



SHIFTing perception and improving lives

The impact of SHIFT: The sexual health
project for over 45s



Interreg 
EUROPEAN UNION
2 Seas Mers Zeeën
SHIFT

European Regional Development Fund

The challenge

Sexual health is often poorly addressed in the context of health, and sexual health in older people is rarely addressed at all.

However, in an increasingly-ageing European population, it is just as important to consider good sexual health for the older population, raising awareness and increasing the discussions to enable people to make their own decisions about what they need to be aware of, and how to address any concerns.

Available sexual health information is often tailored towards certain more commonly thought of at-risk populations; young people, LGBTQI+ people and pregnant women. But are older people also getting the information they need?



The aim of the SHIFT project

A new approach to supporting the sexual health of older people is necessary.

It is vital that older people have access to resources that support their sexual health and wellbeing, which is an essential part of good physical and psychological health and wellbeing too.

The SHIFT project has improved the way we work with the older population, and through collaboration, has developed the tools we need to increase awareness, understanding and engagement with sexual health and wellbeing in older people.

The SHIFT COM-B model

The Capability, Opportunity, Motivation, Behaviour model contributes insights into sexual health and wellbeing behaviours, and helps facilitate behavioural change for an individual around their own sexual health and wellbeing.

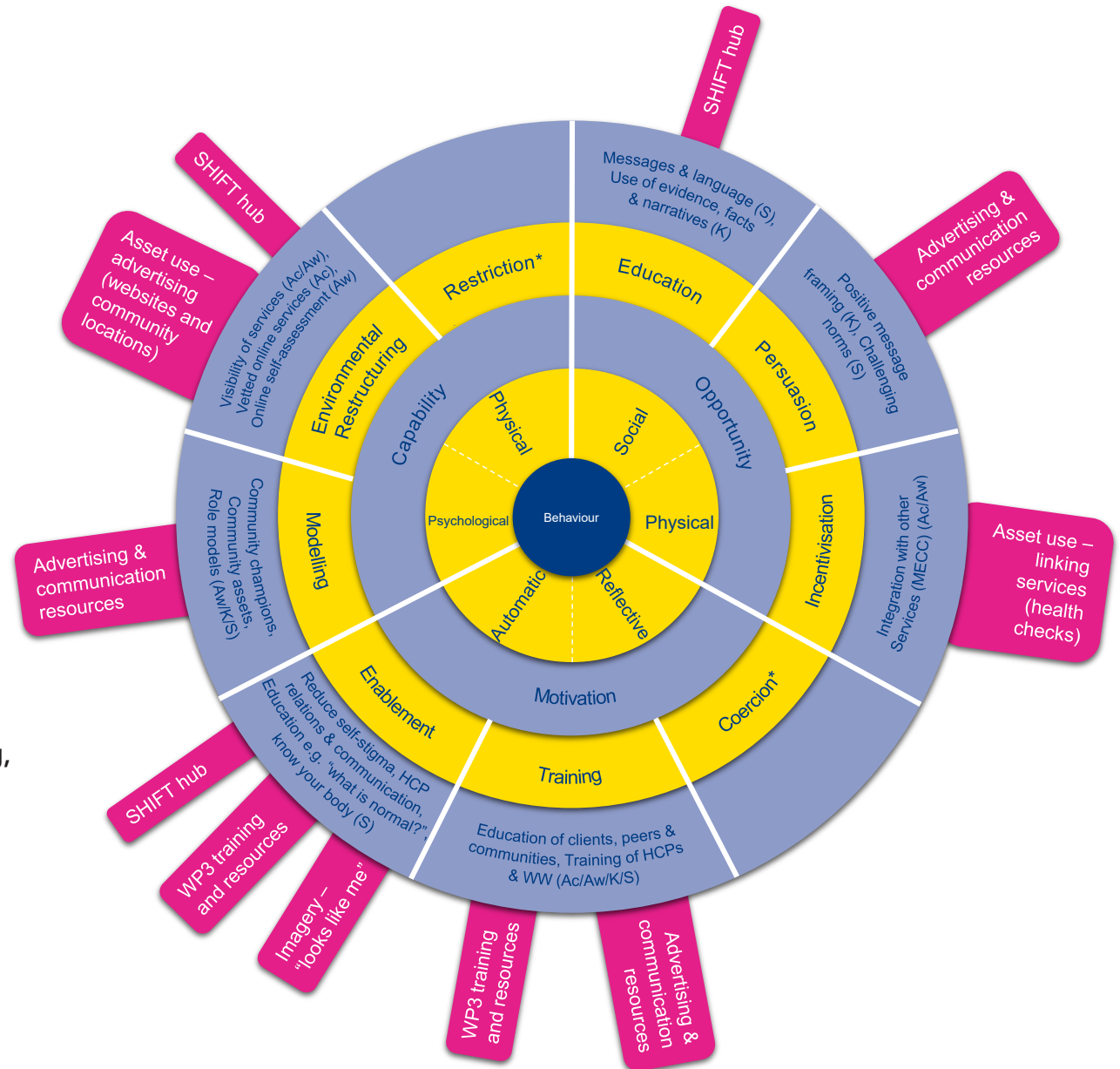
An important part of the SHIFT project, carried out at the start, was finding out what the target population and community needed.

