



# Sage: a project for older LGBT+ people in Leeds

Time to Shine end of project report

August 2021

Yorkshire  
MESMAC

Leeds  
ageUK



Time to  
Shine

COMMUNITY  
FUND

## Summary

Managed by Yorkshire [MESMAC](#) in partnership with [Age UK Leeds](#), the Sage project was co-produced from the start with a strong steering group of older Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender plus (LGBT+) people. Recognising the specific issues facing many older LGBT+ people they came together to:

- address **personal** loneliness and isolation
- assist in building a **community spirit** of self-help through action and volunteerism
- combat stereotypes and negative thinking about being old and being a member of the LGBT+ community through **awareness raising and advocacy**.

Time To Shine's local evaluators, Care Connect, identified research which reinforced Yorkshire MESMAC's understanding of issues that affect older LGBT+ individuals, that LGBT+ people felt anxious when accessing particular services for the first time and were reluctant to disclose their sexuality. Research showed that older LGBT+ people are especially vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness as they are more likely to be single, live alone, have lower levels of contact with relatives and are less likely to engage with local services. People involved in Sage often joined through word of mouth, a powerful medium in the LGBT+ community. Many have made friends at the regular meetings and have carried these friendships on independently.

## Sage in numbers

- Almost 400 individual people have taken part in Sage since 2015
- Sage has been supported by 28 younger volunteers (aged 49 and under) and 34 older volunteers (aged 50+) since 2015
- Volunteers have given over 1,300 hours of their time to Sage
- 22 case studies and stories have been written to share Sage's learning and experiences
- 131 activities have been organised since 2018, including Sage advisory group meetings, regular drop-ins, social events (face-to face-and online), poetry sessions, days out and training.
- Sage is being funded by Yorkshire MESMAC to continue activities for another year beyond funding from Time to Shine, until at least March 2022



# Activities

- Events were organised in LGBT+ History Month and Pride month each year
- A regular support group ran throughout the project and separate men's and women's support groups were also established following member requests. Groups also arranged a range of fun social activities including cooking, singing, writing workshops and trips out.
- Sage held awareness raising sessions on sexual health and HIV prevention to help combat the growth in new HIV infections in older men.
- Volunteers and staff undertook outreach and training with older people's organisations in the non-LGBT+ community in order to help those organisations become more open to LGBT+ members and to understand how to direct members to Sage.

**“It was good to gain insight on the extra layer of issues LGBT+ older people face.”**

- Ageism within the LGBT+ community was challenged with articles, blogs and letters.
- Sage members took part in citywide meetings to put the LGBT+ voice forward.

**“I am involved in the age friendly charter group in Leeds...I had to make a big decision... coming out...is a choice at every single meeting of new people, whether it is an individual or a group, how much am I going to give away of myself.”**

## Celebrating Pride: Building awareness and support for older LGBT+ people through collaboration

In 2016 Sage (Yorkshire MESMAC and Age UK Leeds) and the Time to Shine programme team worked together to increase the participation of older people at [Leeds Pride](#), working in partnership with other organisations to build age friendliness, through awareness and support for older LGBT+ people. The event also piloted the use of volunteer Pride Buddies, to work with older people who may need help with accessing the event.

The activity included provision of a quieter space at the heart of the action so those who were older or frailer were able to take a break whilst feeling part of the celebration

**“Great – I can't survive for very long on the street! This is a safe space, but I still feel part of it all. Keep up the good work and thank you.”**

Around 80 people attended the Sage space during the afternoon (roughly half and half aged over and under 50, thus providing a positive intergenerational element to the event), and many gave positive feedback about the experience.



# What difference did it make for older people in the LGBT+ community?

Positive comments made during the special video story made for Silver Pride in 2020 show very clearly what impact Sage has had on individuals:

**“Sage is the best thing that’s happened to me”**

**“It transformed my life, I’ve found friendship, I’ve found camaraderie, dignity and enrichment of my life thanks to the members of Sage.”**

Sage created a community where people met and developed lasting friendships, increasing their social and personal networks. Importantly, Sage members have spent time in hospital with people who would otherwise have died alone.

During lockdown members helped each other with gardening, exercise and shopping whilst maintaining regular social contact, which was of great benefit to those most isolated.

Sage opened up opportunities for the broader LGBT+ community to meet others and bond through public celebrations. LGBT+ history month and Pride have been wonderful key points to rally around a cause, take time to celebrate the LGBT+ community and to include non-LGBT+ members..

