



Opening Doors in Berkshire

A day conference to highlight the needs of
older lesbians and gay men

at the

Town Hall, Blagrove Street, Reading

on

29th October 2003

Post-Conference Report

(Summary)



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Conference Overview

By Ray Williams

On 29th October, 2003 almost one hundred people gathered in Reading to attend the first Berkshire Opening Doors Conference. The day was organised by the Berkshire Older Gay and Lesbian Forum in partnership with Age Concern Berkshire and aimed to raise awareness of the needs of older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals and to enable service providers to consider and analyse policies and programmes across a wide range of issues.

The Conference brought together delegates from as far afield as Yorkshire, North Staffordshire, Manchester and London and included representatives from a wide range of statutory, voluntary and private organisations.

The day was organised and managed by Jenny Ward, Chair of the Berkshire Older Lesbian and Gay Forum and was chaired by Penny Henrion, Chair of Reading PCT and Director of the local Princess Royal Trust Carers Centre. Penny began the day with a series of 'motivational exercises' which successfully broke the ice and helped to engage the active interest of everyone. The keynote speaker was Dr Brian Heaphy, from Nottingham Trent University, who summarised the findings of his recently published research into the social and policy implications of non-heterosexual ageing. Other speakers included Elizabeth Price, a specialist social worker from Hull, who spoke about mental health issues for gay men and lesbians and Roger Newman, from the Alzheimer's Society, gave a moving account of caring for his late partner who suffered from Alzheimer's disease. Roger was given a standing ovation by the delegates. In addition Wyndham Clampett and Margaret Collins of the Berkshire Lesbian and Gay Forum outlined the issues facing older gay men and lesbians.

The Conference heard that Brian Heaphy's research indicated that older gay men and lesbians believe that they are discriminated against in society and that only one third of older gay men and lesbians believed health professionals to be positive towards them. Given that some gay and lesbian people have faced discrimination and prejudice when they use services many choose not to disclose their sexuality, with the result that they become invisible to service providers.

Because of this invisibility many professionals assume that there are no such clients using their services, or at least very few, which makes it unnecessary to separately consider their views and experiences. This can be an excuse for professionals and institutions to say that the issues of "sexual orientation" aren't important. In fact between 5-10% of clients are likely to be homosexual.

The conference aimed to enable representatives from many of those organisations to discuss, consider and review their own approaches to the care and support of older gay men and lesbians.

A series of workshops held in the afternoon enabled delegates to examine specific topics in more detail, including Residential Care, Health, Caring and Carers, Housing and the influence of language in shaping attitudes. The day was brought to a close by an enjoyable and very professional performance by the recently formed Reading Gay Men's Chorus.

Out of the day a number of practical ideas and strategies developed for moving forward. These included the ideas that all organisations and service providers have a responsibility to:

- explicitly and openly include older lesbians and gay men;
- promote more partnership working;
- publicise their support through their service provision;
- introduce appropriate training for service providers;
- raise awareness of the needs of older lesbians, gay men and bisexuals.

Programme

10.00	Coffee and Registration
10.30	Welcome and Introduction Penny Henrion Director Princess Royal Trust Carers Centre and Chair of Reading Primary Care Trust
10.40	Presentation - Berkshire Older Lesbian and Gay Forum Margaret Collins and Wyndham Clampett
11.00	Dr Brian Heaphy “Social and Policy Implications of Lesbian and Gay Ageing”
11.30	Elizabeth Price “Out of the Shadows”
12.00	Panel and Questions
12.30	Lunch (in the Waterhouse Room)
13.30	Roger Newman “Being Equally Different: the Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Carers”
14.10	Workshops Victoria Hall – “What’s in a Name – Words Can Hurt, Words Can Heal and “Residential Care” Waterhouse Chamber – “Health” and “Housing” Silverthorne Room – “Caring and Carers”
15.00	Tea
15.15	Feedback from workshops
16.00	Reading Gay Men’s Chorus and Close

Workshops

Each workshop was asked to feed back three points from discussions on the flip chart. What follows are these points with some expansion.

Workshop 1: Health and Social Care Issues for Older Gay Men and Women

Facilitated by Liz Hill

What are the issues?

- Need to understand issues for all older people PLUS any sexuality issues
- Is sexuality the last taboo? Language has changed with issues such as physical/learning disability and mental health – language of sexuality used in services needs to change too.
- Sexuality is NOT a disability or an illness – often people treat it as such.
- It is wearing to keep on repeating statements about your sexuality and status.
- Huge sexuality and ethnic diversity issues – support for LGB BME people
- High need for education for caring staff – public/statutory and voluntary sector

Leadership issues

- Senior leadership is essential to effect change in behaviours/attitudes
- Need culture of open dialogue throughout organisations to feed the change process – need for some 'stable' champions to lead the charge in a rapidly changing environment
- We need a grounded, not ivory tower, style of leadership

What needs to be done?

