGBTQ+-related work in their libraries. Criticism can come from both private individuals and organisations. In connection with the 2018 election, rainbow flags were taken down in several libraries that during this period functioned as polling stations. These events garnered a lot of attention in the media, and the debate that followed showed how provocative working with LGBTQ+ issues can be. There are also several examples of criticism coming from a political direction, for instance when local politicians have commented on and even wanted to stop LGBTQ+-themed programme components. In addition, there are norms negatively affecting LGBTQ+ people that are embedded in our library environments and core activities, for example in the way we choose to display items in the physical library space or how we deal with gender in our statistics.

Working with LGBTQ+ issues in the library

The work with LGBTQ+ issues in libraries can vary a good deal depending on, for instance, the size and budget of the library. There is no single way of working that is clearly better than all others. Feel free to try several different methods and ways of working. The best way is whatever is appropriate for the activities in your own library.

The responsibility of the organisation

The library's LGBTQ+ work should be managed by the organisation as a whole and not by single individuals. The responsibility for training staff about LGBTQ+ issues belongs to the management. In order to promote the issue at an organisational level it is helpful to use library policy documents as a point of departure: for instance, municipality-wide strategy documents, policies for equal treatment at educational institutions, or local library plans. It is also possible to find support in both discrimination legislation and the Swedish Library Act.

Experience shows that it is an advantage if the LGBTQ+ work is anchored among the whole staff, including the management, so that everyone feels secure in responding to questions from users. The very best thing is to establish this anchoring early on in the process. Discuss the way in which you can work in your own library in order to meet the requirements and directives in laws and policy documents when it comes to working with equal treatment and issues regarding discrimination. Emphasise that working with LGBTQ+ issues is an obvious part of this.

Appointing a group that has joint responsibility for LGBTQ+ work minimises the risk that it becomes an issue for a single individual. The members of the group can support each other and carry out the work together.

Training concerning LGBTQ+ issues

Today there are several libraries that have been LGBTQ+-certified by RFSL (see below). This means, among other things, that at least 80% of the employees of the organisation have completed a training course and that an action plan for working with LGBTQ+ issues has been prepared. It is an extensive, and for this reason also rather costly, process, and many libraries do not have the ability to implement it. There are also those who do not wish to limit themselves to educational programmes that are so clearly connected to a particular organisation.

RFSL, The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights, is a non-profit organisation that was founded in 1950. The goal of RFSL is that the same rights, opportunities, and obligations should apply to LGBTQ+ people as to every other person in society.
For more information, see www.rfsl.se/en/.

Of course, LGBTQ+-certifying an operation with the support of RFSL is not the only way to acquire knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues. Today there are other organisations and associations that offer training and guidance. It is also possible to carry out training sessions on a small scale with single lectures and workshops held at one's own library. In addition, nowadays there are several digital lectures, some of which are even available completely free of charge for the user. In many municipalities there are other organisations that also work with LGBTQ+ issues. It can be both interesting and rewarding to cooperate with people from outside the library.

Examples:

> *'A group of young people who spent a lot of time in the school library said that it was a shame that there were no activities for LGBTQ+ people of their own age. Together with the youth recreation centres in the municipality, the leisure services department, and the public library we created a queer hangout for young people where we provided book recommendations and screened films.'*

The most important things to remember when it comes to training are its purpose and goals. Perhaps there is a certain area that needs to be addressed; perhaps the purpose is for everyone to have significant knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues so that these issues permeate all of the library's activities. In one case it might be enough to have a lecture with a subsequent discussion, while in another, more comprehensive efforts may be necessary. Adapt the training sessions to the needs and wishes that exist in your own library.

Examples:

> *'We engaged a lecturer who is a researcher in sociology. The lecture did take up a lot of issues, but it was very academic in nature. Afterwards many colleagues pointed out that it was difficult to apply what was said in the lecture in their everyday work. They had wanted to have an opportunity to discuss it in a way that was more tangibly connected to their own activities.'*

It is of course desirable for all staff to participate in these training sessions, but sometimes this is not possible. If so is the case, it may be appropriate to think of alternative means of disseminating knowledge. Perhaps it is possible to film a lecture so that it can be watched digitally during the delivery or afterwards. Perhaps it is possible for someone who has participated in the training to inform their colleagues at a workplace meeting or in a smaller group. Such internal efforts are also useful for introducing new employees and interim staff. In addition, this might be an excellent opportunity for those who have been involved for a longer time to refresh their memories and learn something new.

Use policy documents

In order to provide strength and stability to LGBTQ+ work, these issues need to be included in local policy documents. There does not necessarily have to be a specific LGBTQ+ action plan, but these issues can be included in more general operational or activity plans. Many times it may even be advantageous not to have a separate plan, but instead allow the LGBTQ+ perspective to permeate all work. Even in more specific plans, such as, for instance, collection management or marketing plans, it may be appropriate to introduce this perspective.

Exempel:

> *'At our work place we were preparing a new action plan. The proposal for the plan was very carefully drafted and the content felt both topical and relevant. But when we discussed the proposal, a colleague drew attention to the fact that we had not introduced anything at all regarding LGBTQ+ issues, in spite of this being a focus area for our libraries.'*

It is easy to think that we all work with inclusion and equal treatment anyway, and that for this reason it is unnecessary to explicitly foreground these issues. But in order to safeguard this work it needs to be made visible. Concretising LGBTQ+ work also makes it an organisational issue and not something that will only be carried out by only a few committed people. Policy documents give legitimacy to the issue.

