

yorkshiremesmac

Yorkshire MESMAC is 15 years old

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Reflections by Tom Doyle, [Director](#)

It's hard to believe that Yorkshire MESMAC is only 15 years old. There can hardly be a gay group in the area that hasn't worked with, been influenced or supported by us. The scope and depth of the work of Yorkshire MESMAC is massive including distributing millions condoms and sachets of lube, organising Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual events, developing health promotion materials, undertaking research, contributing to local and national policy, delivering training, supporting individuals, establishing and supporting groups organising and taking part in direct action, being with people through some of the most difficult periods of their lives and generally being a thorn in the side of anyone or any organisation that excludes or works against the interests of Gay and Bisexual men. From humble

beginnings Yorkshire MESMAC has grown into one of the largest and most respected sexual health agencies in the country with four bases across West and North Yorkshire and eighteen fulltime and 48 sessional staff.

Tom Doyle, Director of Yorkshire MESMAC, reflects on some of the key milestones over the past 15 years of developing and delivering services.

It was 1990, when MESMAC was set up with two paid workers, Leeds AIDS Advice hosted the project and we shared a Porta-cabin behind the Town hall in Leeds. The important thing to remember is, these were really early days, no-one else was doing this sort of work in quite the same way, there was no road map and few models that we could replicate - we had to find our own way.

[Story](#)

[continued](#)

The other thing that I remember at this time was that there was a desperate sense of urgency, an HIV diagnosis was considered a death sentence. Gay men were dying all around us in higher and higher numbers. In this febrile environment we had to resist the huge amounts of pressure from all around us to tell men what to do and to limit their sexual choice. One of the things I am most proud of is how we have worked with our communities. We have always rejected the notion of bullying, cajoling and hectoring Gay and Bisexual men. Not only does it not work, it is disrespectful and naïve.

From the early days we took the decision that we wanted to be honest and realistic with the people we work with. We believed, that everyone is an expert in their own lives and our job is not to give a professionally prescribed list of dos and don'ts but to ensure that men have the knowledge, skills, services and resources they need to make decisions about their sexual and wider lives. These remain some of the most important principles guiding our work.

In 1993 Leeds MESMAC became Yorkshire MESMAC – an independent organisation and a registered charity – establishing sites in Bradford and Wakefield. The following year saw Yorkshire MESMAC opening its first site in North Yorkshire.

A lot of people see us as just the condom boys – which is fine if all they want and need from us is condoms.

But Yorkshire MESMAC does a whole lot more. For example over the past 15 years we have helped set up over 50 LGBT groups. Over 20 groups currently use our buildings as free meeting and admin spaces.

In 1996 Yorkshire MESMAC together with ten other Gay men's Voluntary sector agencies from across England came together to form The Community HIV/AIDS Prevention Strategy (CHAPS) partnership. CHAPS works together to develop national mass media campaigns and centrally produced health promotion resources. And together with our Research Partners, Sigma Research, we carry out the largest sex survey of Gay men in the world.

The past five years has seen the growth and development of Yorkshire MESMAC services targeting LGBT youth, with a new youth worker post for North Yorkshire and the further development of our service in Wakefield. We continue to support the youth groups in Leeds and Bradford (Out 2 25 and BLAGY). We have also launched the groundbreaking 'Blast! Project'; a project that works with young men and Boys involved in or abused through prostitution. Following its successful pilot in Bradford we are looking to roll the service out across our West Yorkshire sites.

2001 saw the launch of the highly successful Yorkshire MESMAC Counselling Service.

The service boasts over 40 therapists, employing a wide range of styles and approaches including psychosexual counselling. The service delivers over 600 hours of one to one and group therapy a year as well as signposting to other appropriate counselling services, and offering training to local agencies and individual practitioners.

The 'Our Project' joined the Yorkshire MESMAC group of services in 2002. 'Our' aims to meet the needs of people living with HIV in the Bradford district by providing fast, fair and flexible services to everyone directly infected or affected with HIV and AIDS.

