

Good afternoon everybody.

I hope you're having a good conference.

To those of you who don't know me, I'm Alex Southern and I'm a clerk at Brick Court Chambers where I've been for the last 10 years. I'm also on the IBC's Equality & Diversity Committee and am a supporter of Freebar which is what I'm here to talk to you about today.

Before I start I have been warned about the dangers of uttering the word Freebar at an IBC event, just before lunch.

What is Freebar?

Put very simply, Freebar is an LGBT+ organisation that was launched in February 2016 as a loose collaboration between individuals from across the legal profession who believe that everyone who identifies as LGBT+ should be accepted without exception. We wish to spread that message across the legal landscape and to the wider public at large.

So what is LGBT+?

LGBT is Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual (being sexually attracted to both sexes) and Transgender (identifying as a different gender to the one you were born with). The Plus (+) includes A-sexual (that's those who don't experience sexual feelings) and Intersex (those born with a sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definitions of female or male). The Plus (+) really ensures that we are inclusive of all identities and that nobody feels left out. It also includes our 'straight allies'; who share our aims and assist with our work. We really want to involve everyone and we make it our goal not to have a closed mind-set.

What does 'Acceptance without Exception' really mean?

Freebar's primary aim is to ensure that everyone who is LGBT+ working at and for the Bar as well as anyone who is LGBT+ and a client of the Bar knows, without exception, or hesitation that they will be accepted, treated appropriately and their differences understood.

So why do we need Freebar?

50 years ago this year there was a monumental change in British society.

It was the decriminalisation of homosexuality. It is incredible to think that only 50 years ago it was illegal to be a gay man in England & Wales and that you could go to prison for it.

As little as 20 years ago, when I turned 18, it was illegal to serve in the military in this country if you were gay and Section 28 was still in force in schools to prevent the promotion or teaching of, I quote, the 'acceptability of homosexuality as a *pretended* family relationship'! Wow! The age of consent for Gay men was still 18 and it was perfectly legal to discriminate against anybody on the grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. As a result many LGBT+ people socialised separately, took jobs that did not befit their abilities and generally felt excluded. These were dark days indeed!

In 2017 the majority of us don't give a second thought to somebody's sexuality and we have come to expect that all individuals and organisations in this country will treat everyone equally. In the last 20 years, a raft of legislation has been introduced that makes it illegal to discriminate and most of society's attitudes have likewise evolved.

The problem is that whilst legislation and society has moved on, the Bar of England & Wales generally hasn't. Whilst most big solicitors firms now champion equality and diversity, inequalities still exist at the Bar and some Chambers are inadvertently behind the curve on it.

Why is this?

Despite the best efforts of Barristers to provide impartial assistance, the Bar is still very insular and, as a result, old fashioned ideas have prevailed. Not all Chambers portray themselves as being the most modern of institutions and quite a number do not visibly identify as being particularly inclusive. There are also a disproportionately low number of individuals who openly identify as LGBT+.

As a result, the Bar is not representative of the society that it serves.

The first real challenge to the outdated ideas came in 2012 when the Bar Standards Board introduced its equality rules.

These require all Chambers to produce an equality policy and action plan; produce anti-harassment, flexible working, parental leave and reasonable adjustment policies; ensure chambers' selection panels are trained in fair recruitment; conduct diversity monitoring and analyse data; **AND** to appoint an equality & diversity officer and a diversity data officer.

In the last year the BSBS's 'Women at the Bar' Report has revealed that there is much work to be done to address the inequalities being suffered by female practitioners. Inequality has also been found by University College London's 'Sexuality at the Bar' Report which has been a damning indictment on the experiences of LGBT+ Barristers in England & Wales.

Until last year, virtually nothing had been done to cater for those identifying as LGBT+ who work at and for the Bar. This is why Freebar came in to being. Freebar welcomes everyone who supports its aims; irrespective of their legal profession. As a result, our supporters include Chambers staff, Barristers, solicitors, law students, Inn staff, Court staff as well as members of the judiciary.

By working together we believe that 'Acceptance without Exception' is achievable as a real, tangible and shared experience from the most junior to the most senior.

What is the importance of inclusivity in Chambers?