Working group or responsible person

Appointing a LGBTQ+ working group is another way of safeguarding that the work with LGBTQ+ issues is not based on the commitment of single individuals. The number of people in the group depends on the size of the operation and how the group is intended to work. If several libraries or units in the same organisation are included, it is desirable to make sure that as many of these are represented as possible. Also try to make sure that there is variety with respect to professional categories.

Examples:

> *'In our library the LGBTQ+ group consists of one person from each unit. We have four meetings per year. The dates of these meetings are listed in our joint meetings calendar so that our colleagues know when we have meetings and thus can submit questions they think we should address. We send out a link to the minutes from the meetings in our newsletter.'*

If an operation is very small, it may be difficult to assemble a group. In such a case it may be better to appoint a responsible person. It is a good idea to let the responsibility rotate, for instance per term or per year, and, if the person with that function should quit their job, a new responsible person should of course be appointed. How the group or the responsible person should work may vary. They can use a more strategic way of working, but they can also implement concrete actions such as, for instance, plan training or discussion sessions or compile lists of recommended books. An explicit plan, preferably in writing, of what is expected makes the work easier. It may also be an advantage to have a contact in the management group or similar body.

Regardless of whether there is a group or a single responsible individual, there need to be routines for how the rest of the working group is informed about and included in the work. When there is a group, it is desirable to have a predetermined number of meetings per year and to communicate the dates for these to the remainder of the staff so that they can submit any questions they may have. It is also useful to send out minutes from the meetings afterwards so that everyone is kept abreast of the group's work. In a smaller workplace, workplace meetings or similar meetings can be a good forum for information.

To the library director

The library director's role in LGBTQ+ work

The library director has an important role to play in the library's LGBTQ+ work. Working with LGBTQ+ issues is a given part of the library's other work with issues regarding equal treatment. In the course of the work it is possible to find clear support, for instance in the legislation on active measures against discrimination. Working with these issues is beneficial for the development of both individual staff members and for the staff as a group. It contributes to a good working environment and raises the quality of operations in general.

The tasks can be challenging in many ways. A library director can influence this work a great deal by being committed to these issues and actively participating in the work. By themselves being well-read in LGBTQ+ issues, library directors can provide positive support for the staff. Knowledge also makes it easier for directors to themselves handle problems that may arise, and to ensure that the staff feel secure in answering questions and handling any potential criticism in connection with LGBTQ+ activities at the library.

In connection with active LGBTQ+ work internal criticism may sometimes emerge, or challenges or discriminatory 'water cooler talk'. It is possible to prevent this by providing training and opportunities for discussion and reflection in a secure environment. An important part of this work is that staff, including new employees, are given an opportunity to acquire basic training in LGBTQ+ issues and information about how the library is working with these issues.

Examples:

> *'I overheard two of my colleagues discussing in the coffee room why we have compiled a rainbow book shelf: "I think that this LGBTQ+ thing is given a lot of attention, and of course certain people, as it were, promote their own cause with these issues. After all, why should we celebrate pride in the library? We could just as well celebrate a day for left-handed people, that feels just as reasonable." I did not feel comfortable joining this conversation, but it was good to be able to talk to my supervisor afterwards and that they took the matter seriously.'*

Often the focus is on the visitors when it comes to working with accessibility and inclusion. It is important to remember that working with LGBTQ+ issues also has to do with creating a secure working environment, where all members of staff feel respected and seen. A good point of departure is imagining that 'everyone is in the room', that is, that people who themselves are LGBTQ+ persons, or have friends and family who are, are represented in the workplace. A good working environment creates security and reduces the risk of these people being exposed to minority stress.

Minority stress:

A person who is a part of a minority group, for instance LGBTQ+ persons or persons belonging to a certain religion, is constantly reminded of not being included in the norm. They may be met with glances, questions, prejudiced comments, or other types of minor actions of a kind that are usually referred to as micro-aggressions. People carrying out these micro-aggressive attacks are often unaware of their own actions. Many times these actions are performed without any intent to cause harm. Often they are so imperceptible that the person who is exposed does not always notice while they are happening, but because they are actions that are often repeated they rather quickly grow into something that, as a whole, becomes a major event. All the time being exposed to, or having to worry about and being prepared for being exposed to, this type of event leads to psychosocial stress for many people. This stress is usually called minority stress.

LGBTQ+ activities at the library

As a library director it is important to participate in all stages of the library's LGBTQ+ activities, including planning, implementation, and follow-up. Library directors have to be clear that they stand behind and support the staff in all activities that are being planned and that they will not compromise if these activities should meet with negative reactions from politicians and the public. The discrimination legislation and the library policy documents can be used in support of this work. It is helpful if the library director's role is clear in case the library needs to respond to various types of criticism.

For the library director to think about when planning activities

How will the communication between you and your staff function before and during the activity in question?

In what way should the staff handle any situations that may arise before and during the activity?

Who will handle any contacts with the press?

How will any comments in social media be dealt with?

