

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

Summary

The Sage project is funded through the Time to Shine (TTS) programme, which aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst older people in Leeds. TTS is supported by The Big Lottery funded Ageing Better programme, which operates in 14 areas across England. Sage is run by Yorkshire MESMAC (which has a track record of working with the LGBT community of all ages) in partnership with Age UK Leeds (which offers a variety of activities and services to older people across Leeds). Sage works with socially isolated older LGBT people across the city, encouraging them to connect with services in their local community and across Leeds.

The project offers: fortnightly informal drop-in sessions, supported by volunteer ‘buddies’; social events and activities (including social history, storytelling sessions, film screenings, provision of an accessible space for the Leeds pride event), and signposting services.

Based on monitoring data gathered to date, 264 older LGBT people have been involved with Sage as either a volunteer or beneficiary (exceeding an initial target of 250), and the number of indirect beneficiaries (i.e. those who receive promotional materials) has reached 7046. The project is supported by a paid community development worker, with the longer-term ambition that older LGBT volunteers will lead the project.

Sage also aims to contribute to wider change across the city by working with organisations, through:

- Running: ‘cultural competency’ sessions, which aim to raise awareness of the needs of the older LGBT community and support organisations to become LGBT friendly (as of end September 2017, 104 people had received this training)
- Running volunteer led community talks, which aim to raise awareness of LGBT issues in the community. These are pitched to a general audience and to date one has been carried out with a tenant’s association.
- Both the project team and volunteers meet with organisations and raise awareness of LGBT older people. For example, older LGBT volunteers sit on the Age Friendly board for Leeds City Council and contribute to discussions on issues such as housing strategy and hospital discharge.

Background

Research shows 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). These findings echo those of MESMAC, where LGBT people felt anxious when accessing particular services for the first time and were reluctant to disclose their sexuality. Overall, the research findings suggest that for at least some older LGBT people, loneliness may be linked to a range of individual, but also wider factors linked to a distrust of service providers.

This case study considers the extent to which Sage is effective at encouraging older LGBT people who are lonely and reside in Leeds to get involved in local services. This is explored by examining the extent to which LGBT people engaging with Sage feel **more confident in engaging in their communities** and **are actively involved in managing, designing and delivering the project** (which form two of the four target outcomes of the overall TTS programme).

It also examines how Sage is ensuring services across the city are becoming more inclusive. As Sage has just entered year three of its six-year project duration, with initial stages mainly consisting of volunteer recruitment and outreach work, this case study is part of ongoing research which will trace Sage’s development over time.

Methods

The following methods were used to collect data for this case study:

- Review of documents, including: updates provided by the project team, press releases, monitoring returns, promotional material (including an article published in the Yorkshire Evening Post).
- Analysis of baseline survey data of beneficiaries and volunteers.
- A focus group carried out in November 2017 consisting of four Sage volunteers (all participants also identified as beneficiaries)
- Two telephone interviews with the Project Operations Manager carried out November 2015 and May 2017.
- Two interviews (one face to face, one by telephone) with the Community Development Worker (CDW), carried out February and December 2017.

Key Findings

Older LGBT people are actively involved in managing, designing and delivering Sage

Sage works to ensure older LGBT people play a key role in the project's design and delivery, which is viewed as particularly important given findings that older LGBT people are less likely to get involved in local services. As of end September 2017, a total of 63 older LGBT people had been active volunteers for Sage (supported by an additional 23 volunteers under 50):

The active engagement of older people, really donating time and energy, has been fabulous...it means [the] project is led by people with lived experiences (CDW)

Interviewees referred to the inclusive nature of Sage, with one saying she felt able to contribute to a steering group despite a physical disability. Some volunteers have trained up as buddies (including offering support for one off events, such as Leeds Pride), others are involved in running regular events; these have ranged from providing an age friendly space to ensuring Leeds Pride is more accessible to older LGBT people, to facilitating storytelling workshops and helping Sage to tweak its content for its cultural competency training sessions.

Many also take part in steering groups, these may focus on arranging events, or discussing the future of the Sage newsletter. Though early days, volunteers are being trained to run community talks. Others are contributing to promotional materials. A good example of this is an intergenerational group who are in the process of developing the current newsletter, several ideas have been put forward to improve its reach, not just for Sage, but for the older LGBT population across Leeds. Suggestions include writing about accessible cafés and pubs, and book and film reviews, to add interest.