We can see, then, that the past fifteen years has been a time of growth. This growth is down to the people of Yorkshire who have supported Yorkshire MESMAC, and the staff and volunteers of Yorkshire MESMAC who have continually gone that extra mile. I would like to thank you all and I look forward to many more years of working with this exciting and dynamic organisation.

Condom Reinforcement Campaign

February saw Yorkshire MESMAC, together with our partners in CHAPS, launch a new campaign designed to reinforce the key message that condoms are an effective barrier against HIV transmission.

The campaign uses striking imagery of a condom silhouette set against images of viruses and the slogan, 'Be covered be confident' further underlines the effectiveness of condoms in reducing the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

The campaign has a number of elements, full page press ads in national and some regional Gay press, that will run till the end of May together with a website www.chapsonline.org.uk that looks at issues around using condoms in more depth for example:

- Choosing the right condom for you.
- Choosing and using lubricant.
- Correctly putting on a condom.
- Overcoming common condom problems.

A special edition of Exposed! Magazine will be distributed through the gay scene and other resource outlets. Together with specially designed condom packs, posters and scratch cards.

Tom Doyle, Director of Yorkshire MESMAC, who was involved in the planning of the campaign said, "in a nutshell the campaign says three things. We know its not always easy to use a condom, and there are more gay men than ever before living with HIV, so how are you going to reduce or manage your risk taking?"

New Resource

Yorkshire MESMAC have published a new booklet, "So Now You Know", aimed at Parents and Carers of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth. The resource aims to answer some of the common questions that Parents and Carers have when they find out about their child's sexuality as well as provide useful contacts and information about the local support available for both themselves and their child. If you would like to receive a copy of this resource, please contact your local Yorkshire MESMAC office and we will post one out to you, or alternatively it will also be available through our Website www.mesmac.co.uk .

New Faces@MESMAC

Claire Spracklen

Hi, my name's Claire Spracklen and I started working at Yorkshire MESMAC as a Finance and Administration Assistant at the beginning of January 2005 having had previous finance/admin roles in insurance, social housing and vocational training.

I will be based in the Leeds office doing work across the whole project.



Ellen Hill

I joined Yorkshire MESMAC in January as the Community Development Worker for LGBT Youth in North Yorkshire. Since I finished my degree in Psychology, I have been doing various research jobs, and I am still working part-time at York St John College in the Social Inclusion and Diversity Unit on a project researching Lesbians, Gay men and Bisexuals living in rural communities, especially looking at health services provision, lifestyles, harassment, safer sex practice, mental health and various other experiences related to living in outlying communities.

This new post at Yorkshire MESMAC is fairly open-ended, giving me an opportunity to respond to what people tell me they need, but I will also be talking to the youth projects within the rest of Yorkshire MESMAC, so I can learn from their successes.

My immediate wishes for the post are to enable a greater communication across all service providers for youth in North Yorkshire about LGBT issues, and I will be working on setting up a network to make this happen.

A higher profile of LGBT issues in schools across the region is also high on my list of priorities. I hope that, later in the year, I will be able to run a residential course for the LGBT youth of North Yorkshire. I am open to all suggestions of need across the region and looking forward to tackling whatever comes up!



HIV Home Testing Kits, Update From Yorkshire MESMAC

Rapid HIV testing kits have now been available for many years. Over the last couple of years the availability of these kits has increased dramatically due to sales via the Internet, so are they reliable and should they be made available to the public from UK suppliers?

What the Yorkshire MESMAC team say is this:

Buying on-line

The problem is that when you buy tests on-line you don't know whether you're getting the real thing or a fake and costs can range from about ten quid to over a hundred per test kit. In fact if you do a web search on HIV home testing kits for sale, thousands of web addresses will come up offering you a chance to buy them, even some HIV charities have sponsored links to sites that sell HIV tests from other countries.

Are they reliable?

Studies have shown that rapid HIV tests can offer high levels of accuracy and can be as reliable as traditional tests when performed by a trained person i.e. over 99%. In fact some agencies and clinics have been using these tests for some time.

Do you really need to be medically trained to use them properly?

