



Our History 1983–2020

From the Greenwich Lesbian and
Gay Centre to METRO Charity



Supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund



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Foreword Dr Greg Ussher, CEO

From the outset of lesbian and gay rights activism in 1983, the arc of METRO's history has been towards inclusivity.

There have been many milestones along the way, which this booklet describes. The creation of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre in 1986, the commencement of HIV prevention services in 1992, the formation of The Metro Centre in 1995, our significant constitutional change in 2008, our first merger with Harbour Trust in 2010, and our ground-breaking Youth Chances research between 2012 and 2015.

Of all of these milestones, and others, arguably the most significant was METRO's constitutional changes in 2008. After a long period of dialogue, our members unanimously agreed that we would change our constitution. We had always been resolutely and exclusively focused on providing services for LGBT people and communities. This was the focus of our activism and our advocacy, and of our services and projects. We changed our constitution in 2008 to say that as a charity we would support any person experiencing issues related to sexuality, gender, equality, diversity and identity.

This change opened doors! Many doors! Most importantly, our doors were opened to people whose sexual orientations and gender identities encompassed the breadth and depth of human experience. Doors were also opened to a whole range of diverse funders and commissioners, who saw the strength of our history, the professionalism of our practice and currency and value of our vision. And doors were opened to talented staff,

volunteers and Trustees who have in turn transformed our charity.

In opening doors however, we did not close doors behind us. We have deployed the skills and knowledge we've gained from our LGBT history as a springboard to grow and diversify METRO. From 2008, we've grown exponentially. We've merged with six other charities and now have a fuller suite of services for all people affected by HIV; we've embedded our advocacy and activism for disabled people; we've taken a leading role in supporting other voluntary and community sector organisations to be champions of equality; we've organised our charity across five compelling Domains; and we've taken giant steps in utilising the experiences and insights of the people who use our services to create change at local, regional and national levels.

We are a charity that champions equality, and diversity. As we head into the third decade of this century, we acknowledge that our vision to create a world where difference is celebrated is not just a catchphrase, but a challenge to normativity, conformity and the neo-liberal consensus. The ongoing challenge for all of the staff, volunteers and Trustees of METRO is to continue to be activists and advocates, employees who empower, guardians of our past and agile guides to a future which is inclusive, equal and fair.

Our History is our history – and we have so much to celebrate! Our History is also our future – and we have so much to do – collectively, inclusively and determinedly!

**Woolwich, south-east London
January 2020**

Project summary and acknowledgements

During 2019, METRO's Our History project has archived, recorded, and preserved the charity's LGBTQ+ heritage. This project has been generously supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Our History has culminated in the creation of our documentary archive, a collection of 35 oral history interviews, a physical and digital exhibition for LGBT History Month 2020 and a documentary film.

All of these outputs have been achieved with the contribution of 11 volunteers without whom this project could not have been realised. METRO would like to sincerely thank them for their input and dedication to making this project happen, and for giving their time so generously:

Jess Conway

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Matt Williams

We are also very grateful for the support and collaboration we have had from the Bishopsgate Institute, particularly from Stefan Dickers, and

contributors to the project Steering Group, including Paul Coleman, Stephe Meloy, Royal Greenwich Heritage Trust, and Woolwich Library. For assistance with filling some critical gaps in our archive, we are also very grateful to the London School of Economics Library's Anna Towlson and Gillian Murphy.

Others have also been generous with information and help throughout our research: Geoff Hardy; Maggie Honey; Julian Hows; Sara Leigh Lewis; Mark McNestry; Richard Maude; Lisa Power; Peter Scott-Presland; Sakthi Suriyaprakasam; Marc Thompson.

Thanks also to all of the contributors to oral history interviews for their incredible testimonies which we are delighted will be preserved and available to the public at the Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>. (Please see pages 40-42 for a full list of interviewees).

All images are from the METRO archive collection unless noted with a specific image credit.

**METRO Our History
team and volunteers
wrap party at the
Royal Vauxhall
Tavern, 2019.**



Abbreviations

Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre – GLGC

Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Rights Group – GLGRG

Greater London Council – GLC

Men who have sex with men – MSM

LESBIAN AND GAY MENS RIGHTS IN GREENWICH

Lesbian & Gay Men's Rights in Greenwich hold regular monthly meetings to which all are welcome. These meetings are held on the first Wednesday of every month at Woolwich Town Hall, Wellington Street, Woolwich SE18.

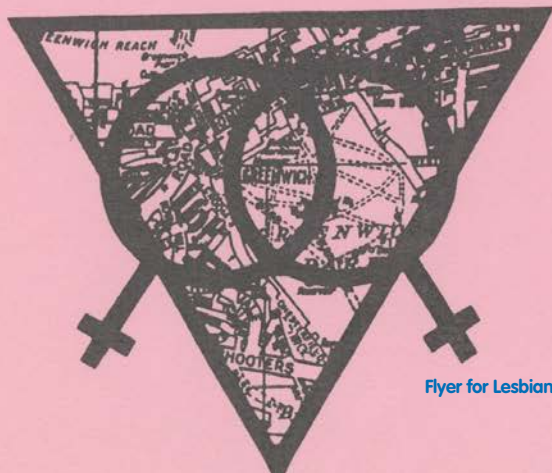
There are also Lesbian only meetings on the third Thursday of each month for which details are available from Kate (number below).

Both meetings are very informal.

For more information contact:

Lesbians : Kate 01-317 8984

Men : Alex 01-310 7995
of Paddy 854 8888 Ext. 2055 (Work)



From Rights to a Centre: The birth and transformation of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre 1984 to 1994



GLGRG including David Simpson, Geoff Hardy and Gill King at the Pride march in London, 1985. (Maggie Honey)

The following account of METRO Charity's history focuses on the decade from the foundation of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre (GLGC) to its rebranding as The Metro Centre. Drawing on oral testimonies with founders, workers, and service users and interweaving historical evidence from the annual reports and newsletters which form part of METRO's rich documentary archive, this essay traces the gestation, birth, and development of the GLGC and how it forged a space both for and with a growing suburban lesbian and gay community, many of whom lived in the working-class neighbourhoods in the east of the Royal Borough of Greenwich.

Let's rewind our cassette tape back some 30 years or so.

Setting the scene in 1983

Jan: *'There was a right wing juggernaut in Parliament. That was what the Government was like. 1983 was when there was also the most homophobic by-election ever – Peter Tatchell, was beaten up several times [campaigning for his seat in Bermondsey]. ...'*

Recalling the mood on lesbian and gay issues in 1983 when activism in Greenwich grew, Jan Parker was a member of the Spare Rib feminist magazine collective and soon-to-be an author of *Changing the World: A London Charter for gay and lesbian rights* as a key player in the Greater London Council's (GLC) Women's Committee.¹ The homophobic culture she illustrated was in part countered by the political

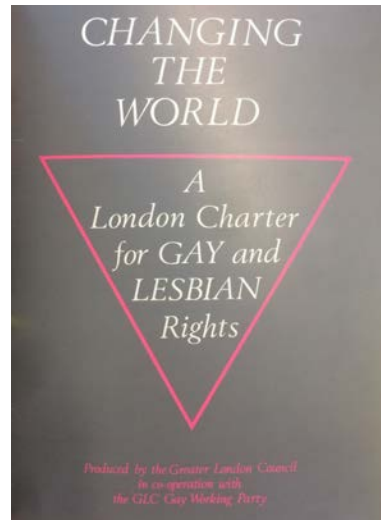
¹ Research interview with Jan Parker, Team Leader for Information/Campaigns Manager for Women's Unit, Greater London Council 1985–1986; 27 November 2019.

will to challenge discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation at the GLC. Based at County Hall, Ken Livingstone's Labour-run administration on the north-side of the Thames eyeballed Margaret Thatcher's Government just opposite them in Westminster – that was before she abolished the GLC in 1986.

Introducing the Charter in 1985, Livingstone recalled after his speech at Harrow Gay Unity on the discrimination of lesbian and gay people, of 'the lunatic uproar that erupted from Fleet Street'.² The GLC ploughed ahead with its equalities agenda. In lesbian and gay rights terms its Gay Employment Group was a key equality and anti-discrimination project.³

Meanwhile, in mainstream pop culture in 1983 queer sexuality and gender fluidity was becoming more openly displayed – if ambiguously so to those without gaydar – by artists such as Boy George in Culture Club's bestselling anthem, Karma Chameleon. Against the buttoned-up Conservatism of Margaret Thatcher's government, Boy George smouldered in the pop video for the song in a riot of psychedelic colours from his plaited mane of waist-length hair to his carnivalesque eyeshadow and New Romantic robes. He was another iteration of maleness being reinvented during the 1970s following

David Bowie and the Punk movement's anti-establishment aesthetics and politics. By the early-to-mid 1980s, the mainstreaming of gay club culture was significant for the social scene that our protagonists in south-east London may have experienced 'up town'. Yet many of them were also living on the margins in the suburbs as lesbian and gay people whose basic rights, such as protection from discrimination in their places of work, were not being met.



