

## Older people policy

2017

Older people's sexuality is often ignored or marginalised. FPA believes that a positive attitude towards older people's relationships and sexuality is a vital part of promoting positive sexual health throughout people's lives and ensuring that everyone is able to access appropriate sexual health advice, support and services.

In this policy we define 'older people' broadly as those aged over 50, while recognising there is diversity within this group.

### **Our beliefs about older people**

1. FPA believes that older people have the right to be acknowledged as sexual beings.
2. FPA believes that older people's sexual health needs should be identified by relevant health authorities and that progress towards sexual health and wellbeing should be monitored.
3. FPA believes that older people's sexuality is often ignored, neglected, stigmatised and stereotyped. We believe it should be viewed positively.
4. FPA believes that there needs to be a balanced representation of older people's experiences of sexuality and sexual activity in resources for professionals and in the media.
5. FPA believes that older lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people are at increased risk of stigma and should be supported to have positive sexual health and wellbeing.
6. FPA believes that all sexual health service providers, including general practice, sexual health clinics and support services, must ensure that they are accessible, appropriate and welcoming to older people, and should offer high-quality, confidential services that cater for their needs.

### **Why we believe this**

1. *FPA believes that older people have the right to be acknowledged as sexual beings.*

Sexual relationships can provide a range of physical, mental and emotional health benefits for people regardless of their age, and the achievement of sexual wellbeing can play an important part in older people's relationships.

The English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing, for example, found that sex is an important part of a relationship to two-thirds of men and women aged 50-90 and



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that people are still sexually active into their 80s and 90s.<sup>1</sup> The study also found that good sexual health is associated with better general health and wellbeing among older people.

FPA believes that all people should be supported to achieve good sexual health and wellbeing and their specific needs acknowledged.

2. *FPA believes that older people's sexual health needs should be identified by relevant health authorities and that progress towards sexual health and wellbeing should be monitored.*

FPA welcomes the Department of Health's recognition of the specific sexual health needs of older people. The [Framework for Sexual Health Improvement in England](#) aims to ensure that 'people of all ages understand the risks they face and how to protect themselves, older people with diagnosed HIV can access any additional health and social care services they need, and people with other physical health problems that affect their sexual health can get the support they need for sexual health problems'.<sup>2</sup> In Scotland, the [Sexual Health and Blood Borne Virus Framework](#) recognises the needs of older people in its key priority relating to sexual dysfunction.

Neither the Welsh government's document, [A strategic framework for promoting sexual health in Wales](#), nor Northern Ireland's [Sexual health promotion strategy and action plan \(2008-13\)](#) and [Sexual health promotion strategy addendum \(December 2015\)](#) make specific recommendations relating to older people, only including brief acknowledgment of older people's variable knowledge and higher incidence of late HIV diagnosis.

However, as a report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Sexual and Reproductive Health found, even where there are commitments to older people, there is no national monitoring against ambitions for sexual health improvement.<sup>3</sup> Although statements are a step in the right direction, there is currently no way of tracking progress of the stated aims.

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<sup>1</sup> Sexual health and well-being among older men and women in England: findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing, 2015)  
[www.elsa-project.ac.uk/publicationDetails/id/7548](http://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/publicationDetails/id/7548)

<sup>2</sup> Framework for Sexual Health Improvement in England (Department of Health, 2013)  
[www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/142592/9287-2900714-TSO-SexualHealthPolicyNW\\_ACCESSIBLE.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142592/9287-2900714-TSO-SexualHealthPolicyNW_ACCESSIBLE.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Breaking Down the Barriers (APPG on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 2015)  
[www.fpa.org.uk/influencing-sexual-health-policy/accountability-inquiry-standards-sexual-and-reproductive-health](http://www.fpa.org.uk/influencing-sexual-health-policy/accountability-inquiry-standards-sexual-and-reproductive-health)



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Public Health England data on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) shows that STI rates in people aged over 45 have risen in recent years, with new STI diagnoses increasing by 18% between 2011 and 2015.<sup>4</sup> Comparatively, rates among people under 25 fell by 0.5% during the same time period.

FPA recommends that regional and national government not only acknowledge the specific sexual health needs of older people, but commit to their improvement. A system of monitoring must be put into place to measure ambitions against outcomes, so that improvement can be made where necessary.

3. *FPA believes that older people's sexuality is often ignored, neglected, stigmatised and stereotyped. We believe that it should be viewed positively.*
4. *FPA believes that there needs to be a balanced representation of older people's experiences of sexuality and sexual activity in resources for professionals and in the media.*

Media representation of sex in the UK is primarily focused on young people, and in parallel to this there is an implicit dismissal of sexuality and sexual activity among older people. The Manchester Institute for Collaborative Research on Ageing notes that older people are subject to stereotypes and misconceptions, with a study of birthday cards showing how older people are portrayed as sexually weak and sexual failures.<sup>5</sup> There is also a degree of gender bias, where it is deemed more acceptable for older men to be sexually active, especially with younger female partners, than it is for older women.

Stigma around older people's sexuality can stop people from seeking professional advice. The English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing found that older people who experienced sexual difficulties had not sought help.<sup>6</sup> Other research

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<sup>4</sup> Sexually transmitted infections (STIs): annual data tables (Public Health England, 2016)

[www.gov.uk/government/statistics/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis-annual-data-tables](http://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis-annual-data-tables)

<sup>5</sup> Let's talk about sex – what do older men and women say about their sexual relations and sexual activity – a qualitative analysis of ELSA Wave 3 data (University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University, 2015)

[hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Let%E2%80%99s%20talk%20about%20sex%20%E2%80%93%20what%20do%20older%20people%20say%20for%20MICRA.pdf](http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Let%E2%80%99s%20talk%20about%20sex%20%E2%80%93%20what%20do%20older%20people%20say%20for%20MICRA.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Sexual health and well-being among older men and women in England: findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing, 2015)

[www.elsa-project.ac.uk/publicationDetails/id/7548](http://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/publicationDetails/id/7548)



has found that the belief that older people don't, or shouldn't, experience sexual desire is a significant barrier to accessing sexual health services.<sup>7</sup>

FPA believes that the media should offer a positive view of older people's sexuality and that sexuality and sexual intimacy beyond intercourse should be recognised and acknowledged.

