Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

A meta-analysis conducted by Holt-Lunstad, Smith and Layton (2010) determined the association between social relationships and their influence on mortality risk. Results across 148 studies found there is a 50% increase in survival rate for individuals with stronger social relationships. Further analysis suggested that the impact on the effect size of social relationships and mortality risk was similar to other established risk factors for mortality, such as smoking and alcohol consumption. The effect was even greater when compared with other well-established risk factors such as obesity, physical activity and air pollution. It is clear that, until recently, we have underestimated the significance of social connectedness and social relationships as a key component in maintaining health.

In addition, local research within Ayrshire & Arran supports the meta-analysis referenced above and local findings support the theory that the more social connections people have with each other, the less likely they are to experience ill health and have better wellbeing, the corollary of which suggests that those with poor social connections will experience higher rates of ill health and poor mental wellbeing.

As part of the process of gathering views for this response, discussions took place with some colleagues in the three local authorities in Ayrshire, a range of NHS staff and 5 staff who are employed specifically to work on developing social cohesion, whose job title is “community builders”. Their views were sought on the prevalence of social isolation in Ayrshire & Arran (A&A). North Ayrshire Council’s (NAC) Community Development team (CDT) have a focus on capacity building amongst older people aged 65+. They frequently visit sheltered housing and have found these complexes to have the highest prevalence of social isolation. Most of the residents have reported they have either never met or have little interaction with their neighbours and their communal areas are underused. The CDT thought the prevalence of social isolation significantly increased after the removal of wardens within these complexes, as wardens often organised day trips, lunches, social events and overall care of the residents.

As referenced above, a programme is being implemented in Ayrshire & Arran which employs a team of Community Builders. The aim of this programme, known as AHEAD (AyrsHirE Asset Development), is to support the growth of local activity and community cohesion within Ayrshire by using an Assets Based Approach. Asset-based approaches have been found to encourage social connectedness within communities. The teams work with a number of older and young people and have noted how socially isolated people can become when, for a variety of reasons, they lack connectedness within their communities. The Community Builders have also identified the development of a “transit mentality” in some disadvantaged
communities where some people do not want to live in one area for too long which further prevents individuals connecting and getting to know their neighbours.

**Impacts of social isolation, for instance loneliness, ill-health**

North Ayrshire Council (NAC) has worked with a number of older adults and regularly witnesses the impacts of social isolation. Examples of these include:

- Decreased mobility
- Poor mental health and wellbeing e.g. depression, low self-esteem and self worth, lack of confidence, anxiety
- Lack of connectedness with their community including intergenerational connections
- Increased likelihood of going into care
- Increased number of falls
- Poor education
- Becoming a carer
- Retirement
- Diminishing size of social networks

The majority of these points were reiterated amongst the community builders but they also witness the impact social isolation has on attitudes and behaviours. For example, they felt it can be difficult to help people to develop a positive approach towards local community activity. They often find it challenging to encourage people to leave their homes to attend an event.

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

Colleagues in NAC shared two approaches that they have used to increase community connectedness: increasing mobility of older people and intergenerational engagement. They have found this to improve general and mental health such as increasing confidence and reducing anxiety. During 2011-2012, the older people’s activity programme was established. It is a multiagency partnership which targets those aged 65+. The programme recognises the benefits of life-long learning through encouraging participation in a range of social and educational opportunities designed to stimulate challenge. The programme included a range of activities such as Art, Arts and Crafts, Computing, Exercise, Drama and Reminiscence work. During the programme children from Greenwood Academy spent some time interacting with the older participants.