Greater London Council 'Changing the World' charter, 1985. (London Metropolitan Archives)

² *Changing the World: A London Charter for Lesbian and Gay Rights*. (London: Greater London Council, 1985) p. 4.

³ One of the first documents in METRO's archive bound to activism in Greenwich is 'The Employment of Lesbians and Gay Men: A Strategy for London.' Gay Working Party Employment Group, Greater London Council; January 1983.



GLGRG workers Gill King, Geoff Hardy and Maggie Honey outside The Albany in Deptford with local residents including Steve Keay, 1985.

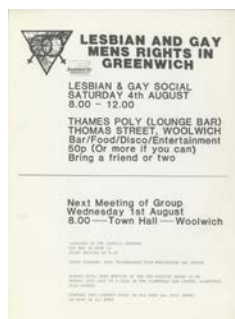
Lesbian and Gay Rights in Greenwich

One such south-east London resident was Geoff Hardy, a former member of the Gay Liberation Front who marched in London's first Pride in 1972. Studying at Goldsmith's College, he became active in the local lesbian and gay rights and social scenes, such as the Campaign for Homosexual Equality's branch in Lewisham. After graduating and teaching at Charlton Boys School in Greenwich, he experienced the underlying discrimination doled out to many people in the workplace, notably not from pupils – who listened rapt to tales of his political activism after he was outed – rather it was from the staff and the wider institutional structure.

Leaving his profession due to this culture and its impact on his mental wellbeing, Geoff's ongoing political engagement, such as in the Glad to be Gay campaign led him to participate in the first meeting held in Greenwich in 1982 when local activists paved the way for the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Rights Group. In 1983 Greenwich Council became involved and the first Council-sanctioned meeting was convened in Woolwich Town Hall on 'Lesbian and Gay Men's Rights in Greenwich' on Wednesday 9th November.

Recalling this period animatedly, he identified a key mover and shaker in this mobilisation between the local authority, residents and their allies:

Geoff: *There was a chap called Tim Barnett who became the first CEO of Stonewall, and he was a Councillor in Greenwich and he was openly gay. Tim made it known that he wished to apply for funding for a lesbian and gay centre for the Borough of Greenwich.*⁴



Flyer for Lesbian and Gay Mens Rights in Greenwich social event at Thames Polytechnic, 1984.

⁴ Oral history interview recorded 23 July 2019, available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>.

The progressive voice of Councillor Tim Barnett, Chair of the Community Affairs Committee, and the broader equalities agenda being pursued by other colleagues led to these meetings, the pre-cursor to what became constituted as the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Rights Group (GLGRG). Geoff was a founder member of the GLGRG.⁵

Focusing on the central aim of establishing a physical space, participants were also concerned about homelessness for young gay people, attitudes in schools to sexual orientation, and ‘anti-sexist coverage in libraries’ among other equality issues.⁶

The significance of the meeting’s location in Woolwich was mentioned in a subsequent press release which argued that the need for support was greatest in the east of the borough. Applying for £36,000 in February 1984, the supporters they cited included the Campaign for Homosexual Equality, London Gay Switchboard, and Greenwich Lesbian Feminist Group, among other allies. The grant application stated:

Our aim is to enable lesbians and gay men to meet their needs and challenge prejudice and heterosexism in the community.



Behind: Geoff Hardy, Margaret Honey. Front: David Simpson, Gill King

GLGRG workers Geoff Hardy, Maggie Honey, David Simpson and Gill King, 1984. (Capital Gay)

Our objective is to provide a social, recreational, advice and campaigning centre for lesbians and gay men in the Borough of Greenwich, in line with the policy of the Council as laid down in its manifesto.⁷

By April 1984, the grant was announced and the GLGRG formalised with a simple constitution to receive the award. Two Development Worker posts were advertised by September 1984 and Geoff Hardy was successful in his application, joined in the job-share post for the gay men’s role by David Simpson. Their lesbian counterparts were in post by the New Year.

Maggie: *My job was being in the office, talking on the phone to people ... setting*

⁵ Geoff Hardy discusses the developing equal opportunities culture at Greenwich Council then in his interview at circa 1’25”.

⁶ METRO/1/1/A1/1; Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives.

⁷ Ibid.



Advertisement for The Bell Pub on Haddo Street, 1986. (Capital Gay)

*up services in the Centre; social events; fundraising events; publicity; newsletter. We did it all.*⁸

Working from the first floor office of the Bell pub on Haddo St, Margaret (Maggie) Honey, her colleague Gill King, and the two male Development Workers were responsible for starting Greenwich's first lesbian and gay community service. Before a Centre was, or could, be established the pub was conveniently a readymade hub for events that were already programmed for Pride month in 1985. Cabaret, comedy, and a performance by the Pink Singers there were all advertised in the



Newsletter of the GLGRG, October 1985. (LSE Library)

GLGRG Newsletter.⁹ More ambitiously, a Lesbian Strength Bop¹⁰ was held at Woolwich Public Hall, featuring 'Maidens in Uniform' and 'Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts', followed by DJ Josephine – all fuelled by a bar and supported by a crèche.

Childcare provision was a consistent thread running through the publicity for all social events advertised at or associated with the GLGC in 1980s. This reflected the use of the Centre by many women who were lesbian mothers in heterosexual relationships hence either not out about their sexuality or confronted with the extremely hostile climate for married women who came out as lesbians and faced the

⁸ Interview with Margaret (Maggie) Honey – Centre Development Worker for the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre, 1985 to 1992; available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>.

⁹ The GLGRG newsletter was first published in winter 1984.

¹⁰ Lesbian Strength references a women's-led/feminist alternative political and social demonstration to the exclusion some people felt from Pride marches in the 1980s. In 1985, a Lesbian Strength Celebration was held on 22nd June, with a march from Hyde Park to Fleet Street, followed by entertainment at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre in Farringdon.



GLGC Management Committee 1987-1988
including Joanne Hill, Alison Hastwick, Derek St Louis, Richard Fabian, Steve McMillan, Viv Betz, Sonia Harris.

institutional homophobia in the family courts where many women lost custody of their children.¹¹

In autumn 1985 the GLGRG advertised its publication, *Changing the World: A London charter for lesbian and gay rights*. Earlier that year the Transport & General Workers' Union had written to councillors in Greenwich, including Tim Barnett on the subject of the Charter and the Council's adoption of an equal opportunity policy in terms of sexual orientation, stating:

Irrespective of what the Lesbians and Gays may think, public opinion is still

*opposed to their way of life, and the majority of the Workers in Greenwich are likewise.*¹²

Local newspaper, the *Mercury* covered the issue on 3rd April 1985, reporting that the adoption of the Charter's policies in Greenwich had been unanimously rejected by its local union members and quoted Tim Barnett's description of the TGWU's letter as "bigoted, insulting and factually incorrect."

In fact, the soon-to-be-housed Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre was a physical manifestation of the Charter's recommendations, particularly on the question of community spaces beyond the commercial scene in central London. The Charter also highlighted the inequality of access for young people, many older people, those who were on low incomes or unemployed, or disabled people who faced access barriers to lesbian and gay social life.¹³

'Greenwich Lesbian & Gay Centre: At Last!'

Announced in the 1986 Feb/March newsletter of the GLGRG, this was the final publication before the title changed to the 'Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre'. As part of this structural

¹¹ See Summerskill, Clare (2012) *Gateway to Heaven: Fifty years of lesbian and gay oral history*. London: Tollington Press. Pages 135–6. Elizabeth (Liz) Day discussed her involvement with supporting the Lesbian Custody Group in an oral history interview for METRO's Our History project: available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>.

¹² METRO/1/1/A1/1; Minutes of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre; T&GWU letter 13 March 1985.

¹³ *Changing the World: A London Charter for Gay and Lesbian Rights*. London: Greater London Authority, 1985; p. 22. Available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>.



GLGC building at Bowater Road near the Thames Barrier, 1991.

shift, a Management Committee was created to formalise the organisation's governance.¹⁴

While the office-cum-community-space was being done up on an industrial estate on Bowater Road in Charlton, services based in the Centre were limited to Thursday 'drop ins'. These were afternoon sessions with activities such as pool and board games, and a phone service continued for general advice and information.

Although there were big ambitions for the use of the Centre, the limited human and budgetary capacity led staff to the conclusion that the process of community building needed to come as much from *without* as from *within*. Using the newsletter as its mouthpiece, staff called on members and the wider lesbian and gay community locally to come forward with their suggestions on how the Centre could and should be

used. This was in spring of 1986 and by the autumn edition the newsletter was reporting not on a deluge but 'a slow and steady stream of new people enquiring'.

