Background

Pilmeny Development Project (PDP) is a local voluntary organisation which has been operating in the Leith area of Edinburgh since 1979. The project was formed and is managed by local residents. The overall aim of PDP is to support local residents and groups through encouraging appropriate self-help initiatives towards the identification and resolution of their problems. PDP provides services for all ages with a focus on young and older people. For the purposes of this paper the concentration will be placed upon older people’s services. PDP aims to work with local older people and carers to develop and improve the range of provision and services in Leith. PDP has developed a range of Older People’s groups and projects including: Older Women’s Positive Health & Wellbeing Group, A weekly ‘Drop In’ for socially Isolated older people, an Older Men’s Health and Wellbeing Group, North East Edinburgh Care Action Group (NEECAG) Older People’s Forum, NE Edinburgh Community Connecting Project, Leith Timebank, New Spin & ‘Generations’ Intergenerational Projects, Leith Anti – Sectarianism Project several other partnership initiatives. One of the main aims throughout all of PDP projects, is to reduce isolation and promote participation and inclusion for older people in need of support. Each project has specific ways in which they tackle social exclusion which will be discussed in more detail throughout this paper.

Prevalence of Social Isolation in Urban settings

Within Scotland there is a growing older population which is due to older people living longer. Over one third of a million people in Scotland are over 75 years old. In an inner city, urban setting, such as Leith, many older people may not know the people living around them, due to the number of people renting property, who move on within short periods of time or increased levels of ‘buy to lets’ and student accommodation. Many older people may live alone due to the bereavement of a loved one or no longer have family members living nearby because they have emigrated or have had to move away to find work. These factors, along with increasing poor health, can contribute to the likelihood of those older people becoming socially isolated. Older people often wish to stay living in their home rather than moving into care, but sometimes this can contribute increased social isolation. Older people who are suffering from increased poor health or disability often find themselves in inappropriate housing (e.g. top floor of an inner city tenement) and unable to get out, thus increasing their social isolation. Others may have higher levels of social isolation as they have lost confidence due to a fall or have a fear of falling due to deteriorating health. Older people who have recently retired have said they find it difficult with no structure in their life and often become more socially isolated once they stop working. Those older people who do have family members who live nearby often find work and other family commitments may limit them being able to visit or provide as much contact as they would like on a regular basis. Older people often say they do not feel the area they live in safe to go out (particularly in urban settings),
which can contribute significantly to reduced levels of confidence in going out and result in increased social isolation.

**Impacts of Social Isolation**

Impacts of social isolation in older people in Leith can include depression, poor mental health and even suicidal ideation. There are many emotional factors which may contribute social isolation including, loss of a loved one, partner or friends which results in increased levels of loneliness and isolation. Socially isolated older people often experience increased physical health problems and this can lead to increased visits to GP and place additional demands on other primary care services. There are also cultural barriers which can result on older people becoming socially isolated, particularly for minority ethnic elders, LGBT or disabled older people. They may face double discrimination of racism, homophobia or ageism within the community which often result increased levels of social isolation.

There are also the physical barriers for older people such as those who may have mobility issues or live in accommodation that does not cater to their needs this then prevents them from taking part in community life. Another barrier for older people may be a lack of physical support to help them leave the house. The cost of community activities and transport can mean that older people who are on low incomes and are experiencing financial difficulties may not feel they can afford to participate, which can lead to increased social isolation from their community.

PDP offers a range of services and adapts those services to try to address and overcome the physical and emotional barriers that socially isolated older people in Leith face.

**Best Practice Ideas from Pilmeny Development Project**

**NE Edinburgh Community Connecting Project**

The Community Connecting initiative encourages the (re)establishment of social connections for older people within North East Edinburgh. The service utilises volunteers to provide support to socially isolated older people for a time limited period to help them to ‘reconnect’ back into community life often after a spell in hospital or following a bereavement. PDP initially undertook a local feasibility study, ran a pilot project and successfully awarded a contract by City of Edinburgh council in September 2012 to carry out Community Connecting in North East Edinburgh. Areas of best practice for Community Connecting include the personalisation of the service for the older people. Individual goals are established in relation to an older person’s individual needs and interests. They are then matched with a suitable volunteer to follow this through. The service is time limited, until a link has been established and the older person is confident to carry out the activity on their own. Community Connecting also works in partnership with many other agencies which in turn, gives older people a variety of services which could match their needs and interests. Evaluations have provided evidence of how successful the approach is in addressing social isolation:
“I have a great time with Alba (volunteer) , we go out to the shops and out to a Café for tea and have a blether. I am going to the bowls again on my own…. I haven’t done that in a long time.”

