‘Life things’: How mid-older LGBT+ people draw on experiences of place-based exclusion to construct wisdom and imagine intergenerational exchange

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Declaration of interest statement

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Keywords:

Exclusion; Intergenerational; LGBT+; Marginalisation; Wisdom; Place

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Abstract:

Depending on which historical moments they have inhabited, LGBT+ people aged 40+ may have experienced a combination of criminalisation, pathologisation, discrimination from within both cis-heterosexual spaces and LGBT+ spaces, and ongoing threats to inclusion through anti-LGBT+ speech. This paper draws on 38 life-course interviews with LGBT+ people aged 40+ conducted as part of the IncludeAge project (2022-27), which explores experiences of inclusion and exclusion in everyday places and online spaces. Our paper considers how LGBT+ people aged 40+ currently living in Britain construct forms of experiential wisdom by reflecting on lives shaped by exclusion and marginalisation. We argue that attention to these ‘life things’ offers a broader way of conceptualising what exchanges between LGBT+ people of different generational moments might look like, and how such exchanges might contribute to age-friendly places and spaces for LGBT+ people. Although our data cannot demonstrate bidirectional LGBT+ intergenerational exchange or its effects, it does suggest that ‘life things’ provide a useful way of conceptualising what might be exchanged: not simply historical knowledge from old to young, but experiential perspectives on the ordinary and difficult business of living.

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Introduction

Depending on which historical moments they have inhabited, LGBT+ people aged 40+ in Britain may have experienced a combination of criminalisation, pathologisation, discrimination from within both cis-heterosexual and LGBT+ spaces, and ongoing threats to place-based inclusion through anti-LGBT+ rhetoric and threats to Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion initiatives (Fish et al., 2021; Hurd et al., 2022; Marzetti et al., 2023). Consideration of how to create spaces for meaningful intergenerational exchange between LGBT+ people, some of whom carry cumulative experiences of exclusion, has become increasingly important within scholarship on ageing and LGBT+ lives (McNamara, 2019). Yet conventional understandings of generation often foreground chronological age and assume nuclear family relationships and relatively predictable life-course trajectories (King and Hall, 2024). These assumptions can sit uneasily with LGBT+ lives, in which identities and experiences of belonging may develop

outside heteronormative or 'chrononormative' patterns (King and Hall, 2023). By 'chrononormative', we mean the social organisation of time around normative expectations concerning the sequence and timing of life events, such as heterosexual partnership, marriage, parenthood, and family formation (Freeman, 2010).By contrast, LGBT+ people can form a generation linked to exposure to discrimination, legal changes, technological affordances, and personal life stages around coming out and transition (Hammack et al., 2018; Fredriksen -Goldsen et al., 2023; King and Hall, 2024).

However, these questions of generation are inseparable from questions of place. Such place-based experiences can shape how LGBT+ people understand themselves and the possibilities available to them across the life course (Pereira and Banerjee, 2021). Thus, we treat place not as a backdrop to LGBT+ lives but as a lived environmental setting, with its own norms, people, routines and boundaries through which exclusion is enacted, experienced, and later remembered. Geographers of ageing and sexualities argue that experiences of both ageing and sexuality are intrinsically bound up with place, and call for a queer geographical gerontology (Gorman-Murray et al., 2022). Empirical work with older LGBT+ people bears this out as past research points to exclusion, and the risk of exclusion, relating particularly to neighbourhoods and rural communities, and in the shared spaces of housing with care (Kneale, 2016; Willis et al., 2018).

By place-based exclusion, then, we mean exclusion that is (re)produced through, and cannot be understood apart from, the specific environmental/physical settings in which it occurs. This differs from exclusion in general in three ways that we illustrate in this paper. First, it is situated: what counts as 'normal' is set by tacit social norms and expectations of a particular school, street, church or workplace etc., and shapes who can be present, what can be said or shown, what happens there and what it is safe to be (Formby, 2017). Second, it is cumulative: places carry histories, and earlier experiences leave legacies that colour how people read later places (Ghaziani, 2021), with historical distrust and past negative experiences acting as barriers to inclusion (Sixsmith et al., 2025). Third, place-based exclusion is revisable: people respond to exclusionary places by concealing, reframing, leaving or making alternative spaces, and in doing so can turn marginal positions into sites of agency (Fang et al., in press; hooks, 1990).

Inclusion, correspondingly, is more than the absence of exclusion or access to a place or space. For example, experiences of passive inclusion and limited visibility can act as barriers to inclusion, even when places and linked organisations are nominally open to marginalised groups (Sixsmith et al., 2025). By contrast, place-based inclusion is framed in terms of sense of belonging, being welcomed, recognised, and able to participate in a place on one's own terms.

In relation to place-based inclusion, we also attend to the 'everyday-ness' of experiences of place because this is where such inclusion and exclusion are lived. By

‘the everyday’ we mean the routine, often unremarkable encounters, practices and places and spaces through and in which people live their lives, such as walking down a street, getting on with neighbours, sitting in a church hall. This is, as May and Muir suggest, where belonging is continually made and re-made, tested and withdrawn (2015). Within the context of LGBT+ intergenerational performance work specifically, everyday exchanges can matter as much as the passing on of recognised histories, and that conveying what it was like to live through historical milestones day in and day out is itself valuable (Farrier, 2015). Following Farrier, we treat the everyday not as trivial detail but as the scale at which place-based exclusion is encountered and at which knowledge about how to live is produced.

This matters for age-friendly policy, as ageing in place presumes that attachment to a neighbourhood deepens over time, yet as Sixsmith and Sixsmith (2008) argue, ageing in place can hold negative overtones. For example, long-established neighbourhoods can be hostile or unsupportive (Hillcoat-Nalletamby and Ogg, 2014; Lewis and Buffel, 2020), and for some older lesbian and gay people ageing in place may be undesirable because of the heterosexism instantiated in the environments in which they live (Willis et al., 2018). The World Health Organization’s Age-Friendly Cities and Communities (AFCC) agenda similarly promotes environments that support independence and participation in later life, yet affords limited attention to the relational and intersectional dimensions of belonging that shape, particularly more marginalised, people’s experiences of place (Buffel et al., 2024).