Slow and steady as it was, early photographs of low-key social gatherings inside the Centre evoke a homely atmosphere and a sense that the suburban lesbian and gay social scene was being forged as somewhere that provided an alternative space to pubs and clubs – somewhere cosy where you could have a cuppa and just connect with other lesbian and gay people (although many groups did reputedly end up moving on to watering holes in the neighbourhood, and also further afield).

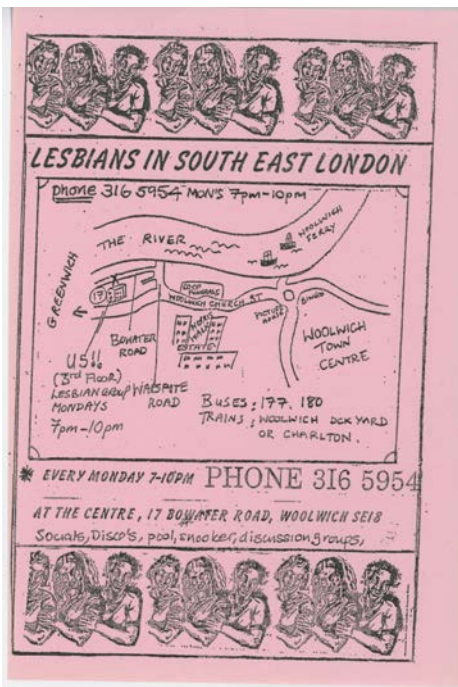
Marilyn: *You had to be determined. It was up a few flights of stairs. I remember walking in ... [and] the guy who worked there just greeted me and made me a cup of tea and I met lots of other people, some of whom I'm still in contact with.*¹⁵

The Centre's somewhat obscure location was commented on as a barrier by many who had to find the building, either as staff or service users. This opinion was not shared unanimously. For Eileen Hibell, a born and bred Woolwich woman, she had a weekly choice of the Lesbian Group on Mondays, with about 10 to 15 regular members,¹⁶ or the Thursday drop-ins on her doorstep. For her, the industrial setting was part and parcel of

¹⁴ METRO/1/2/R2/1 Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre newsletter April/May 1986; digital surrogates from Hall-Carpenter Archives; London School of Economics Library.

¹⁵ Marilyn Major oral history interview, METRO Our History project; available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>.

¹⁶ METRO/1/2/R1/3; Annual Report 1988 (Draft) p. 9. Bishopsgate Institute.



Flyer for GLGC 'Lesbians in South East London' group, 1986. (Maggie Honey)



Notice board at the GLGC, 1986. (Maggie Honey)



Trivial Pursuit at the GLGC Lesbian Games Afternoon, Christmas 1986. (Maggie Honey)



Lesbian group meeting at GLGC, late 1980s. (Pam Isherwood)



Gay men's group party at GLGC, Christmas 1987. (Maggie Honey)

her working life, having had a number of factory-based jobs, such as on an electronics assembly line.

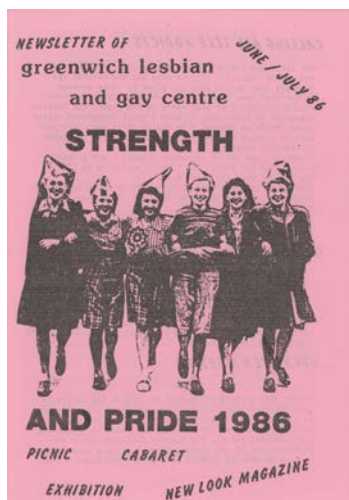
Eileen: *This was down in Bowater Road; it was on the third floor. ... We would have really good discussions there or just good fun nights playing darts or billiards.*

As well as the comfort of the Centre, the solidarity with other lesbians and gay men provided comrades to venture further afield with. Locally and in neighbouring boroughs, where the pub and club scene was growing with nights such as 'Women at Reds' held at the Lewisham Labour Club – including an event in support of striking NALGO union workers – or across the river there was 'Below Stairs', a weekly women-only disco at the London Lesbian and Gay Centre.

Pride season was a natural opportunity for local and central London outings and Maggie Honey remembers the importance of the social network beyond Greenwich:

Maggie: *I'm working in a lesbian and gay centre so I knew about all the things going on in London, and obviously we got involved in a lot of political things and went to Pride. I can remember a group of us, about 20 or 30 women going to that and having a banner. ... It felt very personal. I just*

remember it being great because a whole load of us from the Centre went. ... The women who used the Centre were predominantly working class women from the Woolwich area, and the social scene – I mean none of the people who came to the discos or the party nights we had would have gone "up town" because they were living in Woolwich and the transport links weren't brilliant. A lot of them had children. There were quite a lot of older women who, in those days were in their 30s or 40s ... and that would have been their first experience of going to somewhere [lesbian and gay] socially.¹⁷



GLGC newsletter, Pride 1986. (LSE Library)

¹⁷ Op. cit. Maggie Honey interview.



Flyer for GLGC Older Lesbians Group, 1990.

In terms of the economic realities and hardships that many of the Centre's service users faced, housing was a significant issue, and homelessness had also been on the agenda at the first meetings of the GLGRG. DYFAH (Dykes and Faggots Housing) was a Lewisham-based group concerned with hard-to-let social housing properties. It liaised with the Centre and Maggie Honey also took on its coordination temporarily, however when DYFAH evaporated in 1987 there was an influx of housing-related enquiries to the GLGC. Operating in the late 1980s as a contact and referral point for people experiencing housing difficulties including homelessness and

harassment, the GLGC interacted with many local agencies, among them local hostels, the New Cross Homeless Persons Unit, Stonewall Lesbian and Gay Housing Project and Greenwich Action Group on Unemployment.¹⁸

When Geoff Hardy reflected on his interactions with people's intersecting and complex needs such as housing, mental health issues and/or alcohol dependency, he talked frankly about the burn-out he personally felt when trying to resolve these problems with very limited resources both human and financial – that was even before this period when needs intensified.

Geoff departed from the Centre in 1986 leaving an opening for a gay man to step in. There was a strategic decision to focus that post on recruiting an Afro-Caribbean/Asian Gay Man.¹⁹ Keith Trotman fitted the bill and was hired in the spring of 1986. In an interview for the newsletter, Keith spoke openly about the tensions for him of being Black, mixed heritage, and gay:

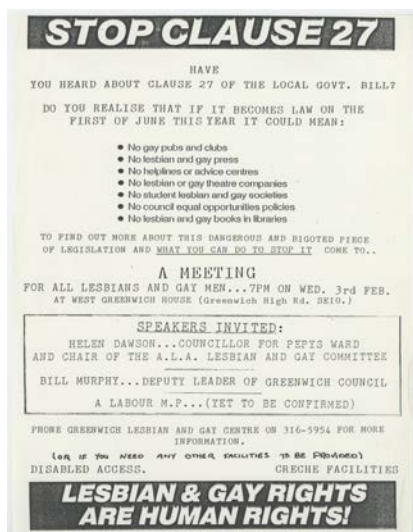
Keith: *I am left out of both communities. In the Black community for not being their definition of being Black and for being gay; and in the general community for being black and gay as well.*²⁰

He was proud of being a south-east Londoner with family roots in Deptford

¹⁸ GLGC Biannual Report 1987-1989.

¹⁹ Op. cit. METRO/1/2/R2/1; April/May '86; p. 3.

²⁰ Op. cit. GLGC newsletter 1987.



Flyer for the Greenwich meeting to organise protests against Section 28. (LSE Library)



GLGC workers Colleen Humphrey and Maggie Honey, 1988. (Maggie Honey)

and Greenwich for over six generations, and he had already invested in supporting the development of local gay communities as a volunteer for the South London Lesbian and Gay Young People's Group. He was the first facilitator for a youth-focused group at the GLGC in 1987, which was billed as a social group for young people aged 25 and under.²¹

Keith was joined by Colleen Humphrey in running the fledgling youth service: Greenwich Young Lesbian and Gay Group. Also Black and in her early twenties like Keith, they facilitated a mixed gender group of regular members. This landed during the intensely political and hostile period for LGBT rights leading up to when the Local Government Act 1988 came into force with the Section 28 amendment to the 1986 Act, preventing local authorities and schools from the intention to 'promote homosexuality' or 'the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.²²

Participating in the politics and the protests, the members and workers of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre were present at the first lobby on the Bill in the House of Commons before

²¹ Prior to then there has been some work on youth-related projects. On 23 June 1985 the GLGRG invited the Lesbian and Gay Youth Movement to jointly run a "get together" day at Greenwich Young People's Theatre so young people could meet each other and discuss setting up a local Greenwich group. The GLGC youth group concept was floated in Sep 1986 newsletter, but at that point LGYM independently ran a youth group at the GLGC premises from late 1986 to August 1987.