Sometimes more obviously threatening situations may arise in connection with LGBTQ+ activities, and for this reason it is important that the library director makes sure that routines regarding threats, violence, and vandalism are clear and have been communicated to the entire staff. It can be useful if a pattern of events can be identified, for instance with respect to petty vandalisation of LGBTQ+ displays, which can also be experienced as threatening, both for those who work with the displays and the people who come to see them. For this reason, the library director needs to be attentive to signals from the staff and to take even minor incidents seriously and document them.

Examples:

'One of my employees told me that the little table flag that usually sits on the rainbow book shelf was being flown at half mast. And the same person had also previously drawn my attention to the fact that the books that are displayed on the shelf have sometimes been turned so that the front covers face the back of the shelf, and that the rainbow marking has been removed from some books. We will address this issue in the next staff meeting and everyone will have to monitor extra carefully that part of the library in order to ensure that this does not happen again.'

Photographer: Emma Karlsson

The physical library

There are many ways in which to make the LGBTQ+ perspective visible in the physical library. This can be done, for instance, by displaying LGBTQ+ items or putting up rainbow flags. Have a look round the premises. Which perspectives can be seen? Which cannot be seen? What about the posters and signs that are displayed on the library premises? Keep in mind that even small things can make a big difference!

The rainbow flag

The rainbow flag, or the pride flag as it is also known, was created in San Francisco in 1978 by gay activist Gilbert Baker. The aim was to create a new symbol for the LGBTQ+ movement, a symbol created within the movement itself.

Putting up a rainbow flag in a library sends a signal to both staff and visitors that there is knowledge here about LGBTQ+ issues, and that this is a place where everyone can be themselves.

Rainbow flags may appear in many different forms in a library. They can be anything from small stickers on the spines of books to large façade flags. Regardless of the kind of flag that is used, it can be challenged, both internally and from the outside. The library staff need knowledge and guidance regarding the significance of the flag in order to be able to defend it, even when its use is being challenged. There also has to be an awareness of the reason why the flag is being used, whether in the context of the broader work with core values within the organisation or as part of more targeted LGBTQ+ work.

The rainbow flag is highly political, but it is not a symbol for a single party or a specific political movement. Using the rainbow flag may be seen as taking a political stand in the same way as all other work

with democracy and human rights, something that can obviously be accommodated within the democratic mission of libraries.

Rainbow flags in libraries
Putting up a rainbow flag in a library means that the library and the library staff support the following values:

We recognise that LGBTQ+ persons have the same rights as hetero-sexuals or cisgender persons.

We recognise that LGBTQ+ people have been and are still a vulnerable group whose members find it more difficult to exercise their rights, and we support their striving for equal rights.

We recognise that LGBTQ+ people belong to a group which is often made invisible, and we want to support them by making them visible.

We link our democratic and accessibility mission to working with an active inclusion of the groups we feel need to be included.

LGBTQ+ people are welcome and the library works towards making everyone feel secure.

[Elliott Edberg, RFSL-led training, lecture on rainbow flags and LGBTQ+ delivered to the Swedish Library Association Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library, 5 April 2019.]

Libraries need to have an understanding of the flag being extra important as a symbol when the rights of LGBTQ+ people are being questioned in society. If the flag is taken down this may create an element of uncertainty surrounding the core values of the library, and some people may even feel both vulnerable and rendered invisible. This is true of library staff as well as library users.

The rainbow bookshelf

Having a dedicated rainbow bookshelf in a library can be a way to foreground items with an LGBTQ+ perspective. When LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ people are being made visible, for instance in a book, it may lead to defusing LGBTQ+ issues while simultaneously increasing knowledge about these issues. A rainbow bookshelf is of course important and valuable for everyone, not just LGBTQ+ persons.

Examples:

'I work at a school and we have had discussions about whether or not to have a rainbow bookshelf in our library. We talked a lot about there being pupils who might not want to be open with what they are reading. Some people were worried that it might be a sensitive issue to go to that shelf to look for books. We arrived at the conclusion that we nevertheless wanted a rainbow bookshelf, but to have the same titles on the regular shelves as well.'

Having a rainbow bookshelf is not a necessity, but highlighting books that in different ways deal with an LGBTQ+ perspective is something that can help and be appreciated by many people. When the books are displayed in the way they always have been, they reproduce the norms that are built into the classification systems being used. Foregrounding LGBTQ+ items does not mean that we create a new system of norms, but has rather to do with showing that there is more than what the norm describes. It also sends a signal about the importance attached by the library to having holdings that include items describing experiences that fall outside the norm.

A possible argument against having a rainbow bookshelf is that borrowers may feel singled out or vulnerable if they use it. It is of course desirable to think about protecting the integrity of LGBTQ+ persons, but it can become a problem if it is taken for granted that it is shameful for visitors to borrow items from a rainbow bookshelf. In order to show consideration for those of us who may feel it is problematic to use a rainbow bookshelf, it is possible to place this shelf in a part of the library that an individual can visit without feeling gawked at. Having, as far as is possible, duplicates in other locations in the library also provides a more accessible selection of LGBTQ+ items. Integrating the LGBTQ+ perspective into the rest of the collections increases the chance of the items being used also by those of us who do not actively seek them out.