## Learning

Reaching people in the older LGBT+ community has had its challenges. This is particularly true when members identify themselves as LGBT+ but do not want to reveal this to others by being members of overtly LGBT+ groups. Sage has found that lockdown has improved the situation to some degree as closed zoom groups ensure the privacy of members.

**“[I] felt I wouldn’t be welcomed in the gay community, complete with walking stick and ‘what are you doing here’...that was my perception... since joining Sage I feel quite able to go crusading [all laugh], this is why Sage exists.”**

Outreach and training has given staff and volunteers in older people’s groups the information they need. This has helped them to sensitively support people who they know to be LGBT+ , and enabled them to publicise Sage services and events to all members through their general communication channels so that older people can access LGBT+ groups discreetly if they wish.

Outreach to individuals during regular visits to Leeds Central Library allowed us to leaflet the general public and to meet people who might be uncomfortable to visit an LGBT+ associated organisation or event. Outreach to smaller venues was challenging as closeted individuals did not wish to be seen talking to the project where they could be easily recognised by local friends or neighbours. But Sage volunteers embraced the opportunity to speak to the public and create allies.

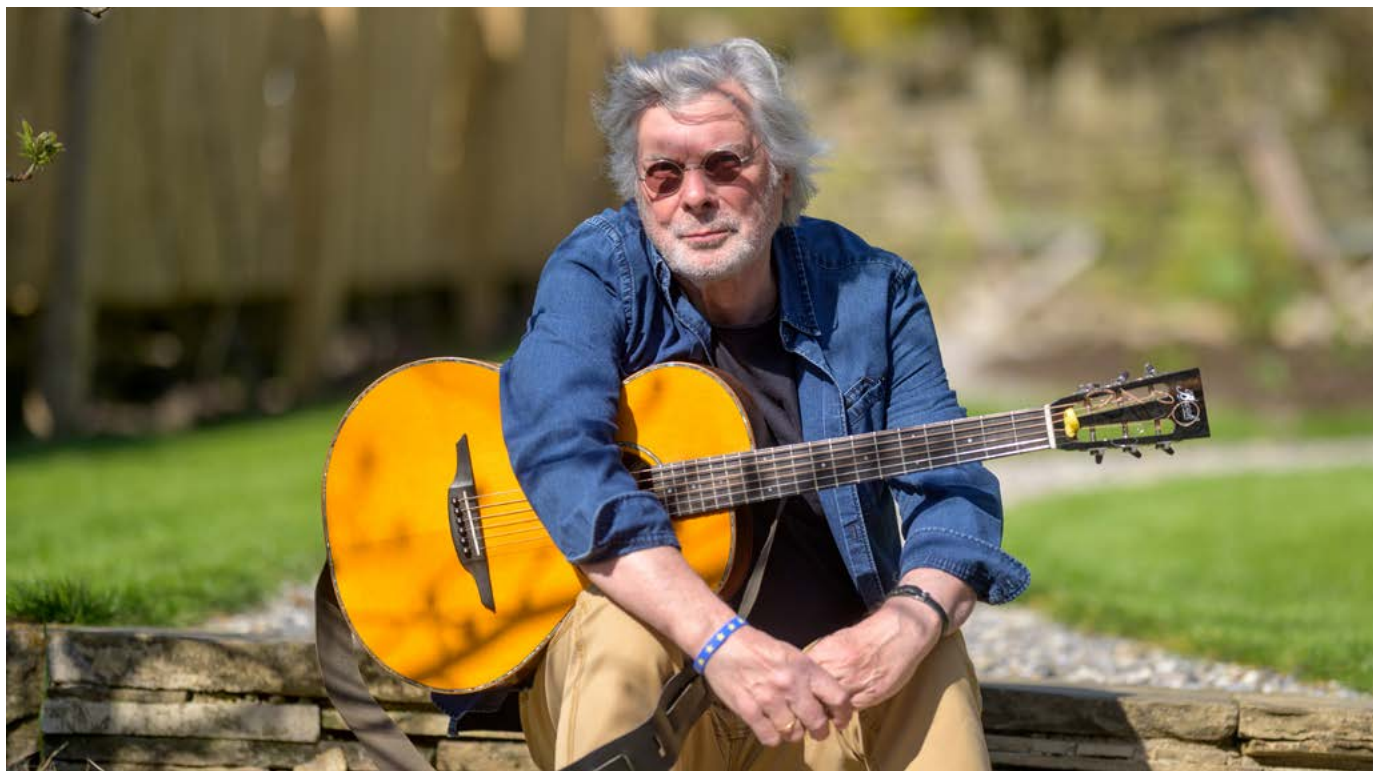
Partnering with non-LGBT+ events such as the International Day of Older People, has also raised awareness of Sage beyond the LGBT+ community.

