



ONLY CONNECT

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON OLDER LGBT+ PEOPLE

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

The emergence of COVID-19 and resulting lockdown meant that Opening Doors London (ODL) had to adjust and reconfigure the vital services we provide to over 2,000+ members.

The changes included recalibrating all our services, including moving from a face-to-face befriending service to a telephone one-to-one befriending service; suspending our over 40 monthly social activities and moving some of them onto zoom; moving specialist support groups online and providing additional support via email and phone; sending out information by post; and sourcing information and communications technology for several members.

During the first 6 weeks of lockdown ODL staff and volunteers made over 1000 phone calls to members (in addition to the calls made by volunteer befrienders). We were able to identify those in most need and to be involved in many other community interventions including the supplying of food parcels to those we found had very little in the fridge to survive on; getting someone into a members flat to get the lights back on; and ensuring that our most vulnerable members were on the radar of their local council.



Following this turbulent period, we wanted to understand how older LGBT+ people were adjusting to these changes and the continued impact of the prolonged pandemic and lockdown. We wanted to find out if organisations like ODL could be doing more to support older LGBT+ people through these difficult times, and better ensure they live happy, healthy, and independent lives, free from loneliness, isolation, prejudice and discrimination.

We launched a survey to ask our members about their experiences during the crisis and the support provided by ODL. The online version was supplemented by telephone calls to 25% of our older LGBT+ members who are digitally excluded. The survey ran throughout June and July 2020 and the results were analysed in August.

BACKGROUND

There are no research studies that demonstrate older LGBT+ people are more likely to catch COVID-19, or figures that show higher rates of mortality in the LGBT+ community. However, there is evidence to suggest that older LGBT+ people experience inequities in their health and care status¹ and therefore might have been more vulnerable and had to shield.

There have been several large surveys looking at the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown on the LGBT+ community generally, for example, a survey of 2,300 LGBT+ people shows that lockdown has exacerbated the existing epidemic of poor mental health amongst LGBT+ people. There have been dramatic increases in the severity of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, and many more LGBT+ people reporting their general mental health declining.² In their survey of 555 LGBT+ people, the Manchester based LGBT Foundation found that 42% of respondents wanted to access mental health support during the pandemic, 34% had medical appointments cancelled by providers and 16% had tried and been unable to access non-COVID related health care.³ Older LGBT+ people experience several health inequalities, including mental health which may put them at higher risk from being affected by the virus. Older LGBT+ people are more likely to be single and live alone. They are much less likely to have support from children or extended family and many experience loneliness social isolation already.⁴ Loneliness and social isolation are not universal experiences among older LGBT+ people, the risk increases where resources for them to meet and socialise with other members of the community are not available or accessible.¹

COVID-19 and lockdown has socially distanced older LGBT+ people from their friends, social activities, and community centres that they once relied on thus increasing the risk of loneliness and social isolation.

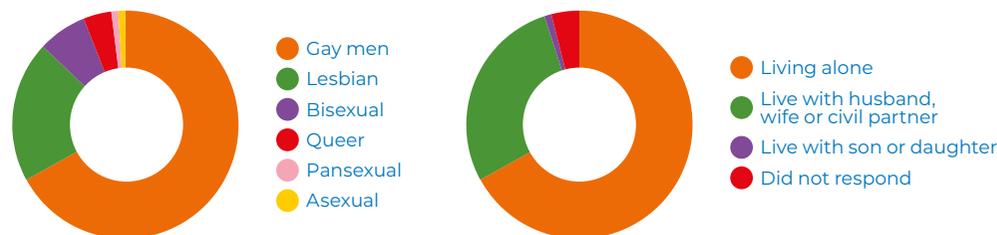
THE OBJECTIVES WERE:

- To evaluate the changes made to our front line services and how effective they were in helping ODL members in maintaining their health and reducing loneliness and isolation
- To develop a deeper understanding of the health and social care needs and experiences of older LGBT+ during the COVID-19 pandemic and whether those needs were being met, and
- To establish new ways in which ODL could support older LGBT+ people to alleviate loneliness and reduce socially isolation by maintaining contact and engagement currently and during any future resurgence of COVID-19.

