

RUTH HUNT



ACCEPTANCE WITHOUT EXCEPTION

RUTH HUNT, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF STONEWALL, TALKS TO **ANDY WASLEY** ABOUT THE CHANGES SHE HAS MADE TO THE LGBT CHARITY

People in the lesbian, gay and bisexual community undoubtedly owe much to Stonewall's immense record of legislative achievements – not least on such totemic issues as equal marriage, parenting rights and hate crime.

Ruth Hunt played a key role in these and other successes in her role as the head of Stonewall's public affairs team. Since taking over as Chief Executive in 2014 she has changed the charity inside and out.

"I was keen to think about how we could move from being an organisation that was set up to achieve legislative change to an organisation that went deeper into communities to achieve cultural change," Hunt says. "I need people to care about the Muslim lesbian living in Yorkshire

who's dropped out of school and is unlikely to earn more than the minimum wage, as much as they cared about their own right to get married. If we all start to think that harm done to one is harm done to all, then I think we'll get there."

This kind of cultural change is a tough mission by itself, but Hunt also had to change perceptions of Stonewall itself. Prior to her appointment as Chief Executive, Stonewall had faced stinging criticism from other prominent LGBT campaigners for what they saw as a sometimes cloth-eared failure to truly appreciate the LGBT community's concerns. It took until 2010, for example, for Stonewall to start campaigning for equal marriage, a delay criticised by two of its own co-founders, Sir Ian McKellen and Michael (now Lord) Cashman. And for ▶

many trans people Stonewall's policy of excluding gender identity from its campaigns smacked of transphobia.

In truth, Hunt's public affairs team had always worked closely with trans organisations on matters of mutual concern, but the charity's overall "LGB-only" policy seemed increasingly at odds with the way the LGBT community saw itself. (It should be noted that Stonewall Scotland had always worked directly on trans issues.) Hunt saw trans inclusion as essential. After a decade at the charity, she says, "I knew that how Stonewall worked was as important as what Stonewall does. I was keen to move us away from being spokespeople for the gay community to an organisation that shares its platforms for the beautiful diversity of the LGBT community."

She put this vision into effect quickly, launching a consultation with trans groups to explore their views on Stonewall's future. This led to a strikingly self-critical report in which Stonewall apologised for making mistakes that had harmed trans communities. The charity is now fully trans inclusive, and is working with a coalition of trans groups to support their campaigns for equality. (Hunt points to the need for a new, less medicalised Gender Recognition Act as an immediate priority.)

It takes strong leadership to change an organisation's culture and reputation this way. Hunt seems amply qualified for the role: after a decade at the heart of Stonewall's lobbying campaigns she now leads a hundred-strong team, and has presided over two years of strong financial growth. Individual and corporate donations were up by 48 per cent in 2015 – more than double the previous year's growth – and overall the charity brought in nearly a million pounds more than it did in 2014.

It's an impressive record for a self-effacing leader who jokes that some of her staff think of her as just "someone who runs around the country making speeches". In seriousness, though, she says she hopes her staff see her as an "empowering" leader: "Staff should be able to bring their whole selves to work. They should be authentic, and should be able to find their voice within this organisation, and have the space to do that."

**SOME
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GET
OVER
IT!**



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This focus on authenticity is reflected in Stonewall's Leadership Programme, now in its twelfth year. Hunt explains: "We take 36 leaders away for two-and-a-half days and get them to think about how their identity has an impact on their performance at work."

"People who go on these programmes say that they are transformative. They come back more enthusiastic, more committed to what they're doing, and are far better in the workplace than they were before the programmes."

For Hunt, the business argument for authenticity is compelling, but she also speaks warmly about the effect it has on LGBT people's daily lives. "On a simple level, secrets are toxic. People who are unable to be themselves are immeasurably affected by that. We talk about who we are a lot at work, and when someone is unable to do that it affects their performance."

Conversely, "when people don't have to risk-assess whether they're able to be open or not, they feel much freer in all sorts of other ways. There's something about LGBT people's ability to value authenticity that is incredibly useful to any organisation."

Hunt suggests that LGBT equality at work could also have a broader effect on business culture, suggesting it "challenges the very notion of 'survival of the fittest'". She explains: "The old way of looking at business is being challenged by a much more sophisticated understanding, where if you let people work in their own way – even if it's not the traditional 'alpha-male model' of performance – you will actually get a work experience that is richer, more innovative and delivers more on every level."

Hunt sees this kind of social change as fundamental to Stonewall's efforts to achieve full acceptance for LGBT people at every level of society. "Stonewall should be at the heart of the social movement for acceptance," she says, emphasising the charity's continuing importance to the LGBT community.

"We know that hate crime hasn't changed in a decade," she adds. "We know that there is still bullying in schools. And we know that there are still whole swathes of the LGBT population – particularly those from minority backgrounds or from faith communities or those with disabilities – who are not in the same position of privilege as some others, and are yet to be able to say with true conviction that they feel equal."

"I think until we reach a stage where every institution in this country, every organisation, every workplace, every school is a place where LGBT people can be themselves, our job isn't done yet."