Any suggestions that men would need to be health professionals in order to use an HIV test are both extremely patronising and untrue. Home pregnancy testing kits and blood sugar tests for example require an individual to be competent, but by supplying the test with step by step instructions this enables users to accurately perform the test. Obviously the ramifications of a positive HIV result are incomparable with other tests used for self diagnosis and this is where the help and support of a health professional can be

invaluable, but again not every Gay man will want pre or post test discussions when testing for HIV or to speak to anyone for that matter.

What advantages do they bring?

Being able to purchase a "take away test" is a very attractive prospect for some men but at the same time where we are at, for the moment, is that the test results could potentially be misleading purely due to the source of the test kit, and not science that's behind the test. They can clearly offer lots of benefits to Gay men who for whatever reason may choose to test in the comfort and privacy of their own home using what is a proven, fast, reliable test if only you could be guaranteed to get the genuine kit. They can offer complete anonymity. You would have no need to wait for a clinic appointment and the results are available in minutes.

What disadvantages do they bring?

Unless proper controls are imposed on suppliers selling test kits from other countries it's extra difficult to have a proper debate about if they should or shouldn't be available in this country purely because they already are, but from less credible sources. If these imports were controlled then obviously the disadvantages of home test kits like the potential of people being tested without their consent would need serious thought. At the moment changing the law to allow UK sales to the public would only mean that they would be available to all individuals rather than just those who have internet

access and that people wouldn't be getting ripped off with fake unreliable tests at inflated prices.

In the meantime if you were thinking about taking an HIV test it would be worth ringing your local Yorkshire MESMAC office to discuss where they are available in your area.

Need Advice on Employment, Debt, Benefits, or Housing in York?

York & District Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) provides information and advice to all members of the community on a wide range of issues. It's a free service, it's independent, impartial and, most importantly, it's confidential.

York CAB is actively committed to Equal Opportunities and to the rights and needs of the LGBT community. Last year in partnership with Yorkshire MESMAC and The Village CAB (Manchester) we held a successful Sexuality Conference to raise awareness of issues facing the local LGBT community. We are currently discussing a research project to find out more about access to services for the local LGBT community. This is

another piece of work York CAB hope to be carrying out with Yorkshire MESMAC and The Village CAB, and we would be delighted to hear from anyone who would like to get involved in some way.

Volunteering needs you...

This year has been named 'National Year of the Volunteer', to raise awareness of the benefits of volunteering, both to the individual and to the wider community. You could help your local CAB to become more diverse and meet the needs of all sections of the community by being a volunteer. Interested? Please don't hesitate to contact Nikki Humberstone at York CAB on: 01904 623648, or by emailing nikki.humberstone@yorkcab.org.uk to find out more.

Development of Services for Perpetrators and Victims of Domestic

Over the last two years Yorkshire MESMAC have been working with Domestic Abuse Co-ordinators in York

and North Yorkshire to raise awareness of the needs of same sex couples experiencing domestic abuse. National and regional research, backed up by data from our counselling service demonstrated a continuing lack of service provision for victims and perpetrators which needed to be addressed.

Rather than waiting for external agencies to take this on, we believe that we all have a responsibility to learn more about domestic abuse and the effect it has on our lives, as well as how we can begin to change a community and culture that assumes that this is acceptable or inevitable in our relationships.

Two years on, there have been some major developments. The issues facing same sex couples are firmly placed on the local agenda, and all the key agencies across North Yorkshire have without exception implemented and encouraged the role of Yorkshire MESMAC in policy decisions and developing service frameworks. We are also working in some areas for the development of service provision aimed at the LGB community.

A number of Yorkshire MESMAC counsellors have been able to attend the nationwide "Patchwork" training, which aims to raise awareness of some of the issues affecting people experiencing domestic abuse.

Although we are only now at a stage of being able to look at what extra

services are needed across the region to work around the issues of LGBT Domestic Violence, we are able to offer the following across the Yorkshire MESMAC region:

- Counselling, both for victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse
- One to one support work
- Training to agencies and other professionals
- Signposting to appropriate service providers aimed at people where service provision does not exist or is very limited
- Awareness raising campaigns

For more information on these services contact your local site office, or talk to Gary Harkness in our York Office for details on the North Yorkshire initiatives mentioned here.