Volunteers also sit on a range of boards across the city in order to contribute to strategic direction, for example, contributing to discussions on Leeds City Council's housing and social care strategies. It is reasonable to say that together, these initiatives are starting to lead to wider changes in perception across the city, an issue that will be re-visited in later case studies.

Older LGBT people value being involved in a project tailored specifically to their needs

Staff and participants referred to the importance of intersectionality, where gender, age, culture and lived spaces mean they experience social isolation and loneliness differently, but these factors nevertheless interact with their LGBT identity in, sometimes, complex ways. For example, with regard to gender, lesbian focus group participants referred to identifying with gay men, with one saying that hearing negative comments about gay men affected her too, as she had experienced similar types of discrimination. However, it was felt that some women identified more as feminists and lesbians, meaning they are more reticent to joining the Sage drop-in which is for both men and women.

While older LGBT volunteers enjoyed interacting with younger volunteers, focus group participants felt that their status as an older LGBT person gave them a shared history, such as remembering when homosexuality was unlawful, and protesting against legislation such as Section 28, alongside other experiences linked to ageing, such as ill health and frailty.

All participants interviewed had experienced some form of homophobia, with one lacking confidence to come out due to negative past experiences where she lived. One referred to casual homophobia, even among friends and acquaintances:

My friends are straight...I have managed to change two attitudes recently, but they still don't know about me (Female Volunteer)

What has worked well

Sage has successfully forged intergenerational links

To encourage wider impact (i.e. across and within communities), adopting an intergenerational approach is viewed as important. The intergenerational element is working well and to date, 23 volunteers under 50 are recorded as contributing to Sage, where a reciprocal relationship has been developed through shared learning, and reducing the social isolation of younger LGBT people:

Younger LGBT can be fairly isolated, particularly in terms of coming into contact and learning from older LGBT people, as they may not come across them in their walks of life. So they see the benefit of becoming friends with older LGBT [people], they can also learn from their experiences (CDW)

Sharing experiences had also increased the confidence of an older participant:

I can say to them what does 'so and so' mean, as I don't know all the jargon and I can put my foot in it...so I have these younger friends, that is good for me as an older person (Female Volunteer)

Another example of intergenerational success was the Leeds Pride event, where around 80 people attended the Sage space during the afternoon (this was roughly an equal mix of people over and under 50, thus providing a positive intergenerational element).

Sage is reducing isolation through enabling meaningful relationships to develop

Focus group participants felt that social isolation and loneliness may be experienced by LGBT people through having limited contact with those who share their identity:

At first I thought, no, I am not socially isolated, I see lots of people...but when I thought about it again, it was yes, I am... as far as LGBT and lesbian was concerned (Female Volunteer)

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)

The participant then went on to say that Sage was able to meet her social need, by introducing her to likeminded people. Focus group participants also referred to the importance of feeling safe, and being able to *be yourself*, with all agreeing that for this to happen, a targeted project was necessary:

I am not out yet, but here (Sage), we can be out...and we know, roughly, that we have all had difficulties in life (Female Volunteer)

It's made me feel I have a place again..., and I am able to make a contribution ... so I feel much more connected to the LGBT community (Female Volunteer)

Sage is helping older LGBT people build confidence and resilience

Perhaps more importantly when thinking about longer term impact, it was felt that getting involved in a project such as Sage can help people feel more confident expressing their identity:

Sage has helped me to...come out more, to more people...it has helped me feel more confident in myself even though I have been out for years...being a lesbian is part of who I am (Female Volunteer)

Another referred to feeling more confident in the wider LGBT community, which all agreed was generally perceived as *young*:

[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 (Male Volunteer)

Through discussions with focus group participants, even those who had *come out* felt their status as an LGBT person was continually renegotiated, particularly when approaching new people or groups:

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 (Female Volunteer)

This highlights how a targeted project such as Sage can work well, as the comradeship developed meant participants valued having a support network to fall back on as confidence is built up:

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 (Female Volunteer)

A less formal approach is leading to greater levels of engagement

Linked to the experiences and concerns of some LGBT people, offering formal groups or support, or requiring potential beneficiaries to sign up to activities, was not viewed as suitable for some. For this reason, Sage runs an informal drop-in, where trained volunteers provide support, such as by having a chat, or helping attendees do an activity. This was viewed as particularly useful for those with multiple needs:

There is no formalisation or ties, just turn up if you feel like, if I missed a drop-in session I wouldn't give it a thought (Female Volunteer)

The drop-ins were viewed by all as successful, and run twice a month, including on a Saturday.

