# Keeping in touch
## Social inclusion and older people in Scotland

**WiSDOM iN PRACTICE**

Discussion paper
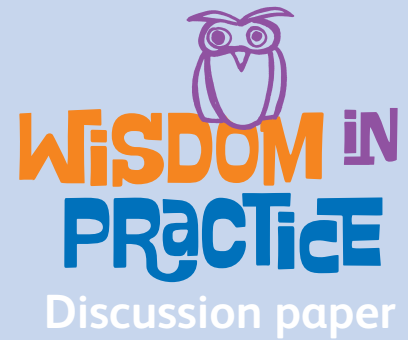
## What is happening

- Most older people say they want to remain independent, feel valued, maintain strong friendships and make new friends. This includes people in their 80s and 90s and people who have higher care needs.

- Older people are part of many community activities. They are contributing to these as well as benefiting from them. One third of people aged between 65 and 74 volunteer at least once a month - which is more than for any other age group.

- Many older people live alone. 55 % of pensioner households are single person (compared to 19 % of working age households).

- Social isolation can be a particular problem for people who have significant responsibilities as a carer for a relative or friend. Among carers aged over 75, 14 % say they feel socially isolated and 16 % say they don't do anything they value or enjoy in their own time.

- There have always been community-led activities and services that enable people to keep in touch and encourage older people who are more likely to be socially isolated to be part of their community.

- In many parts of Scotland more projects aimed at preventing or reducing social isolation have got underway as part of local developments linked to the Reshaping Care for Older People strategy.

Recently there has been more attention on the situation of older people who are lonely.
- Around 10 % of people aged over 65 are chronically lonely - that's around 103,000 people in Scotland.

- Nearly 1 in 5 people in their 80s and 90s say they feel lonely.

- 5 million older people in the UK say that the television is their main form of company - that's around half a million people in Scotland.

*"There is a distinction between isolation (lack of social contact), and loneliness, which, to me, is more of a feeling or a state of mind. Some people are natural hermits: isolated, but not necessarily lonely. Some people are so naturally gregarious that they will always find a way of being in touch. Some people are in touch with others but still feel lonely. And in between there is a complex spectrum."*

## What it means for older people and for the wider community

People who are socially included have better mental wellbeing and also less frequently have physical health problems.

People are not sharing their experience and making a contribution when they are not part of the community.

Problems tend to grow as people lose confidence and self-esteem and find it even harder to take the initiative or respond to the opportunities that are there to become more socially included.

When people who are socially isolated do become unwell they then need higher levels of support and services.

*"Having friends has kept most of us going through all sorts of changes - bereavement, poor health and more. It can get harder to make the effort and stay in touch as we get older but the benefits are huge."*

*"After a bad fall mum was given care at home but not help to keep involved in what was happening in her local area. It's hard to build it up again when someone loses those contacts."*

# What makes a difference

We have heard from older people about their experiences through projects and events which are part of Wisdom in Practice. The points they raise are similar to those described in other reports and research.

These are factors which people say contribute to social isolation for older people.

- Poorer health, including the onset of dementia, or problems with sight or hearing, or having to go to frequent health appointments, or just not feeling well – all of which may mean a reduction in activity and a withdrawal from social contact.
- Reduction in someone's mobility, and consequently in their overall independence. This is very often as a result of a fall rather than disability, sensory impairment or chronic health problems.
- Lack of reliable, accessible and affordable transport.
- Losing family and friends through bereavement.
- Losing contact with friends and/or family - as people move away, or have health or other difficulties themselves, or as phone calls and other contact becomes more difficult.
- Reduced income and/or higher costs, so that people become less able to afford to do things they used to do.
- Not knowing about, or not being part of, activities with other people before becoming more frail and largely house-bound (or isolated for other reasons).
- Previous and/or recent experience of prejudice and discrimination can make it difficult for some older people to risk being part of activities that are meant to be there for everyone.
- Care services that put the priority on doing tasks for people and do not enable people to talk (key factors in this include the short time slots for many care at home services and frequent changes in the workers coming to people who get support in many care services).

Actions that reduce isolation for older people include:

- Encouragement and practical steps to keep up the contacts and friendships people already have.
- Activities that are welcoming and easy to enjoy, and don't expect too much of people.
- Community activities and services that have a good understanding of equality and diversity and are welcoming to people who may feel excluded.