²² See Local Government Act 1988 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/9/section/28/enacted> (accessed 4 December 2019); 'Lesbian and Gay Youth Group', Annual Report 1988 (Draft) p. 11



Protest march against Section 28 at Victoria Embankment, London, 1988. (Maggie Honey)

the Act passed into law and marched in the major Stop the Clause campaign demonstration in London on 9th January 1988. The GLGC's participation was particularly driven by Development Worker Jamie McCarthy who had started the south-east London wing of the campaign. Covering the eruption of controversy and activism over Clause 27 locally in January 1988,²³ the *Mercury* newspaper quoted Jamie on the potential loss of funding for the Centre's social and youth groups:

There seems to be this idea that homosexuals come here to have non-stop sex with each other! Nothing could

*be further from the truth. This is not a pick up point, it's somewhere for them to get together socially, play darts or pool or whatever ...'*²⁴

The threat from the potential legislation became even more tangible when a policeman had apparently informed the caretaker of the Bowater Road building that the GLGC's occupation of the premises was illegal, even leading to *Capital Gay* picking up on the local story in February 1988 and reporting that the Centre had received a letter along these lines from the Police Chief in Woolwich.²⁵ Staff felt sufficiently threatened by this infringement to arrange a safe for depositing the names and addresses of all the Centre's members – totalling over 200 people. Undeterred from their politics, the GLGC joined a major demonstration in Manchester the day after the *Capital Gay* article was published.

From the late 1980s into a new decade

Politics with a capital 'p' aside, there is no doubt that the Centre had created a clear focal point and a base in Bowater Road for a community to build itself. By the late 1980s the GLGC also had a weekly Gay Men's Group, which was set up by David Simpson.²⁶

²³ Clause 27 became the notorious 'Section 28' when it passed into law on 24 May 1988.

²⁴ 'Back to the closet'; *The Mercury*, 28 January 1988.

²⁵ *Op. cit.* Management Committee minutes, 5th February 1988 and 'Police chief gets tough with Greenwich', *Capital Gay*, Friday February 19th 1988.

²⁶ This group started in February 1987. For further details on the GLGC Development Worker David Simpson, who started in 1984 in a job-share post with Geoff Hardy and left in June 1987, see 'Gay Men's Interview, David Simpson', *GLGC Newsletter*, March 1987.



Cheese-tasting event held by the GLGC gay men's group, 1988. (Capital Gay)

Socially, members' calendars could have been very hectic with the offer of activities directly organised by the Centre and those advertised in the newsletters in other boroughs, and in central London. Regular and one-off events included: 'Grand Tea Dance'; Lesbians in Lewisham and Outdance at the Albany; a 'supper cabaret' with the Hot Doris band performing on the Haddo Estate; camp bingo; quiz night and gay men's cross-dressing evenings, not forgetting 'safer sex food evenings' replete with edible condoms. This thriving scene within and without the Centre's space was topped off every June with Pride events. Locally there was a picnic in Greenwich Park and participation in the central London march.

As the Nineties dawned the GLGC was well-established as a local voluntary

**THE FIRST
OUTDANCE
BIRTHDAY
BALL**

**SAT 2 JULY 8 TILL LATE
BAR TILL 2**

TICKETS : £4 ADVANCE / £5 DOOR

THE ALBANY EMPIRE
DOUGLAS WAY · SE8 TEL: 691 3333

Flyer for Outdance at The Albany Empire, 1988. (Capital Gay)

sector organisation however its financial stability and long-term survival was not on solid ground: The need to re-apply for its core and sole grant from Greenwich Council annually and there were concerns over the impact of Section 28 on local authority funding for lesbian and gay community support services. The Centre had already weathered funding cuts from £2,000 to £600 per quarter in 1987/88.



Activists outside Greenwich town hall protesting cuts to the GLGC's budget, 15th May 1991.



Activists outside Greenwich town hall protesting cuts to the GLGC's budget, 15th May 1991.

This affected resources for producing the newsletter which was suspended in autumn 1987.²⁷

A drive to recruit new blood into the Management Committee at the start of the new decade announced ambitions for 'major growth', however in May 1990 an 'Emergency General Meeting' was called about insufficient funding and staff. In June of that year a letter to the GLGC's members stated:

The Centre is under a possible risk of closure in September [1990] due

²⁷ Annual Report 1988 (Draft) p. 8.

²⁸ METRO/1/1/A1/1, GLGC Management Committee minutes; Letter from Keith Trotman, Thursday 21st June 1990.

²⁹ METRO/1/2/R1/6; GLGC Annual Report 1991, p. 8.

³⁰ Ibid.

*to an expected loss in funding as a direct result of our funders, Greenwich Council being Poll Tax Capped by the Government.'*²⁸ This had resulted in a funding cut of £8000 per annum, about which 50 GLGC members protested outside Greenwich Town Hall in May 1991.²⁹

The cuts saw the loss of Maggie Honey, in post since 1985, who took voluntary redundancy while Keith Trotman took half pay until the new financial year in 1992. By then, a decision had been reached to re-recruit for a new staff member with the skeletal funding. This time the management roles would be reconfigured into two portfolios that separated running services from administration and fundraising needs.

Two new recruits would steer the Centre onto the course that its Chair Peter Boniface had rallied for in 1991: '... expansion is the only road to follow.'³⁰ Sage as his advice was to the incoming Management Committee, they could not have foreseen that it was the HIV crisis that would sustain the Centre and secure its long-term future.

The HIV epidemic

Back in June 1985 the GLGRG held a 'Public AIDS Meeting' at the Clockhouse in Woolwich with talks from a local gay

PUBLIC AIDS MEETING.

We have organised a public meeting to discuss AIDS and its effect on our lives. We will have a local gay doctor who will talk about the medical side, a representative from the Terrence Higgins Trust, one of us and a lesbian to talk about blood sisters. The meeting will be at the Clockhouse (see above for details) on Monday 17th of June at 8.00pm. We are notifying the press, all the local health authorities and centres. So we are hoping for a big meeting. Please come and bring lots of friends. See you there.

GLGRC public AIDS meeting in Woolwich notice, 1985. (LSE Library)

doctor and a representative from the Terrence Higgins Trust in the context of the disease being dubbed the 'Gay Plague' in the press.³¹ From then the topic of 'AIDS' occurs sporadically in METRO's archive, for example with news of the London Lighthouse's foundation, rapidly becoming more frequent and then routine later on in the decade in listings for the gay men's group activities, for example interacting with HIV+ support charity Body Positive.³²

Some ten years after the start of the epidemic in the UK, when Mark McNestry began working for Greenwich Health Promotion in 1992 as HIV Prevention Outreach Worker (hard-to-reach-communities) he reflected on his brief.

Mark: I quickly realised that there was no targeted work with gay and bisexual men [in Greenwich].³³

Hitting the road in his Renault 5 and driving around the Borough, Mark's outreach work involved forging relationships with the blossoming gay pubs' scene, in particular with the Gloucester and the Lone Sailor in central Greenwich. The scale of the epidemic and the need to educate and equip people to protect themselves required more staff and resources than Mark could provide. Making contact with the GLGC to explore the potential for partnership, even though he was sceptical about the Centre being 'stuck on a trading estate in Charlton', he passionately believed in the potential for a community-based resource to deliver HIV prevention.

³¹ Founded in 1982, see <https://www.tht.org.uk/our-work/about-our-charity/our-history/how-it-all-began> (accessed 4 December 2019); Terence Higgins former partner Rupert Whittaker was interviewed on video for METRO's Our History project: available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives: <https://www.bishopsgate.org.uk/archives>. See also Clews, Colin. *Gay in the 80s. (Matador: Leicestershire; 2017)*. Pages 232–5.

³² Founded in 1985, Body Positive was a support organisation for people who had been diagnosed as HIV positive, including telephone line and counselling support among other services. Archive available at London School of Economics Library; GB 97 HCA/Body Positive

³³ Greenwich Health Promotion became Bexley and Greenwich Health Promotion.



By then, in 1993, the GLGC's new post of Service Manager had been successfully filled by two lesbian women who were job sharing: Donna Fleming and Sakthi Suriyaprakasam.³⁴

Sakthi: *'We knew that [Greenwich] Health Promotion was doing some outreach work and we knew that there was an opportunity there. Why weren't we connected with them?'*

The partnership that rapidly developed, the sense of new blood and vitality about expanding the organisation and the funding that Greenwich Health Promotion brought in to the Centre unlocked financial resources, ideas and a palpable sense of passion for the

organisation to grow.

Sakthi: *When we did get the money we just had to bring the expertise in because we needed people who understood about sexual health outreach.*

Mike Hartley was hired in November 1993 as the Gay and Bisexual Men's Health Needs Development Worker and with Mark McNestry the GLGC was able to move out more proactively into the community through this work that targeted public sex environments and gay pubs in Greenwich. There was further geographical reach into Bexley when the two boroughs' health promotion services merged.

