Scottish Pensioners' Forum

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<u>Scottish Pensioners' Forum: Consultation, A Connected Scotland: Tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections.</u>

The Scottish Pensioners' Forum recognise the commitment the Scottish Government are making to help combat loneliness and social isolation and make the following recommendations in order that preventative measures can be put into practice rather than reactive measures to incidences which already exist.

The SPF believe that a stronger sense of community cohesion must be adopted to allow theory to be put into practice when considering loneliness and social isolation. Over the years, the understanding of what a community actually is, or was, has changed. Changes to the built environment and the closure of community hubs and services, have led to a breakdown in daily social interactions for many people, particularly in urban areas, thereby diluting the once thriving community spirit that was once a staple of Scottish society.

Nowadays, there is more of a likelihood that the word community is more familiar to many people when describing digital interaction and social media and although these services can be a vital lifeline to many they can also have a negative impact when considering social isolation and the breakdown in communities. As well as this, many older people do not have access to digital services due to several factors including geographical location and lack of funds.

The SPF believe that In order to maximise social connections, more public funds must be made available to rebuild community centres and the like, offering services which are suitable for all, but which can also be tailored to particular interests and needs. More engagement between local

government and communities/programmes must be arranged on a regular basis where the needs of service users are taken into consideration when implementing change. There must also be active participation from those community members directly affected when embarking on community initiatives, their input must be given priority at all times when considering change.

At present, local authorities can charge exorbitant prices for lets on their community use facilities, many of which were built solely with profit in mind and with funds from the public purse. The SPF argue that in order to help tackle loneliness and isolation, these facilities must offer free space that can be used for community pursuits and interests which would not only help to combat loneliness and isolation but would also help build stronger communities and forge intergenerational relationships between younger and older people. Research has shown that these two groups of people can learn a lot from each other therefore it would be beneficial to promote community initiatives such as safety, health and wellbeing and education where there is common interest for both.

(It is important to note that there are key differences when considering social isolation and loneliness in urban and rural areas and that any initiatives and policies are catered to individual needs. It is also necessary to note, that many of the measures presently being looked at are for the prevention of loneliness and isolation as a whole so different measures must be taken into consideration to deal with the problem already at hand. For example, trying to encourage someone who is already socially isolated, and may have been for some time, to interact with others and enter a room full of people, regardless of whether they have common interest or not, would not be a straightforward task)

The SPF believe that local government are key in helping to drive change however at present more and more public services are being withdrawn or limited and so it would appear the emphasis is on saving money and not spending it. This is a great worry to many people and would most probably have a detrimental impact on trying to push plans forward.

In the very recent past, many community services for older people, namely day centres and lunch clubs, have been closed due to lack of funding and resources. These services are often the only social interaction many older people have and instead of helping to combat loneliness and isolation it is in actual fact exacerbating the problem. As such, a more direct approach from central government, perhaps in its distribution of funding to local authorities with the proviso that said funds be used on specific services, may be necessary in order to implement change and to ensure that the government's vision to prevent social isolation and loneliness can be realised.

The government can help empower communities by promoting and encouraging active participation from service users in order that they realise their contribution is relevant and necessary to the long-term sustainability of community initiatives. The government could also go some way in awarding funding to social enterprises and community projects to ensure social connections are forged and that services are being delivered to the community, for the community.

It is important to note that the following key factors be taken into consideration when looking at loneliness and isolation: -

- People suffering from loneliness and isolation are actively involved and are not told what is best for them
- They must be involved in the planning and implementation of how services are devised and delivered to benefit them
- Support must have a degree of flexibility and not be a standardised one model fits all
- Support must be undertaken at all levels of government and in order to deliver the best practice for service users within the community, models and ideals must be set at community level
- Symptoms of loneliness and isolation should be recognised by society as a whole and particularly professional groups. We ask that people working within health and social care sectors be properly trained to recognise signs of loneliness and social isolation amongst specific groups and also to recognise potential triggers and life stage events that may impact on them.
- Recognise that in residential care facilities some particular groups may be more susceptible to feelings of loneliness and isolation, for example, minority ethnic and LGBT+ groups in particular.
- That proper provision is made within residential care facilities to monitor and review people who may be more susceptible to feelings of loneliness and isolation due to health issues.
- Recognise the need for fundamental research into loneliness and social isolation with dynamic application of findings, as too much research activity is focused on short term goals.
- Recognise the need to retain and enhance public transport provision and to retain and extend the scope of entitlement to the concessionary travel scheme.
- Encourage engagement in voluntary work which has been seen to help reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation in many people. However, this should be used as a combative measure in helping people with this issue and not as a replacement for paid employment.
- Encourage participation in faith groups and services which can be a vital resource when aiming to help combat loneliness and isolation.
- Recognise that retirement can have a major effect on loneliness and isolation and there are many problems associated with this. Aside from the emotional aspects this can bring it can also lead to increased risk of heart disease, cancer and depression as well as alcohol abuse, loss of cognitive function and sleep problems.
- Families of older people live on average 117 miles from their elderly parents which precludes regular family visits
- At our consultation meeting in Inverness, we were informed that many family members of older people can only visit their relatives during school holiday periods and then face financial barriers in doing so due to increased costs set by ferry travel operators during what they deem the tourist period.

For the most part, the SPF agrees with the definitions used by the government in this consultation however there are differences between social and emotional loneliness and this could perhaps be highlighted.

In relation to evidence sources, it may be beneficial for the government to look at the reports, studies and publications of The Poverty Alliance for more information on poverty and its direct impact on loneliness and social isolation.

The SPF notes that the Netherlands and Spain have undertaken initiatives when considering loneliness and isolation in older people.

In the Netherlands, a joint initiative was undertaken by the care home Humanitas and the local university whereby students who were finding it difficult to study in often rowdy university conditions were offered an exchange programme whereby they were offered residency and quiet in the care homes provided that they engaged in at least 30 hours of voluntary work per month with residents to help combat loneliness and isolation, This initiative proved successful.

In Barcelona the International Homes and Services for the Ageing, engaged in a similar scheme which proved so popular it was rolled out across 20 cities in Spain.

The SPF are aware that the Nan Mackay Memorial Hall in Pollokshields, Glasgow is a community use facility which has gone some way in building social connections and has been operating for many years. Drawing on the ethos adopted through working with faith groups in the area, particularly the Church of Scotland, the hall is used by all in the community and receives regular funding from several funding bodies to carry out their work as they are deemed a model of good practice.

The SPF have also attached a case study in relation to the contribution trade unions make in helping combat loneliness and social isolation (Attached as Paper 1)

The SPF have been working on a 3-year government funded programme of work in collaboration with the STUC, and through this work have engaged with trade unions, older people's organisations, trades councils and employers to highlight the issue of social isolation and loneliness