



Reengage

**Being with
people where
you don't have
to explain:**

Developing services for
older LGBT+ people

Re-engage

Re-engage is a charity that is positive about older age and committed to fighting loneliness so that people can have social lives and friendship groups however old they are.

We inspire and enable meaningful connections and shared experiences within communities across the UK for people 75 and over facing loneliness and social isolation. Our volunteers work together to create better communities and help to enrich the lives of our members by giving them something to look forward to. Older people who may have felt very alone now feel valued as individuals, continue to form friendships, and have groups that give support.

We make sure that people know they are important well into old age. Respectful, determined, warm, pioneering, and local: we are Re-engage and we are bringing generations together.

We are committed to reaching older people from every background and every walk of life and working to end loneliness for all. Finding diverse people who have led different lives, finding people who have long experienced discrimination, and finding ways to end chronic loneliness and social isolation for all, are crucial to our work as we move forward.



In the lesbian community, one of the things we feel is a duty is to introduce each other, we introduce our friends to each other, we have dinners or parties, or we go out somewhere. We kind of bring people along.

Working with older LGBT+ people

With our commitment to reaching a more diverse population of older people, we wanted to understand how we could best provide our services to older LGBT+ people. So, in the summer of 2021, we conducted interviews and an online survey.

As an older LGBT+ person, you are less likely to have intergenerational relationships and children, which can lead to your 'family of choice' (often made up of people of a similar age), sadly dwindling or increasingly unable to support you as you age together. Existing research tells us that, as an older LGBT+ person, you are more likely to live alone, be single and less likely to see your biological family regularly. Gay men report that being older in youth-centric spaces can lead to them not being desired or included, being overlooked, or being perceived as predatory. Older lesbians are more likely to have fractured relationships with their birth families and to be single and childless. For older lesbians, all too often their isolation is seen by the women themselves as the price they have had to pay for their sexuality. Loneliness and isolation for lesbians is significantly reduced when they are able to form peer social groups.

Recent research has shown that the pandemic has exacerbated some of the social challenges faced by older LGBT+ people: many have reported feeling more lonely and socially isolated since the lockdown. Some say they've had no one locally to support with basic necessities because their friends and LGBT+ community are geographically dispersed.

All these factors can lead to an increased risk of social isolation and loneliness. However, research also shows that attending LGBT+ specific groups and services helps to "alleviate isolation" and create valuable social connections. Indeed, those older LGBT+ people who form social networks through these groups and services are often "cushioned from feeling isolated and lonely".

While the existing research is very insightful, it is largely focused on LGBT+ people aged 50 and above. As a result, there is a distinct lack of understanding about the specific

needs and experiences of the 'older and oldest old'. In response to this, our research focussed on LGBT+ people aged 70 and older. The findings will help us to develop new services and activities that help build social connections and companionship within this group.

Summary of findings

- Older LGBT+ people are experiencing varying levels of loneliness
- Those already involved in groups or activities are the least lonely
- The most commonly used services or groups are those specifically for LGBT+ members
- The keenest interest in new services or groups is in those specifically for the LGBT+ community; this is more important than other deciding factors
- The biggest motivators for joining in are already knowing people in a group, and seeking to make new friends
- Around a third of people say all or more than half of their friends are LGBT+, though 45% of people say less than half are
- Roughly half of people say they sometimes avoid being open about their sexual orientation, often in their neighbourhood and other public spaces
- There are concerns that advertising an LGBT+ service could deter those who do not wish to reveal their sexuality or gender identity to a wider community

Sometimes people need to be with people where they don't have to explain.

Evaluation methods

We put together an online survey that was shared via our website and social media. We had 45 respondents, of whom 32 answered all of our questions. We also conducted in-depth telephone interviews with 4 older people who identified as LGBT+.

We asked about sexual orientation and gender identity, loneliness and wellbeing, and about the services that people already used and would like to use.

Who did we speak to?

We interviewed two men who identified as gay and two women who identified as lesbian, all aged between 71 and 77.

Almost two-thirds of survey respondents were between 70 and 74 years old (65%), making them younger than the people we typically work with, who have an average age of 85.

We did have several completed questionnaires from people over 75 years old, however, and did not find any significant differences in their interests or priorities. They were much more likely than others to have been involved with an LGBT+ group or service in the past three years, though.

While 96% of people said they identified as being part of the LGBT+ community, only 60% of people told us how they define their sexual orientation more explicitly. Nonetheless we can say that approaching two-thirds of survey respondents were women, with the vast majority of them labelling themselves as lesbians. A little over a third of those who told us more about their identity were men, all of whom labelled themselves gay men.