Such relational and intersectional aspects include how mid-older LGBT+ people construct forms of experiential wisdom out of exclusionary experiences of place, and how intergenerational exchange between LGBT+ people might provide a space in which such wisdom can be shared, challenged, and reinterpreted. Recent work has highlighted both the limited contact between LGBT+ people of different generations and the potential of intergenerational storytelling as a developmental and relational resource within LGBT+ communities (Morris, Greteman and Weststrate, 2023; Weststrate, Turner and McLean, 2024). We understand wisdom here not as a stable attribute possessed by older people, but as a form of experiential and reflective knowledge constructed through making meaning from difficult life experiences (Vytniorgu, 2019). As such, we use the term ‘life things’ in this paper to refer to the ordinary but consequential questions through which LGBT+ people work out how to live. These include questions concerning relationships, identity, loss, belonging, ageing, uncertainty, life choices, coping with difficulty, and the search for meaning. The term originates in our participants’ own language, most explicitly in Mick’s desire to discuss ‘life choices, lifestyle issues, life things’ with younger generations, and is useful because it captures a broader field of experiential knowledge than LGBT+ history alone. Indeed, existing approaches to LGBT+ intergenerational exchange sometimes focus precisely on well-meaning but unidirectional transmission of knowledge about LGBT+ history from

old to young, 'who must carry the torch for which the elders have fought' – sometimes over many decades (Farrier, 2015, p. 1404). However, the broader literature around intergenerational exchange, including LGBT+ exchange, also invites attention to the complexities and messiness of lived relationships and the day-to-day search for meaning in life (French, Lovatt and Wright, 2023; Weststrate, Turner and McLean, 2024).

Place is also central to how we understand wisdom, especially if wisdom is constructed by making meaning from difficult experiences. The ruptures, conflicts, and complications from which reflective knowledge emerges occur in particular homes, schools, churches, streets and workplaces, and what people take from them depends on what those places meant to them, allowed, withheld, or made possible. As such, mid-older LGBT+ people's relationships to place need to be understood in relation to accumulated, place-specific histories of exclusion and inclusion (Willis et al, 2018; Fang et al., 2026). We argue that these histories constitute the ground from which experiential wisdom is built, and through which participants live as well as imagine exchange with other generations. 'Life things' are, in this sense, generalisations that participants draw from ordinary, emplaced episodes of everyday life.

This article asks how mid-older LGBT+ people construct meaning from experiences of place-based exclusion and marginalisation across the life course, and how these reflections illuminate possibilities for intergenerational exchange. We argue that participants' narratives can be understood as forms of experiential wisdom: knowledge generated through living with exclusion, negotiating changing social expectations, and developing perspectives on how to live well amid complexity. We then consider how participants' accounts of generational difference, spatial proximity, and historical memory suggest possibilities for sharing such 'life things' across generations.

Because our data comes from participants aged 40 and over, we do not claim to observe or demonstrate bidirectional intergenerational exchange. Rather, we use participants' accounts to theorise what such exchange might involve. The research question guiding our inquiry in this paper is: How do mid-older LGBT+ people attach meaning to place-based experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and marginalisation across the life course? To answer this question, we analyse data from the IncludeAge project (2022-27), funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, which explores place-based experiences of inclusion and exclusion among two population groups aged 40+: LGBT+ people and people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This paper focuses entirely on the LGBT+ population pathway of the project. Our paper suggests that some of that meaning-making from experiences of place-based exclusion involves reflecting on, and possibly sharing that reflection, with other LGBT+ people of different generations.

The article begins by situating literature on wisdom and LGBTQ+ identities within existing discussions around how LGBTQ+ people make meaning from narratives of

exclusion and marginalisation in both cis-heterosexual and LGBT+ spaces. We then reflect on current understandings and approaches to intergenerational LGBT+ exchange as a possible site in which the wisdom generated from reflection on 'life things' might be shared, challenged, or reinterpreted. We then explain the research project and methodology for arriving at the insights we subsequently present and discuss, related to a British context. Our analysis begins by focusing on how our participants narrate experiences of exclusion and marginalisation, before considering the forms of wisdom that reflection on these 'life things' prompted. We then consider the possible ways our participants imagine connecting with LGBT+ people of other generations. We conclude by considering how such connections might contribute to age-friendly places and spaces for LGBT+ people.

Generational LGBT+ experiences of exclusion and the construction of wisdom

Experiences of LGBT+ exclusion are not evenly distributed across generations or within LGBT+ communities (Almack, 2019). The social conditions under which people come to understand themselves as LGBT+ vary according to historical period, age, gender, sexual orientation, and other intersecting social positions (Fox and Hannis, 2024). Consequently, people who occupy different generational positions may encounter different forms of exclusion, while LGBT+ people within the same generation may experience life differently according to their position within and across these identities in addition to intersecting identities (Willis and Westwood, 2023). Experiencing a place as friendly and welcoming, or exclusionary and unsafe, can also differ according to generational experiences and the cumulative impact of psychological legacies of place-based experiences of exclusion (Ghaziani, 2021). Research on sexual and gender minority stress has demonstrated the enduring effects of external discrimination and internalised stigma, while emerging work also draws attention to stress generated within minority LGBT+ places and spaces themselves (Assink and Bos, 2024; Parmenter and Winter, 2025). These differences matter for how mid-older LGBT+ people narrate their lives. Difficult experiences may become occasions for reflecting on identity, relationships, belonging, ageing, or what constitutes a successful life. In this sense, the 'life things' discussed in this paper are not simply universal questions of later life, but are shaped by the particular histories and social locations through which LGBT+ people have lived.

It is within these differentiated life experiences that we locate the possibility of experiential wisdom. Until recently, however, wisdom has been seen as a specialist, subjective, esoteric, or overly niche field of inquiry in the academy, perhaps laden with religious or mystical connotations (Vytniorgu, 2019). But 'with the exhaustion of political ideologies, philosophical systems and grand narratives', wisdom signals potential for making social meaning out of complex personal stories and lived experience (Assmann,

2024, p. 66). Indeed, rather than viewing wisdom as a stable attribute possessed by older people, we frame it as a form of experiential and reflective knowledge constructed through making meaning from difficult experiences of exclusion and marginalisation (Mazurek, 2024). This understanding of wisdom also resonates with narrative approaches to identity and meaning-making, particularly for LGBT+ people (Hammack, Barsigian and Hopkins, 2026; Cohler and Hammack, 2009). Importantly, experiences do not become 'wisdom' simply because they have occurred (Vytniorgu, 2019). Rather, they acquire meaning through retrospective interpretation, comparison and the construction of connections between events (Assmann, 2024). Particular experiences of exclusion or uncertainty are transformed into more generalised reflections about relationships, identity, belonging, or how to live. We refer to these broader reflections as 'life things'.

