I read reports this morning regarding your committee’s examination of the impact of loneliness and isolation and wondered if it might be possible for our organisation to input to this inquiry.

I am the Chief Officer of a small charity in Aberdeenshire which works with older isolated people to combat isolation and loneliness.

To give you some background on the project- The Aberdeenshire Signposting Project is essentially a social prescribing service which works with those affected by or at risk of developing low to moderate mental health difficulties to identify and source support, advice and help for the issues in their lives which are affecting their wellbeing. We also run a sister project- The Out and About Project which works to alleviate loneliness and isolation in the over 55’s by helping people referred to make social contacts and build friendships.

The project works with clients to identify those issues in their lives which may be causing, or exacerbating, their mental health difficulties. We also work with clients for whom there is an identified risk of their developing mental health difficulties if the issues in their lives which are causing them difficulty do not get addressed timeously.

The project is staffed by eight staff across the two linked projects- (the Signposting Project itself and the Signposting Out and About Project)- including administrative support, all but two of whom are partially home based. Referrals can be made by anyone but tend to come from third sector organisations, social work and care management teams and primary care providers, which includes occupational therapists and practice nurses and especially GPs with whom ASP has excellent links across Aberdeenshire. There is a specific focus on improving quality of life and promoting positive mental health. People over 55 years are one of its key target groups, as are isolated people in rural areas and those affected by suicidal behaviour.

**Aims and Objectives**

The Project has key outcomes relating to isolation and loneliness as follows:

- **An improvement in the mental health and wellbeing of individuals referred to the project;**
  We meet this outcome by providing an individual service to each client based upon their needs and abilities. We ensure that the client receives a tailored and appropriate service best placed to meet their needs
- **An increase in the level of social contact and support amongst individuals who were feeling isolated or marginalised;**
  We meet this outcome by ensuring that isolated and marginalised clients are given the time to progress to the point where they are ready and comfortable with making contacts and accepting support. By providing on-going support we ensure that clients are able to progress at a pace they are comfortable with and do not feel pressured into taking action. By encouraging clients to access groups and activities appropriate to their needs, whilst ensuring that those
groups we refer them to are able to induct and support the clients during the initial period after contact, we help lessen the likelihood that clients will withdraw due to insecurity.

- Assisting and encouraging individuals to become more self-reliant and empowered to deal with future issues;
  We meet this outcome by ensuring that clients remain the decision makers in the process of working with the project. We always give the clients options; we do not tell the client what they should or should not do. By encouraging the client to take control of the process and to see us as facilitators, we promote a feeling of self-reliance and empowerment.

- An increase in the utilisation of locally available leisure and educational facilities and other activities
  We meet this outcome by continuing to try to find local and community based solutions for clients and by encouraging participation in groups and activities which help develop social contacts in their local area. We will continue to raise awareness of local activities and events through our discussions with clients and referrers and via our events calendar on our website and in our newsletter.

- An increase in the number of individuals engaging within their local communities and building fulfilling relationships.
  We meet this outcome by continuing to promote and develop the Out and About Project as a source of help and support for marginalised and isolated older people in Aberdeenshire as a whole.

- Assisting older clients in remaining independent and living at home for longer.
  We meet this outcome by sourcing and securing appropriate help and support tailored to fit the clients’ needs in remaining independent and by sourcing support and help which is available to clients at home where possible.

In working towards these outcomes we also have key objectives in place as follows:

- To promote the welfare of the Client;
- To respect the rights of Clients - rights of personal freedom, choice in daily living, dignity and self-respect, independence, privacy and confidentiality, protection from risk of harm, exploitation and violence, and the exercise of free will;
- To assist with any disability or illness which Clients may have, in a manner which reflects the above two statements;
- To enable Clients to be in charge of their own lives and make their own decisions including decisions to take risks;
- To involve Clients, carers and relatives where appropriate in decision-making which concerns them;
- To assess and respond to the changing needs of Clients;
- To take into account the social, cultural and religious context of Clients’ circumstances when making decisions with them and
- To use Clients’ own network of support as much as possible.

We can provide case studies and insights into the effects of isolation and loneliness, specifically in older people in rural areas.

Karen Nicoll
Chief Officer
Aberdeenshire Signposting Project
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