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INSPIRING PRACTICE

Advancing LGBTIQ+ inclusion through a dedicated Anti- Discrimination Unit

by the City of Vienna

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Inspiring practice: Inspiring practice: Advancing LGBTIQ+ inclusion through a dedicated Anti-Discrimination Unit

Vienna has a long history as a hub for migration, culture and political debate and has also become a key destination for LGBTIQ people from within Austria, neighbouring countries and beyond. This includes those moving for study or work, as well as people fleeing increasingly hostile environments and anti-LGBTIQ legislation in parts of Europe and other regions. Within this context, the City of Vienna has chosen to position itself explicitly as a “rainbow city” and to make LGBTIQ equality part of its core identity as a service-providing municipality.

A central pillar of this work is the Viennese Anti-Discrimination Unit for LGBTIQ Issues (WASt), established more than 25 years ago as a transdepartmental unit that connects politics, administration and civil society. The office acts as an interface between municipal departments, NGOs and residents, combines individual case support with structural change and drives both internal mainstreaming and public visibility measures.

This inspiring practice presents how Vienna uses WASt and a broader LGBTIQ mainstreaming approach to embed inclusion into the city administration and everyday municipal life.



Objective

The main objective is to ensure that **LGBTIQ people can live and work in Vienna free from discrimination**, by:

- integrating LGBTIQ perspectives into laws, policies and administrative procedures
- providing accessible complaint and support mechanisms for staff and residents
- building a visible, queer-friendly municipal culture
- supporting community organisations through cooperation and funding
- positioning Vienna as an attractive, inclusive employer for LGBTIQ staff



Impact

Through the work of WAST and the city's broader LGBTIQ strategy, Vienna has:

Strengthened legal protection and complaint routes for LGBTIQ people within the municipal administration, including under the Vienna Anti-Discrimination Act which explicitly covers sexual orientation and gender identity.



Built sustained visibility of LGBTIQ communities in public space, for example through rainbow flags on municipal buildings, inclusive pedestrian crossings, campaigns and events connected to Pride Month

Established permanent education and dialogue structures, such as annual LGBTIQ conferences, Queer City Talks and recurring trainings for municipal staff and students in health and education fields.

Expanded community infrastructure, including a queer youth centre, support for rainbow families, asylum support organisations and other NGOs, enabled through municipal funding and cooperation.

Positioned the city administration as a queer-friendly employer, for example by participating in queer job fairs and creating internal employee meetings for queer staff and allies.

Implementation steps

Phase 1: Creating a dedicated LGBTQ unit

In 1998, Vienna established the Viennese Anti-Discrimination Unit for LGBTQ Issues (WASt) as a municipal office with a clear mandate to address discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Over time, its remit evolved from focusing solely on homosexuality to encompassing a full LGBTQ perspective, in line with community movements and terminology.

WASt was set up as a transdepartmental unit, responsible for LGBTQ issues across all municipal departments rather than being attached to a single policy field. Today it is located within the administrative group for Education, Youth, Integration, Transparency and Markets and reports to the responsible city councillor and vice mayor. The team currently consists of four staff (one head, two professionals plus a secretary), supported by cooperation with other departments.

Phase 2: Embedding a legal and policy framework

Vienna anchors LGBTQ inclusion in a broader anti-discrimination framework. The Vienna Anti-Discrimination Act (2004) explicitly includes sexual orientation and gender identity, following the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and international human rights instruments.

Within the administration, mandatory induction trainings for new staff include modules on ethics and non-discrimination, with LGBTQ issues addressed as part of the city's zero-tolerance stance. WASt also supports the development of guidance documents such as a gender-inclusive language guide, which recommends ways to address all genders in German using inclusive forms (for example, the gender asterisk). While these guidelines are not compulsory, they set a clear normative direction for inclusive communication.

Phase 3: Building internal complaint and support structures

A core function of WASt is to provide confidential advice and support to municipal staff (and, in some cases, residents) who experience discrimination. People can also approach other complaint bodies such as the women's service or independent ombudspersons, but WASt is a key entry point for LGBTQ-related cases.

The preferred approach is mediative: the office works with all parties involved to improve structures, prevent further harm and avoid job loss where possible. Where mediation is not sufficient, WAST can recommend use of the legal options available under the Anti-Discrimination Act.

In parallel, Vienna sees itself as a learning institution. Complaints and feedback are treated as signals to improve services and there is an expectation that departments act on identified issues rather than treating cases as isolated incidents.

Phase 4: Mainstreaming LGBTIQ inclusion into municipal services

WAST cooperates with a wide range of departments – from schools, human rights and social services to the markets authority and public transport – to integrate LGBTIQ concerns into everyday municipal work. Examples include:

- designing and delivering trainings for staff in schools, youth work and healthcare, including mandatory sessions for all students at the healthcare university and teacher education institutions
- advising departments on how to handle situations involving trans and non-binary children or conflicts around religion and sexuality in school settings
- working with departments to adapt procedures, communication and service design based on evidence from studies and casework

This mainstreaming approach ensures that LGBTIQ inclusion is not treated as a niche topic but as part of routine service improvement.

