

Adapting rapidly to change: a lockdown diary

July 2020



Sage is a Time to Shine project, managed by Yorkshire MESMAC and Age UK Leeds, helping to support older adults in the LGBTQ+ community. Since its inception six years ago Sage has undertaken advocacy and networking on behalf of the older LGBTQ+ community, and organised a variety of socials and events to help combat loneliness and isolation for its members.

Tracy, one of the community development workers at Sage, had the foresight to chronicle the thoughts, conversations and challenges which arose at Sage during the very early stages of lockdown in March 2020, as chaos ensued and life as we knew it changed forever. This is Tracy's Covid-19 lockdown diary.

Monday March 16th – Volunteer Catch Up

Today we had a volunteer catch up and we briefly mentioned The Coronavirus as none of us really know much about it except the impact it was having in China, and it was heading our way. So the conversation diverted to our upcoming Saturday Sage Social and should we still have sharing plates of cakes and biscuits! The vote was to provide Kitkats and wrapped biscuits but let's not go mad and ditch the homemade cakes! How bonkers does that conversation sound now.

Tuesday March 17th - Sage Lunch Social

I came into the office and was told that in the interest of safety we needed to cancel ALL group sessions with immediate effect and by lunchtime I was told to take all my belongings and work from home until further notice. I spent the rest of the day sending messages that ALL our social gatherings had been cancelled and I would be in touch. Some Sage rebels still decided they would go to the social lunch – the social bunnies are going to find this hard!

Monday March 23rd - The NEW Remote Sage Begins

Started ringing all Sage members to check in with everyone to see how everyone was, and how the lockdown situation would affect them. I asked a number of questions just to get a feel for how people are feeling and for me to personally assess the most vulnerable:

- Do they have health conditions that have been set out in the shielding list?
- What support do they have?
- How do they feel about being in lockdown and what's their plan?
- I also asked – how can we support you?
- We discussed staying in touch and do they have WiFi / Internet / Equipment
- I asked how they would like to stay in touch and be connected to the rest of the group

These conversations were somewhere near an hour each, but that didn't matter as I felt everyone needed to talk.

After speaking with everyone I felt that I needed to find out what this ZOOM is that everyone is talking about as my members needed connections as soon as possible.

Monday March 30th - I Start To Learn

My first introduction to Zoom was via a Time To Shine Zoom overview session. As a group we shared best practice on how to use Zoom and hints and tips. I just listened and made notes as this was going to be Sage's lifeline to staying connected with each other.

Tuesday March 31st - Learning To Operate Remotely

My second Zoom session was some great training on using technology for meetings / socials and some tips on staying sane and working productively remotely. In my case the dining room table!

Tuesday April 7th - The First Sage Zoom Social

I logged on and one by one their smiling faces appeared all waving and saying "can you hear me?" Sage Zoom Socials had been born! We spent the next hour and half talking over each other in our excitement to say hello to everyone and ask how we all were.

There were many connection issues as people with phones struggled. Some couldn't get their camera to work, some couldn't turn on the mic, some constantly spoke even though they were on mute and all the instruction giving was bedlam – BUT WE DID IT and we all got to see each other which was all that mattered.

The following Tuesday at 2pm we had our 2nd Zoom Sage Social and this time we had a little experience under our belts and managed to switch on all of our mics and cameras and had a discussion about what we want to get out of the session and what the content should be.

The group decided that we shouldn't go down the quiz and activity route but to find out more about each other.

The following week we had a schedule which was:

- **Check In** – We check in with each other and then we say if we have spoken to other members and provided an update to how everyone is. The members offered to call others that didn't come on Zoom which really helped me with the telephone call volumes as it was difficult to get around everyone.
- **"On the couch"** - This is our chat show, Sage style, getting to know each other - I'm the Host and one of the members volunteers to be the Sage Celebrity. I give an overview of their place of birth, education, occupations and hobbies. The other members use the chat feature to send me questions and in Michael Parkinson style I probe the guest. It's lots of fun and it's amazing how much some of them have in common.
- We also have a section called **"Something for the Weekend"** which is a recommendation of a book, film, programme or something that they want to share.

Every Tuesday we now look forward to our Zoom session. As I write this we have successfully hosted 13 Sage Zoom Socials.

Sage Developments

- Sage has developed stronger relationships with Friends of Dorothy (FOD) and Women Space - both LGBT+ older adults groups.
- We actively promote the FOD social which is on a Thursday and Sage members are now attending . We had a combined poetry session with Women Space and some of the women now attend Sage regularly.
- Sage has a new group of 4 members working on the Lippy People Project (this is a video storytelling project addressing bereavement and grief). This has been really successful in supporting some of their difficulties around loss and how that has been magnified during this period of isolation.

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- Sage now does joint working with Age UK Leeds to support the shopping service and the check in and chat.
 - We have had 3 new members this quarter. It's good that we're still recruiting.
 - We have been sourcing new tablets and providing data so that members without IT equipment and on a low income can be connected - not just with Sage but other social groups too.
 - I have provided information to various sectors reporting on how LGBT+ older adults have been affected by Covid 19. I feel this is important feedback as there have been many challenges.

Sage Challenges

- The regular comment of too much work, not enough hours!
- Most Sage members at some stage suffered difficulties especially around mental health. My role has been to reassure and support individuals the best I could. Some members have been referred to external mental health support.
- It's not easy promoting Sage during lockdown. I feel this would have been an opportunity to have explored socially isolated LGBT+ members as those people who may be put off by our location or confidence issues about joining a group in a physical sense may have attended via Zoom.

In Conclusion

The last few months have been like riding a roller-coaster. I started this situation trying to make sure the members are connected, supported and we all struggled to adapt to the new remote style of working.

I feel I have been very lucky to get to know the social group better, however the loneliness and isolation for some is really having an impact. I have used my Age UK Leeds experience to guide them to services, or I've just been a reassuring voice to say everything will be okay.

I would like to plan more for the future and how I can move Sage forward now that we are coming out of the lockdown. I feel I have achieved lots through this crisis. No-one could have prepared but I feel we have risen to the challenge. The members have provided some very humbling feedback, which lets me know that the support I am offering is helping them through this situation.