EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

ANONYMOUS SUBMISSION

Following the Equal Opportunities Committee call for views regarding Age and Social Isolation, I hope you find the following useful in your deliberations. I will address each of the areas you have listed and I have provided a background note at the end, which I would recommend you bear in mind while considering my responses to the various issues you identified.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Since having my son in the early 90’s I have lived in a town, a small village community and now I am back in a larger town setting again. I can honestly say that I felt more welcome and more socially integrated while living in a small village than in a larger town setting. I currently live in a block of 9 flats in an estate of 20 similar blocks. Out of all those ‘homes’ I interact with one neighbour (who actually moved from the same small village as me at roughly the same time). We have become friends of sorts in that we chat and sometimes go shopping together, but that is about it. Other than her and a few good friends who I see more irregularly now due to their work/location and their own family/partner commitments, I do not really have any other friends and I do not know the names of any of my neighbours and couldn’t tell you what any of them look like. However, when I lived in the smaller village community I knew neighbours in my building, across the street and from various other parts of the village. I actually managed to go out to the local pubs and restaurants and I was a lot happier. My inability to interact in social settings does play a part in my social isolation but so does the complete and utter lack of opportunities for single people of my age in my current area (I have lived here for well over one year now and have not so much as gone to the pictures let alone a bar or any other social type outing).

Impact of social isolation, for instance, loneliness, ill-health

See all of the above! Not only all of that but in the past year or so my health has gone noticeably downhill. I have been tested for everything from Lymphoma to Lupus. My eyesight has gone downhill, I have hypertension, my cholesterol is high, my pituitary gland is producing way too much cortisol, I have had frozen shoulders and I have many other physical aches and pains, as well as on-going depression/anxiety issues. While I admit that my age, my situation at work and my son leaving home are also factors in all of this, being socially isolated means spending a lot of time at home alone and becoming inactive…which means I spend more time at home alone – and another vicious cycle is set in motion. Loneliness at various times of the year (valentines, birthdays, Christmas and new-year for example) can be properly heart breaking. Having everyone around me celebrate ‘The Bells’ for example, while I am lying in bed and trying to shut it all out is a feeling I wouldn’t wish on anyone. I don’t want to ‘bog’ my son down and make him feel guilty because he has a right to his own life but the isolation can be crippling.
Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector)

I truly believe society in general must change its attitude towards single adults, and the single parents who manage to ‘break the mould’ and do make a success out of the situation they find themselves in (by that I mean a small number of children, not relying on benefits and raising good, well-adjusted children). A lot of us are single not through choice and we need extra support, especially at key times of the year and throughout our lives (see my comments above).

I think health care could be adapted and something put in place whereby certain ‘triggers’ as I have mentioned above can be identified and tailored solutions can be put in place. Where people are experiencing very real physical and mental symptoms – without one clear diagnosis – then, taking everything into consideration their age, status and situation would be a good indicator of situations similar to mine. Be warned though, people in my situation learn to be very good at hiding their ‘truth’. Training sessions for doctors (and various other professionals) would be brilliant as they often give the ‘first chance’ in spotting the signs.

However, had someone noticed what was going on in my childhood then that particular hell could have been stopped. Had someone bothered to notice the impact of my son leaving home would be much more severe for me as a single parent already experiencing isolation issues than – say that of a couple who could support each other and could ‘rediscover’ each other again (as portrayed in many TV adverts “cough”) – and, taking account of my age, would understand that I was going to hit rock bottom, then even someone acknowledging that reality would be a massive help. Although I still think some kind of support network should be put in place to address this type of issue.

In terms of ‘third sector’, I think employers also have a duty to understand the impact of all of the above. Although I was lucky enough to be shown some empathy I think employers must take account of all of the above and not allow it to adversely affect someone’s position at work. There have been some very, very dark times for me and I could sure have used some understanding which would have prevented further stress being ‘lumped’ on me at a time when I could not cope with it all.

There has to be more social integration for single adults and/or isolated individuals, I don’t know if that needs to be bespoke housing (although living beside people in a similar situation to mine would offer some support/comfort and would have merit), I wouldn’t want an estate to pop-up and end up being labelled in any way, as REMINDING isolated adults of their situation cannot be a good thing!

All I want is to live in peace and quiet and feel safe in my own home. Stability and safety are really important to me and I do fear living on my own, something that is only growing more evident as time goes on. Maybe more safety features in and around areas where people are experiencing a lot of isolation would be good. At present the majority of homes around me have two adults in residence (some with children) and I have noisy neighbours upstairs from me. My inability to speak out (and I would tell you the exact reason for this, but it would likely put me over the six
pages you are looking for) means I have to endure the noise, which stresses me completely and leaves me feeling isolated even further.

**Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy**
Ensure people affected by isolation issues are involved in, at least, the consultation phase of gathering evidence to inform new policy – if not directly involved in the writing thereof.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**
First of all, you have to get those affected by isolation to come forward (and good luck with that one!) to share their experiences and start talking about what they are going through. If GP’s and other professionals could pick up on the indicators/clues then steps could be taken to bring those affected by isolation ‘out of the dark’ and given them a voice. Be prepared though, isolated individuals are very unlikely to come forward as they can become ‘masters’ at hiding their situation/feelings (although I think maybe I could now, having written some of it down here). A campaign similar to “See-Me” could perhaps be established, based on people’s experiences of isolation? Meantime, some kind of social groups in local areas (worst thing you could do is arrange a social night in a club though….isolated people do not need to go on a singles/dating night – that’s not solely what isolation is about! – and the very people who could benefit from a support group simply wouldn’t join in such an ‘event’.) Maybe Facebook groups and/or twitter pages – but they run the risk of turning into a ‘dating agency’ too!

