

The Evaluation of Freedoms

Report Abstract for the London Gay Men's HIV Prevention Partnership

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This report abstract has been produced to summarise the evaluation of Freedoms.

The full Summary Document is available at <http://www.mba4consultancy.co.uk>

Freedoms is one of eight distinct interventions offered as part of the London Gay Men's HIV Prevention Partnership (LGMHPP). It aims to provide 1.2 million easily accessible free condoms and lubricant through 111 gay bars and clubs and 15 saunas in London per year. It is delivered by the Gay Men's Team at Camden PCT, the Healthy Gay Living Service at THT and CLASH.

The Process

The research was undertaken from Autumn 2003 through to the Spring of 2004. Key fieldwork elements included 100 in-depth qualitative interviews in venues with gay men drawn from target communities (undertaken by a specially recruited team of gay men acting as community researchers) and in-depth qualitative interviews with service providers and other stake-holders. The research findings were tested at a community consultation event.

The sample of gay men interviewed was tested against the demographic profile of gay men identified in data from the Gay Men's Sex Survey for London (GMSS) by Sigma Research.

The Profiles of Gay Men

Freedoms targets gay men living in London and seeks to prioritise men who have tested HIV+, younger gay men and men with higher numbers of sexual partners. The profile of interviewees included:

- 60% under 36 with 22% of interviewees under 26.
- Figures for men tested as HIV+ were in line with the GMSS at 12%. 75% had tested negative and 13% never tested.
- More than a third had more than 13 sexual partners in the last year, with 23% having more than 30 partners.
- 69% of our sample were white gay men and 31% were from black and minority ethnic communities (11% Caribbean, 7% mixed race, 7% Asian, 5% African).
- 64% of the sample lived in inner London boroughs, 29% from outer Boroughs.
- 54% had a degree or higher qualification (slightly lower than GMSS) and 23% had low levels of further education (significantly higher than GMSS).

Condom Use

During the interviews attitudes to condoms and condom use were explored, key findings included:

- High levels of condom use for anal sex amongst respondents, particularly amongst young gay men. However, half of the sample had had unprotected anal sex in the past 12 months – this was the same proportion for young gay men and for men tested HIV+.
- Low levels of condom use for oral sex were reported, but this was an area of considerable confusion and anxiety
- Respondents felt that there was a need for condoms to be available in bars. Most said that they would buy them if they weren't free - except young gay men who felt that cost may be a real barrier, and, for some young men, embarrassment was also a barrier.
- For men with high numbers of sexual partners the easy availability of condoms was seen as critical as many sexual choices were characterised as "impulsive"

Views of Freedoms

Both gay men and stake-holders held very positive views of Freedoms, key findings included:

- Gay men regarded Freedoms highly and saw it as well-provided, with supplies available when they were needed. There were no complaints about the quality of the product and very few suggestions about improvements that could be made to the service.
- There was limited understanding that this was an NHS funded service (3%) with most respondents identifying charitable organisations and some making connections between Freedoms and the charity collecting tins on bars.
- Amongst all respondents there was limited understating of the limits to the scheme and that it was designed to be an "emergency" service. Many identified it as a "universal" service.
- A significant minority of gay men were entirely dependent on Freedoms (or similar free schemes in GU clinics etc.) for their supply of condoms.

Conclusions

From the research we conclude that:

- Freedoms are provided where gay men need them and levels of supply in the selected venues are reliable
- There is a limited understanding amongst gay men and the wider stake-holders that this is an "emergency service"
- The target group for the intervention is being reached, but perhaps there is over-use by older, well-educated and more affluent men.

- Gay men do rely upon Freedoms being available, but older and more affluent men could be “re-educated” around the scope of the scheme though clearer publicity (working with other LGMHPP interventions as Freedoms does not have a promotional budget).
- The issue of supply in saunas is different with free supplies being essential. The Freedoms partnership have done considerable work to secure financial sponsorship for free condoms with sauna owners.
- Work with sauna owners and others is evidence that the providers’ partnership is creative and developmental. Within this context and as part of the wider role of LGMHPP work could be undertaken to better co-ordinate Freedoms with other local free condom services.
- However there are some concerns over branding, particularly in relation to the Freedoms shop. There may also be some lost opportunities in relation to promoting the specific aims of Freedoms through the other LGMHPP initiatives (and by messages on the Freedom packs themselves).

Ways Forward

The report identifies 16 specific recommendations, these include:

- The need to reaffirm and publicise the target groups and emergency nature of the intervention
- LGMHPP as a whole should look at the possibility of community development work being undertaken that would “re-educate” the well-resourced and develop more self-reliance/avoid dependency in relation to sex-on-premises venues.
- Freedoms is a success – there is scope to develop the “brand” within the wider partnership and enhance the cross-promotion of messages between the different interventions.

Detailed recommendations arising from this evaluation are contained in the full summary report (see <http://www.mba4consultancy.co.uk>).