- A wide variety of activities and a lot of choice, so people can find the activities that are right for them and are easy to use. This can mean people going to places in a different Council area and having what public services may see as duplication of services in a Council area.
- Services and activities which disregard what someone cannot do (and thereby avoid exacerbating any feeling of dependency and poor self-esteem).
- Help with transport, including community transport schemes built around the circumstances of those older people who, for many reasons, are not already in touch with other services and who are least likely to ask for help.
- Having someone to talk to.

*"I used to talk to my sister on the phone every evening. But since she has been in hospital we have both lost that."*

*"After my wife died, I went down to the bowling club most days to catch up with the lads. I walked, then got the bus down as my arthritis got worse. But now I can't even get to the bus stop and taxis are so expensive."*

*"I was never one for groups or joining things. I prefer to have a real conversation with one person I know. All that seems to be on offer once you get older are groups with a lot of noise and interruptions. Some folk like that but it's not for me."*

*"My family are in Australia. We used to talk on the phone - that was my big luxury. But my hearing got bad and it was just too difficult. I was dropping out of other things too because I couldn't hear. But now I've learned to use skype and we're back talking every day. I'm getting to see my grandchildren growing up. And I can skype my friend who lives round the corner when the weather is bad and we're not getting out."*

*"I used to go to an art class that was in the nearest town and after it we'd all go for a coffee - great chat with new friends. But I'm just over the local authority boundary. So they can't take me this year, even if I pay something towards it. But the nearest one in my Council area takes 2 buses and an hour longer to get it. I'm missing the company the most."*

*"There is a lot happening at the Community Centre, but it seems to be all for young people. I don't think they want people like me."*

*"We've started having our group at the Community Centre. It makes it easier for members to find out what else is going on and reminds everyone else that older people are part of the community too."*

## Things groups led by older people can do

These are examples of current or planned activities led by older people which aim to tackle aspects of social isolation for themselves and/or for other older people. Some are organised as formal services or projects. Others are happening as less formal activities among friends or neighbours.

- Projects and activities which help people find new friendships. Examples include befriending schemes, meeting and having lunch together each week or each month and drop-in sessions where people come for tea and chat.
- Walking groups, dance groups and other activities that aim to help people be more physically active and also have company.
- Digital inclusion projects offer older people advice and encouragement to help them become more confident about using the internet, mobile phones and other forms of digital communication and technology.
- Activities that aim to support people's mental wellbeing, and where it is ok to talk about feeling down or having poor mental wellbeing. Examples include groups which do something - such as a shared hobby - and are 'mental health friendly' - as well as groups which have a more explicit focus on mental wellbeing.
- Activities which happen in the evening, when other services are not available, and at weekends, when people can feel particularly isolated.
- Peer support around difficult times such as bereavement or moving to a smaller house.
- Welcoming people who are new to an area - saying hello, telling people about facilities in the area, and so on. People described taking time to think how to make services and community activities welcoming to new people, such as welcome packs for people moving into sheltered housing, buddy support to help new people join a group, and regularly updating and repeating publicity about what a group does.

- Support such as buddy schemes at times when people have less contact with neighbours and friends, such as after an illness.

*"We asked older people: what things support you? Their responses included church, pub, scenery, gardening, social club, village shop, chatting to the postman, seeing and phoning friends and family. It isn't always about services."*

*"Places where we share our skills. Places where you make a contribution as well as learn."*

*"Befriending projects which are about real friendships, not just all about the boundaries and making a gap between the volunteer and the person who is getting support."*

*"Even when you do it as neighbours you can still be sensible about the risks for people who are more vulnerable. It is common sense but getting some advice on what to do if we are really worried about someone and how to keep everyone safe (volunteers and people who need some extra support) has been very useful."*

*"You still need someone to do a bit of organising. We got a grant to get us started and someone from the Council does the co-ordinating while we come up with the ideas. Now we are getting ideas from the people who were the first to get support. They know what it is like to be lonely, how to present it to other people who are isolated. I think their contribution has made it a much more successful project."*

*"I moved after my husband died and knew nobody. People told me about groups but I felt I had nothing to say, no-one would be interested in me. Then someone came by and said hello. They had a weekly coffee and chat at the church hall that was there for anyone. She kept it nice and gentle, invited me several times before I said ok and went with her one week. Once I made that first step it was easy, nice and welcoming. I've met new friends and feel much better in myself now."*

WOOPI (Wider Opportunities for Older People in Inverclyde) is a partnership between older people and older people's groups, Inverclyde Council and voluntary organisations. The activities have grown in response to what the older people taking part want to do and opportunities that have come along. They now include:

- Writing and websites: a creative writing group, website and digital groups, Roving Reporters
- Dancing and drama: Silverline dancers, Riverview Players Drama Group
- Arts and crafts: several art groups and other crafts groups in towns across Inverclyde
- Music: a singing group, Inverclyde Pipes and Drums (both of which give performances to community groups and at other events)
- Discussion and skills groups: discussing health and sharing skills

You can find out more at www.woopi.org.uk

The Community Resilience work based at Argyll Voluntary Action has led to a wide range of activity led by and for older people.

