

# Sexual health and general health among older adults: an integrated approach

Evidence from stakeholder consultations

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Webinar presentation  
July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023

**NIHR** | Public Health  
Policy Research Unit

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MEDICINE



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Older People and Frailty



# Stakeholder involvement exercise

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Stakeholder  
involvement exercise  
eliciting the views of  
key professionals (25)  
in the field

PPI exercise consulting  
older adults (7) on  
their sexual health  
needs

# Older adults: defining the population

## A diverse age cohort

*In terms of:*

- *age categories and health status*
- *sexual activity*
- *demographics*

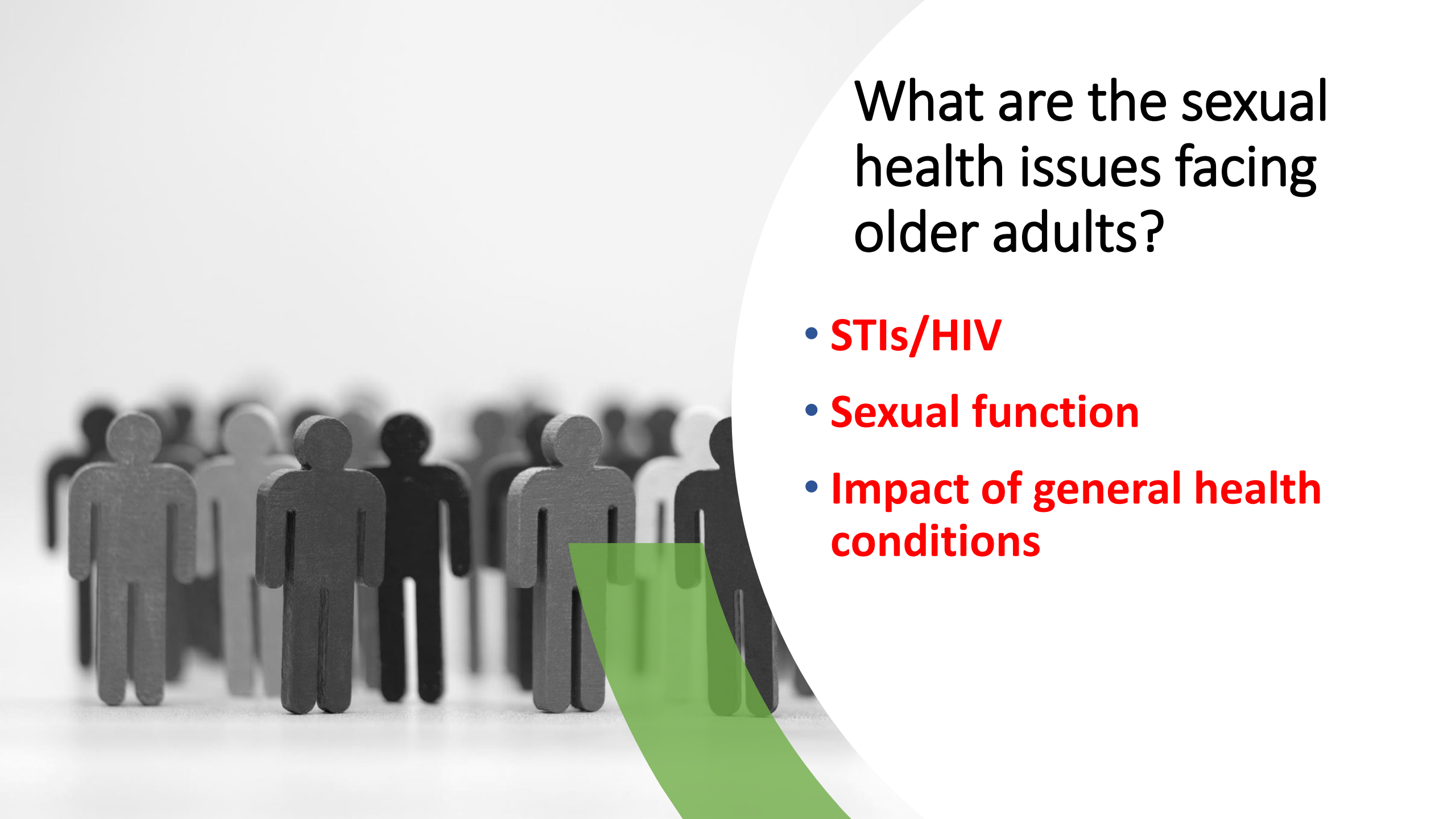
### Sexual frequency and satisfaction among older adults