Photo: Rainbow bookshelf, VisbyStar, CC BY-SA 4.0

In smaller libraries with a limited budget and space, a separate display shelf or the like might be an option. This makes it possible to work with showcasing brochures and items with an LGBTQ+ perspective that can be regularly exchanged. In this case duplicates will not be necessary, but the staff can instead vary what is being displayed. It is also possible to work with temporary displays. Another option is to have a shared collection of rainbow items that circulates among different libraries, where each library has a rainbow bookshelf for a shorter period of time.

Example:

'I work in an organisation where we have decided we want to have rainbow bookshelves. At the public library the suggestion met with a favourable reception, but the smaller libraries in the municipality thought that this would not work. They said that they found it difficult to find room for a permanent shelf and said that there was a great risk that it would end up in an obscure location. We solved this by working with a shared collection of rainbow books that the smaller libraries can use in order to create temporary rainbow bookshelves.'

Showcasing and signage in the library

Showcasing different items

You should include the LGBTQ+ perspective in what is being showcased throughout the entire year and not only on special occasions, such as the annual pride festival or the like. Even if it is not possible to have a permanent rainbow bookshelf, it is possible to work actively with making LGBTQ+ items visible in the other displays in the library. This leads to LGBTQ+ issues not simply being emphasised in isolated thematic displays or exhibitions once or a couple of times a year, but to their instead being included continuously in the planning. This is also a good way for jointly working with the issues and involving many in the staff.

Examples:

> *'When we showcase different themes such as, for instance, **detective stories**, **love**, or **books that have been made into films**, we make sure to always include items with an LGBTQ+ theme. This theme does not always have to be the main theme of a book. A detective story can for instance have an LGBTQ+ person as a main or secondary character, or the author of the book may be an LGBTQ+ person.*

Library shelf signs

Library shelves often have different signs, both on the shelves themselves and in amongst the books, in the form of index blocks and the like. Many times these signs are directly connected to concepts in the classification systems the library has chosen to use. These concepts are not always updated to terminology that is relevant for contemporary times. Working with the formulations on library shelf signs can be a task that increases the knowledge of the entire staff.

Example:

> *'When our library was LGBTQ+-certified we began to work with our end panel signs and shelf signs. We thought about the words we were using and how they can be perceived by our visitors. Do we always have to write exactly the words that are provided by the classification system when we arrange books on the basis of that system, or can we choose to use other words in order to be clear? What subcategories in the classification system do we want to foreground on our end panel signs and shelf signs? Is something being made invisible by the system that we might foreground in our signage? We talked to those in charge of the classification systems at the National Library of Sweden, who said that it was all right to use other words on the signage than just those mentioned explicitly in the system. On the basis of this, we proceeded to change the words on our signs.'*

Other signs in the library

There can of course also be signs in other locations in the library. In many libraries there are spaces for exhibitions and the like from external actors. Do not forget these, because they represent an opportunity for potential cooperation. For instance, one might particularly promote a certain number of exhibitions with an LGBTQ+ theme.

There could also be reason for going through the signage already present in the library. The signs being used for toilets are a type of signage that is important to consider from an LGBTQ+ perspective. Often toilets are separated on the basis of sex, which is rarely perceived as a problem for those of us who define ourselves as cisgender persons. For those of us who are trans, intersex, or non-binary persons, gendered toilet signs may not only be a cause for discomfort and a sense of being made invisible, but can also lead to practical problems because it is not obvious which toilet to use. Having gender-neutral toilets is a good way for creating a more inclusive environment.

When the library is used as a polling station

Libraries are often used as polling stations in connection with different types of elections. Sometimes the library functions as a polling station for advance voting and sometimes as a polling station on election day itself. In connection with libraries functioning as polling stations, rainbow flags and other material with an LGBTQ+ theme in the library have been challenged several times, and sometimes flags have been taken down with the justification that they constitute political propaganda.

Example:

> *'I work in a library that functions as a polling station, and when we prepared for the latest election we thought about whether we had to remove the rainbow flag hanging next to the rainbow shelf, because there must not be any political symbols in a polling station. It is difficult to interpret which rules apply and to know whom to ask about this. It feels important to get it right so that the election will be conducted in the appropriate manner, while at the same time we want the flag to stay up because it is important. How do we act in this case? Whom do we ask?'*

If the library is to be a polling station it is important for the staff and the poll clerks to feel secure and know how to act should the rainbow flag be challenged. The people who work as poll clerks need clear information in advance so that they can answer any questions that may arise in connection with the election. An important part of the puzzle for feeling secure and being able to answer questions is knowing what the rainbow flag stands for and why it is being displayed. Another good way to prevent problems is for the library management to talk to the election committee already before the election and discuss these issues so that both parties agree on what rules to follow. The management can then inform all staff in the library about the common position of the library and the election committee so that everyone knows what rules apply.

An example from the Uppsala Public Library

Here follows an example of how a library or group of libraries can work preventively in close cooperation with an election committee in anticipation of an election. The example is based on work carried out by Bibliotek Uppsala, the public library in Uppsala. Before the election, the election committee was contacted in order to discuss how libraries, acting as polling stations, should act if rainbow flags on the library premises were challenged. On the basis of this, clear instructions were drafted and sent in a newsletter to all colleagues in preparation for advance voting. The newsletter contained information about the roles of both the library and the election committee when a library functions as a polling station, and there was also specific information about how the library staff should act in particular situations. Here are some examples of what the information in the newsletter looked like:

It is the election committee that is responsible for what may or may not be displayed on the library premises during advance voting, and when opinions are voiced regarding this, it is the election committee that should be contacted, not the library.