To date, there have been very few studies exploring the connection between the cultivation of wisdom from place-based experiences of exclusion, and implications for LGBT+ intergenerational exchange. Among these, Chazan and Baldwin (2021) examine how queer and trans individuals from different generations exchange narratives that question traditional views of ageing and contest assumptions of generational divides. Their study emphasises the resilience and innovative approaches used to elucidate LGBT+ ageing experiences, underscoring the importance of intergenerational storytelling in sharing wisdom (Fang et al., 2024). Chazan and Baldwin argue that queer wisdom need not be understood as adaptation to normative life-course expectations. Rather, it may instead involve learning how to question or reconfigure those expectations.

For LGBT+ people in particular, scholars have argued for the need to 'queer the traditional literature on wisdom and generativity by celebrating and learning from the queer wisdom that exists within LGBT+ communities' (McLean et al., 2024, p. 2). This approach to wisdom nurtures acceptance and celebration of queer selves while building 'a community of connection' among those who engage in such wisdom sharing (McLean et al., 2024, p. 17). If stories of queer history are told or even transmitted – including histories of exclusion and marginalisation, the emphasis might shift to what Farrier describes as 'the explication of the everyday of the past', enabling others to get a greater sense of what it was like, day-in-day out, to experience some of the 'big' queer historical milestones that had such an experiential impact on LGBT+ people's sense of self and identity (2015, p. 1405). Indeed, the current literature on queer wisdom suggests that reflection on experiences of marginalisation and exclusion can generate forms of knowledge (or wisdom) that can become meaningful in relational and intergenerational contexts (Weststrate, Turner and McLean, 2024).

LGBT+ intergenerationality and recovering the 'everyday'

Existing scholarship has highlighted the importance of intergenerational relationships within LGBT+ communities, particularly given the historical conditions under which many older LGBT+ people came of age and the potential loss of community memory across generations (Fang et al., 2024; Fredriksen -Goldsen et al., 2023). Past research indicates that our oldest generations of LGBT+ people are more likely to have single generation networks, drawn together by shared cohort experiences (Prasad et al., 2025). As a result, LGBT+ people, especially older people, often have little contact with LGBT+ individuals of different generations (McLean et al., 2024; Weststrate, Turner and McLean, 2024). Intergenerational storytelling has therefore been understood as a means of transmitting histories of activism, discrimination, survival, and social change between generations who may otherwise have few opportunities to communicate with each other (McLean et al., 2024). Such historical transmission is important. LGBT+ communities have experienced forms of criminalisation, pathologisation, violence and exclusion that are not necessarily visible to younger generations. As Morris, Greteman and Weststrate argue, 'LGBTQ+ knowledges, histories, and cultures are lost or disavowed from generation to generation', meaning that LGBT+ intergenerational exchanges which prioritise the transmission of queer histories and knowledges across generations is valuable (2023, p. 185).

However, a focus on historical transmission alone may narrow the range of knowledge understood as valuable in intergenerational encounters (Farrier, 2015). It arguably positions older people primarily as witnesses to a past and younger people primarily as recipients of that knowledge, potentially overlooking more everyday forms of knowledge through which people negotiate LGBT+ lives in the present. Younger people may find that focusing too much on challenges and struggles communicates the message 'that their lives will necessarily be painful and pointless' (Bohan et al., 2003, p. 12). Emerging research is already moving beyond a simple older-to-younger model. Work on multigenerational LGBT+ chosen families, for example, describes forms of latent, bi- or multi-directional and transgressive mentorship in which knowledge circulates across intersecting social positions (Perone et al., 2025).

The question is not whether historical transmission should be replaced, but what else becomes visible when intergenerationality is understood as a space of exchange rather than transmission. As Farrier argues, 'in LGBT intergenerational work [...] the everyday, the quotidian, exchange has just as great, if not greater, impact on the participants as the passing on of accepted gay histories' (2015, p. 1405). French, Lovatt and Wright (2023) have also warned against 'anodyne' approaches to intergenerational exchange which focus too much on simplified notions of social cohesion – and, we would argue, 'historical continuity' – at the expense of attention to the messiness and complexity 'of how intergenerational relationships are lived in time and what they mean to people' (French, Lovatt and Wright, p. 1619). Recent work in the United States with

LGBTQ+ elders, for example, has examined the kinds of wisdom they might share with younger people, including deeper knowledge of oneself and modes of resistance in the face of an oppressive society (Weststrate, Turner and McLean, 2024). Such dialogue may have positive social connection benefits, including improved empathy and appreciation for diversity, as well as a deeper sense of belonging and attachment to culture and place, without collapsing into 'anodyne' solidarity (Somers, 2024; May and Muir, 2015).

Our argument is therefore not that older LGBT+ people possess wisdom that younger LGBT+ people need. Nor is it that intergenerational exchange necessarily produces wisdom. Rather, we explore what forms of experiential knowledge located in time and place participants construct from their lives, and what they imagine might be meaningful to share across generations.

Methodology

This article draws on analytical insights from the IncludeAge project (2022-27; www.includeage.co.uk), funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. This study explores the meaning and experience of inclusion in everyday places and online spaces amongst middle to older aged LGBT+ people. To generate data on inclusion, the project has conducted life course interviews with LGBT+ participants (N=76). Specifically, we draw on findings developed from an analysis of 38 life course interviews exploring experiences of inclusion and exclusion in physical places and online spaces among LGBT+ people aged 40 or above, currently living in England, Scotland, and Wales; demographic data about these participants can be found in Table 1. This study sought to explore the intersections of age, gender identity / sexual orientation, and place, so the demographic data we collected expresses this focus. At the time of this focused analysis, 38 transcripts had undergone full analysis. We therefore restrict the present paper to those 38 interviews rather than treating the remaining transcripts as analysed data.