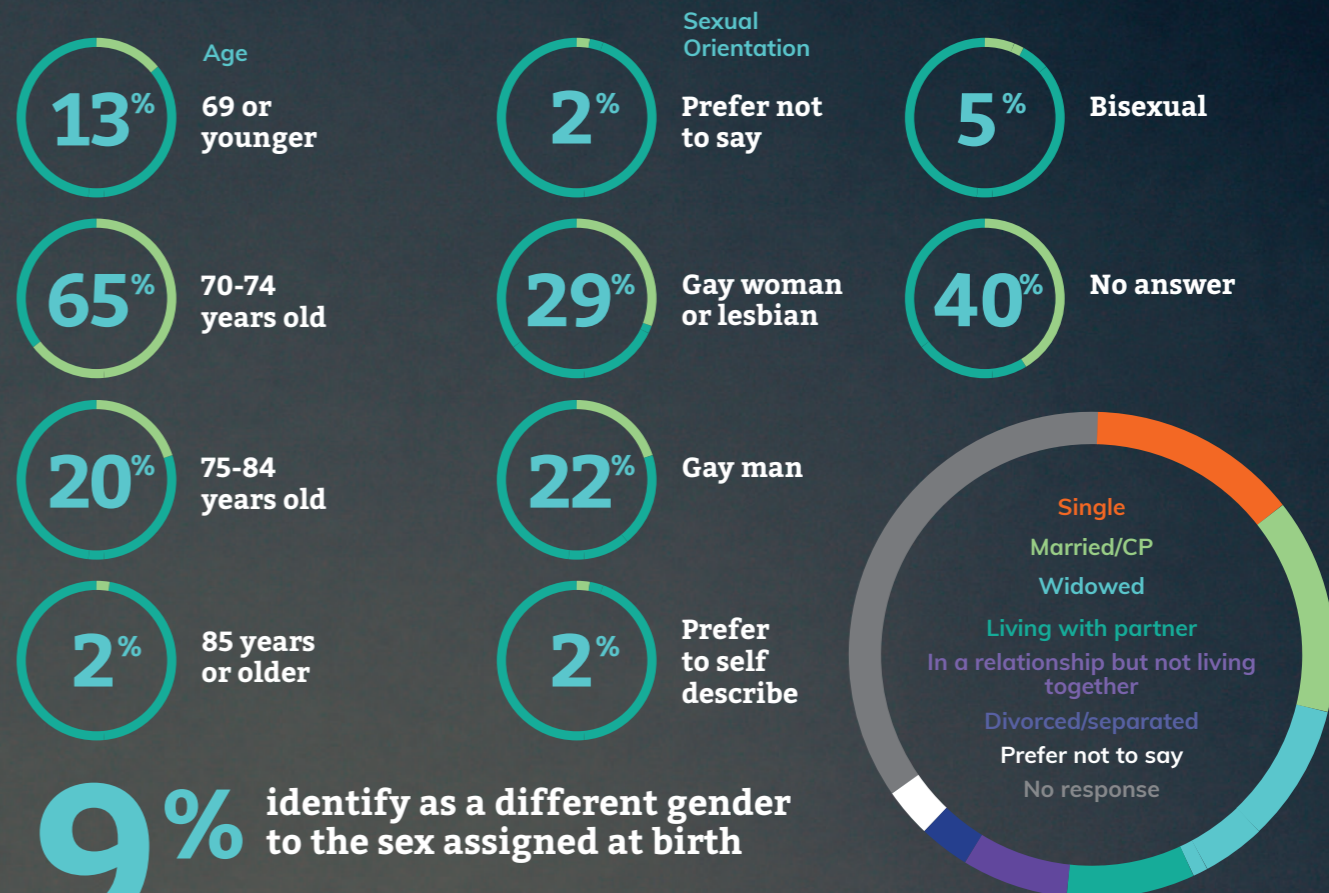
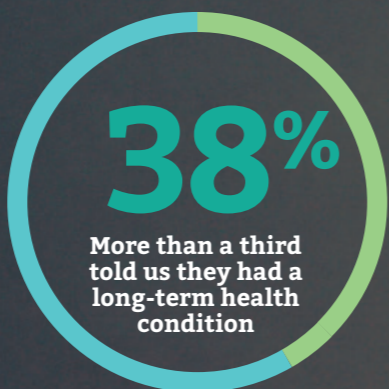
A small number of people identified themselves as trans; as with our older respondents, we could not identify major differences in trans respondents' interests and priorities, except to say that the level of interest in LGBT+ groups and services was even more pronounced.

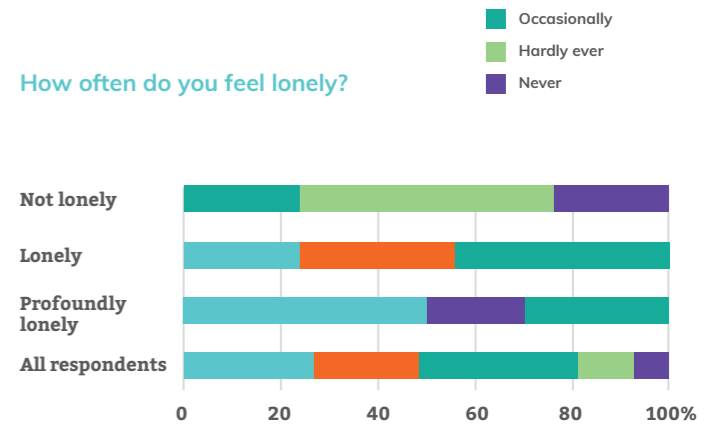
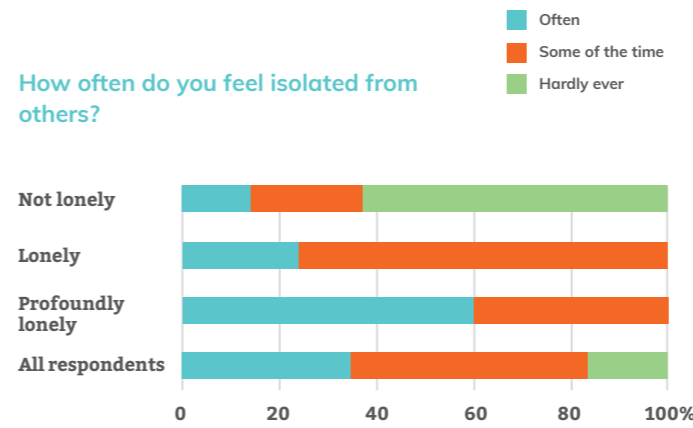
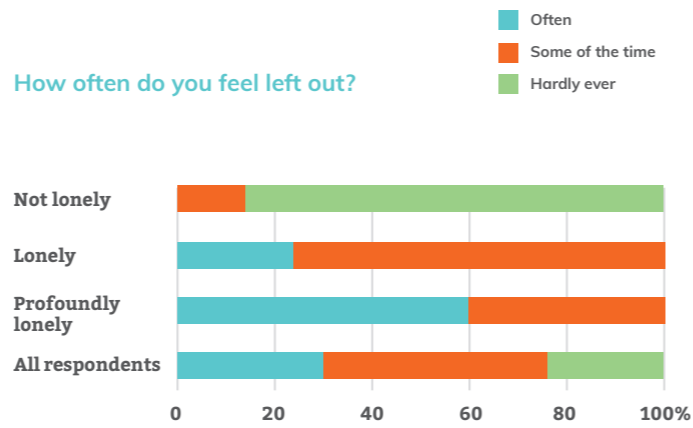
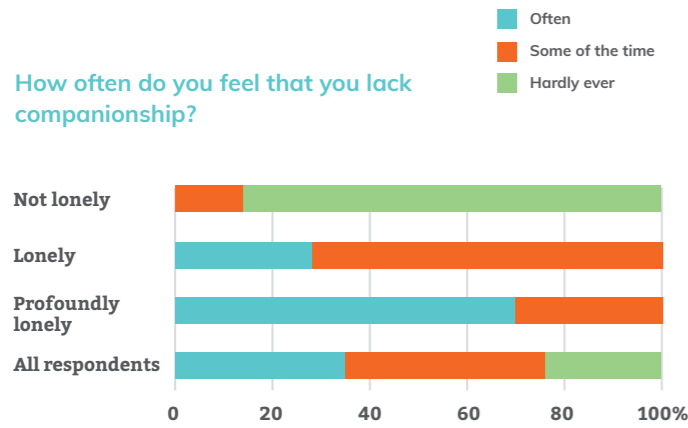
The relationship status of those who responded to the survey was varied, with roughly equal proportions being in a relationship (44% of those who gave us this information) and being in some way single (52%).