Age group	% sexually active (last month)	% satisfied with sexual life
<b>Women</b>		
55-64	43.2	58.8
65-74	22.7	39.3
<b>Men</b>		
55-64	54.3	54.8
65-74	53.9	48.9

Source: Field et al, Lancet, 2013

*People in their 50s? I'm one of them - it's very different for people in their 70s who are moving into the physical health problems.. We can't treat them as one group'.  
Stakeholder*

*We need to be careful not to create another stereotype ...there's a lot that choose not to be sexually active. You can just hear NHS England, developing a new campaign... saying you've got to have sex twice a week.'  
Stakeholder*




# What are the sexual health issues facing older adults?

- **STIs/HIV**
- **Sexual function**
- **Impact of general health conditions**

# Sexual health issues facing older adults:

## STIs/HIV

- Older adults account for small part of STI burden (65+ make up one in 70 of total)
- Diagnosis  among over 45s but from low base.
- MSM diagnoses account for almost all the increase.

## Living with HIV

- >50s make up half of 90,442 PLHIV in England; fall in new infections but 5-fold increase in women
- Over 50s account for 9/10 late HIV diagnoses
- Multiple long-term conditions common

## Sexual function

- Natsal: 65-74 age group:  
One in 10 men report erectile dysfunction

Derbyshire  
Community Health  
Services 'Jiggle  
Wiggle' campaign



 **DERBYSHIRE**  
County Council

  
Derbyshire Community  
Health Services  
NHS Foundation Trust

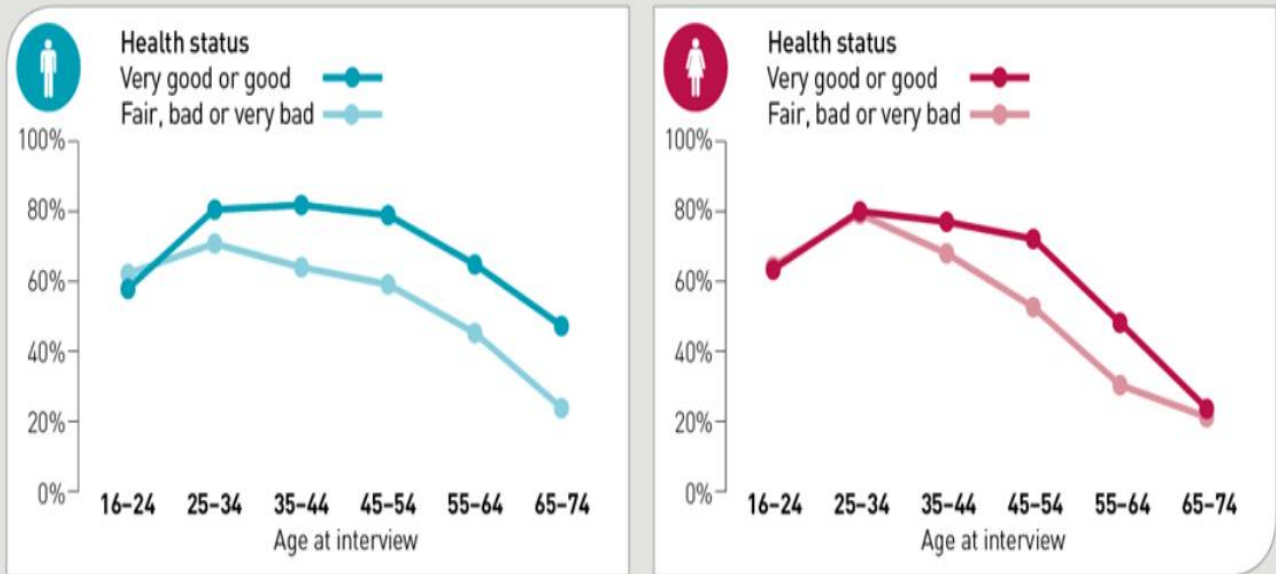


Metro's 'SHIFT'  
project'

# Long term health conditions and sexual wellbeing

Impact of declining health+ medications is most significant factor in sexual health of older adults. 1 in 4 men and 1 in 6 women aged 55 to 74 in Britain have a health condition affecting sexual activity and satisfaction.

Percentage reporting recent sexual activity (in past four weeks)



*... pleasure is difficult [to raise]– but if it's ... integrated into other health conditions, where there is a reciprocal benefit – it's going to have an easier passage.'* Stakeholder