In the information provided by the election committee before the election it is clear that what is meant by 'political propaganda' has a party political connection.

Library staff will not take down material (such as, for instance, rainbow flags) concerning which someone may have an opinion. Questions or opinions about what may be displayed in a polling station is referred to the poll clerks and the election office.

Questions regarding the election process is referred primarily to the poll clerks on site. When necessary, the election office can also be contacted.

The election office has an internal telephone number which can be used by library staff if any questions about the rainbow flag or other things should arise that cannot be handled by the poll clerks on site. Should such a situation arise, the library director shall also be contacted.

The Uppsala Public Library was very happy with the cooperation with the election committee and felt that the close cooperation and the clear guidelines gave the staff confidence. And a confident staff who know how to act can more easily respond to challenges and criticism.

Photo: Malmö library 121, Nemo_bis, CC BY-SA 3.0

The digital library

The library exists not only as physical premises but also digitally. Today virtually all libraries have a web page, and many also have a presence on social media. The LGBTQ+ perspective must of course be visible also in the digital library. The digital channels of libraries may also play an increased role during various social events, such as, for instance, in connection with a pandemic.

The web page and social media

The library website and social media are good platforms for making visible the library's LGBTQ+ work. For instance, if the library is LGBTQ+-certified this should obviously be clear on the web as well, but an LGBTQ+ perspective can also be included in other ways.

Examples of ways of integrating the LGBTQ+ perspective on the web and on social media:

A page on the library website with information about LGBTQ+ certification.

An LGBTQ+ page on the library website with book recommendations.

Showcasing newly purchased books with certain subject headings.

Links to LGBTQ+-related resources.

Recommendations for LGBTQ+ items.

Observe LGBTQ+-related commemoration days.

Information about LGBTQ+ associations or LGBTQ+ activities in the municipality, school, company, or educational institution.

Certain web platforms have functions that, for instance, retrieve and display the most recently acquired books under a particular subject heading. This is an easy way of showcasing LGBTQ+ items. Lists that are automatically updated make the page more dynamic. In addition, traditional book recommendations are often appreciated by both staff and users.

Example:

'We created a simple leaflet with some of the children's books with an LGBTQ+ theme that we have purchased during the year. We posted it as a PDF on our website so that people could print it out themselves. We know that some preschools have used it and distributed it at parent-teacher meetings.'

Unfortunately, on social media comments may be posted that are abusive and hateful. Make sure you have good routines for dealing with such comments, and make sure that the organisation has made preparations in connection with advertising for events with an LGBTQ+ connection. Also keep in mind that new comments to old posts may suddenly appear.

Example:

> *'The library routinely advertises upcoming programmes with an LGBTQ+ focus on social media. One employee brought to my attention the fact that hateful comments and vomit emojis had been posted in the comments section. We immediately went in and responded to the things that were reasonable to respond to and cleared the rest away with reference to our policies regarding abusive statements.'*

There are often pan-municipal or pan-organisational guidelines that can provide support when dealing with this type of incident.

The catalogue: classification and subject headings

Classification

All items in the library are divided into different categories. Normally, one of the well-established classification systems is used, but local variants also occur. In Sweden the SAB system was previously the one most commonly used, but nowadays many libraries, above all university college and university libraries, have gone over to DDC. This is also the system used by the National Library of Sweden (KB).

> *SAB is an abbreviation for Sveriges allmänna biblioteksförening (the General Swedish Library Association), which later joined with Svenska bibliotekariesamfundet (the Society of Swedish Librarians) and formed what is today the Swedish Library Association. The first version of the SAB system appeared in 1921.*
>
> *The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) (in Swedish: Dewey decimalklassifikation (DDK)) is today the most widely used classification system in the world. It was published for the first time in the United States in 1876 by librarian Melvil Dewey. Currently the system is maintained and updated by the American organisation OCLC. Cataloguers working with the DDC also have access to the WebDewey tool, which to a large extent has been translated into Swedish.*

Classifying items and searching for items based on their classification

It is possible to search for non-fiction literature on LGBTQ+-related topics in the library's own catalogues or the joint catalogue LIBRIS using specific classifications. In the SAB the overall classification for works on LGBTQ+ is the shelf mark Ohjh, while in the DDC the corresponding call number is 306.76. The classification systems are general in nature and not optimally designed for classification with respect to LGBTQ+. The SAB system is no longer being developed, and for this reason it is important to be aware of the risk that the system contains old-fashioned terms and

divisions that are no longer in use. The DDC system is continuously being developed, and even though the system is extensive and changes can take a long time to implement, it is possible to influence this system. In recent years people have, for instance, worked towards making it more clear in WebDewey (both in Swedish and in English) to a person working with classification just how the call number 306.76 should be used.

Subject headings
Subject headings are a good aid for helping users, staff as well as borrowers, find LGBTQ+-related literature. In many systems it is possible to add any words at all, but there is a point to using the words that already exist in the controlled lists of subject headings. When the same word is used for items dealing with the same topic, it becomes easier to find one's way.