Participants in the study ranged in age from 40-92, and were primarily a mixture of cisgender gay men (N=18) and lesbians (N=14), trans people N=5), and a limited number of bisexual people (N=2). Participants were based in urban (N=12) and suburban (N=x22) areas, with a few from rural settings (N=4). Participants were recruited through purposive and snowballing techniques; using existing networks helped establish trust in the research. Working with mid-older LGBT+ co-researchers also meant that the networks we activated were sufficiently varied, geographically and in terms of where participants were placed within the LGBT+ acronym. More broadly in the project, co-researchers, who were recruited by the university and paid on as-and-when contracts, provided input into various aspects of the project. These included advising on the effectiveness of the life course interview schedule, making suggestions

for further phases of data generation (reported in additional publications), taking part in project steering group meetings, co-designing and co-facilitating knowledge translation workshops with policymakers and practitioners, and are co-authors on additional project papers and have co-presented conference papers.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committees (UOD-SREC-SHSC-2023-20). Before taking part, participants received information about the study and provided informed consent to participate, including consent for audio-recording and the use of anonymised quotations in research outputs. Participants were informed they could withdraw from the study without explanation and without negative consequence. All data were managed confidentially and in accordance with relevant data-protection legislation and institutional policies. Transcripts were anonymised, and potentially identifying information was removed or altered before analysis and dissemination.

On average lasting for an hour, and conducted in person or online, the LGBT+ interviews were undertaken by academic researchers as well as community LGBT+ co-researchers. Interviews were divided into three main sections. After an opening question about what a participant had 'been up to' over the past week, participants were then asked about what life was like for them in their 20s/30s, especially around coming out or transitioning, if applicable, and invited to share an object that represented inclusion to them in relation to their LGBT+ identity. After this, participants were then asked about physical places and online spaces they felt included and/or excluded in over their lives. Written field notes were made by everyone who completed a life course interview, recording initial thoughts about the interview, anything that other researchers should know about should they work with that participant in the future, and any reflexive comments about their own input into the interview.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Transcripts have been coded by the LGBT+ analysis team (five members of the IncludeAge study team, two male and three female, who identify as gay male (two), bisexual (one) or heterosexual (two). Team members ranged in age from their 30s to their 60s).

Co-authors RV and KA worked with co-researchers (one female, three male, whose identities all fall within the LGBT+ acronym and were aged in their 40s to 60s) to discuss and co-construct thematic meaning using selected transcript extracts. These discussions brought the academic researchers' developing interpretations into dialogue with the co-researchers' positionality and lived experience (including their different sexual orientations and gender identities) as well as their contextual knowledge from conducting interviews. At the time of writing, co-analysis was ongoing, engaging with the rest of the participant sample, and will be completed for a final analysis. The collaborative analysis highlighted the importance of interpreting particular episodes within participants' wider life stories. This contributed to the refinement of our

analytical approach, drawing on thematic narrative analysis to retain the relationships between individual experiences, their contexts, and the meanings participants attributed to them. Notably, issues related to intergenerational exchange and wisdom developed through our analysis despite there being no explicit prompts about these issues in the interview schedule, although sensitivity to intergenerationality was built into the study at application stage (Sixsmith et al., 2024).

Initially, the project team selected reflexive thematic analysis to analyse the life course interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Firstly, members of the initial LGBT+ analysis team (RV, MM, KA and MLF) familiarised themselves with interview transcripts and generated codes to capture meaningful data in relation to the relevant project research questions: (1) 'How do mid-older people who identify as LGBT+ attribute meaning to inclusion in online and local community participation?; (2) 'How do mid-older people who identify as LGBT+ experience societal inequalities, patterns of inclusion and exclusion over the lifespan, and at points of intersection and transition across groups?'. The analysis team then met monthly to discuss codes and participant narratives, develop potential themes and ultimately agree on the final themes for an overall analysis of the LGBT+ life story corpus. These meetings also involved discussion of researchers' biases and assumptions, and how these influenced the coding and development of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

As the analysis progressed, co-analysis with co-researchers was organised through presentation of the potential themes and discussion of interpretations and direct quotations taken from transcripts. This provided an additional meaning-making phase with lived experience input from our LGBT+ co-researchers. For example, one of the co-researchers based in Scotland was able to provide key context as to what the 'local standards' might have been which shaped one of our participant's experience of place growing up in west Scotland, which we discuss below. As this stage progressed, our analytical approach evolved into thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Thematic narrative analysis aims to thematise participants' narratives while maintaining the integrity of the overall story as told during the interview. In practice, for us this meant continually returning to the participants' overall interviews, enhanced by field note reflections and anecdotes from the co-researchers who interviewed roughly half of our participants. We found it increasingly difficult to isolate quotations without placing these in the context of a participant's overall life story as generated during the interview. The shift was therefore not a replacement of one method with another, but a refinement of the analytic approach as the research team worked alongside co-researchers and recognised the importance of retaining participants' accounts within their wider life narratives.

For the present paper, RV and MM undertook a focused analysis of material relating to experiences of exclusion and inclusion, meaning-making, wisdom, 'life things', and intergenerationality. The analysis was primarily thematic, while also being

informed by thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). This enabled us to identify patterns across accounts while retaining attention to how participants situated particular experiences within broader life stories and relationships. Rather than treating these as isolated topics, we revisited relevant transcripts in full, alongside co-researcher interpretations developed during the earlier analysis, to examine how participants connected experiences of place-based exclusion with wider reflections on identity, ageing, relationships, and intergenerational exchange.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Navigating place-based exclusion and the 'successful life'

Participants talked about being on the margins and feeling excluded in deeply personal ways. Our discussion of participants living against the grain helps contextualise how they have navigated life challenges, constructed experiential wisdom through a queer lens, and imagined the possibilities of intergenerational exchange.