*The entry point of an overall health check – including screening for diabetes, cancer, prostate screening – would be a good starter point for conversations about sexual health'. Stakeholder*

*Losing night-time erections is actually the best predictor. So, it's important that we think about medical issues. Stakeholder*



# Health gains of an integrated approach

## An entry point

GP and specialist consultants  
may be first point of contact

## Reducing sensitivity

Raising subject of sexual  
problems may be easier in  
general health context



## Diagnostic potential

Erectile dysfunction may be  
first sign of eg. diabetes, CVD

## Improving adherence to medication


Discussing sexual health allows  
fears about effects of drug/other  
treatments to be aired

## Common risk factors

Mutual benefit for sexual and  
general health of lifestyle  
changes such as weight loss,  
smoking cessation, exercise

## Multiple morbidities

Reciprocal links between eg.  
depression and sexual  
function, HIV and co-  
morbidities, can be exploited



What are the barriers to addressing the sexual health needs of older adults?

**Stakeholders mentioned:**

- stigma, sensitivity and social representations of sexuality
- reluctance to seek help
- communicational difficulties
- resource issues
- fragmented services





# How to overcome them?

## Stakeholders suggested:

- integrating sexual health into general health
- creating an enabling environment
- Collaboration between key agencies
- training range of health professionals

# What might an integrated approach look like?

- including sexual health in annual health checks .
- extending role of mental health services
- effecting a smoother transition across primary/secondary care interface
- signposting patients in primary care/hospital settings to relevant resources and services
- establishing 'wrap around' HIV services for older patients to address multiple needs

*We need greater access to sexual health rehabilitation integrated into all the physical health and mental health settings where sexual dysfunctions are common as a consequence of treatment and the impact of those illnesses themselves'.*