The death of members during the project catalysed discussions around death and dying. A ‘good death’ can be harder to achieve for some older LGBT+ people as they may be less likely to have children, and may have lost touch with family members so might be more likely to die alone.

# Legacy

Sage will not disappear after Time to Shine funding ends as Yorkshire MESMAC will use its own resources to continue Sage for another year.

Two spin-off groups have formed from the regular Sage group: Women's Space and a Men's Group. As a result, levels of engagement for all members have increased significantly in the final year of Time to Shine funding.



Sage is now a key member of the [Leeds LGBT+ Community Consortium](#). This brings together several LGBT+ older people's groups to work on key issues like loneliness and isolation, and arrange social events and new opportunities for learning.

As part of [Silver Pride](#), Sage allowed individuals to tell their own story, working with [Friends of Dorothy](#), the LGBT+ Forum, and [Lippy People](#) (a video storytelling charity). They hope this will encourage other members of the LGBT+ community to tell theirs and to share their experiences with each other and more widely in Leeds.

Sage's contribution to public events like International Day of Older People and the International Day of Disabled Persons has allowed non-LGBT+ members to see into the LGBT+ world. This helps the public to understand how Sage members have many things in common with straight people but also many differences.

Sage continues to work - albeit online - with other older people's organisations to advise on how those groups can ensure any members of their group who identify as LGBT+ are well served by the activities and support they provide. Sage members run training and awareness sessions with organisations like neighbourhood networks to support them to ensure that LGBT+ community members would feel comfortable in their groups.

**“The importance of language and meaning is vital for providing sensitive services to the LGBT community.”**

## Covid-19 response

Sage's online response to the Covid-19 pandemic is detailed in a blog [Adapting Rapidly to Change](#). They increased engagement and widened their reach as new members joined Zoom meetings from as far afield as Harrogate, Bradford, and Wakefield. Zoom has also allowed less mobile members to take part regularly. Meetings moved to weekly at the request of members, with a popular 'on the couch' interview feature enabling members to get to know each other better.

Sage will continue with digital engagement even after face-to-face meetings resume, especially the streaming of public events and activities that some people might not be able to attend.

Many Sage members were helped to improve their digital skills, via the telephone, but the pandemic did highlight the digital divide. Those without internet access have found lockdowns even more difficult, despite regular telephone contact from Sage staff and volunteers. Members were keen to return to small face-to-face meetings whenever opportunity allowed.

Sage was able to take part in the first Silver Pride, with the event held online in 2020. It's purpose was to raise awareness of the realities of life for older LGBT+ people, acknowledge these challenges publicly and advocate for positive change more broadly.

The Covid-19 pandemic also accelerated the development of a good social media presence. Sage was able to link and network through other LGBT+ groups to recruit new members and also raise awareness of continuing ageism.





## Sage story

John joined Sage in 2019 as a way of meeting new people. John's partner had died in tragic circumstances and he was unable to process his grief.

Sage helped to increase his social networks, make friends and, over time, gave him confidence to want to volunteer with Sage.

Sage put John in contact with Lippy People, a video storytelling charity, who helped him to come to terms with the loss of his partner through the [making of his own video story](#). He has accessed counselling through Sage and in many ways has put his life back on track.

John has been shielding throughout the Covid-19 lockdown. As soon as life returns to 'normal' he'll complete his volunteer training and take the next steps on his journey.

## Resources

Adapting Rapidly to Change

[MESMAC Yorkshire Silver Pride](#)

Lippy People [playlist](#) including Carpe Diem, Two people, one mind, A love with discretion, Keeping going on my own, Somebody who loves me and others

Reducing social isolation amongst older LGBT+ people: A case study of the Sage project


To find out more about Yorkshire MESMAC go to <https://www.mesmac.co.uk/>

You can contact Sage on

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Find these reports and other resources on the Leeds Older People's Forum website  
[www.opforum.org.uk/resources](http://www.opforum.org.uk/resources)

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