Among those who told us about their accommodation, most were homeowners (59%, accounting for 36% of all survey respondents) but a significant number of people rent their homes (30%, accounting for 20% of all survey respondents).

We had responses from people in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland; there was geographical spread, but it is worth noting clusters in the south-east and the north of England.

There was little ethnic diversity among respondents, with 96% of those who told us about their ethnic background describing themselves as white.





Loneliness and wellbeing

Our survey included a number of questions designed to help us gauge respondents' loneliness and isolation. Among those who answered these questions, 75% of people told us about feelings that meet recognised thresholds for loneliness: often feeling that they lack companionship, are being left out, and isolated from others.

Close to half of respondents said they felt lonely at least some of the time, with one third saying they often or always felt lonely.

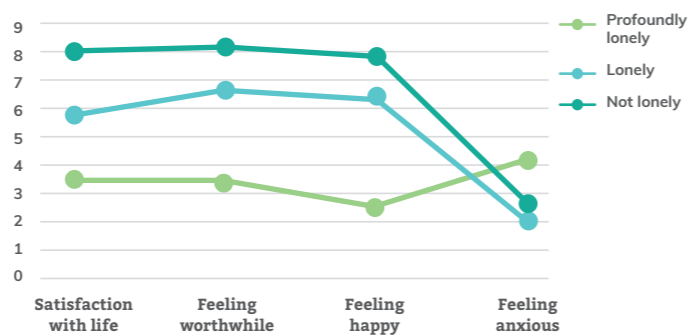
Responses from around a third of people told a story of **low wellbeing**: feeling dissatisfied with life, feeling that things aren't worthwhile, and feelings of unhappiness. Close to one in five people described high levels of anxiety.

Importantly, all of those experiencing low wellbeing were also experiencing loneliness. Based on this, we classified these people as being 'profoundly lonely' (22% of all respondents). Those experiencing loneliness but better levels of general wellbeing were classified as being 'lonely' (31%), and those people experiencing neither loneliness nor poor wellbeing were classified as being 'not lonely' (18%).

We saw significant differences between these groups when it comes to:

- Having people to call on when in need of help or company - only one profoundly lonely person felt sure they could call on someone for help; none said they could definitely call on someone to socialise with.
- Having someone to count on when they need to talk - almost half of people experiencing loneliness said they had no one.
- The ease with which people feel able to trust others - almost all of those not experiencing loneliness felt that most people could be trusted, while almost all of the profoundly lonely said you can't be too careful.
- Levels of satisfaction with their local neighbourhood - only the profoundly lonely expressed dissatisfaction; only those not experiencing loneliness were all satisfied.

Wellbeing measures: self-reported scores out of 10



How often do you feel isolated from others?

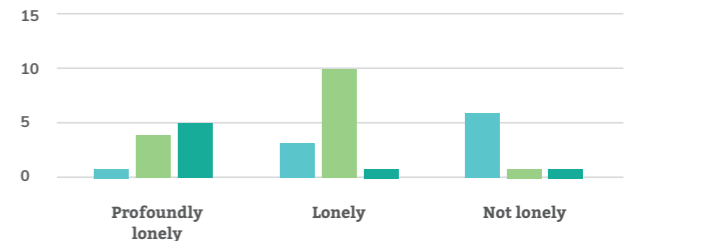
As we would expect to find, those who are not lonely are more likely to be in some kind of relationship (75% of this group) than those experiencing loneliness (43% of the lonely; 20% of the profoundly lonely). Those who are not lonely were much more likely to have used services offering social activities in the past three years (88%) than the lonely or the profoundly lonely (50%).