Stakeholder

Stakeholders emphasised all must be within existing budgets



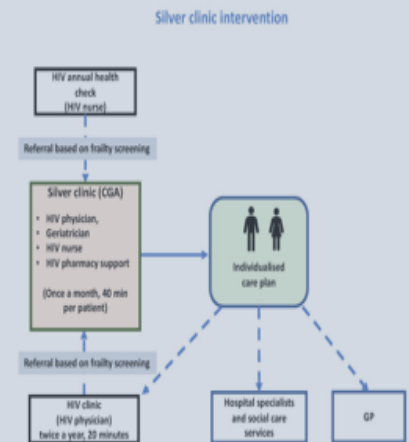
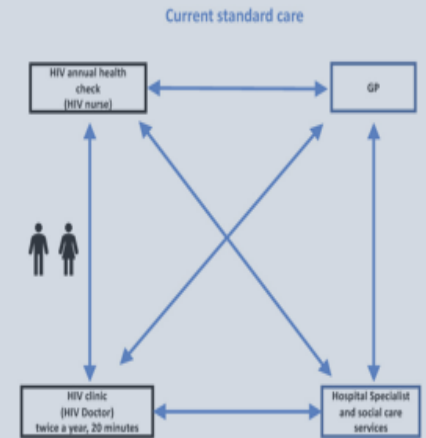
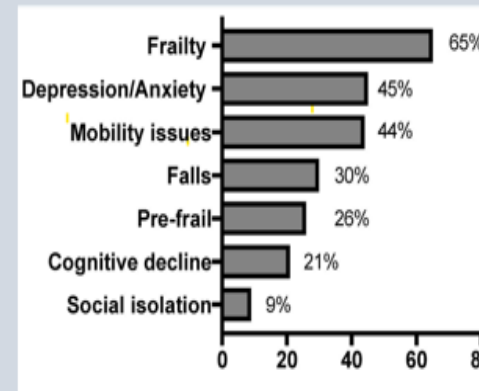
EPS 10

## Eg. a 'wrap-around' HIV service: Brighton's HIV Silver Clinic

- **Efficient/equitable treatment of multiple long-term conditions**
- **Shift in management to preventing ill health generally**
- **Provision of social care**

### Box 2 Brighton's HIV Silver Clinic.

A geriatric service for people living with HIV established in 2013 by Professor Martin Fisher and Professor Juliet Wright. Patients are over 50 years old and have multiple co-morbidities. Interventions offered to patients include combination antiretroviral therapy modification, further health investigations, signposting to rehabilitation or social care services, in-clinic advice, exercise interventions and peer group support. Evaluation of the Clinic (Levett et al, 2020) suggests that specialist geriatric HIV services might play a role in the management of older people with HIV with geriatric syndromes.



Silver Clinic process and position

# : Creating an enabling environment

- Demonstrate inclusivity by featuring images of older adults in sexual health promotional materials, eg red ribbons.
- Use media: 'edutainment', fusing public health messaging with fictional story lines re sexual health issues and older adults.
- Co-opt celebrities as champions to raise public awareness and dispel misconceptions (e.g. Davina).
- Position age-relevant health promotional materials in place frequented by older adults.
- Include older adults in policy documents on sexual health, and sexual health in those policy documents on health & aging

*There needs to be more advertising, posters have been taken down in GPs' surgeries and hospitals because of COVID, but they should show older people, otherwise it's assumed it's just for younger people.' Voice participant*

*'That celebrity that had a programme on Channel 4 about menopause – brilliant. opened people's eyes to the issue of menopause. Voice participant*

# Creating an enabling environment:

## eg 1. Age Friendly Manchester

- Challenging stereotypes
- Debunking myths
- Encouraging conversations
- Tackling taboos
- Changing the narrative on ageing and sex

### Box 4 Age Friendly Manchester's 'Sexual health & intimacy in later life'



Age-Friendly Manchester (AFM) aims to develop age-friendly neighbourhoods and services and to promote age equality. The programme's work gained accreditation with the World Health Organization, the first in the UK to join the global network of age-friendly cities.

AFM prioritises older people's sexual health and wellbeing, setting out to normalise conversations around older and aims to tackle taboos and educate the public and healthcare professionals. to challenge unhelpful stereotypes about what makes a good later life and to change the narrative on ageing and sex.

The programme is underpinned by strong partnerships and effective collaboration and supported at a high level.

