

Combating loneliness amongst older LGBT people: a case study of the Sage project in Leeds

Introduction

Research shows that older LGBT people are especially vulnerable to loneliness as they are more likely to be single, live alone, and have lower levels of contact with relatives. They are also less likely to engage with local services, with recent findings showing that over four-fifths of older LGBT people do not trust professionals to understand their culture or lifestyle.

An ongoing evaluation of a project in Leeds, called Sage, directed specifically at lonely LGBT people provides learning on how to support older LGBT people who are, or may be at risk of being, lonely.

What is Sage?


The Leeds-based [Sage](#) project is a partnership between [Yorkshire MESMAC](#) and [Age UK Leeds](#). The project is part of the Time to Shine programme, which aims to reduce loneliness and social isolation among older people in Leeds and is funded by the Big Lottery's National Ageing Better programme. Sage offers fortnightly informal drop-in sessions, supported by volunteer 'buddies'; social events and activities (including social history, story-telling, film screenings, provision of an accessible space for the Leeds pride event); and signposting services.

Sage encourages older LGBT people to get involved as volunteers, training them to offer support to others, by becoming buddies for those who need support to attend events or sessions. Sage also supports organisations to ensure that services across Leeds are LGBT friendly through running 'cultural competency' training sessions.

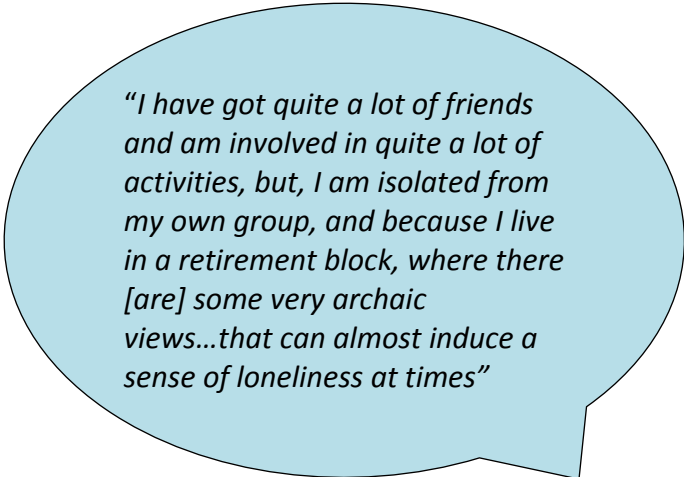
So far 329 older LGBT people in Leeds have been involved with Sage, either as volunteers or direct beneficiaries, and 104 individuals working or volunteering for organisations have received the cultural competency training.

What have we learned from Sage about supporting older LGBT people?

A focus on **creating a safe space** for older LGBT people has been a driver for the success of the project. This has stemmed from working with local organisations to create spaces that are physically accessible (such as for Leeds Pride), and also through volunteer buddies providing support across different settings (such as ensuring attendees at the informal drop-in feel welcome). This focus on the creation of a safe space has provided opportunities for older LGBT people to build confidence and engage with activities that enable them to **meet with likeminded people**.

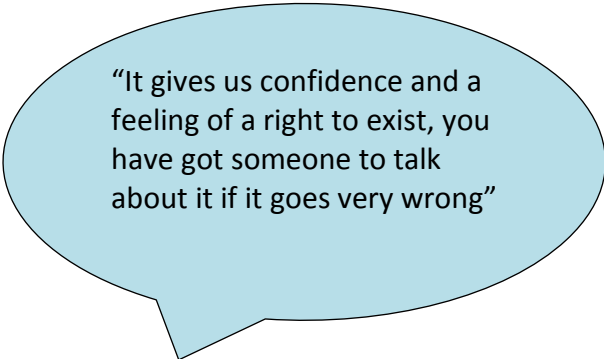


"[I] felt I wouldn't be welcome in the gay community, complete with walking stick...that was my perception...since joining Sage I feel quite able to go"

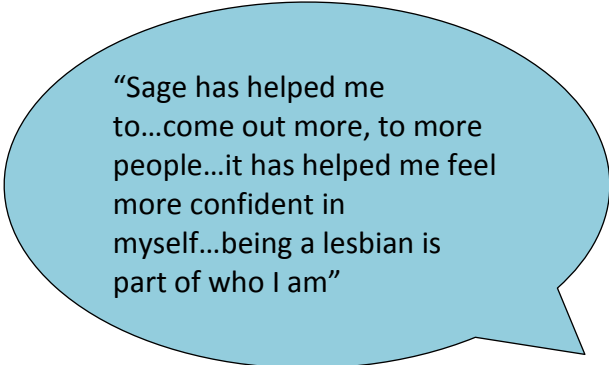


"I have got quite a lot of friends and am involved in quite a lot of activities, but, I am isolated from my own group, and because I live in a retirement block, where there [are] some very archaic views...that can almost induce a sense of loneliness at times"

This in turn has helped participants to open up about their identity to new people and groups, with the knowledge that there is a **supportive network** to talk to about their experiences.



"It gives us confidence and a feeling of a right to exist, you have got someone to talk about it if it goes very wrong"



"Sage has helped me to...come out more, to more people...it has helped me feel more confident in myself...being a lesbian is part of who I am"

Are there other examples of projects creating safe spaces?

The importance of creating a safe space for older LGBT people has not only been demonstrated through the Sage project, but through other initiatives too. For example, [Opening Doors London](#), a charity providing services and support to older LGBT people in the UK runs over 45 social activities every month, runs a Befriending Service, and provides training on a range of ageing and LGBT issues. The organisation recently opened a memory café for LGBT people over 50 living with dementia, believed to be the first of its kind in England, providing a safe place for these people to meet and engage.

Summary – 4 ways to support older LGBT people

Some ways to support older LGBT people who are, or may be at risk of being, lonely are to:

- provide a safe space where people can interact
- facilitate the meeting of likeminded people
- provide a supportive environment to help build confidence
- support local organisations to help them become LGBT friendly

About the authors: this article is written by Care Connect (a research and innovation hub at the University of Sheffield) and Age UK. For further information, email s.alden@sheffield.ac.uk or evaluation@ageuk.org.uk.

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