Relationships with others

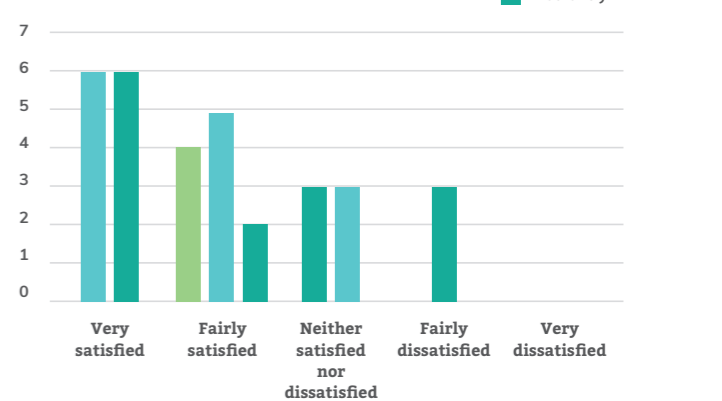
	Profoundly lonely	Lonely	Not lonely
If I needed help, there are people who would be there for me*			
Agree	13%	32%	26%
Disagree	16%	13%	0%
If I wanted company or to socialise, there are people I can call on*			
Agree	13%	34%	25%
Disagree	19%	9%	0%
Is there anyone you can really count on to listen when you need to talk?*			
Yes, more than one person	9%	22%	16%
Yes, one person	6%	6%	9%
No one	16%	16%	0%

* percentages are based on the number of responses to this question

Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?



How satisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?

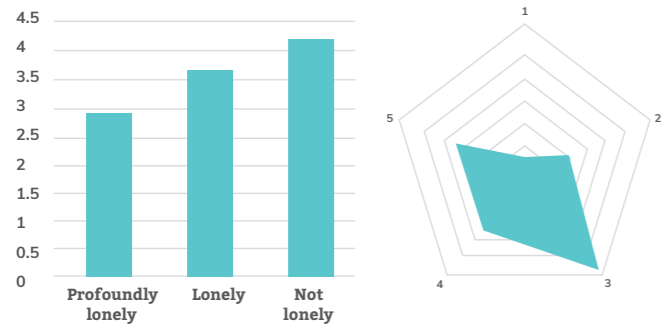


Sexuality and gender

Only those who identified as LGBT+ (96%) or were unsure (4%) were invited to complete the survey or take part in the interviews.

We asked survey respondents to rate how comfortable they felt being an LGBT+ person in the UK on a scale of 1 (uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable). Most people responded to this question, and gave an average rating of 3.5, suggesting reasonable levels of comfort.

Being LGBT+ in the UK from 1 (uncomfortable) to 5 (very comfortable)



We should note, however, that the average rating among the profoundly lonely was lower (2.78), while the average for those who are not lonely was higher (4.13), suggesting a relationship between a person's comfort with their sexuality, and their feelings of loneliness. Research among older LGBT+ populations consistently identifies **links between 'minority stress' (such as experiences of discrimination) and reduced social participation.**

When asked whether they ever avoided being open about their sexual orientation for fear of a negative reaction from others, 48% of people who answered said yes and 52% said no. People identified a range of public spaces where this applied, with the most frequent being in their neighbourhood, on any street or outdoor space, on public transport, and in cafes, pubs, restaurants and so on. Healthcare and social provision settings were also mentioned by our interviewees.

There must be quite a lot [of LGBT residents of the housing provider where I offer support], let's say a thousand. But I've only been called four or five times. One or two who reached out were very concerned about 'exposing themselves' to other residents.

We hear some very sad stories of people in care homes who can't be out. [...] I fear if I ever have to go into an old people's home. There must be people who go back into the closet.

31% said they were not out to any of their neighbours

Do you ever avoid being open about your sexuality for fear of a negative reaction? If so, where?

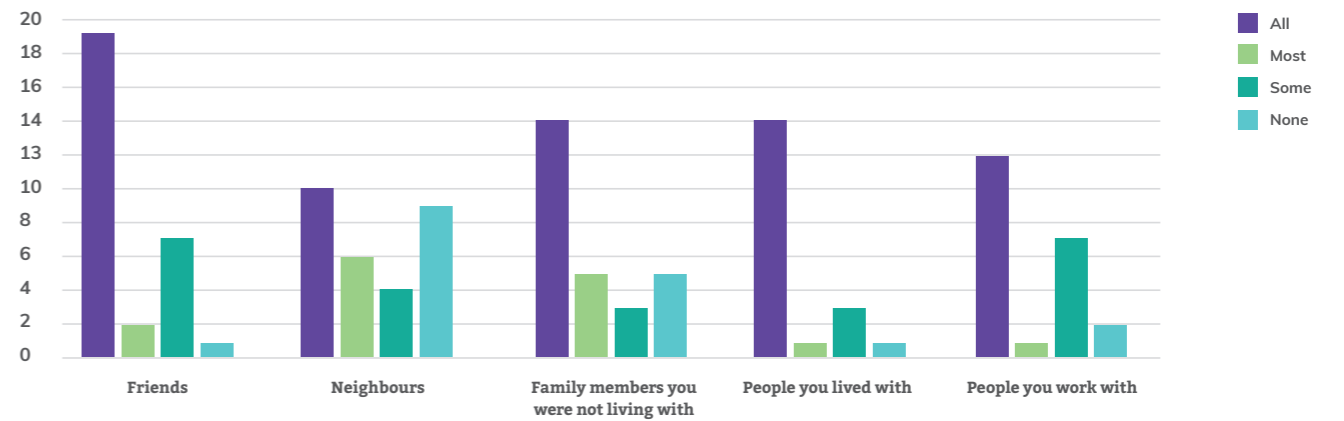


Fewer people said they avoided being open about their gender identity for fear of a negative reaction, but in addition to public spaces these respondents also identified their homes, churches and around family as places where they would not be open.

Almost everyone said they were open about being LGBT+ with at least some of their friends, with a slight majority of people saying that at least half of their friends were part of the LGBT+ community.

People were more likely to be out to all of their friends than to all of their family, colleagues, or neighbours. Almost a third of people who answered this question said that they were not out to any of their neighbours (31%).