- A new volunteer befriending scheme for older people has been launched in Helensburgh. The emphasis is on companionship and targeting older people who are isolated, with training and support for the volunteers who are again mostly older people.
- The Lunch Bunch was created by Timebank volunteers and provides soup groups - gathering at lunchtime once a month or more often - and outings. It is a safe place for people who are frail. The volunteers are also mostly older people who are using their skills and experience to organise and cook the meals, and it is mostly self-financing.

*"I really look forward to the community lunches - our lunch bunch is growing every time so now over 30 of us are meeting up every week and getting to know each other."* Mary, aged 84

There are several men's sheds in Scotland and at least a dozen groups are planning a shed in their area. Men's sheds have become widespread in Australia and New Zealand and Ireland and have been very successful in providing the opportunity for men (isolated older men in particular, and also some younger men and some women) to become active and involved in a place that feels like home. As well as making things, men in sheds can also take the chance to talk 'shoulder to shoulder' about what is worrying them.

The Southside Elderly Club in Edinburgh provides lunch and a social gathering every Monday to its members (who are mostly from the city's South Asian communities and who are, in some cases, otherwise quite isolated and not often away from home). The Club is managed by community members who serve lunches to about 40 people each week. It has recently consulted members around future plans and is seeking funding to allow for new activities to meet members' needs more fully and to reach more people.

## Continuing the discussion

There are older people in your community who are socially isolated. Who can start finding them and talking to them - to make contact with them and to ask what would help for them and for other people?

How can older people be part of discussions about the range of activities and services that happen in local areas to prevent people - older people or people or any age - becoming socially isolated?

How can older people in your community be part of developing and providing activities that welcome older people who may feel excluded? For example, where do people in minority ethnic communities, and people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender get support to stay in touch with friends and be part of other community activities?

What is happening in your area to make sure people who find it difficult to get out of their home and people who are in shared living such as care homes are included and welcomed by activities in the community?

## Information and advice

There are many groups and projects across the country which provide activities that benefit older people who are socially isolated or at risk of becoming isolated.

**The Silver Line** is a free, 24 hour, confidential helpline for older people. It helps older people who are lonely and can advise on what activities and services are available in local areas. Silver Line Scotland is delivered by Age Scotland in partnership with The Silver Line. The helpline is 0800 4 70 80 90 and you can ring for information, advice or just a chat. www.thesilverline.org.uk

Information and research about men's sheds can be found at the website of the **UK Men's Sheds Association** which provides: profiles of many sheds in the UK including several in Scotland; and a great deal of information on how to start and operate a shed. www.menssheds.org.uk and reports at www.otbds.org/wisdom

**Contact the Elderly** has a network of local groups which give company to isolated older people often through regular tea parties. www.contact-the-elderly

**Independent Age** is another organisation that provides social contact for older people through befriending volunteers, telephone buddies and the Live Wires (telephone) book and discussion groups. http://www.independentage.org/befriending/

**The Campaign to End Loneliness** has a website with lots of information on loneliness and its impacts and also on action that can be taken by groups and organisations to reduce it. www.campaigntoendloneliness.org

**Other resources available online to address loneliness include:**

www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/loneliness/loneliness-and-mental-health
www.whentheygetolder.co.uk/helping-your-parents-to-overcome-loneliness/ (which offers a free downloadable 'Loneliness guide')

Some of the case studies on local projects to support older people in their communities that have been established around Scotland through the Change Fund (Reshaping Care for Older People) address loneliness directly or indirectly. www.jitscotland.org.uk/action-areas/reshaping-care-for-older-people/community-capacity-building/community-capacity-building-case-studies/

## About Wisdom in Practice

Wisdom in Practice is a project which supports and promotes the development of services and other activities led by older people. It is funded by the Scottish Government through the Equalities Programme and is run by Outside the Box.

There is a range of resources for groups, including publications, 'how to guides', events and development support for individual groups and projects.

This is one of a series of discussion papers on topics which older people have said are important to them.

There is more information at www.otbds.org/wisdom

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