Freebar aim's to create a visibly inclusive culture not just in Chambers but within the entire legal profession; to ensure everyone knows without asking that they are welcome and feels able to be themselves. Hopefully this will ensure that potential talent isn't lost whilst extensive studies have already established that employees and fee earners who feel comfortable and able to be their authentic selves, perform better and, in turn, their organisations benefit.

But Freebar wants to go further than that...

We also want to ensure that the best possible support is available to LGBT+ professionals. Whilst Lawcare and the Bar Council's 'Wellbeing at the Bar' already provide a great resource, we recognise that those identifying as LGBT+ have more specialist / particular needs. Freebar hopes that by sharing its knowledge it can improve the services already on offer and, in certain circumstances, will be able to provide its own mentoring as well.

We further wants to identify best practices on workplace inclusion so that we can provide checklists and other tools that will allow organisations to maximise their potential in welcoming LGBT+ individuals and exceed the equality & diversity requirements set by the BSB.

So what is Freebar doing to meet its aims?

In a bid to visibly demonstrate that all legal roles are open to sexual minorities, Freebar is encouraging individuals who openly identify as LGBT+ to feature on webpages and in the legal press as 'role models'. Susanna Rickard, a barrister at Serjeants' Inn Chambers, is currently gathering our own collection of interviews which will feature on our forthcoming website and we are interested in hearing from any straight allies who have stories to tell as well.

We are also encouraging data gathering exercises such as the recent UCL 'Sexuality at the Bar Report' which was a world-first research into the experiences of LGBT+ Barristers at the Bar. Further research is needed to investigate experiences in other parts of the law such as those of LGBT+ clerks.

We are already addressing our aims in workplace inclusion. Recently, Freebar hosted a first practical discussion on this topic at Hardwicke Chambers which was attended by a number of clerks and members of Chambers. It is hoped that in time we can work with the IBC's Education and Equality & Diversity committees in a bid to ensure that best practice is spread to as many Chambers as possible.

Freebar also organises social events so that those identifying as LGBT+ and "straight allies" can connect in a relaxed environment.

Our informal, egalitarian committee meets monthly and anyone is welcome to attend these meetings and get involved.

What can Chambers do to support Freebar's aims?

We appreciate that much of the change that happens at the Bar is only made possible by clerks and barristers working together. As a result, there are a number of things you could do to assist us:

- First and foremost we ask that you find out who your Chambers Equality & Diversity Officer is and make sure that they are aware of the existence of Freebar and its aims as well as the 'Sexuality at the Bar' Report, copies of which are available here today on our stand
- We would ask that your Chambers adds LGBT+ 'positive signals' to its website and / or Twitter feed. This doesn't cost anything but clearly demonstrates a commitment to LGBT+ inclusion. Examples could be a news story that clerks attended an introductory talk on Freebar, a declaration / equality statement expressing Chambers support for LGBT+ initiatives or even an interview with a 'role model' from within your Chambers
- If your Chambers didn't attend our recent 'Best Practice' event we would encourage you to get in contact so that we can share with you its ideas and can keep you updated about our further work. You will find our e-mail address on the leaflets in your delegate packs or on our stand.
- We ask you to encourage your Chambers to offer training in diversity to all members / staff which specifically includes LGBT+ awareness
- Whenever your Chambers mentions 'LGBT' we ask that it always uses the acronym 'LGBT+' so that no one feels excluded
- The Bar council is about to consult on changing the current requirement that everybody in a Chambers needs to consent in order for any LGBT+ survey data to be published. We urge you to support our call to remove this restriction which is preventing an accurate picture of the professions to be obtained
- You could also add the Freebar Logo to your Chambers website to demonstrate its desire for visible LGBT+ inclusivity

- Finally, we are always in need of volunteers and venues to host our meetings and events and without any direct source of funding we welcome financial assistance of any kind or offers to help with printing. As with all organisations that assist us, we would be more than happy to include your logo on our media to visibly demonstrate our gratitude for your support.

I really hope that you will go away from this conference with a desire to be even more LGBT+ inclusive in everything you do. If you have any questions on anything I've spoken about or require a copy of my notes, please don't hesitate to speak to me today or, alternatively, you can find my e-mail address on the Brick Court Chambers website.