



## How the MESMEN Project Started

*A short history of the MESMEN project was published on the Staffordshire Buddies website around 1999. The following transcript was recovered from an old archive of the website dated around 2004*

In 1988 The Government funded four pilot projects, through the Health Education Authority which were called 'Men who have Sex with Men Action in the Community' (MESMAC). The broad aims of these pilot projects were to tackle the ever increasing incidence of HIV among Gay, Bisexual and other men who have sex with men. Each project looked at particular aspects and issues surrounding the client group with regard to development of a national strategy for sexual health promotion.

Traditionally, i.e. Since the onset of the HIV epidemic, the Gay Community have been industrious in providing health promotion, and support for those affected by the HIV virus. A great many voluntary organisations have been set up within the Gay Community to address the issues which affect it.

Following the evaluation of MESMAC, the Government recommended that community based initiatives be set up in all health districts in the UK to address the health needs of Gay, Bisexual and other Men Who Have Sex With Men. District HIV Prevention Co-ordinators (DHPC's) across the country have now acted and set up such initiatives in both statutory and voluntary settings. Many such projects have adopted and pioneered the concept of outreach working as a methodology for targeting the client group.

In 1994 work was undertaken by AIDSLine West Midlands to do an Assessment of Need with Gay, Bisexual and other Men Who Have Sex With Men in what was then Mid and Southeast Staffordshire, with a view to setting up a MESMAC style project. In 1995 the contract to provide this service for the now South Staffordshire District Health Authority was awarded to Staffordshire Buddies, a county wide charity, based in Stoke-on-Trent which was set up in 1993 to provide help and emotional support to those affected by HIV across Staffordshire. Thus the South Staffordshire MESMEN Project was born. In December 1995 two workers were appointed to develop the project.

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## How does MESMEN Work?

For the most part the working methodology has been tailored to targeting a hard to reach population, who may not actually identify with having concerns around their sexual health. Our clients may feel that they maintain perfectly safe sexual practices, when in fact they may be ill-informed. Most information regarding safer sexual practices and other related fields is passed on by peers. As such a model of peer education has been adopted by the project to maximise the chance of getting the information across and the likelihood the information will promote behavioural change should their situation require it. Adopting a model of peer education allows the project to access many of the underlying issues associated with unsafe sexual practices such as relationship skills, negotiation skills, esteem building etc.

In South Staffordshire, the client group is very dispersed, both geographically and in terms of a cohesive community. This lack of community hinders the effectiveness of peer education as little if any dialogue takes place within the client group. The project will therefore undertake to develop community links, set up social / support networks as required for the client group. Community development will help the project by providing us with a useful platform for peer education, and help promote discussion of the issues which affect our clients. It will also help us further identify the health needs of our clients.

The project will aim to provide clients with affirming and pro-active information. We are not there to judge a client's behavioural or social circumstances, but to help them explore ways in which they might reduce risks or come to terms with them. The project has a comprehensive Equal Opportunities Policy which is available on request.

Our main activity will be outreach work, i.e. Meeting the client group in the settings which they use to meet sexual partners. At the moment due to the lack of commercial venues or existing social and support networks, this means targeting public sex environments. We also aim to provide space away from such environments so that we can impart more comprehensive and effective information in a more discreet way. Further to this we expect that from time to time, individuals will be referred to the project who require the services of the project.