

MensCraft Positive Elders Group

Earl of Northampton's Charity
Older People and Housing Programme

Norfolk-based charity focusing exclusively on the health and wellbeing of men

MensCraft based in Norfolk focuses exclusively on men's health and wellbeing. They offer one-to-one support, group sessions and links to specialist services. They provide trusted, welcoming and non-judgemental spaces that encourage openness and authenticity. Mercers' funded MensCraft to deliver a three-year programme – the Positive Elders Group – to provide free, purposeful, social activities and specialist support for older men in Norfolk who are experiencing social isolation.

"In some instances we're saving lives.... I don't like to think that we rescue people, and we mend them, but we enable men to improve themselves" Project Lead



Why the work is needed

As men move into later life, the structures, routines, and habits that keep them connected to others often change or disappear. Retirement, declining health, caring responsibilities, and the loss of friends or family can all contribute. These challenges are often intensified in disadvantaged neighbourhoods affected by poverty and health inequalities, as well as in more isolated rural or coastal areas.

Approach

The Positive Elders Group supports men to embed new routines, find companionship, and give back to their communities. A range of different activities are offered including walking groups, craft and music groups.

They take a strength-based approach, valuing individuals' contributions and recognising the importance of peer-to-peer support.

"I think it's being witnessed, I think it's being heard. I think it's listening. I think it's the power of positive expectation – peer-to-peer". Project Lead

Members welcomed the safe, trusted environment that was created by staff whom, often had lived experiences themselves.

"It's their lived experiences. They aren't somebody who's come straight out of college. They've actually had things to deal with ...it's important that you've got that life experience to gain that trust". Participant

Impact



Improving Wellbeing: The Positive Elders group contributes to improved mental health and wellbeing. For some members, attendance at the sessions is their only regular social interaction.

"I'd be dead if it wasn't for this place. Yeah, it saved my life" Participant



Meaningful Impact: Men are supported to reflect on ageing and transitioning into a new phase; sharing stories and feelings, often linked to major life events

"My wife got terminal cancer... and when she died it broke my heart, and this place was a godsend to me" Participant

There are also opportunities to volunteer; promoting a deeper sense of self-worth: *"it's just nice to give something back, you know, to just feel that you can help in some way" Participant & Volunteer*

One member, who had previously tried to take his own life, uses his experience to help others by giving regular talks to students and men's groups about mental health. *"So now I just want to use my story to help others" Participant*



Challenges

Engaging men from some groups and communities (e.g. rural areas) can be challenging. MensCraft are seeking ways to better engage these groups, including creative initiatives, such as a membership card. Some local businesses now offer member discounts.

Obtaining referrals is a challenge, and MensCraft runs a Positive Elders café monthly in Norwich town centre to build awareness.

Obtaining grants is a challenge with some funders stipulating the need to offer something new or different, rather than investing in what is already working well.

Learnings

- MensCraft is keen to take time to reflect, learn and improve. They regularly seek feedback from members, staff and volunteers, and welcome new suggestions and ideas.
- Valuable learning has been understanding the importance of 'the welcome' and 'the goodbye' to encourage participants to want to return.

"let's make sure that even when we're engrossed in what we're doing, we take time to say the goodbye Because you all know that if you're feeling vulnerable and you leave a room and no one says anything, it's mortifying" Project Lead

Organisational Resilience

As an organisation MensCraft are relatively resilient. They have a strong leadership team, CEO and Board which they felt was essential to long term sustainability.

"We've got a really good chief exec, who sets the ethos for the organisation... that ethos ripples down and helps make us very resilient." Project Lead

The Future

The Positive Elders Programme is only in its first year of delivery, but MensCraft are pleased with its progress towards meeting targets. It is well attended and appears to be making a positive difference to older men's lives in Norfolk.

MensCraft intend to continue to use their learning to enhance the offer and will seek additional funding to maintain the programme in the future.