



Silver Rainbows

End of Project Report

Overview

The aim of the Silver Rainbows project was to develop a network for older LGBT+ people in Cheshire West and Chester to bring together those who feel isolated/lonely or excluded from existing provision.

Silver Rainbows was commissioned as part of Brightlife's 'Bright Ideas' strand and was delivered by Body Positive, a registered charity working with LGBT+ people across Cheshire.

The project was initially awarded £20,000 to run for one year, with a further £20,000 subsequently awarded to extend it for another year.

Background and context

Nationally, older LGBT+ people are especially vulnerable to experiencing isolation and loneliness as they are more likely to be single, to live alone and to have less contact with relatives, and are less likely to engage with local services.

In Cheshire West and Chester - a predominantly rural region - there are few opportunities for older LGBT+ people to socialise and make new friendships, with existing provisions tending to have an emphasis on young LGBT+ people.

Social opportunities involving the 'gay scene' in nearby Manchester do not always appeal to older people, and attending social activities that are not specifically for LGBT+ people is perceived to come with a set of risks, including the potential for homophobic attitudes and rejection.

Development and delivery

A part-time project officer was employed to facilitate the development of the network.

New members were recruited to the network primarily through a combination of digital and print marketing: a visual brand, website and social media presence were established, and activities were promoted through existing partner networks and venues.

Where necessary, participants were supported to engage through counselling, telephone 1:1s and home visits. The complex issues experienced by many in the cohort, and the resulting levels of support required, took up much more of the Project Officer's time than had been anticipated. This, in turn, had an impact on the number of participants that the project engaged.

Network activities were co-designed by participants, and included formal activity groups such as the Proud Marys LGBT+ choir and a regular trans support group; regular and one-off events such as film screenings and 'LGB-Tea' dances; and special exhibitions and activities as part of LGBT History

Month.

In August 2018, in partnership with Age UK Cheshire and Brightlife, Silver Rainbows created the first area dedicated to older LGBT+ people at a UK Pride event. The 'Vintage Pride' area at Chester Pride was well-used and raised the visibility of older LGBT+ people at the event, as well as being an effective tool for recruitment of new participants into the Silver Rainbows project.

Proud Marys

"It's not just a choir - it's a chance to be visible to ourselves and to each other."

The Proud Marys, Cheshire's first LGBT+ choir, was established as part of the Silver Rainbows project. Welcoming members of all ages, the choir meets weekly to rehearse a range of classical and contemporary songs to perform at local events including Chester Pride.

"For a few hours I can forget that I'm a minority and feel part of something bigger, something wonderful, something liberating, and every song takes on a new meaning," says Proud Marys member Lorraine Pate. "And having the opportunity to perform at Chester Pride is the icing on the cake. For me, it's not just a choir - it's a chance to be visible to ourselves and to each other."

Case Study: www.brightlifecheshire.org.uk/sue-walker-65/

Impact and legacy

Reducing loneliness

While the data does show improvements for some participants in terms of a reduction in loneliness and isolation, higher levels of social contact and improved health and wellbeing, reluctance of many participants to complete the evaluation questionnaire means that the conclusions that can be drawn from this data are very limited.

However, anecdotal reports from participants indicated that their involvement with the network had a positive impact on their ability to connect with other older LGBT+ people, make new friends and prevent or reduce feelings of isolation.

Promoting best practice

The project raised the visibility of older LGBT+ people and their needs amongst local statutory and voluntary sector service providers. As a result, volunteers from the network have become members of consultation and steering groups, supporting the delivery of training on good practice with relation to older LGBT+ people.

A training and accreditation programme for the health and social care sector has been developed as part of the Silver Rainbows brand, aimed at improving the experiences of older LGBT+ people within institutions such as care homes, along with annual Take Pride in Ageing conferences for the sector. As part of this work, a Pride event was held in a residential care setting. Members of the Silver Rainbows network attended and spent time with the residents celebrating LGBT+ history and culture.

One resident reported that she had previously discouraged a gay relative from visiting her because she was worried about the reactions of other residents. However, having seen residents' positive responses to the Pride event, she would now be inviting him to visit.

Developing skills

Delivering the Silver Rainbows project has enabled Body Positive to develop its skills, experience, and relationships with other organisations. Staff are now better equipped to work with older people, resulting in access to new funding streams and areas of income generation.

The project has also led to a deeper appreciation of the impact that historical treatment of LGBT+ people has had on this cohort. Following delivery of Silver Rainbows, Body Positive was awarded funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to deliver another project, From Prejudice to Pride, involving the collection of the oral histories of older LGBT+ people in the region and the creation of a new collection on LGBT+ history at the Cheshire Archive.

Sustainability

The Silver Rainbows network has been sustained as a virtual and physical entity beyond the end of the Brightlife funding period, with the Proud Marys choir and the Trans support group continuing to thrive, and regular activities continuing to be planned as part of both LGBT History Month and Chester Pride.

Key learning

Older LGBT+ people are especially vulnerable to experiencing isolation and/or loneliness due to a variety of factors.

Preventing and reducing isolation and loneliness for this cohort requires LGBT+ exclusive provision, at least as an entry point.

Older LGBT+ people often require high levels of 1:1 support in order to feel ready to engage, particularly those 'coming out' in later life.

It is important to recognise the impact that LGBT+ history has had on this cohort. Greater understanding of this is required amongst statutory and voluntary sector providers.

Older LGBT+ people are often reluctant to access health and social care services. This is due to perceptions about heteronormative cultures and/or previous negative experiences.

Training and awareness raising is required within the health and social care sector to improve the experience for older LGBT+ people.

'Mainstream' social activities can be supported to become more accessible and less heteronormative.

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