Malton Group for Married Men

Yorkshire MESMAC has a long history of working with married men, with one of the longest established programmes of targeted group and support work, as well as taking a national lead on developing a network of agencies involved in this work.

Following the success of groups across the region, we have now established a group for married men in Malton, which meets fortnightly on Wednesdays between 6 and 8pm, in a pleasant and

secure location. Open to men from across North Yorkshire and beyond, the group offers friendly contact with Yorkshire MESMAC workers, other men in similar situations, resources and the potential to organise trips and outings planned by the group. Information about the group can be found in 'Shout!' and from the York office, 01904 620 400.

More Facts for Free on HIV

Following the success of their FREE one day HIV and AIDS awareness and anti-stigma training course, Yorkshire MESMAC are running further dates throughout 2005/06. This is for all Leeds voluntary sector agency staff and their volunteers.

The course covers HIV transmission and dispelling myths around HIV, issues around testing and exploring values and attitudes. It is also an opportunity to gain confidence and skills to challenge stigma and discrimination, and in discussing these issues with clients. The course will be running on these dates:

2005: Monday 16th May, Tuesday 28th June, Wednesday 27th July, Thursday 22nd September, Friday 4th November, Monday 12th December

2006: Tuesday 31st January

In addition to this, Yorkshire MESMAC are offering an advanced HIV course for all those who have attended the 'Facts for Free On HIV' training. This will be running in September 2005 and January 2006. The advanced course is an opportunity to discuss the issues around treatments, disclosure, prevention and risk reduction in greater detail.

For more information, or to book a place please contact Chris at the Leeds office, 0113 244 4209.

Conference Report – March 2005, Scarborough

Young Peoples' Choices in Sex The Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough was the venue for this conference, aimed at raising awareness of the needs of young people and their sexual health choices. The event came about because of a sudden increase in HIV diagnoses amongst young men in the Scarborough area, and after reviewing the current trends in sexually transmitted infections it was felt that a local event would be the most appropriate course of action. The event was aimed at professionals working in the area who come into direct or indirect contact with young (under 25 years old) lesbian gay or bisexual people, as some of the anecdotal

evidence of the experiences of young people when they were trying to access information and services were alarming, both in terms of the information they were getting, and the attitudes to them disclosing their sexuality. The day attracted around 70 delegates, with a range of workshops and speakers from across the region presenting on topics ranging from Men and Boys Selling Sex to the needs of LGBTQ in north Yorkshire. In the workshops we explored issues regarding the new Sexual Offences Act and the barriers for young people accessing services.

The feedback from the day was very positive and a lot of people went away with ideas and tools for improving their service and engaging young people more effectively. We are now planning to repeat this event in Harrogate and York later in the year. Reports on the conference will be available through our York office.

Coming Together – The Spring 2005 Residential

Great company, fine weather and beautiful countryside.....A personal view

Another successful Residential Weekend was held at the Toc H centre

at Colsterdale attended by men from across our region. The participants who attended soon gelled into a supportive group and this opened the way for men to express themselves in a positive and meaningful way. We undertook some easy informal exercises, which participants enjoyed opening excellent channels of conversation.

The weather was fine and dry allowing visits to Masham, which included an unscheduled trip to the local church, allowing one member of the group a chance to demonstrate his prowess on the organ. As if this wasn't enough there was a cross country ramble in the sunshine later in the day.

The evening was spent in group discussion 'putting the world to rights' in a friendly and supportive environment. As ever, all meals were expertly prepared by Rob and thoroughly enjoyed by everyone who attended. It's not surprising that exercise and breathing good clean countryside air whets ones appetite.

As the weekend residential drew to a close on Sunday everyone expressed how successful and friendly the weekend had been, and suggested that perhaps the residentials could be longer.

Rainbow Weekend. Friday 15th July- Sunday 17th July 2005

Planning is already under way for the 2005 Rainbow Weekend in Leeds. Details of how you can help or of what's happening can be found in forthcoming issues of 'Shout!'. For up to the minute information, please contact your local Yorkshire MESMAC office.