Through quantitative surveys and community focus groups, we found there were minimal resources in relation to sexual health and wellbeing for older people, combined with limited awareness and understanding about the relevance and importance of this subject to wider health and wellbeing.

Four key recurring themes were identified which significantly impact how older people feel about their own sexual health and wellbeing, and what they feel are opinions of others in the community, including health professionals.

These themes are:

- Knowledge
- Awareness
- Access
- Stigma.



Through tackling and addressing these four themes, the SHIFT project enabled people and communities to have a better understanding of their sexual health and wellbeing and are more equipped to take greater responsibility for it.



Visible activities, for example, public promotion events like a pop-up stand at a community event, or an advertising campaign.



What does the activity impact and affect: Knowledge, awareness, access, stigma



The purpose of the activity and what the objective is aiming to affect, for example, education, enablement or modelling.

By working with the target community, the SHIFT project was able to develop tools and resources that would support individuals, communities, and harder-to-reach communities, and help them to gain knowledge, learn skills and adopt behaviours that will be important in achieving better sexual health and wellbeing.



The SHIFT model consists of:

1. An illustrative model to help effect behaviour change (SHIFT COM-B)
 - Focussing on addressing: knowledge, awareness, access and stigma
2. A range of activities that help deliver the SHIFT COM-B model
 - SHIFT website
 - SHIFT advertising and community promotion
 - SHIFT films
 - SHIFT educational tools
 - SHIFT outreach work to support vulnerable at-risk groups

SHIFT website

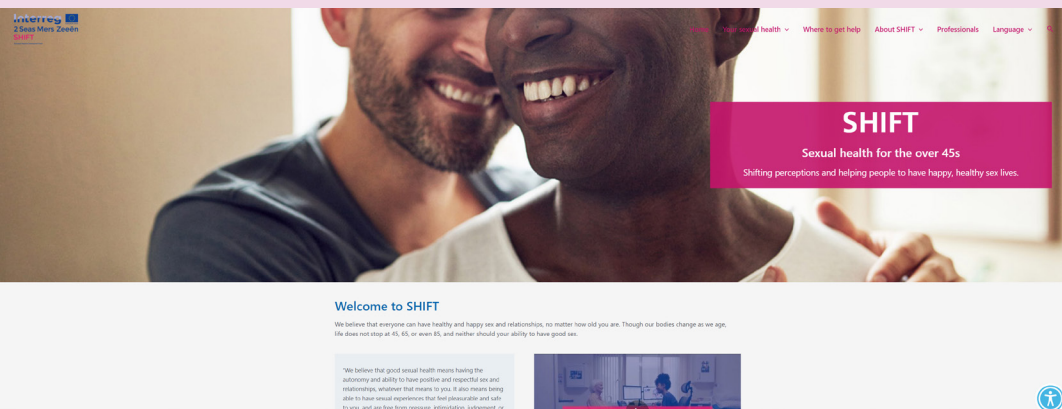
To deliver the SHIFT Model, we identified that the target population had a preference for anonymous interactions. Some of this is driven by fear of judgement by others.