³⁴ Sakthi Suriyaprakasam was Service/Centre Manager for the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre/Metro Centre 1993–1997; Director of The Metro Centre (METRO) 1998–2003.

She was interviewed for the Our History project both on audio and video; recordings available at the Bishopsgate Institute.



Poster promoting the new Metroline launched by Metro Thrust for World AIDS Week, December 1994. (BishopsGate Institute/Switchboard)

The breadth of the work encompassed commercial venues; outreach to local male sex workers; mapping of gay and bisexual men's networks; liaison with local and pan-London agencies and informing local strategies in response to HIV/AIDS.³⁵ Its runaway success as a year-long project in penetrating the gay and bisexual men's local scene resulted in the creation of a longer term initiative, candidly entitled 'MetroThrust'.

Becoming METRO

Launched for World AIDS Week 1994, MetroThrust was promoted in



Flyer for Metro's first Pride Boat outing on the 'Greenwich Faerie' for Pride 1995.

partnership with London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard using a series of five posters under the banner 'My friend is positive.' Produced from a photoshoot at the GLGC, the emotive posters representing diverse couplings, gender identities and an 'alternative' family not only spoke on HIV prevention but, more critically, they tackled the stigma surrounding being HIV positive and the need for acceptance and support. Publicity for the project was also rooted in community-based events with MetroThrust stalls at the Lone Sailor and Gloucester pubs in the heart of the LGBT community in Greenwich.

³⁵ METRO Charity 1983–2014: A brief history. Dr Greg Ussher, p. 7. *Developing a Local Response: Gay and bisexual men's needs in relation to HIV and AIDS*. Mark McNestry; Mike Hartley (London: Bexley and Greenwich Health, 1995).



Mike Hartley stuffing condoms for Pride 1994.

Mike and Mark's double act in leading the outreach work so innovatively was reinforced by the publication of their research in *Developing a Local Response: Gay and bisexual men's needs in relation to HIV and AIDS* in 1995. The report was presented at conferences, raising the profile and credibility of the Centre's work in targeted HIV prevention work and community-embedded practices.

Consequently, it was a natural moment for the success of the project that had trebled the organisation's income to lend its name in rebranding GLGC to The Metro Centre in 1995. Removing the local reference from the title was indicative of an organisation that had rapidly mobilised to become more outward-looking and strategically networked. Relocating to central



Mark McNestry on stage at The Gloucester, 1994. (Mark McNestry)

Greenwich the following year the Centre retained a local community base, now in a purpose-designed premises, while providing better connectivity for engaging with London at large, becoming increasingly robust as a service provider and more sophisticated in its provision of services for gay and bisexual men, not forgetting lesbians.

Turning the tide from the crisis of the early 1990s, it seems apt that tribute was paid to the Centre's heritage in the east of the borough when the 'Greenwich Faerie' launched in 1995 – playing on the Woolwich Ferry as an icon of industrial maritime Greenwich – with Metro Centre's revellers on board sailing from Greenwich Pier up to the Embankment and disembarking for London Pride. That tradition continues in 2020.

METRO's five domains: Summaries of their history and development

Sexual & Reproductive Health



Flyer for Pitstop+ HIV and STI testing, 2006.



Anders Neilson, Andrew Evans as 'Nurse METRO' who began providing services for Pitstop+ in 2006, and Ole Castro Nascimento.



Watch out for M.O.T Zapping this Venue

M.O.T. (Metro Outreach Team)
0181 265 3311

The metro centre, for all lesbian, gay and bisexual lovely people in the easy south east

Flyer for Metro Outreach Team mascot Jacky Late (aka Dax Ashworth) 'zapping' locally with sexual health outreach, 1998.

Although the youngest of METRO's domains, the roots of the charity's sexual and reproductive health services are closely tied to the philosophy and expertise developed in HIV prevention and related sexual health work in the mid-1990s. When the HIV outreach in local pubs, clubs, and cottages, relaunched in 1998 as M.O.T. (Metro Outreach Team), the team donned a mascot. 'Jackie Late' aka Dax Ashworth (Gay & Bisexual Men's Outreach Worker). Jackie Late and her M.O.T. crew's legendary 'zapping' of local gay venues involved 15-20 minute visits using usherettes trays to distribute condoms, lubes, selected resources and M.O.T. calling cards.

The knowledge amassed from this creative and playful approach to sexual health education and its success in

engaging punters in pubs and clubs was redeployed when the organisation developed and diversified.

As Dr Greg Ussher observed of 2006 in his historical review of METRO: 'over half of all funds received ... are provided by Greenwich Primary Care Trust to undertake HIV prevention and sexual health promotion work with gay and bisexual men'. However, in 2008 the picture changed when METRO underwent a seismic shift in its organisational identity from being solely LGB-run and service-focused. Changing its constitutional wording to services for 'any person experiencing any issues related to gender, diversity, sexuality and identity', the potential for new services and service users opened up. The following year, METRO commenced its first foray into non-LGBT specific



Card for the Metro Outreach Team (M.O.T.), late 1990s.

sexual health work when it secured a local NHS Trust contract for Chlamydia outreach and testing in Greenwich, and the neighbouring boroughs of Bromley and Bexley. METRO’s Deputy CEO Andrew Evans was involved in delivering this work and recalled his approach.

I modelled the outreach work I’d already done for fundraising. You’re on the street; you’re asking people for money – these people were out on the streets asking young people for wee. ... the work that we did on that started to get noticed by other [NHS] Trusts.

Andrew moved from HIV outreach work as a volunteer with the charity from the early 2000s in pubs in Woolwich and Greenwich and later became a manager of sexual health outreach. His success

in running street-based outreach work for young people attracted further funding for chlamydia projects across south London and brought a new generation of sexual health outreach workers into METRO’s fold, and expanding the non-LGBT service base and staff.

METRO’s current sexual and reproductive health provision is a thriving set of services, including an advice helpline; free condom distribution and STD testing in Kent and Medway; sexual health-related counselling and group support; walk-in sexual health clinics in Greenwich for contraception and STD screening; relationships and sex education training and distribution of free STI home-testing kits, among other services and support across south London, Kent, Medway, and beyond.

METRO's five domains: Summaries of their history and development

Community



Geoff: *How do you develop a community that doesn't actually know it's a community?*³⁶

Arguably the oldest of METRO's domains, building a 'community' with its own local meeting space was a core objective of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Rights Group. Reporting from the group's first Council-supported meeting in 1983, the eight locals, gay rights campaigners and council representatives who attended were keen for the Centre to be in the East of the Borough: 'Woolwich, Plumstead, etc., - as these areas were most in need.' When a grant was awarded and the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre (GLGC) became a reality in 1986, with its Charlton base, the term 'community' precisely describes the function of the weekly social groups for lesbians and gay men, and later youth groups. These were founded alongside a space where people could informally drop in for a hot drink, have a chat with a Centre Development Worker, browse the community noticeboard or



Flyer for gay men's party at the GLGC, 1990. (LSE Library)

check out new additions to the lesbian and gay library collection. Key to this place was its location in working-class neighbourhoods, even further removed from access to the commercial gay scene than in central Greenwich.

In the mid-1980s to 1990, a dizzying array of social activities created by the GLGC or the wider local/London-wide lesbian and gay community were advertised in the Centre's newsletters, ranging from house parties, for example, a 'mixed social' at Alan and Mike's flat on the Pepys Estate to 'A Cabaret Evening Celebrating Gay Pride '86' at the Albany Empire in Deptford and a gay men's swimming group – to name just a few choices on the community events menu. The events were characterised by being affordable and inclusive in terms of providing crèche facilities, consciousness about disabled access and transport.

³⁶ Interview with Geoff Hardy - Centre Development Worker for the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre, 1984 to 1986; available at Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archive



METRO Volunteers on board the ‘Greenwich Faerie’ boat for Pride 1995.

Pride was an annual staple for GLGC members as participants in central London events and local celebrations like family-friendly picnics and discos. In 1995 when the GLGC had rebranded to The Metro Centre, Pride took to the Thames via the Greenwich Faerie boat trip up to Embankment before the march. METRO has continued this tradition with a Pride Boat from Greenwich every July and now has a float in the main London Pride parade replete with live music.

Becoming more professionalised in the mid-to-late 1990s, METRO’s strong roots within the lesbian, gay, and (by then) bisexual, communities remained essential to successfully delivering the core services of HIV education and prevention work in local venues. In turn, the organisation worked to strengthen and support the LGB community in providing mental health services, such as the weekly mental health drop-in group and the youth group. For older people, in 2003 a 50+ group was created as part



METRO taking part in the London Pride parade 1998.

of the Healthy Greenwich Network. This provided a monthly informal social space for older people along with a programme of speakers and talks by group members themselves on health-related and wellbeing topics, annual trips to the seaside and participation in Pride.