Pre and post evaluation found that:
- 90% felt more positive about the future,
- 88.5% felt more part of their community,
- 91% felt more confident,
- 85% learnt new skills or a new interest.
Comments from participants:
- ‘You can learn a lot from older women if you listen’
- ‘I’ve learned that they are just the same as us’
- ‘I like coming for the company’
- ‘It has made me more active’
- ‘I would be interested in attending again as I feel isolated without these courses’

North and South Ayrshire Councils and NHS Ayrshire & Arran, in partnership with Impact Arts, have also previously organized 25 Craft Cafes for those aged 55+ in order to improve health and well being, reduce loneliness and isolation, support independent living, support renewal of social connections and implement a volunteer programme. Members were given the opportunity to engage with professional artists, to participate in intergenerational work, develop entrepreneurial skills and were also offered advice, information and support on issues, delivered through local partnerships with key agencies. This project recruited a number of participants and trained and mentored 8 volunteers over 6 months. The group was extended for a further 6 months.

NAC have also funded local choir groups as they believe that singing is one of the best confidence boosters amongst the elderly as it improves their breathing and builds enthusiasm. Age UK and NAC support Luminate, a national festival which celebrates older performers, artists and participants in relation to the creative arts and ageing. This programme has been found to increase the number of older people enjoying art activities bringing them social, economic and health benefits with the wider communities and encourages intergenerational connections.

NAC also actively source local clubs within their area and work with them to help build their profile in order to become constituted (if desired) as sustainability is a key issue. These local groups are often voluntary so NAC help strengthen the group’s relationships in order for groups to continue after funding becomes limited.

Lastly, NAC also support the Scottish Older People's Assembly (SOPA) in order to improve empowerment of the older population so that any concerns they have will be heard.

East Ayrshire Council (EAC) also has various programmes within the community to promote social connectedness; for example, The Out and About Initiative is a programme focused on 16-30 year olds with mental health issues. This is a one to one support programme aimed at increasing individual confidence, managing their health issue and increasing connectedness and inclusion in the community. EAC also holds Health Walks and the Home Walking Programme which are designed to encourage older people to become more active however they also promote social connectedness as it brings people from all over Ayrshire to do something they enjoy and at their own level. EAC also hold lunch clubs open 5 days a week across various sites in East Ayrshire, which people can come along and socialize and also get something to eat. In addition, Bingo days, coffee mornings, brunch clubs and events are held, aimed at encouraging older people to come and build their network and confidence. Lastly, as part of Vibrant communities, EAC also hold adult literacy
and learning programmes which aim to improve skills, qualifications and confidence which are possible inhibitors to social connectedness within the community.

A best practice idea shared by the community builders working in the AHEAD programme was in relation to improving housing for those living in poor conditions and disadvantaged areas. They have found a number of residents move away from areas such as Fullarton – where they may have lived for many years - into better housing conditions. However people still frequently return to visit the local activity clubs.

The community builders also use an assets based approach in which they actively go out into their communities and speak to various individuals. They find out their interests, what they are good at and encourage them to go to various clubs. They often work with them to organise their own event/clubs within the community. For example, one of the local residents now coaches the local football team. Another example is a number of local residents getting together to paint the fences of those less able in order to brighten up their area.

Another best practice idea shared by local researchers was to adopt a life course approach to tackle social isolation. As can be seen, social isolation can occur at any age and therefore interventions and support from pre-birth to old age would be beneficial. Around 28% of adults within A&A report volunteering as a means by which to improve social connectedness. Research has found that doing things for others is associated with positive mental health. Currently, volunteering tends to be more prevalent in less deprived areas.

Another example of best practice is within NHS Ayrshire & Arran in relation to the Greening the NHS Estate. In 2013, one woodland walk was upgraded and another path was developed on the Ayr /Ailsa Hospital Campus. Funding was secured to create a third woodland walk and improve access around the site for walkers/dog walkers and cyclists as well as creating outdoor teaching spaces and installing seating, signposting and information boards. This can prevent social isolation as it gives people a safe environment to exercise which not only improves their mental health but also offers opportunities to meet others while out and about.

Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

The community builders suggested that raising the profile of local clubs and initiatives is important, as they often find that people do want to contribute to their community but struggle to find ways in which they can help.