How many people in these groups are you open with about being LGBT+?



Neighbourhoods and other social connections

Although three-quarters of people said they were satisfied with the area they lived in, levels of satisfaction vary significantly: those who are not lonely are far more likely to be satisfied (100%) than those who are profoundly lonely (40%). Our interviewees made it clear that urban settings often felt safer than rural communities:

How satisfied are you with your local area as a place to live?



How strongly do you feel you belong to your immediate neighbourhood?

	Profoundly lonely	Lonely	Not lonely
Very strongly	1	1	1
Fairly strongly	3	4	3
Not very strongly	3	7	4
Not at all strongly	3	2	0

In a village, you're not going to get diversity. We would be holding hands, but we stopped; we felt uncomfortable doing it. Nobody was like us. We don't want to be recognised as being weird.

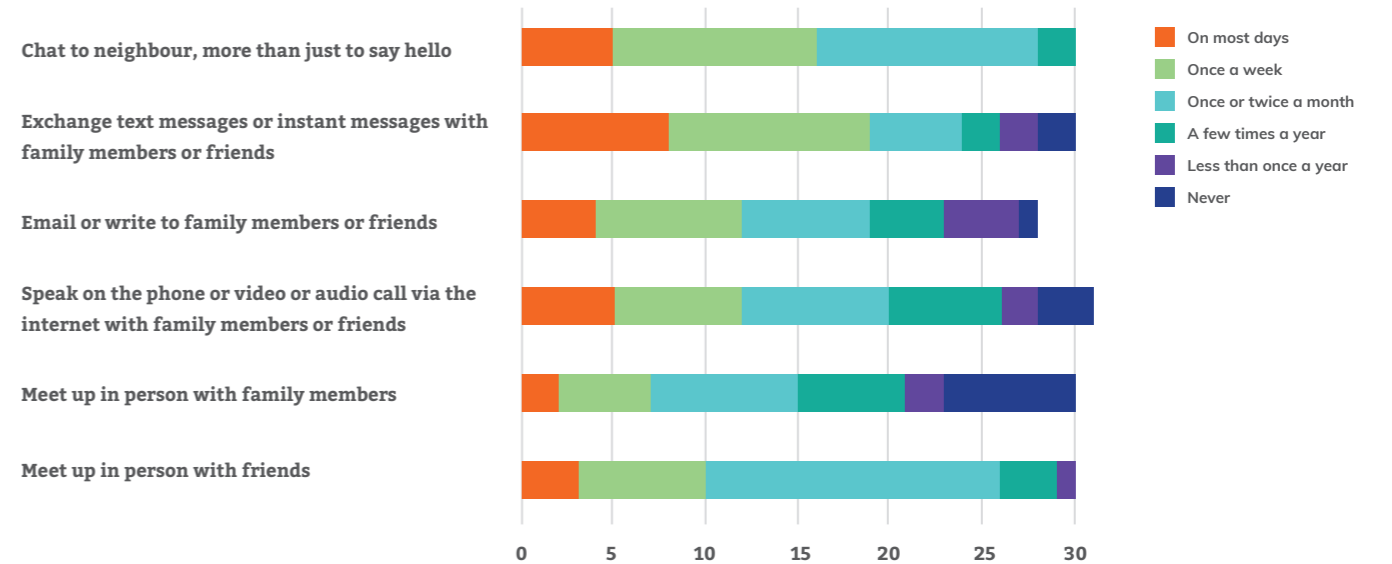
Across all groups, only a few people said they felt a very strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhood; more often, people rated their sense of belonging as fairly strong (32%) or not very strong (42%). There was a difference when it came to feeling no sense of belonging: the notable proportion of people who felt this way (16%) were all lonely or profoundly lonely.

Yet neighbours were often the people with whom respondents had the most frequent 'in person' contact; while almost two-thirds of people said they exchanged messages with friends and family at least once a week, they were less likely to see friends and family so often. In fact, a third of people reported seeing their family less than once a year or never. In the case of neighbours, though, people said they did more than say 'hello' at least once a month.

This is not surprising given what we know about the potential for LGBT+ adults to be estranged from family and, in the case of older LGBT+ people, not to have had children. It is important for an organisation looking to ease loneliness and isolation among LGBT+ older people to recognise that they may sometimes rely on phone calls and text messages to keep in touch with those they care about, and that their 'everyday' interactions may more commonly be with neighbours – i.e., people they are less likely to be out to.

"You never know what's going to happen to your friends [...] you can get quite isolated. I'm lucky that I'm in central London, I'm still working, I've got some good friends and some good neighbours, but people move out of London, people die, people get ill and aren't able to see you anymore [...] you start thinking about that at my age."

On average, how often do you...



Most survey respondents agreed that if they needed help, or if they simply wanted company, there were people they could call on. Again, though, we saw significant variation among respondents, with 60% of those we identified as being profoundly lonely disagreeing.

Similarly, while overall most people said they had at least one person they could count on when they needed to talk, a considerable proportion of those experiencing loneliness said they had no one (42%).

When people are older like me, we didn't have children, so you often think, 'Hang on, who's going to look after me? Who's going to be attentive, who's going to care if I feel terrible and can't go out for three days?'

[My partner] lives a long way away. I spend quite a lot of time on my own and I would relish spending time with other people. I'm not that lonely, I'm too busy to be lonely, but I do enjoy other people's company.

Accessing services

Around two-thirds of survey respondents said they had accessed services or groups offering social activities in the past three years; that figure rose to 88% of those who were not experiencing loneliness and fell to 50% for those experiencing profound loneliness.

