Orkney Equality Forum welcomes the opportunity to respond to the above Consultation into issues around age and social isolation. The Forum is an active group consisting of representatives of the organisations within Orkney Community Planning Partnership as well as individuals with an interest in specific areas of equalities.

This Consultation was of particular interest to us given the remoteness of some of our communities within Orkney. Orkney Community Planning Partnership’s Equality and Diversity Strategy recognises that peripherality – being on the edge – is an equality issue in Orkney because access to goods and services can depend very much on where you live.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

Social isolation can be high in rural locations where there is limited access to public transport and either no access to or an inability to use private transport. Older people can be particularly isolated because they have lost a loved one or if their family has moved away. Sometimes people move to Orkney because of the isolation, for example to live on one of our outer isles, but when things go wrong they often find themselves in a difficult situation as they have no local family connections and have not integrated within their local community - and the isolation they sought becomes part of the problem. The situation is likely to be exacerbated if they have existing physical or mental health issues.

It can also be difficult for families who move to Orkney to integrate into their new community, particularly for a parent who is at home alone during the day with young children and without access to a car or friends and family in the area.

Social isolation is not limited to our remote areas. Voluntary Action Orkney run an Adult Befriending Service. The number of referrals from Kirkwall, our main town, highlights that social isolation is also experienced in our urban areas. The Service currently has 30 matches and a waiting list.

Social isolation has also been identified as an issue for young people. Young people who live in the country can be isolated because of a lack of access to services which are ‘Kirkwall centric’. The Youth Café and the Pickaquoy Sports and Leisure Centre, which includes the cinema, are all in Kirkwall for example. Even young people who live on a bus route can find any activities they want to involve themselves in may not fit around the bus timetable. This could mean they are not able to attend at all or that they can travel to Kirkwall but there is no suitable bus back home. For those young people who do not live on a bus route, including those who live in our outer isles, the problem is even greater. An increasing number of young people are not engaging with any services at all and the local Connect Project have added these ‘invisible’ young people as a new strand to their work.
People who are experiencing mental ill health can easily become isolated regardless of age and location, particularly when a diagnosis of a mental illness becomes known in the community that they normally interact with. Friends and family can be unsure of how to support someone, or feel awkward talking about the subject, and so avoid contact, whilst others can be afraid of being associated with the person. All of this adds to the stigma that surrounds mental health and this is a major element in the reasons behind isolation becoming a problem. Orkney Blide Trust, a community organisation that provides a range of services to support those affected by mental ill health, tell us that of the 25 people supported through their housing support service in the past year (April 2014 to date) thirteen people (52%) would be categorised as being isolated.

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

Older people often experience a decrease in physical and mental wellbeing and this can be exacerbated by social isolation. They may make more frequent visits to their GP, often for social rather than medical reasons. Their limited access to shops may result in a lower quality of nutrition. They can go on to experience loss of confidence, self-esteem and coping skills, leading to an inability to engage with their peer group and local community, which increases their isolation.

For younger people social isolation can impact on their employability options. They may find themselves in the position where they ‘live in their bedroom’ and lose contact with the outside world, resulting in them disengaging with their peers. The isolation can also lead to alcohol and substance misuse.

People who are isolated may also develop mental illness. Among the people supported by Orkney Blide Trust are some who have been diagnosed with agoraphobia and others with anxiety issues. People experiencing isolation in tandem with mental ill health may be unable to attend appointments in relation to health or benefits. As a result they could experience sanctions or even lose benefits altogether. Agencies such as the Citizens Advice Bureau can help with benefit claims, but accessing this help can be made more difficult by an inability to attend appointments. The inability to leave home to buy food on a regular basis can lead to a poor diet as food stocks run low. Those experiencing anxiety may keep their curtains closed and rarely get the benefit of natural light. People who had previously been in employment could become de-skilled over time. This in turn will result in a decrease in self-esteem and confidence. All of these will further impact on their mental well-being.

Most of the impacts experienced by people with mental ill health are exacerbated by the lack of public transport to remote and rural areas. In Orkney the main services are located within the main town of Kirkwall, reducing their accessibility from the more remote and rural parts of Orkney, but especially affecting those who live on the outer isles.
Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives (including housing, health, third sector)

A range of work is being carried out in Orkney, some in partnership as part of the Orkney Community Plan (which includes our Single Outcome Agreement) and other activities and initiatives being run by partner organisations.

The third sector plays a large part in helping to create a strong, caring community in Orkney. As the local third sector interface, Voluntary Action Orkney supports this by bringing together resources and expertise and working with the community. A high number of third sector services for older people are available through Voluntary Action Orkney. These include Lunch Clubs; Intergenerational Projects, Intergenerational Befriending; Volunteering and Supported Volunteering; Peer to Peer Support in Engaging People; and Developing Older Volunteers. As well as delivering one-to-one and intergenerational befriending sessions, the service now provides support to older people either on their return from a hospital stay or to enable them to remain in their own home without the need to go into hospital. This service is delivered by a team of trained and dedicated volunteers.