Participants described how (hetero)normative pressures had delegitimised their identities and experiences while they were growing up. Alysya, a bisexual trans woman in her mid-to-late-sixties, underscored the cultural impact of government legislation in her earlier life. Her account illustrates how dominant templates of a 'successful life' were organised around chrononormative expectations, particularly the prescribed timing and sequencing of socially valued life milestones: 'everything's wrong unless you're married and straight and have two kids, a dog and doing the suburbs. That was your model, anything outside of that is just wrong'. Meanwhile, Cameron, a gay man in his mid-to-late-fifties, explained the pressure he faced from his mother as a young adult. She 'couldn't envisage that an out gay person would be successful at work or in life', and viewed his homosexuality as a 'massive obstacle' to his future happiness. Cameron also recalled that 'all the way through school I kind of never really fitted in', describing himself as an 'odd person by my local standards'. Here 'local' is explicitly place-based and imbricated in the everyday, locating his perceived difference in relation to the norms operating within both his school and wider neighbourhood. For Cameron, these norms were explicitly around masculinity, communicated through watching older men behave with each other in everyday settings. And Neil, a gay man in his mid-to-late-seventies remembered the 'enormous pressure to be heterosexual' and to 'conform and get married' during a time in which male homosexual acts were still illegal. This pressure pushed Neil into concealing his sexual orientation in religious environments, such as the church, which upheld a narrative that marriage may happen 'eventually' for ordinands who were currently single. Neil gradually began to distinguish between church environments, and what they could and could not legitimately argue

for; post-legalisation, evangelical churches fell back on interpretations of Scripture, whereas more liberal, Anglo-Catholic churches no longer felt the need to comply with broader societal and legal discrimination once legalisation occurred.

Other participants, meanwhile, spoke of the shame they felt through internalising normative pressures within the wider culture. For example, Tara, an asexual trans woman in her early-to-mid-sixties, explained how, in her earlier life, when trans visibility was extremely low, being trans was something 'you internalised [...] as something that was wrong, something that was fetish, something that [...] you had to be ashamed about'. These accounts show that pressures to conform were not only externally imposed but could also become internalised, shaping how participants understood and presented themselves within particular social and spatial contexts. For while such passing or 'performance' strategy may allow individuals to avoid immediate stigmatisation or exclusion in the place they find themselves, it reinforces the heteronormative pressures by perpetuating a façade of compliance, especially when such pressures are crystallised within 'local standards'. At work, Tara still finds herself monitoring other people's reactions to how she dresses day-to-day, using a locker at work to keep her clothes in so that when she returns home she does so as a man, having to navigate an environment in which she cannot be fully herself.

For some participants, place-based heteronormative pressures intersected with other systems of oppression, such as racism and conservative religious norms to create interlinked forms of exclusion. Because these pressures operated simultaneously, participants could not always pinpoint the source of their marginalisation. For instance, as Tokunaga, a gay man in his early-to-mid-forties, explained, being Asian and gay 'define who I am as a person', while questioning whether he had felt 'excluded [in Britain] because I was Asian or whether I was gay'. For Tokunaga, such experiences of exclusion were encountered in multiple places – in the workplace, in the neighbourhood, and on online dating apps that were ostensibly dedicated to providing a space for LGBT+ people to meet other LGBT+ people. Not only does Tokunaga attribute a lack of 'togetherness' among gay men due to dating apps such as Grindr, but he also sensed the wider discrimination on such apps targeted at older gay men and at Asians in particular. For Tokunaga, his experience of digital exclusion through dating apps is not separate from his sense of exclusion in physical places: they are part of how he experiences responses to himself as a person.

Conflicting identities associated with ethnicity and sexuality can also be exacerbated through the struggle to reconcile sexuality with both ethnic heritage and religious belonging. Munir, a gay man in his early-to-mid-fifties based in the West Midlands, recalled that, when he was in his early twenties, his family discovered his sexuality they 'took me aside' and 'had this conversation about Islam and what it means to be Muslim and a good Muslim'. For Munir, the conversation positioned homosexuality and being a 'good Muslim' as incompatible in their eyes. But, as Janusz, a Polish gay

man in his early-to-mid-forties, similarly emphasised that, when there are no resources available to navigate gender and sexuality within the heteronormative place one is in, there are fewer means of recognising, naming, and navigating the intersecting pressures which are experienced. These accounts show that exclusion arose not only through normative pressures themselves but also through unequal access to the interpretive resources, support, and affirming spaces needed to understand and negotiate them.

Despite the pressures posed by heteronormativity and the challenges of intersecting identities, some participants resisted these constraints and found ways to assert personal agency in the face of structural barriers, which can be seen as a way of queering other people's 'conventional wisdom' or their version of what constitutes a 'successful life'. For example, Alysya came to a place where she decided she can 'live without everything else' – with things she may once have wished for as a younger person – and while she couldn't find a man who would accept the trans aspect of her identity, she wanted to find a girlfriend 'who would accept me as trans because I knew that was part of me' – a state of being she referred to as an 'in-between' space. This 'in-between' space can be isolating, and may involve accommodating exclusion on some level, but it also holds the possibility for reimagining and queering relationships and self-conceptions, for finding meaning and value in challenging life experiences and which is suggestive of bell hooks's (1990) concept of turning marginal spaces into spaces of empowerment. For Steffan, a gay man in his early-to-mid-sixties, he initially experienced his rural childhood environment in Yorkshire in the 1960s and 1970s as marginal, full of normative standards for gender conformity, but, later in life he returned to a different rural space (in Wales), which became empowering for him after reflecting that other gay men's vision of a 'successful life' in London failed to resonate with him and the way he wanted to relate to the countryside and being in nature.

These accounts suggest that experiences of place-based exclusion could also, at times, be sites of creativity and queer agency, allowing LGBT+ people to navigate and challenge dominant narratives or norms. Marginal and 'in-between' positions within spaces could enable participants to question heteronormative and chrononormative expectations and reimagine alternative pathways towards self-expression, connection and belonging. These narratives suggest that participants' experiences of exclusion were not simply recollected as episodes of marginalisation. Through retrospective narration, participants reinterpreted these experiences and articulated alternative understandings of identity, belonging, and what constituted a worthwhile or successful life. We understand this movement from lived experience through reflection and meaning-making as a form of experiential wisdom.

Making meaning from experience: 'life things' and experiential wisdom

While some participants in our project speak about resisting normative pressures, and even finding the space to reimagine what a good life looks like for them under their own terms, other participants use the opportunity of talking about negative experiences to philosophise in more general terms, moving from the personal to the general. We use 'life things' to describe the ordinary but consequential questions that participants extract from their experiences. Specifically, our participants emphasise the importance being yourself, living in the present, asking questions and searching for meaning in life, and also attending to the stories, perspectives, and lenses of others.