Phase 5: Creating visible and permanent public practices

Vienna has institutionalised a series of recurring visibility measures that signal municipal support for LGBTIQ equality:

- Rainbow and Progress Pride flags on city hall and other municipal buildings during Pride Month, with flags and installation supported by the city.
- Inclusive pedestrian crossings and street markings in rainbow and trans colours in selected locations.
- Participation of the city and WAST in the annual Rainbow Parade (CSD) and the Pride Village on the city hall square.
- Regular billboards and public transport messages promoting acceptance and signposting to WAST.

In addition, WAsT and the city organise or host permanent events such as:

- an annual LGBTIQ conference at city hall, often based on new study findings
- Queer City Talks on topics ranging from global anti-LGBTIQ developments to local experiences
- roundtables with NGOs, police and ministries on hate crime statistics and cooperation
- an open house at WAsT where residents, school classes, NGOs and colleagues can visit, ask questions and learn about services

These recurring activities contribute to normalising LGBTIQ presence in public life and maintaining an ongoing dialogue between the administration and communities.

Phase 6: Funding community organisations and projects

The City of Vienna provides substantial financial support to LGBTIQ organisations and initiatives. This includes:

- core or project funding for NGOs such as the queer youth centre, rainbow family centre and asylum support organisations for LGBTIQ refugees
- financing major community events like the Rainbow Parade and Pride Village
- competitive funding schemes such as the Queer Small Project Pot and Rainbow Month funds, which allow NGOs to apply for annual support for innovative projects

Studies such as “Queer in Vienna” and thematic research on youth, older people and healthcare are also funded by the city. These studies generate evidence on discrimination, service needs and satisfaction with municipal provision, and directly inform policy adjustments and new initiatives.

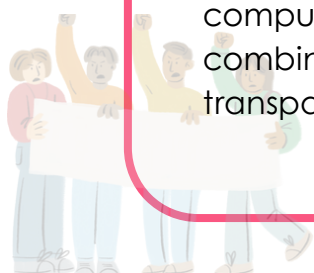
Phase 7: Mobilising staff and change agents

Mobilising staff beyond the already convinced is an ongoing challenge. WAsT invests heavily in networking and relationship building with departments so that colleagues know where to turn when issues arise or when they want to address LGBTIQ topics in their work.

Key approaches include:

- proactively offering training and support to departments
- explaining why LGBTIQ inclusion matters for service quality, trust and legal compliance, to reduce fear of change
- engaging management and political leaders so they visibly support initiatives
- organising an internal employee group where queer staff and allies can meet regularly

At the same time, Vienna recognises that voluntary training tends to attract those already interested. The city therefore sees a need for more compulsory learning on ethics, human rights and non-discrimination, combined with clear procedures for anonymous complaints and transparent follow-up.





Lessons learned & challenges

DOs

Use a dedicated unit as a hub for mainstreaming

A small, transdepartmental office can effectively coordinate between departments, NGOs and political leadership when it has a clear mandate and access to decision makers.

Combine individual support with structural change

Complaint handling, studies and visible public measures should feed into each other, so that every case and every survey contributes to improving systems.

Invest in long-term formats

Recurring conferences, talks, Pride-related activities and funding schemes build continuity, trust and visibility, rather than relying only on one-off projects.

Ground actions in data

Regular surveys of LGBTIQ residents provide evidence for where discrimination persists and where municipal services need to adapt.

Work closely with external organisations

Community organisations bring expertise, credibility and reach that the administration alone does not have.

DON'Ts

Don't treat complaints as isolated incidents

Without systemic follow-up, institutional issues remain unresolved and trust in complaint mechanisms erodes.

Don't separate internal and external work too strictly

Staff culture, service design and public visibility are interlinked; progress in one area depends on movement in the others.

Don't underestimate the resources required

Sustainable work needs stable staffing and funding for both municipal initiatives and community partners.

How can this practice be replicated by others?

Municipalities wishing to strengthen LGBTIQ inclusion should begin by creating or designating a cross-cutting unit with a clear mandate and direct links to political leadership. It is important to embed LGBTIQ equality in local anti-discrimination laws and internal policies, explicitly recognising sexual orientation, gender identity and, where possible, sex characteristics.

Establishing accessible complaint and mediation mechanisms for staff and residents, with clear pathways and transparent follow-up, is essential to build trust and accountability. Municipalities should also invest in recurring education and visibility measures, including annual conferences, trainings, Pride-related activities and regular public campaigns.

Developing funding schemes for community organisations and grounding priorities in studies or needs assessments can further strengthen the local ecosystem. Above all, LGBTIQ mainstreaming must be treated as a shared responsibility across departments and NGOs, rather than a niche topic. Even with limited staff, a municipality can make significant progress if it uses its dedicated unit as a connector, listens to community feedback and commits to continuous improvement.

For more information, contact

WASt – Viennese Anti-Discrimination Unit for LGBTIQ Issues

Auerspergstraße 15/21

1080 Vienna, Austria

☎ Tel: +43 1 4000 81449

✉ Email: wast@post.wien.gv.at

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Author: Vasia Madesi, Yellow Window

Based on insights shared by **Mag Dr Helga Haberler**, social scientist and officer at the Viennese Anti-Discrimination Unit for LGBTIQ Issues (WASt)

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