



Q&A with the Age of Experience Group Richard

1) How long have you been a member of the Age of Experience group and what motivated you to join?

I have been a member of the Age of Experience Group since the Ageing Better project was first set up, which must be over five years ago now. I was encouraged to become involved by Maria from the Birmingham LGBT Centre, where I had been attending a monthly Book Group and Coffee morning. I had retired from what had been a demanding job for over 36 years as a probation officer. I was looking for ways to enjoy my retirement which would be stimulating for me but also helpful to the wider community. I felt that members of the LGBT community face particular issues as we grow older. Many of us have moved away from isolating, rural communities to cities which are more diverse and accepting of us, as I did myself. However, that means we don't have the family support that some others have as we grow older. Many of us don't have children or a partner, so that can be isolating too. The particular issues we can face are set out in an excellent report by Stonewall entitled: " Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual People in Later Life".

2) What have been your highlights so far?

I have really enjoyed meeting new people at the Age of Experience meetings. The quarterly and annual get-togethers have been great fun. Sadly, all of that has been curtailed by COVID-19, though those of us who are "computer savvy" have been able to keep in touch on-line.

Also, I became a member of the Ageing Better Funding Panel. It has been truly impressive to approve funds for some really innovative community projects to reduce social isolation. Prior to COVID-19, I was fortunate enough to visit some of these projects and see them in operation. The joy the meetings were bringing to people was very moving. We are social animals after all, which is why Coronavirus is impacting on all of us, by forcing us back into the isolation of our own homes. With others, I am now on the Transition Fund Panel (which meets on-line) and again have been amazed by the inventiveness of people who try and keep the contact with others going during the current pandemic.

3) What would you like the legacy of the Ageing Better in Birmingham programme to be?

That's easy. I want Birmingham to be an age-friendly city where no-one has to endure loneliness or social isolation. We need to keep our social groups and activities going in local communities so nobody has to sit alone at home, and where everyone is made welcome, regardless of age, disability, gender, race, faith or sexual orientation. One of the greatest assets Birmingham has is its diversity.

4) What will you take away from the experience once the programme ends?

Get involved! Social isolation is damaging to our health and mental well-being. We all get anxious about attending something for the first time. However, if we overcome those fears, it is so rewarding to meet other people. It enriches our lives and can lead to lasting friendships.