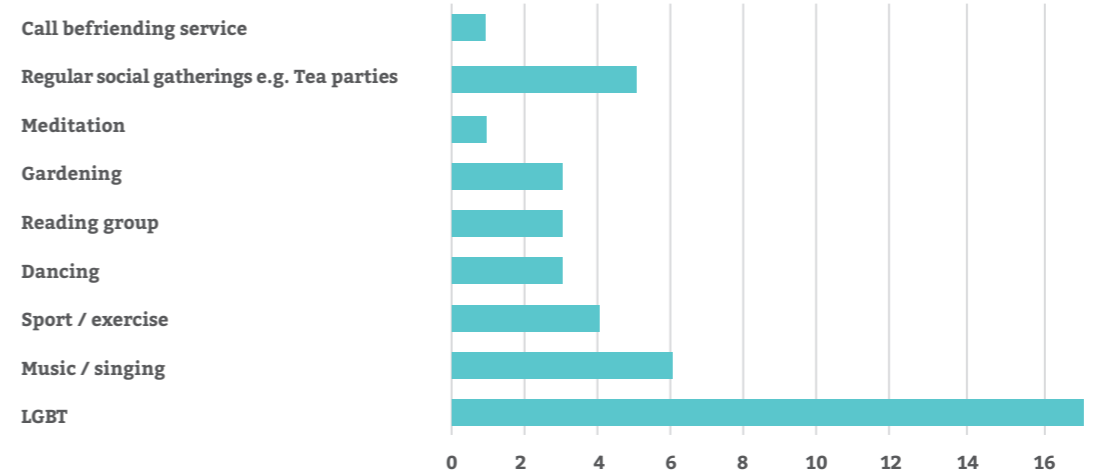
We asked people to tell us more about the services they had used. Of 21 people who responded to this question, 17 (81%) identified services specifically for LGBT+ people. This included lesbian walking groups, LGBT+ charity volunteering, and services run by Opening Doors London.

LGBT+ groups and services were by far the most common service used irrespective of people's apparent levels of loneliness. This was mirrored in the responses when we asked about the kinds of groups or services that people would like to use: 81% of people said they were interested in services specifically for LGBT+ people, with the majority of them saying they were very interested.

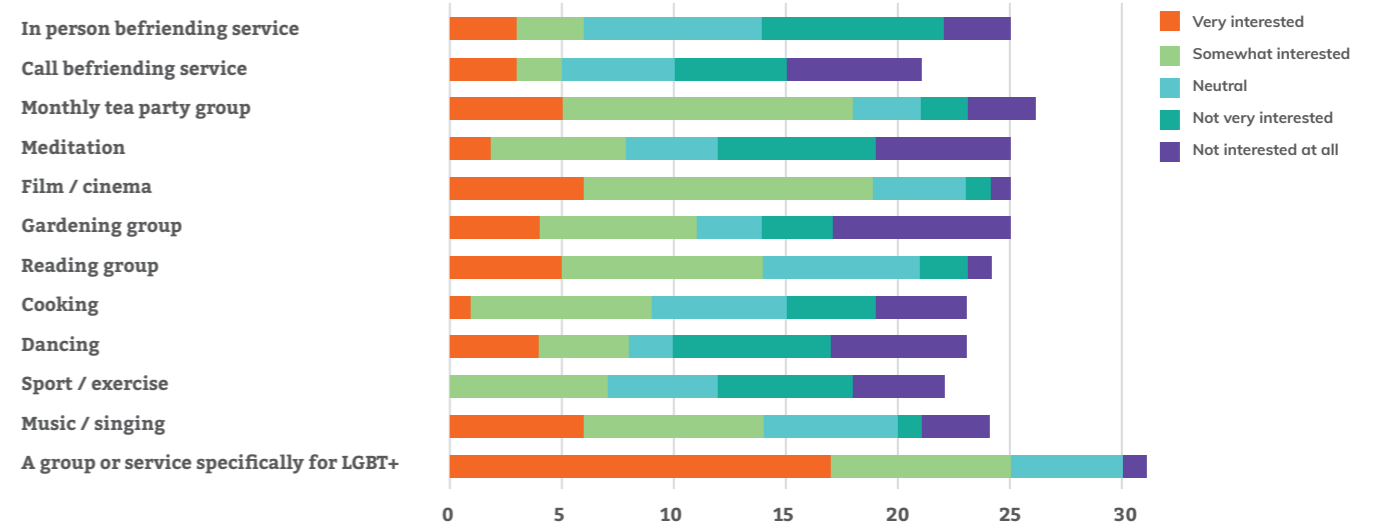
[An LGBT+ group] would appeal to me in the sense that I would be with a group of people who have something in common, but in the end, it would be the subject matter or the reason for getting together that would make the decision about whether or not I go to it.

There is something about being with other lesbians where you don't have to feel like you're coming out all the time.

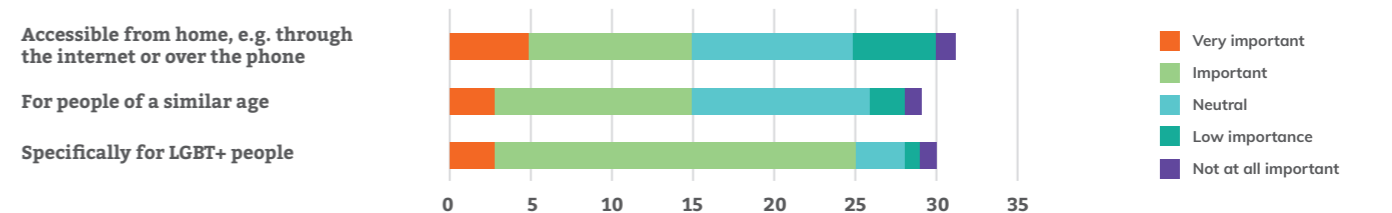
Services used



Services of interest



Priorities: How important is it that a group/service is...