Perhaps because of the need to respond personally to challenging experiences, participants speak of the importance of being yourself and realising that 'my story is as relevant as anyone else's', as Derek, a gay man in his early-to-mid-sixties puts it. Susan, a lesbian in her early-to-mid-forties, says that 'I am just who I am, and I don't hold back with anyone', while Irene, a lesbian in her early-to-mid-seventies, argues that 'everybody right from birth should be able to be what they want to be'.

Of course, as our participants' narratives of exclusion highlight, this so-called 'birth-right' is the ideal, and far from something universally experienced by LGBT+ people in practice. But despite the social and cultural challenges to 'being yourself' as an LGBT+ person, participants still insist on the importance of exploring and trying. As Munir puts it, he sought to 'assert' himself 'as a young man' once he had 'grow[n] up a bit [...] experimented a bit [...] explored the world a bit more [...] I was searching [for] my identity and myself as a young adult'.

Munir's emphasis on experimenting, exploring, and searching connects to a further aspect of wisdom highlighted by our participants, focused on the importance of asking questions, talking to others, and being comfortable with a state of searching. Wisdom is comfortable with knowledge generated 'through rupture, challenge and transformation', rather than something abstract (Assmann, 2024: 67). In a similar manner, Neil reminds us that people are 'very complicated. The world is very complicated [...] And we should help people live amongst the complications, I think'. For example, Neil's experience of navigating churches while male homosexuality was still fully illegal drew his attention to the competing pressures different institutions may have faced: pressures towards orthodox religious practice vs pressures to concede to wider societal pressures for acceptance. His recognition of 'the complications' in life is the result of cumulative everyday encounters in places that had competing pressures placed on them.

Indeed, living 'amongst the complications' isn't easy. Daniel, a gay man in his early-to-mid-seventies, speaks of having been 'quite restless' in the first part of his life, but that this 'restlessness came partly from a desire to seek, seek and search'. Daniel's restlessness and his desire to 'seek, seek and search' can be interpreted as an

existentialist commitment to becoming and to being open to personal and social transformation – a rejection of the 'preconceived ideas' that Mick, a gay man in his mid-to-late fifties, says he eschewed through simply talking with others. In these accounts, participants are not simply reporting what happened to them. They are performing retrospective narrative work, which involves selecting experiences of place-based exclusion, interpreting their significance, and extracting broader propositions about how life might be lived. Their narratives therefore move between the particular and the general, turning episodes of exclusion into forms of experiential knowledge.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, participants therefore also focus at length on the importance of attending to the experiences, stories, lenses, and perspectives of others, and through this attention, working, albeit falteringly and not without ambivalence, to a more inclusive social world. For Neil, who has navigated a range of church environments throughout his life, including homophobic ones, the act of getting to know people forces others to attempt to see a whole self as opposed to fixating on one aspect they disagree with, such as being gay. For Alysya, the important thing is to 'see people, I talk to people. I like people a lot and that's how I form relationships'. Similarly, Mick places pragmatic emphasis on getting on with his neighbours, 'because as far as I'm concerned I'm part of this [...] I'm part of this street'. Mick then abstracts from the immediacy of his emplacement on his street to the value he places on looking at 'anything' in life 'from all angles' and how other people may think differently to him. 'We all see things differently', Mick says.

This emphasis on the ability to appreciate different perspectives and try and see an issue from a different angle – to transform your own perspective – is foundational to wisdom discourses, as is the ability to live with disagreement and complexity (Mezirow, 2012). While many of our participants suggest that this kind of change can occur from direct interpersonal contact, there are other ways of building and extending wisdom. For example, one participant highlighted the importance of artistic practice in facilitating this process. Dexter, a gay man in his early-to-mid-sixties, recalls how, at the height of the AIDS crisis, he choreographed a dance exploring gay men's experiences of living with HIV-AIDS. Dexter was invited to perform this piece at the Mothers Union by his Catholic friend who was diagnosed with HIV-AIDS, believing that the performance would initiate a conversation with the audience about their attitude to homosexuality. As a result of the performance, members of the Mothers Union later cared for Dexter's friend in hospital, and this *volte face* also changed Dexter's perspective on Christianity. Dexter's narrative highlights how the process of engagement through arts – particularly in places (such as the Mothers Union) that might have been interpreted beforehand as exclusionary – can initiate multiple perspective transformations.

As noted earlier, participants were not asked directly about wisdom, but our analyses of their life stories has highlighted how wisdom develops. Wisdom is constructed through the effort required to be yourself in a world where examples and

role-models can be scarce and where one feels on the margins; by searching and exploring for meaning; and by attending to others – including those of different generations – and the inclusive potential this holds.

Imagining intergenerational exchange around 'life things'

Participants were not explicitly asked about intergenerational exchange, yet issues around intergenerationality arose spontaneously in a number of interviews. These accounts are important not because they demonstrate intergenerational exchange itself (we did not interview younger participants or observe intergenerational interactions) but because they reveal what some mid-older LGBT+ participants imagine should be shared across generations and what they hope might be gained from such contact. While some participants emphasised the need for younger LGBT+ people to know 'their' history better, others were more open to a wider range of possible exchanges. For example, Mick focuses more on the need to be asked questions by younger people: 'Talk about anything', he says; 'Just ask, you know [...] anything, you know, anything. The nitty gritty [...] if I don't want to answer it, I'll tell you'.

One of the reasons that Mick is so insistent that younger people ask him questions is his sense that 'certain things I think just don't occur to younger people', especially aspects of 'being gay'. Whereas people of Mick's gay generation can 'talk about so much' that connects to being gay, with 'the younger generation, I'm beginning to worry that it doesn't even occur to them [...] I just think there's a, there's just a lack of awareness'. Similarly, Bow, a gay man in his mid-to-late-sixties, argues that 'gay people now have forgotten or not, don't know or haven't been educated in what's led up to where we are', or that a younger gay man may not have any 'real idea about his background as a gay man'. Thierry, a gay man who is also in his to-late-sixties, makes the same point when he says that 'it's always bothered me, irritated me here that [long pause] people don't ask our generation about history, their history'. Such participants' accounts therefore re-assert the value of an important model of intergenerational exchange, between older LGBT+ people as holders of historical knowledge and younger LGBT+ people as recipients.