With METRO’s expansion beyond LGB-focused services in 2008, the organisation’s reach in the community and voluntary sector locally, London-wide and within Essex, Kent, Medway, Surrey and West Sussex has expanded, for example, with sexual health outreach work to heterosexual communities. A series of mergers has also expanded the organisation’s community-based services, starting in 2010 with the Harbour Trust which had provided support to HIV+ people in Woolwich, particularly focused on gay men historically and more recently with the many migrant communities from African countries living in the Borough of Greenwich and nearby. In 2016, a merger with Positive Parenting and Children



Advertisement for GLGC volunteers, 1990.

further diversified and specialised METRO's knowledge base, services, and support for families living with or affected by HIV.

A notable exclusion from METRO's constitution and specified services were those for people identifying as transgender until the formal addition of 'T' in 2015, although there was significant policy development in 2001 and heated internal debates on the topic in 2005. Archival records reveal service users who identified as trans prior to then, unsurprisingly, yet this official recognition of a more diverse community with specific needs has ushered in the development of a specialist knowledge base in catering for twenty-first century gender identity language and the provision of services such as those for young people who identify as trans or non-binary. The use of the bracket LGBTQ+ embraces this gender and sexual orientation diversity and recognises the need for a more nuanced equalities agenda.



Advertisement for METRO volunteers, late 2000s.

Perhaps more than any other factor over three decades of community development and services has been the input of volunteers. With over 50 volunteers currently contributing to the charity's operations – including 11 people on the 'Our History' project itself – volunteers have served both historically and recently as Management Committee members, Trustees, and on making the delivery of high quality frontline services sustainable, such as counselling, youth groups and special events like Pride. This volunteer-based heritage has been reinforced more recently with three further mergers: in 2017 with Greenwich Action for Voluntary Services, in 2019 with Greenwich Association of Disabled People – both broadening and deepening METRO's local roots in Woolwich and beyond – and also in 2019 with St Peter's House Project working across Surrey and West Sussex on HIV support for people living with HIV.

METRO's five domains: Summaries of their history and development

Mental Health & Wellbeing



The 'Ship of Fools' bus took METRO staff, volunteers and service users through central London for World Mental Health Day, October 1998.

In the mid-to-late 1980s, counselling was sporadically mentioned as a desired service for the lesbian and gay community in Greenwich. This need could not be met within the GLGC professionally and staff taking telephone calls on the Centre's advertised service for advice and information encountered people in crisis. At the weekly lesbian, gay, and youth groups during the 1980s, Colleen Humphrey related how she felt that the emotional and psychological needs of some of the members extended beyond what she and the socially-focused group sessions could offer.³⁷

As the 1987–1989 GLGC Biannual Report defined, there were limits to this area of service that clearly needed to be addressed:

The Centre is unable to offer an extensive counselling service, but does offer befriending and support to isolated lesbians and gay men on a short-term basis. Where more support or counselling is needed, we are able to refer people on to local supportive agencies both in the borough and in Lewisham. We are currently investigating the possibility of setting up a regular counselling slot at the Centre ...³⁸

Soon after the GLGC rebranded to The Metro Centre in 1995, mental health came on to the agenda in a more focused way, in addition to counselling support that was delivered by volunteers. The

Brochure for the MetroNet Project and mental health services, circa 1998



³⁷ Oral history interview with Colleen Humphrey, GLGC Development Worker/youth group facilitator 1987–1988.

³⁸ Greenwich Lesbian & Gay Centre, Biannual report 1987–1989; p. 8.

influx of community members as a result of the HIV prevention outreach work presented a noticeable “trickle of need around mental health that we didn’t want to ignore”, recalls Sakthi Suriyaprakasam, then Metro Centre Manager. Approaching the mental health commissioners in Greenwich Council with the issues she was seeing in the community, they expressed their own concern that there was a lack of representation of LGBT people in their services. This dialogue resulted in a year’s funding commitment for the Centre to bring in mental health expertise to run a ‘drop-in’ and engage with the people who would use it.

Then in 1996 the Mental Health Department of Greenwich Social Services funded a Mental Health Worker at the GLGC and the flagship ‘MetroNet’ project for self-referring LGB people was born. By 1998, the Centre’s more significant engagement with mental health was reflected in its participation in World Mental Health Day with a ‘ship of fools’ themed event in central London. Natalie Koffman, who led the MetroNet initiative, conducted research predominantly on residents within Greenwich but also encompassing Lewisham and other neighbouring boroughs in The Metro Centre’s *Lesbian and Gay Bisexual Mental Health Needs Assessment Report*.³⁹ Produced in 1996, the report was not published

externally, however the research and evidence informed the practice that sustained the LGBT mental health drop-in which continues in 2020 as a mainstay of METRO Charity’s weekly services.⁴⁰

METRO has a full suite of counselling services for young LGBTQ people and adults on issues such as gender identity, sexual health and HIV-related issues, plus advocacy and crisis work on topics, including domestic violence and hate crime.



Flyer launching the new Metro lesbian, gay and bisexual mental health project MetroNet, 1996.

³⁹ Video interview with Natalie Koffman conducted for the Our History project is available at the Bishopsgate Institute.

⁴⁰ See METRO’s 2019 short documentary on its LGBTQ+ mental health drop-in service: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XP495le2mFE> (accessed 18 December 2019).

METRO's five domains: Summaries of their history and development

Youth



Advertisement for GLGC Young Lesbians group, 1990. (Feminist Library)

In 1986, the notion of a youth group was floated in the September newsletter.

IMAGINE AN EVENING OR AFTERNOON (or both) EVERY WEEK for young people to make friends and lovers, to learn about each other and ourselves and how to cope with all the grotty aspects of our lives. To play pool and cards, watch videos, to be silly and serious.

Keith Trotman, in his role as Afro-Caribbean Male Development Worker, took the challenge forward in May 1987. Upsetting the Inner London Education Authority's protocols, the group was open to under 16s and spanned up to those aged 25. The group took off as



Flyer for Metro SNAP! ('Sexuality Not A Problem') youth group in Bromley for LGB people under 26, launched October 2000.

the south east London Young Lesbian and Gay Group, rising at one point to twenty members in the first year, however this success was short-lived. One factor was the loss of a facilitator with expertise in youth work, however the GLGC was generally struggling to survive in the late 1980s and early 1990s due to local authority funding cuts among other issues.

In 1991 there was a weekly support and social group for young gay men but it



was not until the mid-1990s when the organisation rebranded as The Metro Centre, attracted new funding streams and expanded that things took shape on a more secure footing. The Metro Centre participated in the Greenwich Gay Youth Forum, led the Young Women's Video Project across five LGB youth groups in London and by 1997 it was jointly managing an LGB youth

Participants in the METRO Young Women's Video Project, a filmed needs assessment that considered the needs of young lesbian and bisexual women based at youth groups across London in 1995.

service in partnership with Greenwich Council – Greenwich Freedom Youth was staffed by two facilitators for young people aged 16 to 25.

METRO has given me a space where for three hours on a Sunday afternoon, I can be whoever I want. (Contributor to Polari, METRO, 2005, Dir: Charlotte Prodger)

Youth as a core service continued into the 2000s and in 2005 the film-maker/artist Charlotte Prodger (Turner Prize winner 2018) collaborated with members of METRO’s youth group to document their discussions about sexuality and identity in the film Polari. METRO’s deepening appreciation of the issues discussed in this film, such as the importance of peer support for young LGBTQ people, was taken on a national trajectory when METRO embarked on major research project in collaboration with the University of Greenwich, supported by the Big Lottery Fund.

Youth Chances: the experiences of LGBTQ young people in England was published in 2015 and was based on surveys of over 7,000 young people, 29 commissioners of young people’s services and 52 providers. The report provided evidence from the ‘most representative and robust survey of its kind’ that documented LGBTQ young people’s experiences of: discrimination; community exclusion; abuse; homelessness; lack of support in schools for LGBT sexual orientation/gender identity issues; mental health issues; specific disadvantages felt by young trans

people, and lack of local services addressing these complex needs.

Addressing the sexual health needs of non-LGBTQ young people, in 2014 a programme for boys and young men was developed and currently runs in Merton and Medway as a mentoring and support service. This includes issues about relationships, identity, sexuality, and harmful or risk-taking behaviours.

In 2020, METRO’s youth work reflects the complexity of service users’ needs across its services in south-east London, Kent and Medway with 11 LGBTQ-focused youth groups, including further foci with Inside Out, ‘run by and for people of colour’ and Transcend as ‘a monthly social for trans and non-binary young people.’ Additionally, there is a youth group supporting young people living with or affected by HIV in south London. The youth domain also hosts the ‘Guys into Guys’ online chatroom funded by Public Health England, providing a safe virtual space for young bisexual or gay men to discuss their sexuality, sexual health, and wellbeing.

METRO's five domains: Summaries of their history and development

HIV

Graphics for Metro HIV needs assessment & Metro Thrust outreach condom packs, 1994.