Lists of subject headings in Swedish libraries

There are several different lists of subject headings with controlled subject headings. Two lists of subject headings used in Swedish libraries are Svenska ämnesord (Swedish Subject Headings) (SAO) and Barnämnesord (Children's Literature Subject Headings) (Child). There are also other lists of subject headings for special collections and libraries with particular specialisations.

SAO is the most comprehensive of these lists. It is used by most Swedish university college and university libraries, as well as a number of public libraries. SAO is managed by an editorial committee at the National Library of Sweden. The Child list is used to index literature for children and young adults. The Swedish Institute for Children's Books is responsible for working with this list, in collaboration with the editorial committee of the National Library of Sweden.

Updating subject headings

As our society changes subject headings often have to be updated, and new subject headings are also continually being added. It can also be important to update the description of the word (the so-called scope note) as changes in society occur. For a new subject heading to be added to any of the controlled lists there has to be a source that confirms that the heading in question is an established one. Such a source can, for instance, be a dictionary, or at least a specific work with which the word is associated. The Swedish Library Association Expert Network for Working with LGBTQ+ Issues in the Library continuously works with discussing and submitting new proposals for LGBTQ+-related subject headings to the Swedish Institute for Children's Books and the editorial committee for SAO (see examples below).

Examples of subject headings that have been added to the the subject heading lists:

- *Non-binary (Child)*
- *Non-binary gender identity (SAO)*
- *Non-binary persons (SAO)*
- *Queer (Child and SAO)*

Examples of words that have been updated:

Sex change ⟶ *Gender reassignment*

Examples of new formulations in scope notes:

Crossdressing (existing subject heading)

'This heading refers to works about people who dress in clothes that are normally associated with the opposite sex.'

was changed into

'This heading refers to works about people who use another gender expression than the one expected from this person on the basis of their legal gender. This can involve clothes, make-up, hair, body language, voice pitch, and other attributes.'

If a library has a local cataloguing system with entries that are not automatically updated, the staff will themselves have to monitor and replace obsolete and inappropriate subject headings. Libraries working with LIBRIS can also go into that system and change or add subject headings.

Searching for LGBTQ+ literature using subject headings

It is useful to have a list on the library web page with subject headings that can be used to search for LGBTQ+ items in the catalogue. Because it can be difficult to search for information about LGBTQ+, an important function for librarians is to provide guidance when LGBTQ+-related questions are posed. Good advice on how to search can, at least to some extent, compensate for hetero- and cis-normative database functions and subject headings.

Examples of established LGBTQ+-related subject headings included in SAO and/or the Child list:

Bisexuality
Gay culture
LGBTQ persons
Heterosexuality
Homophobia
Non-binary
Identity-seeking
Intersexuality
Gender identity
Gender reassignment
Lesbian women
Norms
Queer
Rainbow families
Sexuality
Sexual orientation
Trans persons

When it comes to non-fiction literature it is standard practice to assign a subject heading, and in some systems subject headings are automatically generated on the basis of the book's shelf mark. The fact that there are subject headings does not automatically mean that it is easy to find material with an LGBTQ+ content. Here it is particularly important for librarians to help students navigate and be aware of the problems and the discriminatory structures.

Example:

'In our library we use MeSH, a controlled vocabulary used to index articles in the medical database PubMed. In the system we need to deal with old, discriminatory subject headings. There are also filters that exclude, for instance, trans persons. All this has led to our having to work hard to help our users get around these problems.'

There are rarely subject headings with respect to fiction for adults, which makes it more difficult to find books with an LGBTQ+ theme. Here it is possible to use webpages and books with lists of LGBTQ+ literature as an aid.

Books for children and young adults are often provided with clear LGBTQ+ subject headings so that they will be easy to find. For instance, one can use the following subject headings to look for literature for children and young adults: LGBTQ, homosexual parents, trans persons, bisexuality, homosexuality, non-binary, intersexuality, and asexuality. Beginning in 2019, all books for children and young adults with an LGBTQ+ theme will also be assigned the umbrella subject heading LGBTQ.

Photographer: Erik Vesterberg

Andrew Hill, Uniting Network @ Sydney Mardi Gras 2016

Programme activities and other public activities

Virtually all libraries have some form of programme activities, anything from story time sessions for small children to academic lectures. Regardless of the type of programme that is arranged at a library it is important to think about representation. Whose story or stories are given space? Which person or persons are not visible?

A well-thought-out programme plan provides good prerequisites for programme activities with a broad representation. There might be reason to focus in particular on perspectives that are often made invisible, for instance the LGBTQ+ perspective. You should aim to try and arrange activities that can both work as a mirror for those of us who are LGBTQ+ people and as a window for those of us who are not. LGBTQ+ people should have an opportunity to feel represented and made visible, and other people should have an opportunity to share experiences that are different from their own.

LGBTQ+ is a wide and multifaceted area. LGBTQ+ people may be homosexual, bisexual, trans people (male and female and non-binary), queer, intersexual, and many other things. LGBTQ+ people also have many different skin colours, ages, belief systems, nationalities, and functional variations. All these things interact with and influence other things, which means that experiences and stories can be wildly divergent. Including an LGBTQ+ perspective in programme activities can therefore be done in many different ways.