However, this emphasis on 'his background' and 'their history' argue for an uncomplicated connection between younger and older generations, linked by struggle for LGBT+ rights and inclusion. As Thierry argues, 'gay people, young people should know where they came from', and younger generations should realise that the benefits they now enjoy are 'a direct result of us and our fighting'. But this begs some questions: who is to tell them where they came from? Is it right to insist that younger LGBT+ generations take responsibility for bearing witness to the struggles of the past?

Other participants placed value on connections across generations, expressing the desire to have contact with people outside their own generation. Indeed, intergenerationality is imagined here not only as involving knowledge about queer history. It can also be about companionship, continuity, or belonging. In part, as Daniel expressed, this in recognition that 'our lenses are different, generational lenses are different, they view things differently' – suggesting perhaps that realising this is a step towards wisdom. Neil, meanwhile, admitted that he was keen on 'making young friends' because 'one of the difficulties of being old is that [your very close friends] die'. Andrew, a gay man in his early-to-mid-seventies, stressed the importance of his intergenerational 'chosen family' of gay men of different generations. He especially valued their coming together in the space of the home at key times of the year such as Christmas, when 'we're just a little tired of families and children and nephews and nieces'. Where Daniel suggests that important knowledge can be generational, informed by historical events that shaped a generation's experience and understanding of themselves, Andrew and Neil return to the everyday, forming valuable relationships around key milestones such as Christmas, in which the everyday is disrupted by habitual routines that can sometimes highlight one's difference or apartness from traditions that others can take for granted.

Thus, Neil and Andrew focus on different ways in which intergenerational relationships form and are maintained, often by homing in on the everyday value of intergenerational relationships with other LGBT+ people, which might also include a mentoring aspect. Jonathan, a bisexual trans man in his mid-to-late forties, reflected on how much he could have benefited from having an LGBT+ mentor and source of guidance when he was younger, wondering 'where do you find information' and feeling 'too scared' to phone available helplines for guidance. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that some of our participants explicitly mentioned the pleasure they get from being in mentoring roles of varying degrees of formality; as Andrew explains, 'many of them [my former students] still look to me, as it were, for advice, [...] to talk things through'. Sarah, a lesbian in her mid-to-late-sixties, mentions the joy she used to get from teaching and 'interacting with the young people', and, through her karate classes in retirement, of being between generations and 'being kind of somewhere in the middle' in terms of the age range of people attending. Mick, meanwhile, talks about having 'gone through life', and that he'd like to be able to discuss with younger generations 'life choices, lifestyle issues, life things', as they connect to LGBT+ people. Thierry echoes this by advocating channelling such desires into new initiatives: 'it would be great if there were places and projects which encouraged communication between people [...] the generations'.

These accounts move beyond the question of what younger people need to know about LGBT+ history. Instead, participants imagine conversation around relationships, choices, uncertainty, work, ageing and other 'life things' through which people negotiate the practical and existential problems of living. It is especially significant that mentoring

features so strongly: mentoring suggests the ability to offer advice and guidance that may work against the kind of conventional 'norms' or 'pressures' participants experienced in places when they were younger. Being able to discuss 'life things' between LGBT+ generations may, paradoxically, help LGBT+ people of any age to re-assess their relationship to the everyday and the places in which the everyday can sometimes become oppressive, laden with exclusionary norms and pressures. Such an approach could create the conditions for more reciprocal exchange, but our data cannot establish whether or how such reciprocity would occur. This remains an empirical question for research involving participants across generations.

Discussion

Our findings suggest that experiences of LGBT+ exclusion can become resources for narrative meaning-making, through which participants construct forms of experiential wisdom about how to live. This is significant because such wisdom is not simply a product of chronological age, nor a fixed attribute of an 'older generation' (Assmann, 2024). Rather, it is produced through reflection on experiences situated within particular historical and spatial contexts (Pillemer et al., 2022). In this sense, the 'life things' participants discuss provide a way of understanding how LGBT+ people make broader meanings from experiences of marginalisation and belonging.

Importantly, participants did not simply recount difficult experiences. They retrospectively interpreted them and connected them to other experiences, extracting broader propositions about how life might be lived (such as Alysya knowing that she can 'live without' things deemed desirable by cis-heteronormative standards). This is consistent with narrative approaches that understand identity as constructed through the interpretation and organisation of experience across time (Cohler and Hammack, 2009; Hammack, Barsigian and Hopkins, 2026). It also develops existing conceptualisations of wisdom as a process of making meaning from complexity and transformation (Assmann, 2024; Vytniorgu, 2019). What is distinctive about the present findings is that this meaning-making is situated in LGBT+ experiences of exclusion, including exclusion that is historically and spatially specific. Through reflecting on their experience, participants arrive at philosopher Mary Warnock's existential realisation that 'one has not come to the end of what is worth having' (Warnock, 1978, p. 203).

This process of meaning-making is also generationally situated. Although all participants were aged 40 and over, some were decades apart in age, and therefore encountered substantially different social and political conditions in relation to sexuality and gender (Hurd et al., 2022). For example, Neil encountered exclusion and marginalisation during the criminalisation of male homosexuality in England and Wales, whereas Janusz experienced being on the margins during and immediately after communist Poland. Their narratives should consequently not be read as representing a single 'older LGBT+' perspective. Rather, they illustrate how experiential knowledge is

shaped by different cohort histories and geographies, while also being differentiated by sexuality, gender, ethnicity, and other social locations. This supports queer approaches to generation that understand generational position as more than chronological age (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2023; King and Hall, 2024).

The concept of 'life things' helps connect this account of wisdom to intergenerationality. Participants' reflections encompass questions such as: how to form relationships, negotiate uncertainty, understand oneself, cope with loss, live with difference, and decide what constitutes a good life. Yet their answers to these questions are shaped by having lived as LGBT+ people in particular historical and spatial contexts (Fox and Hannis, 2024). What might be shared across generations, therefore, is not simply a body of historical facts but perspectives formed through living. This extends Farrier's (2015) argument concerning the importance of 'the everyday, the quotidian' in LGBT+ intergenerational exchange by suggesting that the everyday is also a site in which experiential wisdom is produced. As Farrier argues, 'a story about an older person's experience of walking in a street might be as profound to the group as learning about the (contested) history of the gay movement' (2015, p. 1404). Our participants talk about navigating family dynamics (Munir), lacking resources to understand sexual orientation (Janusz), feeling left out by 'local standards' (Cameron), witnessing cultural invisibility on a daily basis (Alysya, Tara), being in homophobic churches (Neil), and simply being a neighbour on a street (Mick).