Tackling transportation issues should be considered. The elderly Public Partnership Forum raised the issue of transportation to and from community clubs. North Ayrshire Council currently have a community transport scheme in which they source and use any local buses that go underused to drive their older residents to their local community clubs. South Ayrshire also has the Kyle Community Minibus, funded through the Change Fund, which can be rented by older people and their communities at a cheaper price in order to travel in the area.

Increasing awareness of Capacity Building; many clubs need a lot of support at the early stages of their club e.g. help with funding issues, development of networking
skills and building the profile of their group. After some time, groups learn to manage and are able to sustain, reducing the amount of support by support staff. Anecdotal feedback suggests the social return of investment from this approach is considerable.

Improvement of sheltered housing and improvement of general housing in deprived areas. For example, reduce the amount of temporary housing by changing housing policy. Improving conditions will make areas more desirable and encourage more people to stay within their area and reduce the “transit mentality”.

Increase social connectedness and inclusive communities by making communities more welcoming for example reducing the stigma of “rough” areas which potentially causes individuals to be scared to leave their house. Police community officers and youth wardens could be reinvested within communities. This could promote connectedness within the community as they are providing safe environments and encouraging people to get involved in local activities and looking after their community.

Changing the way in which data is gathered to evaluate a project for example by making it more organic. Using more qualitative and longitudinal data to gather resident and patient stories and feedback regarding what people do within their community/what they are involved in, their interests etc. In addition, more local and sub-national data could be published to improve research and methods for intervention. For example, within the A&A Mental Health and Wellbeing Population report, national data was more accessible than published local data.

Increasing financial security and creating mentally healthy environments for working and learning. Nationally, female and younger households are less likely to be managing financially, along with households in most deprived areas and single parent households. Living in such circumstances makes it less likely that individuals will be engaged in their communities.

Involving communities during policy development for example the Netherthird, Craigens and Skerrington Community Action plan 2015-2020 conducted a community wide household survey to find out the views and ideas of the local residents on how their community could further be developed. This empowers individuals within the community and, as a result, they become more invested and engaged, which can prevent social isolation.

Lastly, Collins (2014) provides some examples on what practitioners in health and social care can do to tackle social isolation:

- Be aware of the issue
- Be aware of the range of supports available and let others know about the support you provide
- Involve older people in the planning of services
- Be adaptable
- Enhance personal independence rather than providing a service
- The issue of transport

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**
NAC has been very proactive in awareness-raising. For example, over 200 questionnaires were sent out within communities to find out what individuals were interested in. From this, the Council began to consider local events that could be held within communities.

NAC has also set up “Carena”, an independent website for individuals and carers within North Ayrshire which provides information on social care services and support within the community, leisure and activity groups, local events and news. This is used more by younger people, however IT classes are being set up for those older individuals wanting to learn how to use a computer and the internet.

NAC also promotes capacity building through community interfaces, elderly forums, by advertising in the local community newsletters, word of mouth, various stakeholder events and often contributes to the ‘What’s on’ directory. The directory was created by the Ayrshire Community Trust and provides a list of all the events, clubs and groups running within the community over the course a year.

North Ayrshire in partnership with NHS A&A and Impact Arts successfully promoted the Craft Cafes with the use of Impact Arts in-house Communications team who created publicity and a press release which was shared in local community facilities such as doctor’s surgeries, health centres, community centres and local churches. They also used the local radio station and social media sites in order to reach a wider audience. They contacted relevant partner agencies such as social services, Job Centre Plus, Look Ahead, Wisegroup, and Sheltered Housing. Furthermore, NAC often also link in with various primary schools and other external groups such as Active+.

East Ayrshire has a dedicated publicity and event management team to promote the work they do in the community and raise awareness. They also have the “Buzz”, a local “what’s on” booklet which is distributed in schools, libraries and community groups in order to spread the word on the activities available for young and older people within the area.

The Community Builders in the AHEAD programme actively go out into the community and speak to people slowly building trust. They also raise awareness through networking at events and using social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter to upload blogs and information about the community as a whole.

Anne Clarke  
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3 Collins (2014) Preventing loneliness and social isolation in older people, IRISS Insights, No 25