Alongside this we found that no matter their levels of loneliness, age, or health, more people stressed the importance of a group/service being specifically for LGBT+ people than other potential deciding factors. Our interviewees talked about why this is so important:

“If you enter a heterosexual group, you always have to take a backward step.”

Befriending services received a mixed response, but some of our interviewees had had good experiences with telephone befriending, particularly during the pandemic. Others indicated that they considered themselves too young or too content with life to want a telephone befriender, instead seeing themselves as more likely to volunteer for such a service.

“I wouldn't need one-to-one telephone befriending right now [but] I think I'd be very happy to go to a tea party with a group of LGBT people.”

Those who were not lonely tended to mention more interest/hobby-based groups, such as singing and gardening, than services aimed specifically at befriending and socialising. In interviews, there was still some preference for those activities also to be part of LGBT+ groups.

For some people, simply being able to talk honestly about their personal lives was the most important thing:

“Provided I could be open with whoever I'm talking to, it's not that important to me what their own personal situation is.”

Some people, however, talked about experiences of homophobia in groups where they remained a minority:

“I was accepted, and they knew I was gay, but as long as I didn't talk about it. [They were] drooling over men, and just looked at me with disdain. [It was like] ‘We don't mind you being there but just don't talk about it.’”

“I sang in a choir, and we went to Brussels to sing. I shared a single room with a woman who was not gay; we heard the next morning that two farmers had gone on about me and this other woman getting married. She was mortified. Another woman asked me, ‘Why don't you like men?’”

Research with older LGBT+ populations has shown that past experiences of marginalisation can have an impact on social engagement and **lead to older LGBT+ people avoiding seeking help**, for fear of experiencing further discrimination or having to manage insensitive interactions.

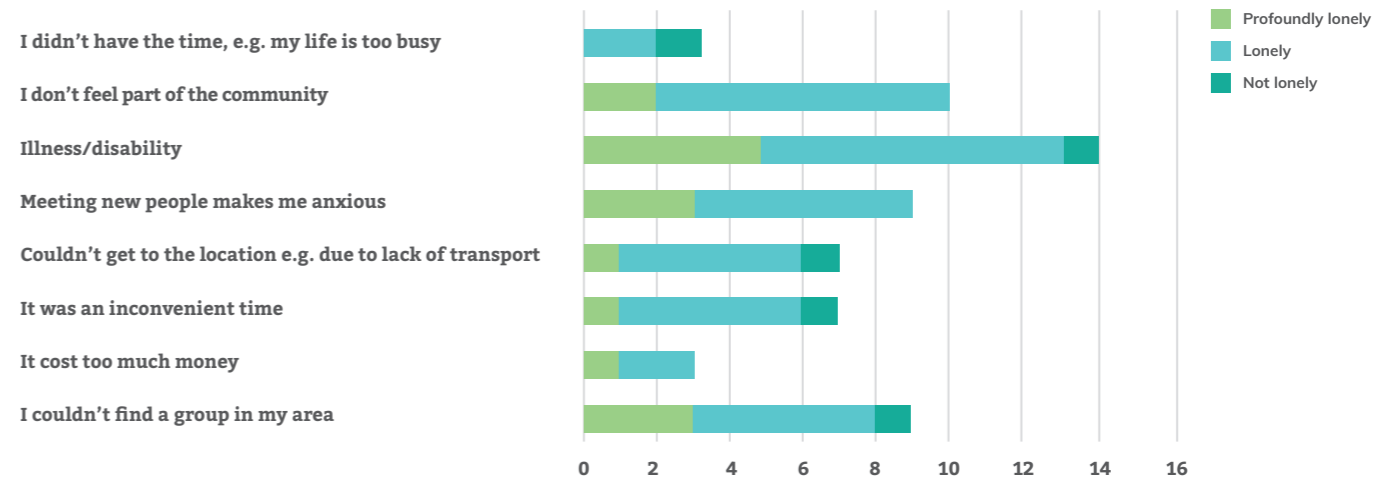
When you're with [other] lesbians, it just feels like you're a bit closer together to start with.

I'd love to dance, but I don't know where to go. [The groups in my area] are all heterosexual and that feels very strange. The idea of dancing with a man these days feels very odd.

I doubt if I would go, if I don't actually know some people there.

Barriers to access

Reasons for not joining a group or activity that you wanted to join



More than half of respondents said there had been at least one time when they wanted to join a group but hadn't done. Once again, this was most common among those who are lonely (around 80% of lonely and profoundly lonely people), yet still affected half of people who are not experiencing loneliness.

Most often, illness or disability had prevented people from joining in. Being unable to find a local group was also a problem (this may be exacerbated by location where people are looking specifically for LGBT+ activities).

For those experiencing loneliness, feeling that they don't belong to their community as well as anxieties about meeting new people create additional barriers. This can be an issue even when joining in with LGBT+ groups:

“I turned into a bit of an introvert after [my partner] died and I felt I was going to be a wallflower, so I didn't go [to a lesbian disco]. I went to one and actually quite enjoyed it, but I still felt a bit exposed. Most people were there without partners but there did seem to be groups of people who knew each other, and I didn't know very many people. If I'd gone with a mate, I wouldn't have batted an eyelid; I would have had a whale of a time.”

While wanting to make new friends was a common reason for being interested in joining a group, knowing somebody who already attends was most often selected as the reason that people would go along to something.

“I've often thought [U3A] would be interesting, but I've never really got around to it – basically because there's nobody I know there.”

“Would I actually know any of the people? That would probably make up my mind.”

This may relate to people's concerns about being out and past experiences of discrimination. Research has previously found that particularly for older LGBT+ people, **social support networks among the LGBT+ community are crucial**. Our interviewees agreed:

“In the lesbian community, one of the things we feel is a duty is to introduce each other, we introduce our friends to each other, we have dinners or parties, or we go out somewhere. We kind of bring people along.”