Our argument is not that historical transmission is inadequate or undesirable. On the contrary, participants' accounts demonstrate why historical memory remains important, especially for gay men whose experience of generational rupture caused by the HIV-AIDS epidemic carries a significant legacy (King and Hall, 2024). Some of our gay male participants were concerned that younger LGBT+ people might not know the struggles through which contemporary rights and freedoms were achieved. As Morris, Greteman and Weststrate (2023, p. 185) argue, 'LGBTQ+ knowledges, histories, and cultures are lost or disavowed from generation to generation', meaning that LGBT+ intergenerational exchanges which prioritise the transmission of queer histories and knowledges across generations is valuable. But historical transmission represents only one form of intergenerational knowledge. And not all forms of intergenerationality described by participants involved the deliberate exchange of knowledge either. Some concerned friendship, companionship, being in shared spaces, and mentoring and peer support (Pepping et al., 2024).

We therefore also distinguish between intergenerationality as an object of participants' imagination and intergenerational exchange as an observed social process. The present study provides evidence for the former but not the latter. Because our analysis is based on interviews with participants aged 40 and over, we cannot establish whether the forms of knowledge and connection participants imagine would be reciprocated by younger people, or whether encounters would actually produce the kinds of mutual learning suggested in the literature (McLean et al., 2024). What the

findings do provide is an account of the kinds of knowledge, relationships, and encounters that mid-older LGBT+ people consider potentially valuable across generations.

These findings thus have implications for the design of LGBT+ intergenerational initiatives. Rather than treating older participants primarily as holders of historical knowledge and younger participants as recipients, initiatives might create opportunities for historical storytelling alongside informal conversation, mentoring, friendship and shared activities. Such approaches could provide spaces for participants to explore 'life things' without prescribing in advance what knowledge should be exchanged. Whether such approaches generate reciprocal learning or reduce isolation, however, requires empirical investigation involving participants across generations.

Our findings also have implications for age-friendly communities, since approaches emphasising participation and social connection may overlook how histories of exclusion shape LGBT+ people's experiences of community settings (Buffel et al., 2024; McNamara, 2019). Neil's account of homophobic churches and Cameron's reference to 'local standards' highlight how belonging can depend on conformity to expectations about identities and relationships. Mick's account of being a neighbour, meanwhile, draws attention to the possibilities for connection through ordinary proximity and everyday encounters in neighbourhood streets. Our analysis suggests that making places age-friendly involves more than providing activities or physical access: it requires attention to whether people can participate without concealing their identities or conforming to assumed life trajectories. This aligns with a related analysis from the wider IncludeAge study, which highlights how accumulated histories of inclusion and exclusion shape subsequent expectations of safety, belonging and participation (Fang et al., 2026). In community centres, faith settings and neighbourhood meeting places, this could involve recognising diverse relationships, addressing exclusionary remarks and creating opportunities for repeated, informal contact across generations. Such encounters could allow conversations about relationships, loss, ageing and other 'life things' identified in our analysis, without prescribing older LGBT+ people's roles as mentors or historical witnesses. These proposals arise from participants' accounts; whether they foster belonging and reciprocal intergenerational exchange requires further investigation.

Conclusion

This article has examined how LGBT+ people aged 40 and over make sense of place-based experiences of exclusion and inclusion, and what these experiences suggest about the possibilities for intergenerational connection. Our findings show how participants draw on lived experience to make sense of relationships, identity, uncertainty, ageing, and the practical challenges of living. Through this narrative

meaning-making, experiences of exclusion and belonging can become forms of experiential knowledge that we describe as 'life things': everyday insights into how to live, rather than knowledge confined to LGBT+ history or identity.

Attending to 'life things' therefore offers a way of extending understandings of LGBT+ intergenerationality. The transmission of queer histories remains important, particularly given the 'loss or disavowal of LGBT+ knowledges across generations' (Morris, Greteman and Weststrate, 2023, p. 185). However, participants also imagined intergenerational connection through friendship, mentoring, and spatial proximity. These possibilities suggest that intergenerationality need not position older LGBT+ people simply as knowledge-givers and younger people as recipients. At the same time, because our study did not include younger participants or observe intergenerational interactions directly, it cannot demonstrate that such exchange is reciprocal. Rather, it identifies forms of knowledge and connection that mid- and older LGBT+ participants understand as potentially valuable across generations.

Future research should therefore examine how these possibilities are negotiated in interactions involving people from different generations, including how experiences of place-based exclusion shape what is shared and what remains difficult to communicate. Such research could help develop a more nuanced understanding of LGBT+ intergenerationality, which recognises the importance of history while also attending to the everyday, relational and experiential dimensions of how people learn from one another across the life course.

A further limitation concerns the relatively limited attention to online spaces in the analysis presented here, despite their inclusion in the wider project's remit and interview questions. This limits what the article can establish about the role of digitally mediated encounters in the development and sharing of experiential wisdom. The predominance of physical settings in this account should therefore not be taken as evidence that online spaces are unimportant to participants. Further analysis is needed to examine how experiences across physical and online settings intersect, and what these relationships mean for intergenerational connection.

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Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Geographical location	*N*	Residence Area	*N*	Age range	*N*	Ethnicity	*N*	Gender Identity	*N*	LGBT+ Identity	*N*	Sexual Orientation	*N*
London	7	Rural	4	40-44	4	White British	28	Male	18	Gay man	18	Homosexual (gay/lesbian)	30
South East England	9	Suburban	22	45-49	1	White Irish	5	Female	14	Lesbian	11	Bisexual	6
South West England	4	Urban	12	50-54	4	Asian British - Chinese	2	Transgender	4	Trans woman	6	Asexual	1
East of England	3			55-59	5	Asian British - Indian	1	Non-binary/ Gender queer	1	Trans man	1	Heterosexual (straight)	1
West Midlands	3			60-64	8	White Gypsy or Irish Traveller	1	Undisclosed	1	Bisexual man	1		
South Wales	4			65-69	6	Polish	1			Bisexual woman	1		
Central Wales	1			70--74	6								
West Wales	1			75-79	3								
North West England	2			90-94	1								

Yorkshire and the Humber	2
West of Scotland	1

South Scotland	1