

January

2010

## Opening Doors Evaluation

### The Story So Far...

### Executive Summary



**AGE**  
*Concern*  
Camden  
Hackney  
Islington  
Kensington & Chelsea  
Westminster  
*Opening Doors in Central London*



LOTTERY FUNDED

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appointed by Age Concern.

## Foreword

“Older gay men and women in the UK have lived through positive changes in public attitudes towards homosexuality. Yet, when you are brought up to believe you are unnatural, abnormal, just plain queer, age doesn’t always help you take advantage of social changes.

These days, young gay people are encouraged to be open about their sexuality. Older ones, particularly those who don’t have a partner, can find it difficult to share in the new freedom. They are no longer criminalised – but that doesn’t mean they are free from discrimination in public places. Some are understandably still fearful of verbal and physical abuse.

This is what makes Opening Doors Older LGBT Project so vital for those it reaches. It’s an initiative which needs to spread across London and then the rest of the country, wherever older gay people feel isolated.

Unlike their straight peers, they may have no family or even understanding friends to shield them from loneliness. They deserve our support and the Project is admirably providing it.”

**Sir Ian McKellen (January, 2010)**

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The evaluation report explores the impact of a three year Big Lottery funded project Opening Doors in Central London, working with older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) older people 2008-2010.

The evaluation was conducted over a six month period July-December 2009; at a half way point in the project's activities to enable recommendations to inform the third year of the project.

## About the Opening Doors in Central London project

Opening Doors in Central London has 339 service-users, of which 73% are gay men and 27% are lesbian women (November 09 figures). The project runs several social groups, provides a monthly newsletter and organises personal development classes. Opening Doors runs a well attended regular event in conjunction with the Metropolitan Police on community safety issues, an annual Information Event where services and older LGBT people come together, an older people's presence at the annual Gay PRIDE event and awareness raising and training initiatives for care professionals.

Large numbers of older LGBT people have experienced high levels of isolation, discrimination and mental health issues related to their sexuality and the service was established because there are no other older LGBT services in the five boroughs and many care services do not even acknowledge the existence of service users who are not heterosexual. Yet there are estimated to be as many as 13,000 lesbians, gay men and bisexuals over the age of 55 in the five main boroughs in which the project operates. London is known to have the highest proportion of lesbian and gay people in the country and there are estimated to be between 96,000 and 134,000 LGBT people over the age of 50 based on the 2001 population figures living in the capital.

## Summary of key benefits of Opening Doors

**Maintaining Independence** – almost 70% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the project contributes towards maintaining their independence.

**Well-being and social contact** – over 70% said that the project had helped them feel less isolated.

**Dignity and Self-Esteem** - 100% agreed or strongly agreed that the project enabled them to be themselves “without being judged”.

- The project provides a vital and highly valued social support network for older LGBT people across London. The social groups alone reach over 60 people each month and have been very inclusive of people from different social and cultural backgrounds and those with physical disabilities and mental health needs.
- The very existence of this specialist project gives individuals the confidence to be more open about their sexuality, which may make older LGBT service users less invisible in future.
- Older lesbians and gay men have had very poor past experiences with the Police and this project has helped to build bridges with the Police service and establish clear lines of communication for reporting homophobic crime.
- The befriending service is providing a vital service to older LGBT people who are less able to access groups and who are isolated in their own homes.

## Key findings

- A significant 100% of those surveyed at a consultation event agreed with the statement “I feel uncomfortable on ‘the scene’ now because of my age and fear being rejected.”
- Almost 70% of those surveyed said they didn’t feel safe in their community and more than one in four said they didn’t feel safe and secure in their own home.
- Many moving personal stories were shared with the evaluators. These included men and women who had experienced psychological and physical abuse and in one case a violent homophobic murder of their partner. Experience of isolation and difference had led others to periods of feeling suicidal and long term mental health issues.
- 75% of those surveyed reported fear of moving into sheltered housing or a care home for fear of discrimination and many chose not to be open about their sexuality with anyone other than close friends.