Voluntary Action Orkney also have a range of services for younger people and these include: Young Persons’ Befriending Project; Saltire Volunteering Award; Supported Volunteering; Peer to peer support in engaging people; Connect Project (developed one to one bespoke training programme and pre-training support to engage the hardest to reach young people); Crossroads Young Carers; Y-people; and the Youth Café.

Increased capacity through Voluntary Action Orkney has allowed more focus on volunteering, which can give structure, direction and meaning to people’s lives. It can lead to widening social networks, improving vocational and interpersonal skills and, in some instances, helping individuals to gain access to employment, education and training. Voluntary Action Orkney and Employability Orkney tell us that, during the year 2013/14, 22 volunteers moved into employment. Orkney has one of the highest rates of volunteering in Scotland, and our young people are keeping up the tradition. Working closely with schools and other partners, Voluntary Action Orkney promotes recruits and supports young people from the age of 12. Young volunteers can gain nationally recognised Saltire Awards which acknowledge an individual’s volunteering efforts and the contribution they make to their local communities. One example is a group of young people who volunteer as ‘Friday Friends’ at Eunson Kloss, Very Sheltered Housing. In addition, the Community Learning and Development Service has delivered high numbers of quality accreditations from a variety of awards from Duke of Edinburgh to Youth Achievement and Dynamic Youth. There is now a marked increase in the percentage of school leavers entering employment, further education, volunteering or training.

In a Community Planning Partnership initiative involving eight different agencies, Orkney College has piloted a full time life skills course, ‘Pathways to Independence’, for students with complex support needs. Personal support is provided by Orkney Health and Care and course modules are delivered by College staff and partner agencies. The initial intake has performed so well that it is planned to expand the course from one year to two.
Orkney has the fastest-increasing population of older people anywhere in Scotland, and this is forecast to age dramatically over the next 25 years. Within community planning we are actively planning to keep people healthy, independent and engaged with their community for as long as possible - one of our new strategic priorities is ‘Positive Ageing’, recognising this growth in our older population. Within the Orkney Community Plan we acknowledge that Orkney’s older population already contribute enormously to the community and we promote positive ways for everybody to get out and about, and have the opportunity to participate in learning, sport, leisure and volunteering activities, against the day when they might need some support themselves. We have set targets around usage of ‘fifty plus’ activities and registered members over 65 at the Pickaquoy Leisure Centre and these have both increased standing at 5,727 and 691 respectively during the year 2013/14. The number of new people aged 60+ registered to volunteer in past 12 months is also on target.

Orkney Blide Trust provides a one to one housing support service that works with people to increase their social activity, supporting them to reduce their isolation by attending community events and groups. Additionally, the housing support worker provides help with budgeting, attending appointments etc. The Trust also provides a range of services that people can access, including:

- A drop-in, open 365 days a year
- Out and About activities such as walking trips
- Sports activities
- A variety of activities such as crafts, photography etc
- Blidehoose, a clubhouse where people are given meaningful work that contributes to the running of the organisation
- Support to access training and educational courses

The common theme in providing successful services is giving people meaningful things to do; activities that help increase self-esteem and confidence. The Trust’s clubhouse fulfils this function. This is a model that works, but in the view of the Forum there are too few clubhouses being supported in Scotland.

**Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy**

We firmly believe people with lived experience of mental ill health and isolation should contribute to this debate. Campaigns such as ‘See me’ help challenge the stigma around mental health, but not the effects that result such as isolation.

It is important to show older people in a positive light. Older people can contribute to their community and, within third sector organisations, older people are often the driving force behind these groups as board or committee members etc. The use of pre-retirement courses would also encourage older people to get involved in their local communities by making them aware of what services are available and the range of opportunities open to them, such as volunteering.

We believe isolation is an equality issue and we hope that reduction of isolation, including addressing public transport issues, will form part of the work of community planners in the course of the Community Empowerment agenda.
Local work on activities such as befriending do much to reduce social isolation. It would be beneficial if local authority areas had funding set aside specifically for delivering such services.

Maximisation of opportunities for community groups to access and use community assets and venues would be of benefit to all communities, particularly in remote areas, whilst at the same time ensuring facilities were utilised to their full potential.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

While social media is increasingly becoming a preferred method of communication it is not always suitable, particularly in relation to sensitive issues such as mental health where people may feel exposed – although links to self-help sites or support groups can help.

Orkney Blide Trust has found that placing posters in GPs’ surgeries, public meeting places etc has been successful in attracting people to their service either directly through self-referrals or via referrals from other professionals. They have also found the local newspaper is receptive to articles on social or health issues.

Voluntary Action Orkney has established a joint statutory/third sector website for older people [http://www.goio.co.uk/](http://www.goio.co.uk/) and published a Directory of Services for Older People which is distributed to communities, older people, statutory and third sector practitioners and managers. It has also developed and published a Directory of Services for Children and Young People.

We look forward with interest to seeing the report produced by the Committee on its findings later in 2015.

Frazer Campbell  
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