The SHIFT website was developed as a dedicated and focussed website in English and Dutch, and has been shown to be easy to navigate, providing accessible and usable information for users.

Through community input and feedback, the content of the SHIFT website has been reviewed, edited and new content has been suggested and added. It is vital that the SHIFT website has up-to-date content that is also locally relevant.

The SHIFT website will be a legacy resource, which needs to be maintained and updated on a regular basis with appropriate maintenance costings embedded into the programme.

<https://shift-sexual-health.eu/>



SHIFT advertising and Community promotion

Although the SHIFT website was developed to increase engagement and increase accessibility to relevant information, it was important not to forget that there are some individuals who are not as internet-savvy, as others. It was essential to use traditional media to communicate with the community as well as utilising on-line methods.

The use of printed media was very well received. Some printed media was also accessible on-line, but the use of printed magazines, posters, newsletters, fliers provided a simple and straightforward way of discussing and promoting sexual health and wellbeing.

Radio was also a popular method of communication and could be used to link into other relevant national events such as sexual health week or HIV testing week, or other local community events improving local partnership working.



SHIFT films

Looking for different ways of communicating about sexual health and wellbeing, the SHIFT project created six bespoke short films on different topics and themes. The films have raised awareness and have educational value for individuals, communities and professionals.

In addition to the educational content, these films were a great way to increase community engagement, bring people together, raise their curiosity and open up conversations. This was evidenced by the discussions at the SHIFT film promotional events and the subsequent post-event publicity.

<https://www.youtube.com/@METROCharity>



SHIFT educational tools

As well as benefiting the older community, the SHIFT project also aimed to provide education and support to third sector and healthcare professionals who work closely with the community. Through developing informative educational tools, the SHIFT project can

work with local healthcare providers, educational establishments to deliver relevant training to help raise awareness and knowledge, improve local services and reduce stigma around sexual health and wellbeing.

SHIFT outreach work to support vulnerable at-risk groups

For the SHIFT project to be effective, it needs to address the sexual health and wellbeing of all older communities. Some of these communities have more vulnerable, at-risk individuals, who may benefit from more targeted interventions. Local needs assessment review and engagement with local health practitioners or regional health commissioners may help identify these populations.

With a more targeted approach - for example language-appropriate and culturally-appropriate material, or more in-person interventions, these communities can have their sexual health and wellbeing needs addressed.

Translational outcomes

The SHIFT project sought to provide equity for sexual health and wellbeing.

Through all aspects of the SHIFT Model, the aim was to 'even the playing field' through providing relevant resources and empowering the community. It also created training tools for third-sector or healthcare professionals who can go on to provide suitable support, advice or care.

SHIFT wanted to normalise discussions around sexual health and wellbeing for the community aged 45 and over and support them to make their own informed decisions. Through community events, SHIFT has gone directly to into communities to work with them. Some people attend events in person, others observe from afar through social media. Every interaction, every engagement, is a positive consequence.

Vulnerable at-risk communities respond well to the SHIFT Model, with the emphasis on clear, accessible information. However, it is important to address the additional barriers around sexual health and wellbeing for this population compared to the general 45+ population. One particular strategy which worked very well with the harder reach groups was the use of in-person contact, whether this was around in-person education and knowledge sharing or in-person access to services rather than online services. Partnership with local community groups and outreach work into at-risk communities clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of this work.

Through the SHIFT Model and the commitment of the community and strong partnership working – the conversations, engagement and empowerment around sexual health and wellbeing will continue.

Appendix

The SHIFT COM-B model - Dutch language version

SHIFT website - Dutch language version

<https://shift-sexual-health.eu/nl>

