EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION
SUBMISSION FROM HEALTHY VALLEYS

Background

Healthy Valleys is a community led health improvement organization located in South Lanarkshire. The aim of Healthy Valleys is to reduce health inequalities and promote positive lifestyle change for people who experience economic and social exclusion. The organisation is embedded within the local community and over the years has established productive relationships with local residents, statutory partners, and other third sector providers. Healthy Valleys is well aware of the challenges faced in delivering services in a rural area. The South Lanarkshire RCOP partnership recognized there was a gap in existing service provision where older people experiencing complex health issues were often at risk of becoming isolated, resulting in a damaging impact on their health, wellbeing and independence. In response to this need we developed a volunteer led project namely Re-Connect.

Re-Connect was established to support isolated older people aged over 50 living in their own homes in the rural Clydesdale area of South Lanarkshire who are experiencing issues which increase isolation and therefore making it difficult for them to live independently.

Prevalence of social isolation in rural settings

South Lanarkshire’s population is ageing faster than Scotland as a whole. In 2011 37.6% (118K) of South Lanarkshire’s residents were aged over 50 and this is forecast to increase to 42.2% (137K) by 2021. The National Records of Scotland Office projects that over the 2010-2035 period the number of single households aged 50+ in South Lanarkshire is projected to rise, primarily due to a rise in the number of single person households – up 13330 or 46% over the period.

Around two-thirds of single pensioner households are on low incomes. South Lanarkshire pensioner households have an average income around 10% lower than pensioners in Scotland as a whole. In 2011 South Lanarkshire around a third of households were living in Fuel Poverty, spending at least 10% of their household income on energy significantly above the Scottish average. Around 10% of households in South Lanarkshire were in Extreme Fuel Poverty, spending at least 20% of their household income on energy.

Over a quarter of those in South Lanarkshire with a long term condition are aged 66 or over. The highest rate of long term health / disability in South Lanarkshire was in the 55-65 age group, where 60% had some form of long term problem. In the 66 and over group the rate was 55.3%. Emergency hospital admissions of those 65 and over have been rising in South Lanarkshire in recent years. In South Lanarkshire the rates are greater for both admissions and bed days than in Scotland as a whole.

Impacts of social isolation

Research has demonstrated conclusively that there is a direct link between older people’s isolation and their physical and mental health. Negative impacts include:
- Generally decreased feeling of vitality, less energy and feeling tired more often
- Greater likelihood of chronic illness such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes etc.
Greater likelihood of unplanned or emergency hospital admission
More frequent bouts of sickness such as colds or flu and longer recovery times
Longer recovery times for injury
Regular feelings of loneliness
Increased likelihood of depression
Decreased level of happiness and satisfaction with life in general
Shorter life spans

Re-Connect has been developed in partnership with older people, it promotes a preventative approach and offers more than activities and information encourages and supports older people to change behaviours and adopt healthier lifestyles.

The Re-Connect Partners recognise the effects of social and emotional loneliness on physical and mental health and wellbeing are extensive. Re-Connect has been developed in partnership with older people, it promotes a preventative approach and offers more than activities and information encourages and supports older people to change behaviours and adopt healthier lifestyles.

There are many reasons why older people experience isolation and do not take advantage of the services and supports available within our communities. Some older people do not know what is available; some find it difficult to deal with issues like public transport, while for others low levels of confidence and self-esteem make it impossible to access opportunities. Re-Connect recognises this and will work with each older person to address and overcome whatever is preventing them from living happier more fulfilled lives.

Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector)

Re-Connect is a form of early intervention and prevention which draws on recognised national and international best practice to bring together a range of interventions which will ensure the best possible outcomes for older people. Specifically Re-Connect offers a combination of:

- Flexible practical, social and emotional support for individuals
- Encouraging and supporting social activity and wider community engagement
- Information and signposting to relevant services and supports
- Facilitating group interventions / activities
- Health promotion to raise awareness, increase knowledge and promote independence

In addition research by Age UK and others emphasises the importance of including older people in all stages of the development and implementation of interventions and of using community resources to build capacity. Research also highlights the importance of active rather than passive social contact i.e. service users encouraged and supported to develop meaningful social roles and community engagement and not just home visiting.

Re-Connect empowers and improves the lives of older people other services in South Lanarkshire cannot reach, creating an equitable service across the whole of South Lanarkshire. Re-Connect was developed following a detailed review of existing services and supports available which identified a number of excellent services and supports for older people but recognised that there are a significant number of older people in Clydesdale not accessing the services and opportunities available to them in their community. We have also worked closely with older people who have played a central role in the development of the Re-Connect service.
Re-Connect Volunteers provides practical, emotional and social support to empower and improve the lives of older people. From the outset Re-Connect takes an asset based approach by working with older people to identify their strengths and build on these to set appropriate goals. Re-Connect works collaboratively with older people to identify their own unique strengths and challenges. Re-Connect works with older people helping them to figure out what they want and then assists them with identifying the steps needed to achieve those objectives.

**Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy.**

Third Sector needs to be actively involved in the development and implementation of national and local policy. Must be represented at Locality Planning forums and redesign of statutory services. Community Planning Partners recognizing that South Lanarkshire’s voluntary sector is a key player in addressing many of our communities’ social issues and that the voluntary sector often works with the hardest to reach and most vulnerable individuals. Voluntary sector service providers represented on National forums and Working/ Task groups.

Advocating, raising awareness amongst policy makers, supporting organisations and rural communities themselves to take control of issues affecting them.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

Re-Connect has been designed to harness the creativity and enthusiasm of South Lanarkshire’s communities and unlock the potential of local support networks. Healthy Valleys has a proven track record of effective community consultation and engagement and this has is demonstrated through successfully securing the long term support and commitment of local volunteers. The Re-Connect project will continue to build community capacity to support isolated older people maintain their independence, develop social networks and reengage with their community.

**In conclusion**

Isolation is a growing problem in the rural areas of Scotland due to a range of socio-economic and cultural trends. However, we know that projects like Re-Connect are the most effective in reducing rural isolation, as they impact directly on the lives of older people by increasing contact with others and improving access to local services.

Healthy Valleys
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