Another comment from an older person’s daughter (who is also their carer):

“I am seeing a difference in my Mum – she seems to be keeping much better and is much brighter. Please thank Alba (volunteer) for making such a difference.”

Community Connecting provides outcomes such as reduced isolation, increased participation and inclusion for older people in need of social support. Older people also feel they have greater confidence and self esteem and feel more supported by other people. Finally they feel they are reconnected into the wider community activity and support.

Leith Time bank
Leith Time Bank is an exciting idea that gives local people the opportunity to share time and skills to develop the community of Leith. Everyone has skills, knowledge and experience to offer, which could be beneficial to someone, such as gardening, sewing, listening, simple repairs and running errands. Time Banking is a way for people to exchange their skills and time. For every hour members “deposit” in a Time Bank, perhaps by giving practical help and support to others, they are able to “withdraw” equivalent support in time when they themselves are in need. Everyone’s time is valued equally whatever is being offered. 1 hour = 1 Time Credit.

Time Banking and co-production go hand in hand. The core values on which timebanking is based support and empower local people to build a stronger community through the exchange of skills and time, where everyone is respected and regarded as an asset in helping to bring about positive change. Time Banks provide opportunities for Reciprocity: giving and receiving builds trust and mutual respect, helping to create bridges between different communities, cultures and generations.

The main focus of the project is to work with older people and carers. However, this is not exclusive and other demographic groupings are members, thus all benefiting from this intergenerational work, ensuring the service is “inclusive” and “barrier-free”, and building a stronger community. Involvement of older people and carers provides support to enable them to live independently at home and to tap into the wealth of the skills, experience and knowledge that older people have to contribute to their local communities. Older people and carers have reduced levels of social isolation, improved health and well-being and an enhanced quality of life, creating more resilient individuals and communities. Thus, older people are able to look after themselves better, resulting in less need to call on expensive statutory and health services.

The project meets both NHS and Edinburgh Council’s strategic priorities, tackling health inequalities among older people and carers, particularly in relation to the Scottish Government policy of Reshaping Care for Older People and CEC Health and Social Care developments of Community Connecting and Co-Production.

The main emphasis of Leith Time Bank is to develop relationships and community spirit that may have been lost in urban settings. Many of the Time Bank members have
expressed the value this has placed on their life. Four examples are provided below of the impact that Time Bank has on its members..

“I retired from my job almost 10 years ago now and have felt a little disconnected from my community. However, after joining Leith Time Bank I’ve made new friends, and got to know more people who live and work in the area. Most of all, it’s great to feel part of something again”

“Since joining the Time Bank I feel I have more of a foothold in my community than previously”

“The reason I joined was to meet people, but also to help people and use my skills. I have been quite isolated recently and it is important for me to socialise with lots of people. The project has helped me to meet new people.”

“It is very important for me, as a senior, to keep my mind active and engaged, as I live on my own – the Time Bank has allowed me to do this”

Leith Time Bank provides a service for older people which allows them to gain support but also allows them to use their skills and feel valued within their community which is a very successful form of best practice.

