EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION
SUBMISSION FROM GET2GETHER

PREVALENCE OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Get2gether, an independent charity, was formed by four major Scottish charities Thistle Foundation, Garvald Edinburgh, Freespace and Elcap who have collectively over 100 years of groundbreaking innovative practice in working with adults with disabilities. They saw however, that one of the unintended consequences of supporting disabled adults in their own tenancies was social isolation. The service users said clearly they wanted what others take for granted, access to ordinary activities in ordinary places based on their interests. What held them back was lack of knowledge of what Edinburgh had to offer, fear of rejection, fear of places being inaccessible and fear of being bullied. Knowing there will be people there to say ‘hello’ makes entering a pub, cinema or whatever much less frightening. The harmful and negative effects of loneliness and social isolation are now well researched and understood. Adults with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to suffer social isolation than the general population.

The project began with a launch party in May 2013 at the Corn Exchange in Edinburgh. Over 300 people danced the night away and had what was described by one person as ‘the best night of my life’. Since then we have developed a programme of events based mainly in Edinburgh which reflect the diverse interests of our membership. Opera to Jam House, Clubbing to Salsa, ping pong to roller derby – we’ve tried them all. We have a small staff team of 2 part time workers and a steering group of up to 10 members who meet monthly to co-produce the programme. In February 2014 we began a collaboration with the CAV nightclub in Edinburgh which means we now offer inclusive bi monthly clubbing experience to up to 300 people. We also offer sessional employment opportunities to 2 disabled djs.

We are introducing our members to a range of cultural and leisure activities around Edinburgh. In doing this we are then encouraging our members to continue to visit these venues independently of us – many of our members now feel confident enough to do this. The venues have been overwhelmingly positive in their inclusion of our members. As staff members my colleague and I take a ‘light touch’ approach – letting people find their own way in the activity. We support our members to build resilience, not dependence. This has led to members getting prizes at Wiff Waff table tennis at OOTB, being joined on the dance floor by strangers at the Mercure disco, mixing with gay men and lesbian women at the Gay Pride march and having new food experiences at the Mosque Kitchen and Sushi bar.

More importantly however, members report they have an increased sense of well being, a real excitement when the new events newsletter comes through their letter
box, a wider circle of friends and a sense of anticipation as the club nights approach. Many of our members have also met romantic partners. We all know the path of love does not always run smooth and this is another life lesson that some have had to learn but as one member said:

‘I’m now living my life rather that enduring it.’

IMPACTS OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

Despite many changes and advances made over the last two decades to remove barriers for people with learning and other disabilities to live full lives in their communities, a significant number of people still have limited opportunities to meet other people and form friendships and relationships outside formal care and activity settings.

Following the publication of ‘Relationships, Sex and Sexuality’ by the Altrum group in 2006 http://www.partnersforinclusion.org/documentdownload.axd?documentresourceid=3 further research was carried out by the four founding organisations. The results indicated that there was a need for opportunities for people to enjoy both new and familiar social activities around where they live, and to do this with people who experience similar barriers. Many of the people asked also want the opportunity to meet someone who, like them, wants to be in a relationship, and they want to feel safe about doing all this.

Practical experience gained through our 18 month pilot phase has demonstrated a larger than anticipated untapped demand. We have members from a large number of different service providers outwith our founding organisations. Less than a third of our members come from our founding organisations, which, through our pilot phase, has shown us the scale of demand and interest there is for this. Since we have been operating there has been approximately 1600 unique attendances at events – which means 1600 crucial social contacts.

These aspirations tie in with findings noted in the Joint Lothian Learning Disability Strategy’ (2009) http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/16042/joint_lothian_learning_disability_strategy in which people said that they want to maintain friendships, and social and family ties and to access general services, and specialist ones when these are required.

The Scottish Government’s national strategy - Keys to Life http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/06/1123 : Improving quality of life for people with a learning disability (2013) states how it is a priority of key importance for people with learning disabilities to have meaningful relationships, love and friendship. And although it is essential for their wellbeing many disabled people find achieving this very difficult. The strategy recommends that at a preventative level we need to develop and embed clear delivery models with specific aims and outcomes for relationships and friendships. This will develop good practice
throughout Scotland so that people with learning disabilities have more places to go to have fun and feel safe. The strategy recognises that some people will need support to meet others and build relationships to achieve a sense of belonging and social inclusion and that this is important in realising the potential of people with learning disabilities to be all they can be. The strategy states that:

“Many people with learning disabilities want that chance to have a romantic, sexual and long-term relationship. The Same as you? (1990) evaluation tells us, however, that only one third of those interviewed were able to name at least one close friend. So there is a clear need for people with learning disabilities to be given opportunities to have friends and all the benefits this can bring.”

We work cooperatively with other organisations across Scotland including LGBT centre, BEMAS dates'n'mates and dnm2. Our members’ use their experiences to post on ‘Euan’s guide’ commenting on accessible venues across Edinburgh and the Lothians. [www.eaunsguide.org.uk](http://www.eaunsguide.org.uk)

BEST PRACTICE

Get2gether has recently won an award from Directory of Social Change in London. We were selected from charities across the UK for this prestigious award in the category of ‘New Enterprise’.

Our core principles are simple:

- Everyone wants to be loved, respected and to belong
- Everyone should have the same opportunities for love and friendship.
- Meeting other people should be uncomplicated and accessible
- People benefit when we include everyone, we all need to be heard
- Increased independence and resilience makes us all feel better
- People should lead the life they want

Our approach is one of ‘light touch’ involvement in real life situations. What this means in practice is that disabled people are encouraged to communicate with each other directly – not through support workers. This, we believe, leads to people building resilience, not dependence.

Loneliness can only be tackled by people taking control of their own lives and living them. We operate an approach of adult to adult – as in Transactional Analysis. This ‘I’m OK – You’re OK’ means that people feel more in control and ‘heard’ as adults.

EFFECTIVE AWARENESS RAISING WITHIN COMMUNITIES

We believe that adults with disabilities want what everyone else wants, the freedom to do ordinary things in ordinary places.
Taking part in the vast cultural and social opportunities available in Edinburgh means that communities are introduced to our members in a real and effortless manner. One of our members has become an avid pool player and now independently organizes a league of similarly interested people he has met through get2gether. They use existing pool halls to play two or three times a week. Before this involvement this man was isolated, lonely, very depressed and unhappy. He now feels a new zest for life and a real interest in other people. They are now well known in the venues they visit and are a welcome addition to the pool community.

Marion Smith
Project coordinator
get2gether
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