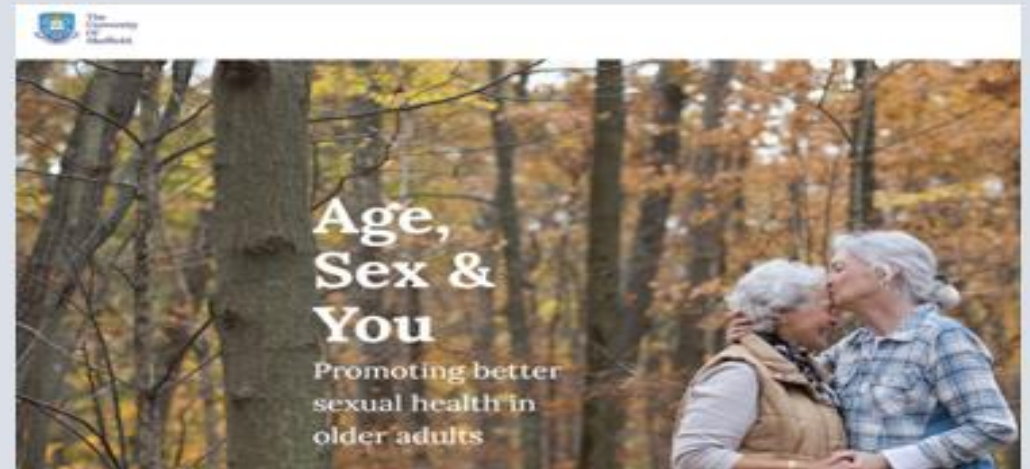


## Creating an enabling environment: eg 2. Agesexandyou

<https://www.agesexandyou.com/>

### Box 3 Agesexandyou.com

**Agesexandyou.com** is the UK's first website dedicated solely to the sexual changes people can face as they get older. It aims to support healthy ageing for the millions of older adults to whom sex and intimacy are important, by providing reliable information all in one place. It is designed based on user needs for both the public and professionals. Our research with older adults consistently highlighted the lack of available information on sexual issues for the over 50s.



The website is part of extensive work on the sexual rights of older adults at the University of Sheffield. As a public health website, it is a recommended resource by NHS and aged-care services (e.g., Sexual Health West Sussex University Hospitals Sussex NHS Foundation Trust, Age UK North Tyneside). The website features on the United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing Platform, the European-wide #AgeingEqual campaign, and The Psychologist Guide to Retirement (British Psychological Society). *Agesexandyou.com* underpins the sexual health training that we deliver to professionals including primary care nurses via the Primary Care Doncaster Training Hub.



# Collaboration: partnership working & joint action

- Multi-sectoral + multi-disciplinary approaches; linking clinical services, third sector and other agencies
- Partnerships between sexual health services and voluntary organisations

## Training

- Train practitioners from wide field, including nurses.
- Evaluate and upscale training modules by, eg. Royal Colleges, professional associations, voluntary organisations
- Develop tools to help open and conduct conversations about sexual issues with older adults

# Training modules

## London Metro's SHIFT (Sexual Health in the over Forty Fives)

Funded by, and collaborating with the EC

<https://shift-sexual-health.eu/>

### Box 5 London Metro's SHIFT (Sexual Health In the over ForTy-fives)

Funded by the European Regional Development Fund aims to improve sexual health outcomes in those aged 45+, especially the socio-economically deprived. Led by Metro London, an equality and diversity charity providing health, community and youth services in the capital, and working with lead partner, the Health and Europe Centre, academics, local government bodies and community organisations, SHIFT supports HCPs and the wider community workforce to integrate sexual wellbeing for older adults into their regular practice and to increase their ability to raise sexual health issues, address basic needs, and refer to targeted services where needed.

Four free training modules:

- **Start to SHIFT** - an e-learning module on the impact of age on sexual health
- **Assess and communicate** - module on sexual health communications with focus on older adults
- **Reduce risk** - module aimed at increasing knowledge of sexual health risks in adults aged 45 and over, including STIs, sexual dysfunction, transgressive behaviour and chronic disease.
- **Embrace difference** - module on diversity, including socio-economic, ethnic and cultural differences, LGBTQ+ ,people with disabilities.



<https://shift-sexual-health.eu/>