103 older LGBT+ people responded to the survey. All ODL members were alerted to the survey through the member's monthly online newsletter and those who we know to be digitally excluded were phoned. Respondents were between 51 and 90 years of age and the mean age was 62 years. 67% of respondents defined themselves as gay men, 20% lesbian, 7% as bisexual, 4% as queer, 1% pansexual and 1% as asexual. Most of the respondents were from White British backgrounds with 10 people identifying with BAME groups.

Our survey respondents (n=103)

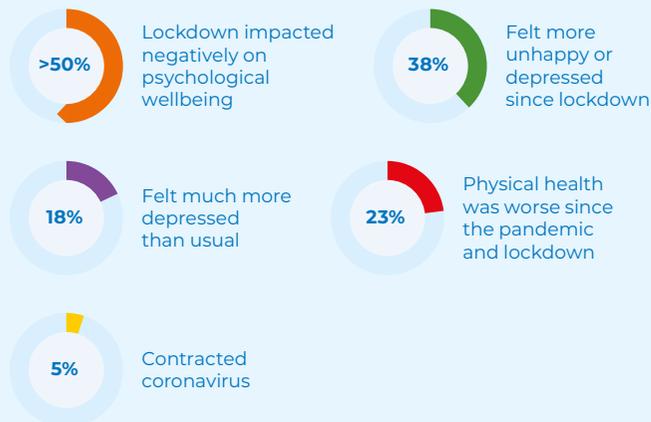
Members identified themselves as:



KEY FINDINGS

AT A GLANCE

Health



Loneliness and isolation



Socialising



Support from the local community



1 / THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING OF OLDER LGBT+ PEOPLE

Over half the respondents reported that lockdown had impacted negatively on their psychological wellbeing. 38% of people reported feeling more unhappy or depressed since lockdown and 18% of people said they felt much more depressed than usual.

Phone calls noted that members were feeling very isolated, suffering from depression and that their anxiety was increasing significantly. Staff monitored reports from volunteers very carefully to ensure that we were supporting our most vulnerable members.

Five of the respondents reported contracting Coronavirus. 23% of people said their physical health was worse since the pandemic and lockdown. Some people reported waiting for treatment resulting in a worsening of their physical conditions and others that they were more anxious due to underlying conditions and shielding.

“I feel more depressed than usual and I have thoughts of suicide coming into my mind.”

Cisgender gay man, 60s

“I am waiting for cataract surgery and my sight is very blurred. Also had the virus and it has left me not being able to do things I could manage.”

Cisgender lesbian, 70s

“I have found myself becoming tearful for no reason at all.”

Cisgender gay man, 50s

2 / THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FEELINGS OF LONELINESS AND ISOLATION AMONGST OLDER LGBT+ PEOPLE

We know that isolation and loneliness is an issue for older LGBT+ people, and during lockdown 37% of respondents said they felt more lonely than usual. Most people reporting feeling lonelier, lived on their own. The closure of social activity groups run by ODL increased social isolation.

Many respondents expressed their gratitude for the reconfiguring of the face to face befriending programme to a weekly telephone befriending call. We know from our Befriending Service that several members felt suicidal during the last few months – and we have been making regular calls to monitor the state of their mental health.

“ X is very isolated and suffers from depression. Her sister is her nearest contact, but she is bedridden with a serious respiratory condition. She is able to go out for food etc but doesn't seem to have any network and is anxious and frightened. She was VERY grateful for the offer of a tele-friender.”

“ Y suffers from arthritis and colitis and is worried about running out of medication. She's housebound and immunocompromised and has been living on cereal for weeks. I am the first person she's spoken to for weeks. She's got a food delivery coming tomorrow – she is running out of food.”

