

Positive East: Older People's Programme

Charity of Sir Richard Whittington
Older People & Housing Programme

Holistic support for people ageing with HIV across East London

Positive East Older People's programme provides holistic support for people ageing with HIV across East London. The project aims to reduce loneliness, isolation, and poverty and helps people navigate growing older with HIV through a comprehensive support programme, co-designed with service users.

"We understand each other, we're on the same route together, fighting stigma. We don't judge each other." Volunteer



Why the work is needed

Over half of people receiving HIV care in the UK are over the age of 50. Ageing with HIV often means managing multiple health conditions alongside the emotional impact of ageing and stigma. People aged 50+ living with HIV are three times more likely to experience loneliness than the general population, and 58% live in poverty.

Approach

The programme offers free activities and support, providing a safe, welcoming space where HIV can be discussed without stigma.

Project values including community, belonging, peer support, and independence. Staff and volunteers are friendly, respectful, and non-judgemental. Everyone is treated with dignity.

At the heart is a monthly lunch, providing a place to socialise, share food, and form new support networks:

"When you eat, you talk. When you start talking, you exchange experiences." Participant

Key approaches include:

- Social outings to overcome financial or confidence barriers
- Practical health and wellbeing advice sessions focused on ageing well with HIV
- An accredited advice service for benefits, housing and immigration
- A befriending programme

In the past year, 289 referrals were received from external partners. There are partnerships with five East London HIV clinics, clinical nurse specialists, mental health services, foodbanks, and other voluntary organisations.

Impact



Meaningful Impact: People come to the project seeking connection, understanding, and support. Described as being “like therapy”, the project fosters hope, confidence and a strong sense of belonging, described as “an HIV family”.



Practical Support: There is also practical support available, and over 50 beneficiaries have received advice about benefits, housing, and other needs identified during the monthly lunches.

“I feel safe... I’m not worried I’ll say something wrong because we are all the same.”

Participant

“When I’m here, I’m more comfortable than with my extended family... this is my second home.”

Participant



Challenges

Many participants have low motivation due to poor mental health, complex health issues, financial pressures, or unstable housing, which can influence engagement.

Operationally, the wellbeing panels proved more time-consuming to organise than anticipated, with low engagement.

Externally, changes in the NHS, particularly the shift toward a neighbourhood care model have challenged service delivery.

The service cannot meet the level of need in the city: referrals are received from outside East London which cannot be accepted due to capacity.

Learnings

- The key learning is about how individuals can come together to create a safe, inclusive community, and sense of ownership.
- The project has adapted to participants’ priorities. For example, a lighter-touch offer was initially anticipated, but most participants engaged in multiple parts of the programme.

“It’s the people who’ve come along that make it welcoming. It builds its own momentum... people interact, make it their own, and carry those connections with them.” Project lead

Organisational Resilience

The organisation has undertaken a review of its strengths and governance and has a clear understanding of priorities and future capacity.

Mercers’ funding has provided stability, allowing the organisation to retain staff, and evidence the continuing need for the service.

The Future

The need for this programme will continue to grow as more people age with HIV. Positive East will continue refining the project to meet the changing needs of older people living with HIV, responding to policy changes and strengthening partnerships and advocacy.

Plans include preparing for a growing older population, addressing issues such as stigma, care planning, and end-of-life support, and exploring the potential to become a community-based treatment centre.