Awareness raising is leading to changes at the wider level

While early days, Sage is starting to make an impact across Leeds; the Community Development Worker (CDW) felt this had been aided to some extent by the need for organisations to ensure they are catering for LGBT people:

Organisations are realising there is a gap, they need to do something about it, many more want to make their engagement more visible... Funders and key statutory organisations such as Leeds City Council and the NHS are much more proactive, so organisations need to evidence how engaging

Feedback on the cultural competency training being carried out shows this is heading in the right direction, with Carers Leeds, for example, setting up a new group for LGBT carers:

Training is an important way of raising awareness... people report feeling more confident about how to support older LGBT (CDW)

In turn MESMAC, who run Sage, have become more attuned to the needs of older people, such as being trained as dementia friends.

This, of course, contributes to increasing confidence at the individual level, as older LGBT people may be more likely to use a service if it is perceived as LGBT friendly.

Sage increased its profile through running an event for Leeds pride. The event worked in partnership with a range of local organisations to provide an accessible, age friendly space where older LGBT people (and indeed, those of all ages), could participate.

Barriers and Challenges

Meeting individual and organisational level needs

One of the key strengths of Sage is that alongside working with LGBT people who are lonely or socially isolated, it also supports organisations to help them become more LGBT friendly.

However, one issue encountered is that some older LGBT people have complex needs, but there are limited resources available to provide more intensive support.

To assist in the support element of Sage, trained buddies were originally intended to provide one to one support for the most isolated, but due to resources and training requirements, setting this up has not been possible. Instead trained buddies help out at more informal drop in sessions or events.

Ensuring Sage becomes a volunteer led project

One of the ambitions of Sage is to become a volunteer led project, thus contributing to its sustainability once funding ends, and the evidence certainly shows that volunteers are involved at all levels of Sage. Yet staff and volunteers did not feel this was feasible without some element of paid support, referring to participants who may have complex needs, or the need to apply for additional funding to run events. One volunteer said she didn't want to have too much responsibility, another suggested that other issues, such as relating to health, may be a particular barrier for older volunteers:

For older people, enthusiastic as we are, our stamina is less as volunteers and our consistency is less because we have health issues, we have energy issues, and these things interfere...organisations for older people need paid input there is no question about it (Female Volunteer)

Engaging and working with the most isolated

Moving forward, volunteers are instrumental in identifying ways in which the most isolated can be engaged, such as through developing *mini flyers* that can be left in GP waiting rooms. Yet while this may raise awareness, the CDW and volunteers identified a gap (both for Sage and TTS as a whole) in terms of meeting the needs of those with complex and multiple needs (e.g. dementia and mental health issues), who will inevitably require more intensive, one to one support.

Complexity of linking with BME LGBT older people

Though staff and focus group participants highlighted a perceived shared identity due to being LGBT, it was agreed that this may not extend to older people from particular BME groups, who were less likely to engage. This was due to a perception that the LGBT community as primarily *white*:

There is...a discomfort in coming into the LGBT community because it is actively white ...it's an additional barrier for them, so why would they feel at home with us, it is a part of their identity as blackness is a part of their identity (Female Volunteer)

This was also linked to some BME cultures, whereas Asian men in particular were viewed as less likely to identify as gay due to community/familial pressures.

Sage is carrying out ongoing work to ensure BME communities are aware of what they offer, it also signposts to help and advice elsewhere for those who aren't looking for LGBT based social environments. Promisingly, Sage has some BME LGBT volunteers, and it was felt that this may assist engagement moving forward.

Learning and recommendations

Based on the findings to date, Sage is working well, increasing the involvement and confidence of older LGBT people and raising awareness at the organisational level (leading to real change, such as the Carers Centre developing an LGBT group). While BME groups have engaged less, steps are being taken to remedy this, including through wider signposting, and working with younger BME LGBT volunteers.

Based on feedback, while the volunteering element is working well, those involved felt a paid worker was necessary to provide ongoing support. It was also felt that those with complex needs require more intensive support. Yet for this to be taken forward, either a standalone project would need to be resourced, or Sage would need to secure funding to develop this element. Finally, it is important to ensure that robust tools are in place to demonstrate how Sage is leading to wider system change, ensuring its legacy is captured.

References

- Guasp, 2011. *Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual People in Later Life*, London: Stonewall.
- Heaphy, B., Yip, A.K.T. and Thompson, D., 2003. *Lesbian, gay and bisexual lives over 50: report on the project: The social and policy implications of non- heterosexual ageing'*, Nottingham: York House Publications.