

Reducing social isolation in LGBT+ communities aged over 50 – learning from Ageing Better

Introduction

Ageing Better is a test and learn programme. It is collecting information and insights from across 14 partnerships to identify learning that will be useful for other programmes and organisations delivering activities aimed at reducing social isolation in people aged 50+.

This paper focuses on our learning from Ageing Better on reducing social isolation in the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community. It brings together information from a number of different sources:

- a literature review to understand how our learning fits with the wider context
- a learning session we held with Ageing Better practitioners
- evidence received following a call out to Ageing Better projects delivering to this client group
- results from a qualitative questionnaire sent to all Ageing Better areas

This review starts by highlighting the context for LGBT+ people aged 50+. It then goes on to share some of the specific activities undertaken within Ageing Better to tackle social isolation in LGBT+ people aged 50+. It finishes by highlighting some of the challenges to the wider statutory sector and sharing some links to further information.

As more learning emerges we will add to and amend our learning papers covering this topic. We also deliberately do not replicate the learning and research undertaken by the specialist projects delivered by Ageing Better and whose reports we link to at the end of this document.

Context

Changing attitudes towards LGBT+

Across Ageing Better evaluation reports we use the Office of National Statistics (ONS) official figures for LGBT+ people. This suggests a figure of 1% of the population over 50 identify as LGBT+. However, the wider research we undertook with Ecorys (link to document provided below) and anecdotal feedback suggests the true size of this figure is much greater and that the official figure is underestimated as a result of the history of discrimination and prejudice LGBT+ people over 50 have faced. One of the messages from our initial scoping group was a call to emphasise with all the Ageing Better areas the importance of collecting demographic information from project participants in order to accurately reflect the number of people defining as LGBT+.

The desk review of the wider research also highlighted the LGBT+ community can suffer disproportionately from social isolation and loneliness. The review identified a myriad of reasons for this including the greater likelihood of not having children, disconnection from family networks due to disapproval or rejection and the death of a long term partner. A situation highlighted through our survey was that of people who were LGBT+ leading relatively sheltered and hidden lives (or not living as openly “out”) with their long term partners which then meant that when one partner died there was effectively no LGBT+ social network and support for them to link into.

Ageing Better programmes who undertook a range of consultation and research with LGBT+ people aged over 50 highlighted a clear fear of both homophobia and transphobia in relation to engaging with both community and statutory services. This fear of stigma is found more in the older LGBT+ community because of their lived experience of prejudice and the specific LGBT+ historical context so leading to a very real fear of being openly identifying as LGBT+ and its possible consequences. Feedback from Ageing Better areas was also that people coming out in later life can require additional support, which as Ageing Better in Birmingham identified can often be hard to access as there is little specifically available for this older age group and Ageing Better in Camden/LGBT+ Connect work to a specific brief of reducing social isolation and loneliness amongst LGBT+ people aged over 50, running up to 30 activities per month to allow LGBT+ older people a voice and a presence they often didn't feel they had on their own.

Ageing Better areas also identified that people who are struggling with their sexual identify can also experience mental health issues which in turn may mean they need to be able to access more intensive specific support.

LGBT+ people aged over 50, of course, do not represent one single homogenous group but rather a variety of sexual orientations, identities and all are individuals. There is also an intersectionality to this diversity for example, LGBT+ with a disability or Catholic and Trans. A common feature of this LGBT + group, however, is their shared experience of historical prejudice and this emerged as an enormously important context in all our sources of evidence.

*‘it’s hard to speak loudly and proudly about it after a lifetime of fear and caution’
Age With Pride, Ageing Better Middlesbrough.*

Key Learning: LGBT+ people over 50 can be hard to identify and may be reluctant to self-identify. This reflects a history of discrimination and negative attitudes. Although attitudes towards the LGBT+ community have become more positive, the expectation of discrimination and stigma still exists in many LGBT+ people aged over 50. In addition there was feedback of increasing and new concerns about the fear of growing older as a LGBT+ person for a variety of reasons including those linked to

care requirements. This, we would suggest further contributes to the under-reporting of the size of the group.