This ethos has taken organisational form with groups such as Kenric and Opening Doors London.

Interviewees' suggestions for serving and reaching older LGBT+ people

In common with many of the older people that we already work with, interviewees spoke enthusiastically about organised group outings to public gardens, different cities, and other attractions. People outlined their specific appeal, as well as the fact that these sorts of places are most likely to be accessible to wheelchair users and those with restricted mobility.

"I would like to go to gardens, or round the countryside, and then maybe go to a pub."

"Many towns have a really rich history, some of my friends have trained as city guides for example and they take people round the city, and you could have that sort of tour as well; cities are usually fairly wheelchair friendly, you could get a local historian to take them around, or indeed one of them, as they will have a long history."

Other suggestions were more adaptable to virtual groups built around common interests, with interviewees acknowledging that location could be an issue for in-person gatherings.

"You could [invite] people to tell their stories. There's a programme on Radio 4 called The Exchange; they get two people together who have something in common, but something different. They have a facilitated conversation about what they have in common and what is different. Even quiet people if given the chance. Storytelling with a theme, something with a very positive slant on it."

"I'd be interested in meeting other dog owners [for example]. We all love talking about our dogs and showing each other photos. You wouldn't have to own a dog; you'd just have to be interested in them. A bit like gardening groups: you could have people who have amazing gardens and people who have the balcony in front of their flat and that's it, but they're interested in plants."

Virtual groups and telephone befriending might also attend to concerns about being 'outed' by joining a group labelled as being for those who identify as LGBT+. Some interviewees felt that closeted older people – who could be among those who'd benefit the most from services intended to foster social connections – would be reluctant to do anything that might advertise their sexuality to others.

"[There are a] number of older people who aren't all that open, who actually do not want to identify, quite often because they've already got families, got married and have children and grandchildren in some cases. I wouldn't be asking people too closely, there may be people you're already dealing with who may not want to disclose that."

Interviewees referred to organisations such as Kenric, where word-of-mouth among existing networks helped to reach others, and Stonewall, who produce newsletters. They also suggested that healthcare settings might provide ways of finding LGBT+ people who do not currently have such social networks.

"Find other organisations that serve various parts of the LGBT+ community; other than that, put your own stuff out. GPs and social services. They've often been through quite a complicated journey, and they may have ended up in a situation when they don't want to be put in a particular group. Make the approaches as open as possible and as wide a spectrum as possible."

"I had visions of handouts in doctors' surgeries. What you need to do is tap into people that are well networked and tap into the organisations or newsletters or things that they use. And ask people a) to sign up, and b) if they know anybody else who would be interested, and if they give permission to put them forward."

Though interviewees had mixed feelings about precisely what services they wanted or needed for themselves right now, they all felt that offering LGBT+ services for older people was important. Together with the strength of feeling in the survey responses, this suggests a need that is not currently being met.

It would be better to run a service that isn't labelled from the outside, it needs to be anonymous.

It might be better if you have one specific point of contact for those people. If you give people a secure point of contact that you can guarantee is completely confidential, it might get people to talk to them about it and go from there.

Stonewall obviously have a huge database, you could ask for a section in their newsletter. Lesbian and Gay Switchboard – they are very good; they have databases you can access yourself. They may be able to put you on the database. Samaritans – national signposting system.

If you can just ensure that you are supportive, without actually talking about anyone's individual circumstances and be aware whatever discussions you're having that people are supportive and make it clear that all these people are welcome.

One of the longstanding lesbian organisations is called Kenric, and one of the things they used to do very regularly, they did an annual pilgrimage to Sissinghurst. Lots of people are interested in gardens and very often public places like that are constructed to be accessible.



Conclusion

The findings of our research has given us a unique insight into the lives of LGBT+ people aged 70 and over. It is clear to us that we have a role to play in providing services that will support older LGBT+ people and allow them to continue to make social connections as they age and as their existing social circles get smaller.

A striking feature of this research project was the complexity of identifying LGBT+ people in the age cohort we generally work with, i.e. 75 and over. One researcher told us that older LGBT+ people can be “lost to the world”.

In a 2019 report, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee noted the levels of **homophobia in the Health and Social Care system** which means that older people's sexuality is simply not acknowledged. This very much reflects the experiences of our respondents and their perceptions of ageing.

Although our sample of respondents is small, our research shows clearly that there is an appetite for services and activities designed specifically for LGBT+ older people, but that there are multiple barriers to participation, including illness and disability as well as the varied availability of local services. Those who are most lonely are least likely to have accessed social activities and groups, with anxieties about meeting new people making it more difficult.

The loneliest of our respondents reported feeling less comfortable with their sexuality, showed lower levels of trust in people, and felt they did not belong to their local communities. They were more likely than others to hide their sexuality or gender identity in public, and our interviewees showed concern for those older LGBT+ people who would like to make social connections without 'exposing themselves'.



Against this backdrop, we have committed to a long-term programme of developing services for older LGBT+ people that will begin with a telephone befriending service, rainbow call companions. Our experience of working with 'older old' people has given us insight into the experience of living with growing numbers of comorbidities and an almost constant sense of loss and grief; we know that telephone befriending brings valuable social contact to those experiencing loneliness and social isolation and in this case will allow us swiftly to reach out to older LGBT+ people regardless of where they are or how open they choose to be about their sexuality or gender identity.

In the longer term, our experience of working with older LGBT+ people via rainbow call companions will improve our understanding of their needs around other activities, and help us to design and deliver activity and social groups – both in person and virtual – that are inclusive and accessible.

We look forward to creating social groups and opportunities for older LGBT+ people to spend time with others who share life experiences as an LGBT+ person and where everyone feels free to be themselves.

Sometimes people need to be with people where they don't have to explain.



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