



Connecting with and Supporting older LGBT+ people

**A Time to Shine learning Report
February 2022**

“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?”

Leeds
Older
People's
Forum

Time to
Shine

Yorkshire
MESMAC



About Time to Shine

Time to Shine is one of fourteen areas which form Ageing Better; an ambitious, large scale programme funded and developed by the National Lottery Community Fund. Ageing Better aims to improve the lives of people aged 50 and over by reducing social isolation and loneliness.

Introduction

Since Time to Shine started to share information about the research on how best to support older people from the LGBT+ community it has become apparent that there is a lot of interest in what works. This report, the connected toolkit and the [Sage report](#) and [case study](#) have been produced to share our findings.

A extrapolation from research by the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) suggested that Leeds might have a population of around 12,000 people (aged 50+) who define themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT+).

Academic research cited in a Sage case study by Time to Shine's local evaluators at the University of Sheffield, 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 (Guasp, 2011), and are less likely to engage with local services. Heaphy et al. (2003) found that over four fifths of older LGBT people do not trust professionals to understand their culture or lifestyle, and believed that traditional services aimed at older people are not accommodating of their needs, with half reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation (Guasp, 2011)."

Research by [Yorkshire Mesmac](#) during the lead up to Time to Shine identified two issues as important to older LGBT+ people in Leeds:

- fear of homophobia and transphobia as they grew older
- desire for support from, and enjoyment of activities with, peers

They interviewed a number of gay men and lesbian women. This revealed some social opportunities for gay men, but a lack of provision for women. Some older men participated in the local gay scene, but it was felt to be focused on younger people.

“[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...”

Individuals spoke of their loneliness and isolation.

There were real concerns about what would happen as people became frail and housebound, fearing that people coming into their homes to offer support may be homophobic. This fear extended to care homes.

An article on [loneliness and isolation in LGBT elders](#) talked to lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. Most were 'out of the closet' but spoke of lives 'hidden in full sight' as they grew older. They spoke of devastating loneliness especially with the loss of partners. A group was a vital place to meet: a safe place to which they belonged, with people with whom they could be themselves. They were also emphatic that they preferred same sexuality groups.

As a result of this work Time to Shine invited applications for a 6-year LGBT+ project which would be co-produced with LGBT+ older people and would address some of these issues.

This report looks at how Time to Shine has worked with LGBT+ older people through the Sage project at Time to Shine, (led by Yorkshire Mesmac, in partnership with Age UK Leeds) supported an Age Friendly Pride, and commissioned 6 Connecting Older LGBT+ People: Micro Fund projects in partnership with Leeds Community Foundation. It focuses on the experiences of a number of staff and volunteers who have been involved in the work over the past seven years, their reflections on achievements, learning about what still needs to be done and ways that might be achieved.

It can be read alongside the Sage end of project report, and the Working with LGBT+ older people toolkit, both of which are available on the [Resources](#) page of the Leeds Older People's Forum website.

Age Friendly Leeds Pride events challenge ageism in the gay community

Leeds is part of the Age Friendly movement and one of the priorities for the Time to Shine Age Friendly officer was to work with Sage on making Leeds Pride more age friendly. Pride, along with much of the traditional gay scene in Leeds, was seen as a space for younger people. In 2016 Sage and the Age Friendly officer worked in partnership to create an Age Friendly Leeds space, in a room above Lambert's Yard, a bar at the centre of the action. The Sage worker and Sage participants were based at this friendly, accessible, intergenerational space within the festival area. A support option was also piloted offering 'Pride Buddies'. These were volunteers who could assist individual older people who needed additional help or support to access the event.

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

“Fantastic! Just what was needed at the end of the march. A safe, friendly space in the midst of the celebrations.”

As Pride moved online in the past two years an online alternative [Silver Pride](#) kept the message alive.



Community development work or individual support - tension in project design?

Sage was based within Yorkshire MESMAC, an LGBT+ organisation primarily focussing on sexual health, and delivered in partnership with Age UK Leeds. The project was co-produced, along the lines of a community development model, with the twin aims of raising awareness of the LGBT+ community within older people's organisations and setting up social activities for LGBT+ members to get involved in.

What transpired was paralleled in a number of Time to Shine projects: a proportion of those who came to the project had higher needs than had been anticipated and staff time quickly got pulled into support work. This reduced the effort that could be committed to other aspects of the project, but didn't really address the higher support needs identified. In fact intersectionality could mean that a greater proportion of LGBT+ older people have extra support needs.

A Sage Community Development Worker with a background in health was surprised to see what a difference support and advocacy could make. A group member, recently widowed and with deteriorating health conditions, found themselves able to make contact with mainstream third sector support services as a result of the referral from a trusted organisation. The worker expected, from their clinical experience, to see the group member become more isolated and lonely following their bereavement and was gratified to see support from other group members meant this didn't happen. This offered evidence of what working with the social group could achieve, however it was still only reaching approximately 20 people at each meeting.

Another worker also identified that Sage could have reached more socially isolated or lonely LGBT+ people but the small scale of the project prevented this. This finding is reinforced by similar learning from a number of Time to Shine delivery partners. There was recognition that it was not possible to combine outreach and 1:1 support work with the most lonely and isolated people at the same time as supporting preventative or peer based social activity without a commitment of more staff time, and different skill sets.