Key Learning: Supporting people who are struggling with their sexual identity and/or fear being open about this in later life may well need additional support and resource. We heard that in practice the support requirements in working with this group was greater than Ageing Better programmes had originally anticipated.

Key Learning: LGBT+ people aged over 50 are an enormously diverse group, within which the intersectionality with other characteristics adds to this diversity. Programmes and projects need to acknowledge and recognise the historical context whilst at the same time and in keeping with wider Ageing Better learning adopting a person centred approach working with each person as the individual they are.

Social networks

The literature review undertaken by Ecorys highlighted that the LGBT+ community are more likely to be single as they age; more likely to live alone; more likely to be childless; and more likely to have lower levels of contact with relatives. These characteristics in turn can all result in having weaker social networks.

Ageing Better areas have connected with people who are “coming out” in later life and so have little or no connections to the wider LGBT+ community. As mentioned already, the loss of a long term partner is also a risk factor to being socially isolated. Learning from across Ageing Better in working with people 50+ has also highlighted the real struggle that socially isolated older people can experience in taking the first steps to be more social because of their lack of confidence and in some cases mental health issues.

The diversity and history of the LGBT+ movement also mean that their social networks can be found in a variety of places and not necessarily specific LGBT + groups. For example, lesbian and bisexual women historically may have identified more strongly with women only or feminist liberation groups rather than generic LGBT+ activities and networks.

Ageing Better areas also commented that many LGBT+ people aged over 50 saw the local gay scene in their areas as being more focused on and aimed at younger people and that they perceived local LGBT+ services as being mainly for younger people. Ageing Better in Birmingham also found this issue with some respondents reporting that they had experienced ageism within the local gay scene and it was felt that there was little for LGBT+ participants outside of that ‘scene’.

Ageing Better in Camden/LGBT+ Connect also reported that respondents enjoyed socialising with their peers and with the LGBT+ volunteers aged from 23 to 70+ who help out at events - it’s about providing the opportunities to allow people to make choices for themselves about what they’d like to engage in and supporting them in doing so. This intergenerational work is of immense value across the age ranges.

Key Learning: LGBT+ people aged over 50 are at an increased chance of experiencing the risk factors that can lead to social networks being weaker. People who have either lost a long term partner and/or who are coming out in later life are also more likely to find themselves outside of supportive social networks.

Action

Connecting to opportunities

Ageing Better projects have provided a range of opportunities for LGBT+ people aged over 50 aimed at strengthening their social networks and helping to connect with other communities.

We learnt that “word of mouth” was a very important way of engaging people as having the reassurance from someone trusted could be the deciding factor as to whether to give a particular activity or group a try. This need for trust to develop was common across all of Ageing Better activity, together with the need to allow time for relationships to build in order to engage people in projects and services.

Ageing Better areas also employed a variety of creative events to engage people. These included themed promotional events e.g. films shown as part of LGBT history month and co-designed activities (e.g. choir). Regardless of what activity was on offer we found that reaching people successfully needed a wide and varied range of tools and activities in order to appeal to people as individuals. Again, these included attending existing groups to talk about specific activities and raise awareness; specific flyers; social media; and holding launch events or taster sessions. We also found that in some areas MeetUp worked better than Facebook as a way of connecting people.

LGBT+ Connect (London) and Sage (Time to Shine, Leeds) use newsletters (LGBT+ Connect also has regular email/phone client contact) that raises awareness of their activities among ‘allies’ and older people. This means people can slowly build up their confidence, knowledge and understanding prior to fully engaging in the activity or group.

Bristol Ageing Better and Ageing Better in Camden/LGBT+ Connect both offer a range of drop in and social opportunities. Learning from Sage (Time to Shine, Leeds) as well as Bristol Ageing Better was that it was important to remember that people might take time or “be testing” it before committing to an activity. Using “pop ups” or “taster sessions” could raise awareness of the opportunities that were available to someone. Consideration, however, needs to be given to holding “pop ups” in small communities where people may be nervous about being identified and seen connecting with a LGBT+ branded activity. This means consideration needs to be given to the context of where “pop ups” are held and how visible they are to other people.