- Gay and lesbian issues need to be worked on more formally – is this seen as an 'add on'?
- Paperwork on 'marital status' needs changing
- Assessment tools and single assessment process should tackle this.
- Information sharing protocols between different sections of health/social services and voluntary sector need to be developed.
- Use open questions about personal circumstances
- Review paperwork locally
- We need to maintain the voluntary sector's expertise on sexuality – more formalised advocacy for users and policy advice to public sector
- Flexibility of residential care placements
- More specialist community development workers to enable access to services
- A system of user involvement across all planning activity – there is currently no system for LGB involvement
- Develop a 'health activist' approach to develop health promotion/healthy living advice and to feed back to services
- Use staff training as a catalyst for change

- Apply person centred planning principles
- Experiential training and awareness raising for staff
- Use PCT protected learning time arrangements to access doctors/practice staff

Education/Training

This is vital.

Systems and Information

Policy and Guidance

Leadership

- empowering ourselves
- empowering communities
- empowering organisations

Workshop 2: What's in a name – Words can Hurt, Words can Heal

Facilitated by Margaret Collins and Rebecca Ballard.

Communication in context

Negative & positive descriptions

Being Comfortable & respecting others' position

Isolation & Secrecy

Facilitating openness but not everyone wants to come out

Sensitivity

Men → negative

Women → invisible

Workshop Notes

Words used to describe gay men predominantly negative. There are far fewer words used to describe lesbians – in the main, lesbians are more “invisible” than gay men.

Important to recognize that some older people may be more used to, and therefore more comfortable, describing their sexuality with words that we may perceive as negative.

Balance to be struck between words that are acceptable to the older gay man or lesbian and those that we are comfortable using.

Very many older gay men and lesbians have lived their lives extremely privately. A supportive environment will allow those who wish to be open about their sexuality to be so. Some will still not wish to share this information. Service providers need to be sensitive to both sides.

Workshop 3: Carers and Caring

Facilitated by Roger Newman.

Patient Confidentiality – individual and lesbians and gay men need to have Power of Attorney for partners.

Action Points

- Specify benefits of coming out to professionals (i.e. their own coming out).
- Discuss issues raised with colleagues.
- Allow carers that I am working with to have time to tell me about themselves.
- Need more information.
- Look at assessment tools to ensure tick boxes are there to ensure recognition – central government issue.
- Take back to older people's partnership boards.
- Training at ground level needed.
- Feed assessment forms through Berkshire Older Lesbian and Gay Forum for comment.
- Need to prove we know about LGBT issues.
- Services need to appear to be open and try to be so.
- Look at all services.
- Mention sexual orientation in anti-discrimination literature.
- Raise LGBT care issues through care manager.
- Issues raised with care staff groups.
- Look at Policy and Procedure.
- Assessment not one-off.

Choose carefully when to ask about sexuality.

Workshop 4: Residential Care

Facilitated by Elizabeth Price

Important Issues: dignity, choice, privacy, equity, independence.

National Care Standards Commission → legal support.

Residential/Nursing Care → independent Living, sheltered housing

Guidelines/Training need for:

- Providers/staff

about:

- Language/Assumptions
- Attitudes of other residents
- Prejudice
- Strategies/Processes for dealing with incidences of abuse/harassment

Training – NB NVQ covers diversity but **not** sexuality

Separation vs Integration – LGB homes?, “specialist” services – some older lesbians and gay men will want separate accommodation others will not – it’s a matter of choice.

Older lesbians and gay men more likely to be in residential care, due to lack of family/community support

Advocacy service for individuals needed.

Workshop 5: Housing

Facilitated by Cindy Creasy

Right to tenancy succession NO BUT...

Homelessness

Harassment?

Sheltered accommodation

Together or apart

CHECK LOCALLY

Notes

Tenancy succession for same-sex partners may not exist in agreements *per se* but an appeal taken to the Court of Appeal held that same-sex partners had the same rights as heterosexual partners in this area. Legislation on the horizon for the registration of same-sex partnerships. Consultation document explicitly suggested tenancy succession rights would be given to registered partnerships.

Because of attitudes and harassment by some fellow residents, and in some cases family, older lesbians and gay men more likely to face homelessness than their heterosexual counterparts.

Look for good practice and share it.