[Early 1980s]. London was starting to explode it was really great. ... It was at that time that Terry became ill. He started complaining of headaches that just wouldn't go away ... he got sicker and sicker over time. I went to see him as much as I could. ... As Terry was dying in hospital I said that "I think this is that American disease we're starting to hear about in the papers." Capital Gay had started to talk about it. Because I wasn't anybody to listen to, I was completely dismissed but obviously it was that. At that point they didn't even have a name for it ... the 'gay cancer'. (Rupert Whitaker)⁴¹

In July 1982, Terence Higgins' death was one of the first subsequently attributed to HIV. As the epidemic grew within London's gay community there was a dearth of knowledge and information about the unnamed disease.

Within METRO's archives, AIDS surfaces as a topic in the first year that the GLGC provided services, however it was somewhat of a footnote to the main issues for gay men that featured during this period. Significantly, in 1985 GLGC worker David Simpson convened a public meeting about AIDS at Woolwich Town Hall some two years before the infamous Government-sponsored public health 'Don't Die of Ignorance' television advert campaign.⁴²

Targeted HIV prevention work was only began locally when Greenwich Health Promotion (GHP) appointed an HIV Prevention Worker in 1992. The partnership with the GLGC that ensued and GHP's funding of a Gay and Bisexual Men's Health Needs Development Worker marked a hugely significant moment in METRO's history.

⁴¹ Interview with Rupert Whitaker conducted as part of METRO's Our History project, available at Bishopsgate Institute.

⁴² See <https://wellcomelibrary.org/item/b16797140#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0>

The innovative and energetic work that they mounted with colleagues and the vibrant gay venues in Greenwich and adjacent boroughs as well as public sex environments created both significant relationships and a vital knowledge base. The ‘action research’ that was published as a result of this project in *Developing a Local Response: Gay and bisexual men’s needs in relation to HIV and AIDS* was widely disseminated and the partnership with Bexley and Greenwich Health Promotion continued as the agency funded MetroThrust, enlarging the outreach team with two further posts.

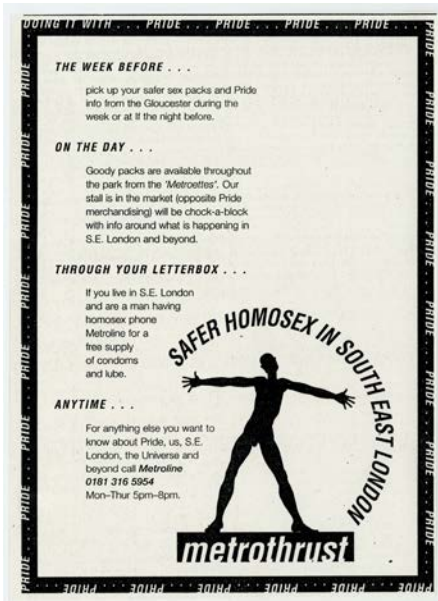
MetroThrust’s local outreach was extended further afield through partnership working including with Gay

Switchboard. A joint publicity campaign in 1994 to 1995 was one powerful mode of communicating about the indiscriminate reach of the virus while poetically representing diverse sexualities and gender identities. The ‘Metroettes’ peddled their free condoms, lube and leaflets from the MetroThrust Roadshow which consisted of a ‘pop up’ stall loaded with these goodies in local venues such as the Gloucester opposite Greenwich Park, ‘If’ at the Albany in Deptford and at Heaven in central London.

In 1998, the HIV prevention work rebranded as M.O.T. (METRO Outreach Team) covered seven venues, with support from volunteers, including the Woolwich Infant and the George and Dragon pubs in Greenwich, spanning to Shakti (later renamed Club Kali) in north London. The outreach work continued successfully in this vein and expanded in 2001 when the ‘Pitstop’ clinic was launched to provide testing for men who have sex with men (MSM) run in partnership with the STI clinic at Queen Elizabeth’s Hospital. This was the first community based HIV/STI testing clinic for gay and bisexual men in London. That clinic remains as a weekly drop-in service, now based at METRO and runs alongside an online sexual health information and advice service: pitstopplus.org

METRO’s expertise on HIV testing and prevention services coalesced in its

Flyer for Metro Thrust - Safer Homosex in South East London, Pride 1995.





Poster promoting Metroline advice service launched by Metro Thrust for World AIDS Week, December 1994. (Bishopsgate Institute/Switchboard)

formation and leadership of the 'GMI Partnership' in 2008 with Positive East and Spectra. This continues as a service for MSM and is fully inclusive of trans people.

Further diversification of HIV services came with METRO's merger with Harbour Trust in 2010 as the specialist provider for support to HIV+ people in Woolwich and the surrounding areas, predominantly for gay men and migrants from African countries living in Greenwich. From 2014 METRO also established a presence across Essex, providing HIV support services. A further set of expertise and services in



Metro Thrust outreach stall and team including Stephen Speight, 1994-1995.

HIV+ support for families came with the merger in 2016 with Positive Parenting and Children, which worked across a number of south London boroughs, and with the merger with St Peter's House Project in 2019, taking METRO's HIV support work into Surrey and West Sussex.

METRO's current HIV-related services include peer mentoring and support groups for people living with HIV; home visits to families affected by HIV; counselling support; advice and advocacy; a social group for HIV+ gay and bisexual men in London, and services for emerging communities in London affected by HIV such as Polish, and Latin American communities.

Archiving the METRO Collection



*Chris Scales, Archivist,
Our History project*

**Chris Scales (Archivist) and Charlie Saunders
(Volunteer) working on the METRO collection in
Greenwich, 2019.**

A major outcome of the Our History project has been the creation of METRO's Archive, now housed at Bishopsgate Institute. The library there opened in 1894 and specialises in London history, socialism, activism, feminism, LGBTQ+ history, freethought and humanism. METRO is therefore in good company alongside the other organisations represented, including Stonewall, GMFA and Switchboard.

In order to transfer METRO's collections to Bishopsgate we went through a six-month process of organising and cataloguing the archive. As archivist for the project I was tasked with overseeing the process of arrangement and cataloguing. However with a collection of this scale help was needed. The work could not have been done without the help of

our amazing team of volunteers who worked alongside us at Greenwich West Community and Arts Centre to list, rearrange and package over 1,300 items ranging from committee minutes and project files to photographs, annual reports and newsletters.

Although the collection covers a wide period of METRO's history including the minutes of the Greenwich Lesbian and Gays Rights Group from our founding in 1983, it was clear there were big gaps in the collection where material had been lost over the years. Fortunately we were able to reach out for help from others to fill these gaps by digitising a wide range of items.

For the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Centre (GLGC) era, former worker Maggie Honey generously loaned us



Organising the flyers and ephemera of the METRO archive collection, 2019.

the many photographs, annual reports and flyers that she had kept. We were lucky that the Hall-Carpenter archives at the London School of Economics (LSE) contain a complete set of the GLGC's newsletters, which we digitised for inclusion alongside the issues of METRO News that have been preserved. Additional material came from the Wellcome Collection and the Feminist Library, and other former workers who contributed to oral history interviews loaned items including Sakthi Suriyaprakasam, Mark McNestry, Geoff Hardy and Marc Thompson.

Similarly, very few early press cuttings about METRO had survived in our archive but with the collections of the *Capital Gay* and *Pink Paper* held at LSE, and microfilms of *The Mercury*



Visitors listening to Our History interviews at the 'Provoke' LGBTQ history conference at London Metropolitan Archives, 2019.

and *News Shopper* held at the British Library, we were able to recover many articles about key events in our history.

Everything has been lovingly repackaged and labelled in acid free folders and boxes by our volunteers and the METRO archive is now safe in its new home at the Bishopsgate Institute but the process doesn't end here. We are also transferring a large amount of digital materials from more recent times and hope to continue growing the collection in years to come.

METRO'S oral history collection



The METRO Pride bus in central London for Pride 2000.

METRO's oral history collection of interviews with a range of LGBTQ-identifying current and former staff and Trustees; service users; local community members; collaborators and allies.

During 2019 some 36 oral history interviews have been recorded on audio and on video. The contributors represent creators, communities, and collaborators of METRO. We have not been able to interview all of the key people in the charity's history but these testimonies undoubtedly provide a rich source of historical insights and personal stories that expand the documentary archive. These interviews can be listened to and/or watched at the Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archive.

VIDEO INTERVIEWS:

All filmed and edit by Tom Line, METRO Film Maker.

Interviewees

Elizabeth (Liz) Day

Volunteer Counsellor at METRO mid-1990s; HIV Coordinator for Bexley Council late 1990s; Principal Family Therapist at Oxleas

NHS Foundation Trust 2004–2014. She is a systemic psychotherapist, visual artist and writer.

Taz Edwards-White

METRO staff member since 2003 in mental health and advocacy services including LGBTQ+ drop in; currently Alliance Manager.