Ageing Better areas also piloted using ambassadors and buddies to support people to access activities and explored whether activities could be fully volunteer run. The learning from this delivery is still emerging but it suggests that any type of volunteer activity will still require an element of paid support. Ageing Better in Camden/LGBT+ Connect also offer to meet new attendees at an event/group to lessen the impact of arriving without knowing anyone. All LGBT+ Connect activities are volunteer led/run offering considerable peer support to attendees.

Key Learning: LGBT+ people over 50 connect to opportunities through a variety of routes and as the individuals they are. So a variety of methods and communications will be needed - do not underestimate the power of word of mouth. Pop up events are likely to get low numbers but play an important role in raising awareness of the opportunities and to people going on to engage with groups and activities.

Accessing existing assets

Ageing Better projects have supported LGBT+ people over 50 to access existing assets such as established events, groups etc. Time to Shine and Sage worked with Leeds Pride to make it more age friendly by hiring a room overlooking the main parade so creating a ‘mellow’ space where older LGBT+ people could be part of the action without being part of the crowds. Ageing Better in Camden/LGBT+ Connect hired an open top bus for London Pride Parade allowing those less-abled to be part of the Pride experience and also hosting an afternoon Soho Pride tea party for those wanting to join in but not be part of the big crowds. LGBT+ Connect also has a strong presence at Trans, Bi and Black Prides showcasing LGBT+ Connect and encouraging people to join up and join in.

Ageing Better in Birmingham identified that the LGBT Centre supported a large geographical area (wider West Midlands). This was positive as it ensures large numbers and an opportunity for people who did not want to identify as LGBT+ in their local area. However, for some LGBT+ people, living away from the ‘hub’ and needing transport and a car to access it created both fears and practical problems about what would happen as they got older and lost access to independent travel.

Ageing Better areas located away from some of the urban hubs highlighted that there is sometimes a nervousness among workers about how LGBT+ participants will be accepted in non LGBT+ specific groups. But they also identified how this nervousness was sometimes misplaced. One example shared was the story of an established participant who had wanted to start attending a session as a woman with his wife for whom he was the carer. Despite concerns, the session workers discussed how to manage this both with the individual and the group which resulted in the individual being able to attend in the identity he was comfortable being and the group activity continuing, without comment or change.

The insights gained in particular from our learning group with practitioners and from Ageing With Pride by Age Better Middlesbrough identified how there was often a disconnect between what participants say and what they do. The language used by participants can be “phobic” but their actions then not reflect this. Practitioners identified that this can be tackled by using the situation as a learning point to help participants understand why their language is inappropriate.

Across Ageing Better areas, a strong and common theme was the importance of projects taking place in safe spaces - places where it is made clear that any discrimination will be challenged and where people are free to express their identity and be themselves. For example, many Ageing Better areas made use of the rainbow flag to identify welcoming places. Ageing Better in Camden/LGBT+ Connect staff and volunteers use rainbow lanyards to identify themselves across their 25+ activities per month.

Key Learning: There is an important role for LGBT+ specific groups to help connect with socially isolated people aged over 50. However, this does not need to be the only provision that is accessible and welcoming. Training and support can help LGBT+ people aged over 50 access existing groups, activities or spaces.

Key Learning: Safe spaces are important. Make it clear discrimination will be challenged in these spaces and that all people are welcome. Recognised symbols such as the rainbow flag can help identify places as safe spaces.

Wider services and changing context

Concerns and issues

The literature review undertaken by Ecorys showed that older LGBT+ adults are five times less likely to access health and social care services. Some LGBT+ people will not use statutory services because of fear of discrimination. Ecorys also identified research in Ireland which showed less than half of older LGBT+ adults felt respected as an LGBT+ person by healthcare professionals as well as research by Stonewall who found 23% of LGBT+ respondents witnessed negative remarks from health care staff while accessing services.