FPA agrees with the conclusions of the University of Manchester's Dr David Lee that resources for professionals should 'offer counter stereotypes about late-life sexuality, and offer older people a reference against which they may relate their own experiences' while not 'proposing "arbitrary norms" of sexual health and function on older people.'<sup>8</sup>

5. *FPA believes that older lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people are at an increased risk of stigma and should be supported to have positive sexual health and wellbeing.*

Older LGBT people experience significant stigma and dismissal of their sexuality. Research has found that growing old is a real concern for the one million lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain over the age of 55. A survey of 1,036 older lesbian, gay and bisexual people and 1,050 heterosexual older people by the charity Stonewall found that a significant proportion of older gay people are more likely to rely on formal services for help in the future.<sup>9</sup>

The Terrence Higgins Trust has found that older people are the fastest growing group in the UK living with HIV and that they may be disadvantaged in a number of ways, from poorer health, to social care and housing problems and significant financial disadvantage compared to their peers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sexual health and well-being in middle and late adulthood: Current knowledge and future directions (University of Sheffield, 2015) [hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Hinchliff%20MICRA%20event%2006-02-15.pdf](http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Hinchliff%20MICRA%20event%2006-02-15.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Sexual health, quality of life and wellbeing among older men and women in England (University of Manchester, 2015) [hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/ELSA\\_MICRA\\_presentation\\_060215.pdf](http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/ELSA_MICRA_presentation_060215.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Working with older lesbian, gay and bisexual people: A guide for care and support services (Stonewall, 2011) [www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/older\\_people\\_final\\_lo\\_res.pdf](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/older_people_final_lo_res.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> A national study of ageing and HIV (50 Plus) (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010) [www.tht.org.uk/~media/Files/Publications/Policy/50-plus-final-report.pdf](http://www.tht.org.uk/~media/Files/Publications/Policy/50-plus-final-report.pdf)



We believe that all organisations providing support to older people should ensure they are inclusive of LGBT people and that their policies and staff training ensure the people in their care are treated with dignity and respect.

6. *FPA believes that all sexual health service providers, including general practice, sexual health clinics and support services must ensure that they are accessible, appropriate and welcoming to older people, and should offer high-quality, confidential services that cater for their needs.*

Research has found that healthcare professionals often don't discuss how a health condition can affect sexual function and don't offer relevant screening tests when older people feel that they are appropriate.<sup>11</sup> This may be due to a belief that sexual health is a specialist area and not a part of their own role, embarrassment, the perception of a lack of appropriate context, fear of causing offence and or the assumption of asexuality. Yet in a 2012 study, 86% of participants aged 62-96 reported that they were comfortable discussing sexual health.<sup>12</sup>

FPA believes that there are a number of opportunities that health professionals could take to engage older people proactively about their sexual health and to give sexual health advice and support as appropriate. We support the Royal College of Nursing guidance, which recommends that all care home staff should strive to incorporate consideration of relationships and sex alongside other aspects of care.<sup>13</sup>

There are also opportunities to discuss sexual wellbeing during routine screenings (for example, for cervical and bowel cancer) and during discussion relating to the menopause. All healthcare professionals dealing with conditions that could cause sexual dysfunction should be trained to approach the issue with patients, in order to offer appropriate advice and support. This should include training on attitudes and communication skills as well as sexual health knowledge.

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<sup>11</sup> Sexual health and well-being in middle and late adulthood: Current knowledge and future directions (University of Sheffield, 2015) <http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Hinchliff%20MICRA%20event%2006-02-15.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Are older patients comfortable discussing sexual health with nurses? (National Center for Biotechnology Information, 2012) [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22166909](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22166909)

<sup>13</sup> Older people in care homes: sex, sexuality and intimate relationships (RCN, 2011) [www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004136](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004136)



### **Further resources**

- People over 50: Relationships and sexual health
- [www.fpa.org.uk/product/people-over-50-relationships-and-sexual-health](http://www.fpa.org.uk/product/people-over-50-relationships-and-sexual-health)  
FPA policy statement on contraception  
[www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/contraception-policy-statement.pdf](http://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/contraception-policy-statement.pdf)
- FPA policy statement on sexually transmitted infections  
[www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/stis-policy-statement.pdf](http://www.fpa.org.uk/sites/default/files/stis-policy-statement.pdf)

### **Additional reading**

- Sexual health and well-being in middle and late adulthood: Current knowledge and future directions, University of Sheffield  
[hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/ELSA\\_MICRA\\_presentation\\_060215.pdf](http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/ELSA_MICRA_presentation_060215.pdf)
- Sexual health, quality of life and wellbeing among older men and women in England, University of Manchester  
[hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Hinchliff%20MICRA%20event%2006-02-15.pdf](http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/institutes/micra/events%202015/11%20February%20event%20/Hinchliff%20MICRA%20event%2006-02-15.pdf)
- Sexual health and well-being among older men and women in England: findings from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, English Longitudinal Survey of Ageing  
[www.elsa-project.ac.uk/publicationDetails/id/7548](http://www.elsa-project.ac.uk/publicationDetails/id/7548)
- Older people in care homes: sex, sexuality and intimate relationships, Royal College of Nursing  
[www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004136](http://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004136)