Andrew Evans

Volunteer in the early 2000s; Sexual Health Project Manager; Deputy CEO of METRO.

Jackie Foley

METRO staff member from 2003 convening 50+ group; Sexual Health Services Manager; currently Clinical Projects Manager.

Tyler Hatwell

Founder of LGBT Traveller Pride.

Julie Hayward

Youth Worker at Bexley Council; METRO collaborator on LGBT youth issues and Pride participant.

Eileen Hibbell

Woolwich born-and-bred GLGC lesbian group member, mid-to-late 1980s; member of METRO's 50+ group in the 2000s.

Colleen Humphrey

GLGC Worker involved with lesbian groups, youth group and general services 1987–1988.

Gwendoline Jones

Woolwich born-and-bred youth worker and Pearly Queen of the Royal Borough of Greenwich.

Natalie Koffman

Mental Health Worker at The Metro Centre (METRO) mid-to-late 1990s.

Jonathan McClelland

Volunteer: METRO LGBT youth group, early 2000s; current Trustee as Company Secretary.

Carmel Mundt-Leach & Rosie Mundt-Leach, and their daughters

Engaged with METRO as same-sex parents in the late 1990s and socially as LGB community members.

George Rodgers

METRO LGBTQ+ mental health drop-in service user; HIV+/diabetes co-morbidities patient activist.

Michelle Ross

Founder of CliniQ sexual health clinic for transgender and non-binary people.

Sakthi Suriyaprakasam (also audio interview) Service/Centre Manager for The GLGC/Metro Centre 1993–1997; Director of Metro Centre (METRO) 1998–2003.

Marc Thompson

Activist since the late 1980s in HIV+ issues for BAME people as a worker/volunteer with Big Up, Positively UK, Terence Higgins Trust; Founder of prepster.info in 2015; METRO ally and collaborator.

Councillor Danny Thorpe

Leader of the Council, Royal Borough of Greenwich; former user of METRO's youth service.

Dr Greg Ussher

Outreach and Community Development Manager 2005–2013; CEO METRO Charity 2014–present.

Vito Ward

Service user of METRO 50+ social group in the 2000s; activist for older LGBT people's services; former member of the Royal Navy.

Dr Rupert Whitaker

Founder member of the Terence Higgins Trust and partner of Terence Higgins; Chairman, Tuke Institute; HIV+ patient activist.

AUDIO INTERVIEWS**Simon Brammer**

HIV and Sexual Health Unit worker, Bexley Health/Bexley and Greenwich Health Promotion in the mid-1990s. Former member of METRO Board of Trustees, including service as Chair for two years.

Clive Cort

Mental Health Worker at The Metro Centre 1997–2000.

Ian Elmslie

Musician and performer in south-east London's queer arts scene in the 1990s as one half of the award-winning cabaret double-act Katrina and the Boy.

Simon Faulkner

Convenor of METRO Walnut: a prostate cancer support group for gay and bisexual men.

Simon Hall

Worker in HIV health promotion for the UK Health Education Authority and Terence Higgins Trust in the mid-1980s, and was involved with Cambridge AIDS Helpline; currently METRO Trustee as Treasurer.

Geoff Hardy

Campaigner in the Greenwich Lesbian and Gay Rights Group; GLGC Development Worker 1984–1986.

Stuart Heatherington

Current 50+ group service user at METRO.

Maggie Honey

GLGC Worker 1985–1991; convened lesbian groups at the Centre among many other roles.

Mark McNestry

HIV Prevention Outreach Worker for Greenwich Health Promotion (later Bexley and Greenwich Health Promotion) from the early 1990s; Partner with GLGC on the development of MetroThrust.

Marilyn Major

Member of GLGC lesbian group in the mid-1980s who grew up in Abbey Wood; nurse working in HIV prevention with Greenwich and Bexley Health Promotion in the 1990s; METRO Board member 1998–1999.

Stephe Meloy

Hither Green local and musician involved in south-east London queer arts scene, identifying as working class and gypsy; Chair of Lewisham LGBT Forum.

Willie Millar

Current 50+ group service user at METRO.

Mike Williams

Service user of both the Harbour Trust and then METRO HIV support services.

SKYPE INTERVIEWS

Mike Hartley

Gay and Bisexual Men's Health Needs Development Worker 1993–1994 (GLGC); MetroThrust Manager 1994–1997 (Metro Centre).

Cliff Pereira

Former Director of Harbour Trust HIV support charity; Board member of METRO following its merger with Harbour Trust in 2010.

Interviewers

Tabitha Deadman

Tony Furlong

Niazy Hazeldine

Stephen Hooker

Iris Jaouën

Emma M. Jones

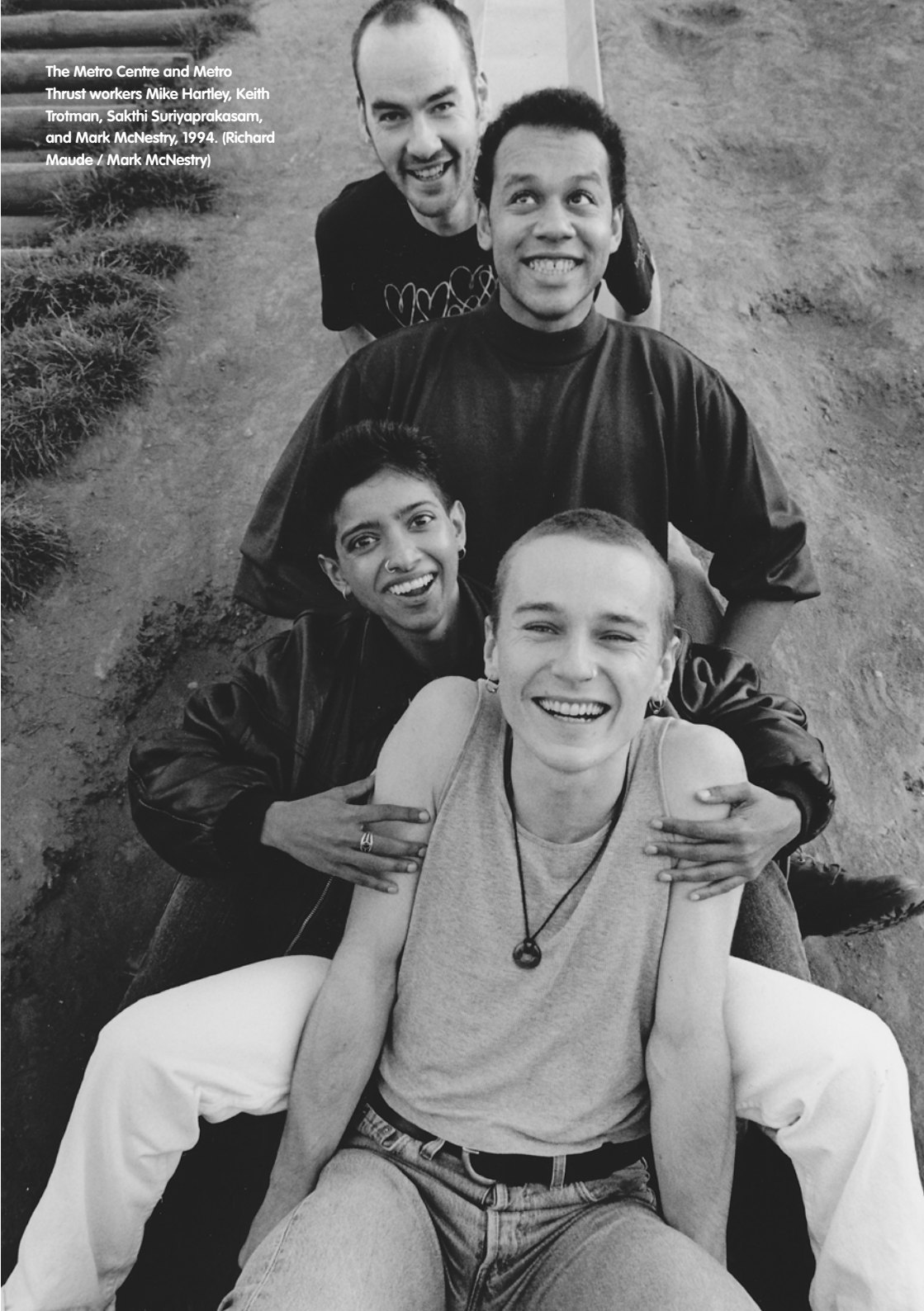
Alan Palmer

Charlie Sanderas

Sakthi Suriyaparakasam

Matt Williams

The Metro Centre and Metro Thrust workers Mike Hartley, Keith Trotman, Sakthi Suriyaparakasam, and Mark McNestry, 1994. (Richard Maude / Mark McNestry)





CONTACT

To find out more visit metrocharity.org.uk/ourhistory,
you can also contact the METRO team
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