**Background note**
I am a 47 year old female. Not that old, but isolation can hit people at any age, in many formats and for many, many reasons. For example, I had a very troubled childhood and witnessed considerable violence and alcohol abuse. I also suffered psychological and physical trauma, as well as other types of assaults (I am sure you will know what I mean) throughout my childhood and well into my teens. Unfortunately, that seems to have been a ‘theme’ of the 60’s/70’s but, as a victim, I can concur that the effects are lifelong and have had a very detrimental effect on every aspect of my life.

I have never married as a consequence of my childhood, not because I didn’t want too, rather it is because I do not have the ability to maintain such a relationship – and for that I feel I have been cheated out of my chance at a happy ‘family’ life (like any young girl I used to dream of being a bride and having a family but that dream has never come true for me). However, I do have one grown up son (thankfully not blighted by the same experiences as me) and he is now engaged, he has a career and will marry in 2017 – and I will be eternally grateful that he will have a ‘normal’ life.

Furthermore, on top of the hell that was my childhood I then had to deal with the imposed stigma of being a single parent from the early 90’s onwards. No one wanted a single mother living next door to them and I seriously struggled to find quality housing. Throughout the years when my son was growing up I was subject to various forms of single parent stigma and labelling, on some occasions even outright hostility from complete strangers. I also had to endure further ‘abuse’ from my parents – with my mother claiming she was the victim of my ‘indiscretion’ on more
than one occasion (without even so much as an acknowledgement or a glimmer of remorse for what they put me through in my formative years)!

However, I decided that my son would have a better life and I put myself through college and university and gained a Higher National Diploma and a Bachelor of Arts Degree both in Law. I started my studies when my son started school and I worked part time to make ends meet. My son, now 23, has never claimed any kind of benefit in his life and wouldn’t know how to if I am being honest. He has never been in any kind of trouble, he is also a keen sportsman, he has the confidence I lack, he is very happy and he has such a strong moral code that I am often in awe of him.

Needless to say I feel very angry, not only about my childhood, but also about how I was treated while raising my son. I NEVER deserved the many labels that were thrown at me as a single parent. His father on the other hand, who ‘didn’t want to know’ (a stance that still stands to this very day), should have had many alternative labels thrown at him! I blame society and the general preconceived judgement of me and my son for the hell that I was put through as a single parent – not through choice – and the fact that I had to work harder than the ‘normal’ two parent scenario to ‘prove my worth’. I get really angry when I see children with both parents (working or not) in situ, who get away with running wild and are responsible for most of the anti-social type behaviours I see around my area all the time, yet it was ME who was labelled as being the cause of raising that kind of unruly children and incapable of being a good neighbour! Likewise, (and there are single parents within this ‘group’) something MUST be done to address those who deliberately have huge families and set out to make a ‘career’ out of having children to get maximum benefits and use the system to their advantage.

Due to my childhood and the way society in general has treated me I do not have the confidence to interact in social groups that include the types of people with overtly strong/powerful/confident personalities. I also find it difficult to mix and talk to strangers in general. I tend to ‘remove’ myself to a ‘place of safety’ (normally within my home with the doors locked). This means I isolate myself and I am aware I am doing it, but I can’t stop it and it is a vicious circle.

Unfortunately, I am ‘judged’ at work too and I know people see me as ‘the spinster’. There are a couple of younger females who, simply due to their status being ‘Mrs’, regard themselves as being better than me in some way and they most definitely treat me like the office pariah, for example. I do not have anyone in my current workplace I feel I could talk to, nor could I regard anyone in my current office as friends. Although, I have met colleagues in previous posts who have gone on to become good friends. I was a lot happier at work and in general, back then. Even yet, when I am in a group where I feel comfortable and accepted I am quite happy to ‘let my hair down’, I love to dance, I even partake of karaoke, I love a good laugh and playing practical jokes, I am also a keen artist and I love to surf – waves, that is. I guarantee not one person in my office could tell you any of those things about me, but my friends could. Therefore, there is yet more stigma applied, i.e – spinster/loner etc. and, again, not through choice (believe me, it happens!)

Unfortunately twice now (although in previous positions within my place of employment) I have been subject to serious bullying by the very type of people I
have mentioned here. I was so badly affected by the first experience of bullying that I went through a spell of self harming (I had never done that in my life before – not even in the depths of my hellish childhood) as well as developing serious depression. The second time around I chose to remove myself from the situation before it got to the self-harming stage (although the depression has never really left me from the first ‘round’ of bullying and remains with me to this very day) and I re-deployed to another post. My lack of confidence in social situations and inability to speak out made me an easy target I suppose, and I paid a hefty price both times – both personally and in my career.

Feeling already isolated at work, and although I was happy to see my son progress and meet his future wife (who I am lucky enough to have a great relationship with and I am delighted that she will be the mother of my eventual grandchildren) for example, my son moving out caused me a great deal of heartache and further isolated me. I was suddenly living on my own and it felt like there had been a ‘death’ in my family. For many, many months I isolated myself even further and depression became a major factor for me once again. A mix of my age (mid 40’s at the time), unhealthy work environment and the experience of my son moving out virtually brought my life to an end. Having no friends I could talk to (and let’s face it, would you want to talk to my parents about how you were feeling if you were in my position!) led me down a very lonely and bleak path.

The reason I mention my childhood and experiences as an adult is because all these ‘events’ and experiences have had an impact on my life, and each of the areas you have decided to look at in your consultation as a consequence. Being isolated already due to a range of factors (be it horrible childhood or domestic violence etc.) and then having children leave home and suddenly being completely alone is very traumatic and I know my work (and position at work) suffered as a consequence.

I might be willing to come to the committee to talk about any of this – but it would have to be off camera. I hope you have found my submission useful.

12 February 2015