Sage was a co-produced project aiming for independence as part of its sustainability plan, and the social group has moved a long way towards that. Members have also become involved in other activist projects in Leeds, and there is now a [Leeds LGBT+ Community Consortium](#) comprised of groups who came together as a response to the pandemic and a requirement to redirect efforts. It has however become apparent that peer support can only take individuals so far when people's needs increase, and unsupported voluntary effort is not an appropriate or sufficient way to address the needs of some individuals.

“I don't want to do the planning and have such a large commitment, I am happy to help out but I'm in retirement now and don't want the responsibility” Sage volunteer





Difficulties connecting with older LGBT+ who are no longer part of the scene

There were concerns that despite the success of the social project in supporting older members of the LGBT+ community, more older LGBT+ people needed support to join in. The lack of time for individual support meant that workers were unable to reach those most in need of support through either outreach or the creation of referral routes in from other organisations working with older people.

One of the Community Development Workers, concerned the project was not reaching the most isolated, undertook some outreach by running pop-up sessions. Doing this identified some additional challenges around this process. Although it was possible to take Sage to venues outside the city centre it might still be impossible for individuals not 'out' within their local community to approach the project. The outreach worked well in terms of networking and building allyships in community venues where publicity could be used to follow up the outreach but it was a very time consuming activity which it wasn't possible to exploit fully within the project.

Leeds Mindfulness Coop had difficulty recruiting to a 6 weeks Breathworks course (one of the Connecting Older LGBT+ People projects) which they had identified as being of increased value to an exclusively LGBT+ group. The course was filled as a result of personal invitations to known individuals, but the group was concerned it would be of benefit to many others and wanted help in knowing how to connect to older LGBT+ people not already in the loop.

The Sage project was successful in creating a social group but felt it had only just started to make an impact in terms of creating routes into the project, either formal routes through NHS and Adult Social Care workers who might identify individuals and share information about Sage with them, or through less formal routes involving publicity sharing from Neighbourhood Networks and others.

“I have got quite a lot of friends and am involved in quite a lot of activities but I am isolated from my own group, and because I live in a retirement block, where there [are] some very archaic views... that can almost induce a sense of loneliness at times” *Female Volunteer*

For this volunteer, her experiences led to her confiding in a professional, yet her need was initially identified as being emotional, which she disagreed with:

“Counselling had been mentioned, I had no interest whatsoever, I didn’t wish to be counselled, I wished to be part of a social group” *(Female Volunteer)*

Suggestions to remedy issues around letting people know about positive activities for older LGBT+ people included:

- identifying and advertising those routes to support into LGBT+ groups for the health professionals who identify loneliness
- providing more time and worker support within LGBT+ organisations to refer older individuals to specialist services (for help with housing, money or health issues) would enable a social group to remain focused on social provision
- more awareness training to ensure other organisations supporting older people in Leeds are LGBT+ friendly and welcome and support people appropriately
- creating a toolkit for allies in non-LGBT+ organisations to use to help them know how best to welcome and support people by making local groups LGBT+ safe spaces

Enabling general older people’s activities to be safe spaces would have the added benefit that, however much members appreciate the support of an LGBT+ group, most also have other interests and want to be part of other groups and organisations.

In the final year of the Time to Shine programme funding was used for a series of Connecting Older LGBT+ People: Micro Fund projects aimed at supporting small community groups and individuals who could deliver grassroots activities that would engage older LGBT+ people in opportunities to establish and maintain social connections. Funding was given to LGBT+ organisations, and community grass roots organisations, and projects offered a range of creative activities - from Mindfulness courses, to running co-produced programmes of online activity. The projects don’t report until March 2022 but verbal feedback indicates the activities are being well received but it is challenging to reach new participants.



Case Study A volunteer's perspective

Susan was asked, by word of mouth, to become a member of the steering group of the Sage project from the very beginning. Although she had been a lesbian feminist activist for many years she found it a new experience to be part of the Sage group which pulled together gay men, lesbian women and transgender individuals to work together on a project. She felt she learned a lot about other people's experience.

Susan was able to use her professional experience as a trainer to deliver LGBT+ awareness training in care homes and to other organisations.

As part of Sage she helped to set up 'Women's Space' for lesbian and trans women. This was something that was important to her, and provided personal support and friendship.

She felt it was valuable for people to have access to both general and specific groups as this reflected the context and history of the different groups in Leeds.

Susan is now volunteering with other projects that have come together over the past few years, pulling older LGBT+ groups together in a consortium and working on the idea of LGBT+ co-housing alongside an LGBT+ community hub..



References not already linked in the text

Making LGBT+ older people feel comfortable in your groups: a toolkit for people organising social groups and activities for all older people. This is available on the resources section of the Leeds Older People's Forum website.

[Reducing social isolation in LGBT+ communities aged over 50 – learning from Ageing Better](#)

This document contains a wealth of information and links to other LGBT+ organisations working with older people


[Opening Doors London](#)

Centre for Ageing Better [LGBT+ History Month blog](#) and others



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