“ Z sounded very vulnerable. Eg. No credit on mobile phone, NOT ONLINE. Relying heavily on his land line.”

Befriending volunteer comments

Some members were eager to get back outside as soon as lockdown was lifted. Other are not leaving the house at all and have said that seeing people without masks has made them too anxious to ever go out. Some members are definitely very distressed about the perceived lack of care from other members of the public.

“ I have been very lonely, since I have no relatives and the groups, I used to mix with stopped due to the virus.”

Cisgender lesbian, 60s

“ If I didn't have my civil partner with me, I'd have been much worse, my mental health would have suffered, and I would be more isolated and lonelier.”

Cisgender gay man, 70s

“ Much happier since befriending relationship started. My befriender has been amazing and matched really well. Been drinking more since lockdown but feel it is under control.”

Cisgender gay man, 50s

3 / THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIALISING AND HAVING SOMEONE TO TALK TO

When asked if they had someone to talk to 73% respondents said yes often or some of the time, these included members who had telephone calls with their befrienders, and 27% said hardly ever or never. Not being able to attend social activities, diminished contact with friends and mixing with other LGBT+ people all had a major impact on peoples' sense of belonging and happiness.

Many respondents described how they tried to remain in touch with friends via the telephone and social media. However, this did not make up for physical social interaction and intimacy. Digital technology was a challenge and disliked by some respondents. We know that over 20% of our members either do not have the appropriate equipment (smart phone, tablet, laptop) or access to the internet. This figure more than doubled for those contacting our Befriending Service for support. Many of our members do have good social networks, but these tend to consist of peers rather than intergenerational friendship circles.

reported that they received less or much less than usual and 18% said that they hardly ever received support from neighbours and local community.

Some respondents reported getting on with their neighbours, whilst others were always on their guard and some continue to conceal their identities for fear of prejudice and discrimination. For some people, their local community was less significant as their friends and LGBT+ community were more dispersed across the capital. This meant that some respondents had no one locally who they could ask for support in getting access to basic necessities.

“ Keeping in touch is very important. I have been emailing and sometimes having phone conversation with friends, plus zoom events, but I miss people and going out.”

Cisgender gay man, 70s

“ Just the thought of zoom or skype online meetings makes me very anxious.”

Cisgender bisexual woman, 50s

“ I have been lucky to get food supplied, but it would have been useful to be able to get online. I don't have a tablet or smart phone.”

Cisgender gay man, 60s

“ More support than usual, I have met lots more neighbours.”

Cisgender lesbian, 50s

“ People seem to be more caring towards each other.”

Cisgender lesbian, 60s

“ Sometimes but I am always on my guard.”

Cisgender gay man, 60s

“ Okay-ish but friends are mostly London wide not local.”

Cisgender mostly lesbian woman, 60s

“ I feel the stigma of being a pariah.”

Cisgender male, queer, 60s

4 / SUPPORT FROM NEIGHBOURS AND LOCAL COMMUNITY

The largest disparity found amongst the respondents was the amount of support they received from their neighbours and local community. 68% of people stated that the support they received was the same as usual 5%

5 / THE ROLE OF ODL AND OTHER LGBT+ ORGANISATIONS IN SUPPORTING OLDER LGBT+ DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND BEYOND

Many respondents lamented the loss of ODL social and activity groups and the social interactions, face-to-face relationships they had with their volunteer befrienders. Equally respondents understood why this was no longer possible during lockdown. There were many positive comments about the telephone befriending service and how this had been a lifeline for them. People also appreciated the online specialised groups. However, as previously noted, for many older LGBT+ people who are digitally excluded this is not an option.

At the start of the pandemic lockdown ODL volunteers made over 400 telephone calls to those members who were digitally excluded. These calls were vital to assess peoples' support networks, their vulnerability and offer support to the digitally excluded including the development of our telephone befriending service. We also received a surge of self-referrals to our Befriending Service, which again revealed the extent of social isolation: less than 1% of new referrals had someone they were close enough to that they could provide a telephone number in case of emergency.