This context was re-enforced by findings from Ageing Better areas who found significant concerns from LGBT+ people aged over 50 about growing older and specifically about people coming into their homes who were not LGBT+ friendly together with fears about future care needs as they aged. Time to Shine also shared research produced as part of a case study by the University of Sheffield on the Sage project. This highlighted how 80% of older LGBT+ people do not trust professionals to understand their lifestyle and that traditional services for older people would not meet their needs.

Reports from across Ageing Better areas highlight how people report high anxiety of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia when first accessing services and a feeling they would have to 'go back in the closet' after losing a partner, entering care or accessing services. This is a further addition to the historical context discussed earlier with widespread concerns from an ageing group of LGBT+ people who have experienced those earlier forms of discrimination.

This was also illustrated by work commissioned by Ageing Better Middlesbrough involving discussions with care home residents which highlighted homophobic attitudes in some non LGBT+ care home residents. What was positive from the research was people's willingness to change these attitudes when they had the chance to meet and speak to people from the LGBT+ community.

Key Learning: The wider research, consultations from Ageing Better areas and insights from practitioners all identify a significant barrier for some LGBT+ aged over 50 in connecting with statutory services as a result of their expectations and fears of prejudice and discrimination.

Support and training

Ageing Better has run several projects and initiatives to help combat this challenge. Sage (Leeds) developed a cultural competency package so that existing activities from both the voluntary sector and statutory sector were more accessible to LGBT+ people over 50. They also created Community Speakers who would connect with statutory organisations to share their experiences and increase awareness.

Alongside a wider campaign, Ageing with Pride in Birmingham provided care homes in Birmingham with specific LGBT+ training. Take Pride in Ageing Conferences supported by Ageing Better in Camden have also sought to raise awareness of and highlight best practice. Ageing Better areas also arrange opportunities for statutory organisations to connect with existing groups by attending existing sessions or activities. LGBT+ Connect, as a project within Opening Doors London, promotes 'Pride in Care' their national quality standard aimed at organisations working with older people as well as ODL's LGBT+ specific training for care and support staff and works with a variety of organisations to improve LGBT+ awareness.

Some Ageing Better areas are keen to promote positive messages but recognise that there is a gap in training and understanding/awareness amongst their delivery partners, volunteers and participants. There are plans in place in some areas for more training and awareness raising on the diversity of sexual orientation and the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity.

Key Learning: There is an ongoing need to ensure LGBT+ people aged over 50 have access to services. LGBT+ people aged over 50 should not fear discrimination or prejudice about accessing services which they will require as they age. Work also needs to be undertaken with care homes and the Statutory and health Sector to ensure that services are LGBT+ appropriate.

Further information

- [Ageing Better in Birmingham](#) are evaluating both their LGBT+ Hub and their LGBT+ local action plan projects. Learning will be produced around increasing the visibility of older LGBT people through their Ageing with Pride project and improving outcomes for LGBT people in adult social care through the changing practice in adult social care project.
- [Ageing Better in Camden](#) fund Opening Doors London to provide activities that engage LGBT+ members and more information can be found.
- Time to Shine in Leeds are continuously collecting test and learn data around working with LGBT+ older people and will be sharing this information through [their website](#)
- Middlesbrough Ageing Better commissioned a piece of work exploring LGBT+ issues in care homes and is available from [Ageing Better Middlesbrough](#)
- Bristol Ageing Better have produced a learning digest sharing the experiences of people who are LGBT+ including information on appropriate inclusive language is [available here](#)
- Ambition for Ageing have an ongoing programme of activity and have an Equalities Board. More information on [Ambition for Ageing Toolkit for inclusion in practice](#)
- [Literature review](#) undertaken by the National Lottery Community Fund evaluation partners, Ecorys.
- More detail on the tools and projects used to build connections and our wider insights from across the programme are available at [Ageing Better](#)