NE Edinburgh Older Men’s Health and Wellbeing Project
North East Edinburgh Older Men’s Health & Wellbeing Project aims to promote the health and well being of older men. PDP identified older peoples provisions were mainly attended by older women. PDP carried out a local feasibility study to explore why no older men were engaging and to find out if there was unmet need within the area. The feasibility study revealed that many older men were suffering from severe levels of social isolation and poor health and wellbeing. The results from this study led to the development of NE Edinburgh Older Men’s Health and Wellbeing Project. The project works inclusively with 50+ older men in NE Edinburgh including BME and GBT community members. The project focuses specifically on the needs of older men who may be deemed vulnerable or at risk from a number of factors which may lead to poor mental or physical health in later life. The project has also provided a vehicle for older men to gain confidence and to begin to re-engage with their community. The project provides a session at PDP once a week however this often involves the older men going on trips to other organisations within the community. The project therefore promotes the other organisations within the community and it allows the older men to re – engage with their community. The group is valued by the older men and they have expressed what the project has done for them:

“It helps me with loneliness”
“Since coming here my life has completely changed, you have all been really wonderful bringing me out of my shell”
PDP Older Women’s Positive Health Group
The older Women’s Group follows similar patterns and outcomes to the Men’s group, but specifically addresses the needs of socially isolated older women who require a gender specific setting.

PDP weekly ‘Drop In’
This provision is for isolated older people and provides an informal meeting place for both men and women. This is much valued by the older people as a place they can socialise and meet new people.

New Spin and Generations Intergenerational Projects
PDP have been working in partnership with a local Youth project since 2012 delivering New Spin project. This project involves over 30 socially isolated older and younger people and is involved in a range of weekly activities and outings throughout the year. New Spin Intergenerational Project received the top award in the Intergenerational category at the National Youth Worker of the Year Awards as well as being named the overall winners of the coveted National Youth Worker of the Year Award 2012.

In addition to this work, PDP also developed the Generations Project and ran several Intergenerational sessions in partnership with a local housing association sheltered housing schemes and local high schools. These groups run for six weeks and usually involve over 20 older and younger people. The outcomes of both projects included an increased awareness of young and old in Leith, between the generations, which make a difference to the quality of life for both age ranges. Also, through these projects a model of effective intergenerational work has been established.

Younger people wouldn’t get the same chance to learn what makes older people laugh, tick…form relationships with them’ (older person)
‘Nice that youngsters want to mix with older people’ (older person)
‘We all went to the Ceramic centre together – it was a lovely day’ (older person)

There are many other projects within PDP which support those suffering or at risk of suffering from social isolation including:

Leith Anti-Sectarianism Project
Leith anti-sectarianism Project worked predominantly with older men who attend PDP and was successful in helping to challenge social isolation in a number of ways. Firstly, the project created an exciting programme of activity that took a wide approach to exploring sectarianism. Key to this was an overarching theme of oral history and exploring the history of Leith. This meant that the project was more than simply a group which met to discuss sectarianism. The project was participatory in its design and implementation. Being locally based also helped the project to target local people in becoming part of the project. This encouraged people of all ages to attend sessions alongside several older men who had formed the core of the group. This in turn helped the older men with social isolation barriers they were experiencing as well giving the group an intergenerational outlook.
NEECAG older people’s forums
NEECAG enables local older people’s voices to be heard by addressing issues or concerns older people face within their community as well as proving a social event each month, which reduces social isolation.

Potential Ideas for Improvement and Influencing Policy
- Need for recognition from statutory services re value of funding preventative services/provisions by third sector as a powerful, cost effective way to alleviate social isolation and need for continued support – not cutbacks for this type of work
- Need to involve and engage older people themselves in indentifying causes and solutions towards prevention of social isolation in their local areas
- Recognition of volunteers as a great asset there needs to be some resources to provide a proper infrastructure to provide support and continuity in local areas.
- Need for more locally based provision to help reduce social isolation
- Need for creative approaches
- Need to value and support diversity in older people and their needs re social isolation.

Effective awareness raising within communities
PDP has a very positive reputation within the North East of Edinburgh and continues to provide services which the community identifies as a need. PDP is a grassroots organisation which was originally formed by local people in the community and has established other forms of raising awareness within the local community such as word of mouth. PDP has developed many partnerships with other organisations which is an asset to the community and has helped address social isolation issues in a variety of ways, which would not have been possible to do as a single agency. This not only provides PDP with many organisations/services to assist older people to attend or help them along to, but it also allows for these organisations to refer older people to the services that PDP provides and thus provide really effective local networks which really get to the heart of addressing social isolation in Leith.

Anne Munro & Claire O’Brien
Pilmeny Development Project
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