We experienced a significant increase in the number of safeguarding issues we were dealing with. Issues included carers not turning up, homophobic abuse from neighbours, domestic violence, personal items being stolen by carers, financial abuse and strangers moving into their accommodation. ODL staff worked with colleagues in the police and social services to resolve.

“ODL has done splendidly in keeping going during lockdown and coming up with imaginative ways of doing things.”

Cisgender gay man, 70s

“Have become aware of the priceless job the charity does, it offers a lifeline as it offers lots of activities and really appreciate the befriending scheme.”

Cisgender queer man, 60s

“Glad to have a befriender but was hoping to meet in person. Main problem there are no social events in my area, and I don't want to travel. It would be great to have ODL provide events in the area where I live.”

Cisgender gay man, 50s

“I am a computer dumbo, I would like to be able to get advice online or by telephone as and when I needed it.”

Trans woman, feminine, 80s

PRACTICE AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This survey has evidenced the extent of loneliness and social isolation experienced by a group of older LGBT+ people living in London, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 lockdown and worsened both physical and mental health. It also evidenced that the recalibration of ODL services meant that we were able to continue support for this vulnerable population.

In order to meet their duties under the Equalities Act 2010 and the Care Act 2014, public authorities need to better identify and engage older LGBT+ people in order to incorporate their specific needs into local planning so that this marginalised and sometimes vulnerable population can access health and care at the point of need, gain support from their own LGBT+ communities and generally feel more safe and secure in their local neighbourhoods.

FOR VOLUNTARY AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Many Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprises (VCSEs), including ODL, have had to quickly adjust the way they deliver services and come up with new ways of working for their staff and volunteers so they can continue to reach the older LGBT+ members who need their services.

Our LGBT+ specific befriending services both telephone, email and face-to-face have been particularly successful at minimising the loneliness and social isolation of older LGBT+ people, but digital exclusion inhibits many of this population from fully participating in the growth of online individual and group support.

With the resurgence of the COVID-19 VCSEs will need to continue to build IT literacy through inter-generational volunteering and explore more innovative approaches to supporting those who remain digitally excluded. This will involve identifying the digital competency of older LGBT+ people and supporting their better connection through resourcing and practical support, while ensuring both phone and postal communications remain available.

FOR GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY AND LONDON COUNCILS

Greater London Authority and London Councils need to identify the older LGBT+ populations in their Boroughs, research into their needs and incorporate actions into local London borough Joint Strategic Needs Assessment plans. LGBT+ hate crime, hate crime incidents and their associated effects need monitoring as part of safeguarding requirements and Councils should meet and work with LGBT+ stakeholders to ensure safe and secure neighbourhoods as well as alternative LGBT+ safe community spaces throughout London and beyond. While LGBT+ organisations can assist with this work, engagement is also needed from community development workers and local community centres who should receive awareness training into the lives and needs of the older LGBT+ people in their neighbourhood.

FOR POLICYMAKERS AND COMMISSIONERS OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR SERVICES

The LGBT Consortium's 'Insight Report,' has demonstrated the financial impact that the crisis has had on LGBT organisations. 47% of LGBT organisations reported an immediate loss of income, with consequences such as cutting staff hours and reducing services. 38% have seen a reduction in donations or forecast a loss of planned income. 20% are concerned that they will have to close due to the financial impact of the pandemic.⁵ The vital services that LGBT charities provide in supporting LGBT+ people need to be recognised and prioritised and necessary funding made available to sustain these services in the years ahead.



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Opening Doors London (ODL) is the largest charity providing information and support services specifically for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT+) people over 50 in the UK.

We are a membership organisation providing regular social opportunities across London to help develop networks and communities for LGBT+ people, aged over 50.

We also offer specialist training and the Pride in Care quality standard for statutory and voluntary organisations, such as care homes, housing associations and hospitals, to help them better understand the needs of older LGBT+ people.

Find out more about our services for older LGBT+ people

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