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When decisions are made to help people improve their health, sexual health and wellbeing are usually not high on the list of priorities.

This is even more evident as the population gets older, with many other competing priorities in areas such as employment, finances and money-issues, health care and social care responsibilities.

With respect to health care, it is well-documented that older people are at increased risk of chronic health concerns like diabetes, dementia, heart disease and falls. The impact of

Community engagement

Conducting a local needs assessment helps to identify what needs to be changed or achieved to reach the goal of improving sexual health and wellbeing. Through community engagement, four clear themes were identified for the SHIFT project:

- **Knowledge** – clear and understandable information around a range of topics for sexual health and wellbeing.
- **Awareness** – active promotion, unambiguous messaging and improved engagement around sexual health and wellbeing for individuals, communities, and healthcare and wider workforce.
- **Access** – improve access to appropriate services and support for sexual health and wellbeing.

these conditions can affect not just physical health and wellbeing, but also mental health and wellbeing and the rarely-examined area of sexual health and wellbeing.

Using the methodology of SHIFT, communities can develop the tools and resources needed to support better sexual health and wellbeing outcomes for older people and address clear and growing health inequalities affecting older people.

- **Stigma** – reduce the stigma and health inequalities around sexual health and wellbeing for individuals, communities, and healthcare and wider workforce.

Your own needs assessment may identify similar topics, or new topics.

Once themes or areas of concerns have been identified, the development of activities to start to tackle these in turn create a local SHIFT COM-B model, with the individual and the community at the centre.

Community needs

To deliver SHIFT it's essential to be mindful of the needs of the community.

Language barriers are one of the significant areas where resources need to be adjusted to accommodate to local needs and requirements. Using clear and effective plain language helps people to better understand information, process and enable personal decision making.

It is also important to remember, in addition to writing health information in plain language on websites, leaflets or fliers, that unambiguously translated materials may be required for certain communities, and direct communication through clear spoken messages offer a more immediate way to improve engagement.

In return, good communication and clear language have a significant impact on helping to reduce stigma within the community around discussing sexual health and wellbeing. This also forges improved trust and respect between the community, health professionals and community support organisations, influencing positive health outcomes around sexual health and wellbeing.

It is also essential when bringing information and services to communities, if these are in-person delivered activities, that the people who are delivering the events are friendly and familiar with the community and their needs. Where possible through recruitment, appropriate training and support frameworks, these individuals are ideally key connectors within the local community and are community champions for sexual health and wellbeing, and help to reduce sexual health inequalities.

The creation of a local community asset register or directory identifies who are the key stakeholders in a community whether they are non-government organisations, healthcare organisations, private companies, or local or national government authorities. This directory will facilitate new partnership working, or strengthening of existing networks, and should be updated to reflect local changes over time.

Community voices

SHIFT aims to empower the older population to think about and, where necessary, action areas around sexual health and wellbeing.

SHIFT found that the community did not see itself being part of any relevant promotional material or advertising. Through developing more appropriate resources, it was possible for the community to see someone who “looks like me”. The SHIFT films likewise provided both an educational perspective to improve knowledge, raise awareness and reduce stigma and also were an engagement tool to open up discussions around sexual health and wellbeing.

To improve access to services or develop new services, extended engagement with communities helps to reduce misinformation and foster better understanding of need. Coupled with the provision of mobile outreach services or service adaptation which can increase engagement and usage.

But after activities are developed and implemented the work does not finish there.

It is vital to get feedback on the activity whether it is a website, change of clinic times, provision of a mobile service or community educational session. Through assessing engagement, relevance and interest in the activity; what works, what doesn't work, what do they want to happen at the next one etc. a fuller picture of the effect of often smaller-scale localised activities have the overall goal of

improving sexual health and wellbeing can be gained. All feedback is useful, and helps to shape future activities, or arrange for suitable adjustments. This in turn will further strengthen partnership working with the community and demonstrate the community is being heard.

As well as the target community of people aged 45 years and over, SHIFT identified the need to work with other stakeholders such as non-government organisations and healthcare providers. Historically interactions between the community and other stakeholders have not been encouraging. With the use of education resources that help raise awareness for the population as a whole, and reduce prejudice and stereotypical thinking, we can help to normalise discussions around the topic of sexual health and wellbeing.

Working at a community level, helps to address the factors needed to create, support and value the population's sexual health and wellbeing and in turn foster the creation of a safe, inclusive environment to allow these conversations and changes to happen.

The effect of SHIFTing Together

Being part of a community, having supportive social connections and having a say in local decision-making all help to contribute to better health and wellbeing.

Through developing a local SHIFT model and working in conjunction with the local community, SHIFT can support improving sexual health and wellbeing in older people by developing community awareness, empowerment and resilience, providing access to relevant information and knowledge, ensuring access to appropriate services and support and reducing the stigma and health inequalities around sexual health and wellbeing.

Community-centred partnership working is essential to improve the sexual health and wellbeing of older people. It is important to increase the ability to start conversations about sexual health and wellbeing in the community and SHIFT helps bring discussions full-circle.

Influencing the community supports and facilitates change at the individual level to reduce personal health inequalities, and enables personal empowerment around their own sexual health and wellbeing.

Communities matter.

For further information see the following SHIFT documents:

SHIFT Output 1 document
SHIFT Output 2 document – Tailored Strategy
SHIFTING Together