The important thing is not primarily which kind of activities are carried out or how many there are. The important thing is that there is a conscious plan based on existing preconditions. This might include lectures on separate LGBTQ+ issues, but it can also be a question of aiming to always

include at least one book with an LGBTQ+ perspective in every book talk for school classes. It is better to have an activity on a small scale rather than no activities at all. If it is difficult to come up with activities, perhaps there is a local association to collaborate with. It might also be a good idea to check what is going on in other libraries in order to find inspiration.

However, in order to be able to easily document and follow up on these activities, it may be simpler to begin by creating measurable targets in the form of a certain number of LGBTQ+ programme items each year. This is an excellent point to include in an action plan or similar document.

Suggestions for LGBTQ+ activities:

- *Book talks with an LGBTQ+ perspective*
- *Story time sessions with books that have an LGBTQ+ theme*
- *Reading circles about books with an LGBTQ+ theme*
- *Screening films with an LGBTQ+ perspective*
- *Lectures on LGBTQ+-related topics*
- *Rainbow language cafés*

Photographer: Elin Andersson

What other people think

When the library works with LGBTQ+ issues one might get reactions from staff, visitors, and the public at large. Sometimes the reactions are very positive and encouraging, but other times one will receive critical and challenging comments.

Critical voices

There are many people who have an opinion on library activities, and in spite of the fact that working with LGBTQ+ issues goes hand-in-hand with the general mission of libraries, people may criticise this.

A relatively common criticism voiced against LGBTQ+ displays has to do with the reason why LGBTQ+ issues and rainbow flags are showcased and other perspectives are not. One might also receive comments arguing that a library should be a neutral place and that it is obvious that anyone and everyone is welcome there, without this having to be specifically pointed out.

Example:

> *'A person came up to me and pointed to the rainbow flag we keep at the information desk. This person was very upset and said, "I don't understand why you have to have one of those flags here. After all, there are so many other flags you could have there. Why do you have this left-wing propaganda in the library?"'*

One can respond to negative criticism in various ways. Sometimes it can be enough to inform people matter-of-factly about the LGBTQ+ work done at the library. In such situations it can be a good idea to have a folder or leaflet at the ready explaining what the library is working with and why. Unfortunately there are occasions when this is not enough and when threatening situations may arise. There may be visitors who act aggressively inside the library, or there may be people who by force tear down or destroy flags. There may also be specific groups that hand out LGBTQ+-hostile material or make threats via telephone calls or letters. Comments in social media are a frequent occurrence. In such cases it is important to support oneself using the routines for how threats should be handled in the workplace, and also to document all incidents and report them to the police if necessary.

Example:

> *'I participated in arranging a programme at the library where we would be visited by the project "Bland drakar och drag queens" (Drag Queen Story Hour), with drag queens reading fairy tales to children. On the eve of this programme a letter was sent to the municipality in which a person from a political party questioned the municipality's money being spent on this. Our library director was very clear that they supported us in this, and we were also supported by colleagues from other libraries.'*

Positive reactions

Many of us who work in libraries that actively promote LGBTQ+ issues know that even if negative criticism sometimes occurs, positive comments are much more common. Writing incident reports when something negative has happened is a relatively well-rehearsed task in most of the library's activities, but it is not as common to note down any positive responses received. Unfortunately, also in staff meetings and the like positive feedback risks being drowned out by the attention given to any negative reactions.

Example:

'When we evaluated our LGBTQ+ work internally we asked whether people had received a lot of comments about, for instance, our rainbow bookshelves. It was possible to state both 'negative comments' and 'positive comments', and there was also an opportunity to write down examples. It was very gratifying to find that most people wrote that many visitors appreciated our work. A lot of people said that visitors had expressed an appreciation for our work. We were actually surprised, and reminded of how often we tend to focus on things that are negative.'

By creating a forum where positive reactions can be collected you have an opportunity for gathering strength in moments of frustration. Write down any positive reactions in a special document or notebook. By foregrounding positive feedback you can make visible the significance of LGBTQ+ work not only for individuals but also for the library and society at large.

Example:

'When arranging the latest pride display at the University Library I saw two girls who proudly held hands after passing the rainbow flag.'

'Several people have come up to me and said that the library looks so nice with all the rainbow flags.'

'My colleague, who is a trans person, was during our programme activities at the library in connection with the annual pride festival given an opportunity to speak to some of their colleagues about themself and their experience of being a trans person.'

'When we carried out a customer survey several people said that they felt good about the rainbow flag being on display. They saw it as a guarantee for an inclusive attitude and a signal that everyone is welcome. One of the interviewees said that they felt safe seeing the flag.'

'One borrower thanked me because they did not have to state either 'female' or 'male' when obtaining a library card.'

'I was wearing my rainbow-striped lanyard when a young visitor came up to me and said it looked nice. They were themselves wearing rainbow pins on their jacket and I thought that they were probably not just commenting on its aesthetic aspects. That felt good.'

Photographer: Emma Karlsson

Proposal for a taxonomy for LGBTQ+ work in libraries

A taxonomy is a way of structuring an activity into different levels. What is stated in the description are the objectives aimed for at each respective level. The first level (Level 1) is the basic level and the final level (Level 7) is a vision for the work. The taxonomy presented here describes how the library can work with LGBTQ+ issues. Feel free to use the taxonomy as an aid when planning LGBTQ+ work or when presenting this work to the library management and executive leadership or to external partners.