## The impact of an LGBT specific project

*“I don’t need to hide who I am any more.”*

- Opening Doors in Central London is extremely positively regarded by its service-users:

 *“I was desperate – that day Opening Doors literally saved my life – I wouldn’t be here if not for them.”*

- The social aspect is particularly valued as well as the freedom to be open about being gay:

 *“At 82, a lot of my friends have died so it’s nice to have somewhere to go where I can be myself.”*

- A number of service-users talked about how the project's existence had given them a renewed sense of being part of a community, a structure to their life and things to look forward to again.
- The befriending service has been able to reach older lesbians and gay men who are less able to attend groups due to disability or mental health issues. In some cases, befrienders have been able to increase service users' confidence in going out more and becoming more involved in other social networks.
- There has been a strong endorsement of the importance of having LGBT specific initiatives for example for computer classes and a dancing group.

 *"First time I have felt comfortable enough to join a dancing group... no need of pretence."*

- There is still some work to be done in helping care professionals understand that whilst integration might be a longer term goal, LGBT people **do** still need the safety of having their own groups. Whilst everyone is and should be 'equal', different needs do require different service interventions.
- Whilst some of the project's activities have successfully involved men and women together, both lesbians and gay men have expressed the wish to have separate groups.
- The project has had a particularly successful collaboration with the Metropolitan Police Service with regular meetings at a central London pub to discuss community safety issues and encourage greater confidence in reporting homophobic crime.
- An Information Fair in September 09 brought together a wide range of services with older LGBT people. This was beneficial to the older people who attended by giving them an opportunity to find out what services were available and for the organisations represented to be able to consider the needs of a specific client group and how they might respond to these needs.

## Key Recommendations

**Extend Opening Doors as a PAN London project:** The existing focus on five London boroughs was not particularly helpful as there were many who were members who came from outside these boroughs.

**Consider running more regular day time events:** Many of the regular groups currently run in the evenings and a significant number of those consulted said they would also like more day time and weekend activities.

**Continue to develop more service user involvement in the project:** The extension and sustainability of the project depends to some extent on the greater involvement of its members in the organisation of initiatives particularly when the existing development workers are working to full capacity.

**Keep things fun:** Although talks about health, community safety, direct payments etc had been valued, many of those interviewed and especially the women wanted there to be the most emphasis on social and creative activities in future.

**Develop closer links with care services working with older people who have dementia or who are physically frail:** The project has reached fewer older people who are more dependent and in the much older age group. More creative partnerships will need to be developed to try and find the most isolated older LGBT people and to find ways of meeting their needs.

**Develop better communications:** The service needs to improve publicising its successes, using the media, the internet and other promotional opportunities to reach more potential service users and advertise its existence.

**Share examples of good practice in statutory services:** Confidence in using care services remains anecdotally low, so there need to be initiatives similar to that of the partnership with the Metropolitan Police which promote contact between care professionals and older LGBT people in order to build up trust.

**Organise more structured training opportunities for staff and volunteers on**

**LGBT issues:** Opening Doors has given a number of talks to care managers and other professionals, but the next step is to provide more training to enhance staff understanding of the years of prejudice and discrimination which many have experienced and how this impacts on their confidence in using services.

**Improve systems for measuring impact:** Opening Doors needs to develop better ways of demonstrating how it has helped services to review its policies and procedures and improve practice in terms of working with older LGBT people.

## Conclusion

Opening Doors has enjoyed an extremely busy and productive first two years of operation. The need to continue and expand the current Opening Doors project across London has been proven by the success of the existing project and the value to which service users, staff, volunteers and stakeholders attach to the project and associated services. The need for a specialist service run by a well respected older people's organisation such as Age Concern was strongly endorsed.

Mike Phillips and Sally Knocker

### Independent Evaluators

January 2010

For a full copy of the report call 0207 837 3777.

A PDF version of the report is available on our website: [www.ageconcerncamden.org.uk](http://www.ageconcerncamden.org.uk).