1
LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ perspectives are on the agenda

2
A working group works with LGBTQ+ issues

3
There is knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ perspectives

4
LGBTQ+ perspectives are included in the physical and digital space and in public activities

5
The LGBTQ+ perspective is anchored in the organisation and all members of staff have basic LGBTQ+ competence

6
LGBTQ+ cooperation is well developed

7
The library is active in social development regarding LGBTQ+ issues

1 **LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ perspectives are on the agenda**

The library takes stock of and orients itself concerning LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ perspectives. The executive management is informed about and participates in the work. What competences can be found in the operation?
What is happening in this area when it comes to the local community and society at large?
What stakeholders are there?
What opportunities and obstacles are there?

2 **A working group works with LGBTQ+ issues**

A working group, or, in smaller organisations, a responsible person, has been appointed. This group or person is responsible for preparing a sustainable LGBTQ+ strategy/plan for library activities. Smaller LGBTQ+ projects have been initiated.

3 **There is knowledge and awareness about LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ perspectives**

Different kinds of awareness raising, including training, is underway for the staff. There is time and space for the staff to discuss, reflect on, and problematise LGBTQ+ issues and LGBTQ+ perspectives.

4 **LGBTQ+ perspectives are included in the physical and digital space and in public activities**

The staff agree on the importance of representation and a norm-critical perspective in public activities. The library cooperates with local associations working with LGBTQ+ issues. LGBTQ+ perspectives are implemented in the collection management planning and showcasing of items, and are integrated into the work on searchability. The library works with representation on the basis of a norm-critical LGBTQ+ perspective in its external communication and marketing.

5 **The LGBTQ+ perspective is anchored in the organisation and all members of staff have basic LGBTQ+ competence**

Policy documents, recruitment, internal communication, and other staff policy issues include an LGBTQ+ perspective, on all levels of the organisation. All staff, including the executive management, are trained in LGBTQ+ issues on the basis of a norm-critical perspective. There is a plan for basic LGBTQ+ training for new employees.

6 **LGBTQ+ cooperation is well developed**

There is deeper cooperation with associations and organisations with an LGBTQ+ perspective. There are common goals and plans.

7 **The library is active in social development regarding LGBTQ+ issues**

The library sets a good example with respect to LGBTQ+ issues for other municipal, regional, national, or international stakeholders. The library actively networks regarding LGBTQ+ issues on a national and international level.

Att fundera på

How do we make everyone feel welcome and included in the library? What does the physical and digital library space signal?

What norms do we convey in the library?

What LGBTQ+ competences are there in the organisation in which I am working?

Is there a plan for LGBTQ+ work in my library? Is the LGBTQ+ perspective included in the policy documents of the organisation?

How are abuse and discrimination combated in the workplace and in the library's activities?

Do we continuously foreground and recommend items with an LGBTQ+ perspective, for example in lists, displays, or in other ways?

How is LGBTQ+ included in the library's programme activities?

What possible cooperation partners are there for LGBTQ+ issues?

What opportunities and forums are there for exchanging experiences concerning LGBTQ+ issues and norm critique?

What support, training, inspiration, or advice are needed in order to foreground and make visible the LGBTQ+ perspective?

Photographer: Anders Magnusson

Closing remarks

The libraries in the public library system shall be accessible to everyone. By working actively with LGBTQ+ issues, good preconditions are created for achieving this. Systematic LGBTQ+ work at libraries contributes to making visible and increasing knowledge about LGBTQ+ issues in society. It also contributes to creating and maintaining safe spaces for LGBTQ+ people. Openness and the freedom to be who you are is something that everybody in the library benefits from, staff as well as users.

Working with LGBTQ+ issues is a part of the statutory work against discrimination and is something that should self-evidently be a part of a library's work on equal treatment. How this work should be structured depends on, among other things, the library's budget, the size of the organisation, and the prior knowledge of the staff. This can be a question of creating rainbow bookshelves, arranging LGBTQ+ programmes, or actively working with subject headings. It can also have to do with arranging training and discussion meetings for staff.

Some libraries have an opportunity to do more extensive projects, while others work on a smaller scale. Several libraries today carry out well-established and extensive LGBTQ+ work, and it can be easy to think that there is no point in doing something if one does not have an opportunity to do something on a large scale. But every little thing done is a step forward towards more accessible library operations.

Bilder:

Sidan 7: Queer people unite, Greensefa, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
https://www.flickr.com/photos/greensefa/30918780612/in/album-72157675156690621/

Sidan 15: Fotograf: Emma Karlsson

Sidan 17: Regnbågshylla, VisbyStar, CC BY-SA 4.0
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Regnb%C3%A5gshylla.jpeg

Sidan 20: Malmö library 121, Nemo_bis, CC BY-SA 3.0,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:2019-06-14_Malm%C3%B6_library_121.jpg

Sidan 25: Fotograf: Erik Vesterberg

Sidan 26: Fotograf: Andrew Hill, Uniting Network @ Sydney Mardi Gras 2016

Sidan 27: Fotograf: Elin Andersson

Sidan 30: Fotograf: Emma Karlsson

Sidan 34: Fotograf: Anders Magnusson

Svensk biblioteksförening

biblioteksforeningen.se