EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

SUBMISSION FROM THE SILVER LINE

The Silver Line welcome the Equal Opportunities Committee’s inquiry into age and social isolation and offer thanks for this opportunity to contribute our experiences to this important parliamentary inquiry.

Introduction

We were delighted to be asked to share our experiences particularly as a new national charity supporting lonely and isolated older people. Our experience so far will not provide all the solutions but hopefully our unique position as the only free 24/7 helpline for older people means we can contribute fully and meaningfully to the debate.

We would also wish to endorse the written response of our partners Age Scotland.

Background to The Silver Line 24 Hour Helpline

Dame Esther Rantzen wrote about her own experience of loneliness in a national newspaper and received an overwhelming response to the article from people who said they felt similarly but were unable to talk openly to family or friends because they did not want to be a burden. Other people were ashamed to admit to being lonely and said how brave Esther was to write about it publicly. She was aware that nearly 30 years earlier the stigma of child abuse prevented children from disclosing what was happening to them. She then suggested to a number of organisations responsible for the welfare of older people that a dedicated, free and confidential, 24 hour helpline – a ChildLine for older people – might be an answer for the most hard-to-reach and isolated older people. A pilot based in the North West, North East, Isle of Man and Jersey was funded by Comic Relief and was independently evaluated by The Centre for Social Justice. It showed unequivocally that The Silver Line Helpline could make a huge and transformative impact on the lives of the most isolated and lonely older callers. The idea of volunteer Silver Line Friends was trialled at this stage with paid staff making weekly calls to the same individuals at a regular time and day, and the feedback from those receiving friendship calls was extremely positive. There is a mass of data about loneliness and isolation among older people who have lost their partner or are the sole carer for a partner with illness or dementia. Friends and family have moved away or died, and the ability to socialise becomes limited with more physical frailty and reliance on others for transport and support. Silver Line is a simple and obvious solution; what is astonishing is that it did not exist before. We developed a pilot which launched in November 2012. Our key objective was to link people with local services and to reach the hardest to reach by working with pharmacies and domiciliary carers who could identify people who may be isolated. The pilot phase and subsequent evaluation by the CSJ proved the value of The Silver Line so clearly that we were able to develop a detailed business plan with tangible outcomes which we could measure through our KPI’s. The business plan and objectives enabled us to gain seed funding from the Department of Health and we then submitted an application to BIG Lottery who had the confidence in our plans to grant us £5m over 2 years. We set targets in relation to calls to the helpline and referrals for friendship which in turn meant we could develop a detailed resource plan
and budget. We recruited our first group of volunteer Silver Line Friends who make weekly calls to individual older people who wished to receive a regular friendship call via a virtual call centre for safeguarding. These calls are free to both parties. Our plans were informed and developed with the rich experience we have on our senior team and trustee board – drawing on our CEO’s experience as former National Chair of Samaritans plus the ChildLine experience that our Founder and Director of Policy and Communications both have, we were able to combine this experience of running 24/7 services with the added value of utilizing volunteers.

**Isolation and Loneliness**

Before The Silver Line launched nationally in November 2013 a ComRes survey was conducted into loneliness among people aged over 55 years. The results revealed that there were more than 2 million older people in Britain who feel lonely “often” or “very often”, something they haven’t shared with their friends or family. The majority of lonely older people (60%) have never discussed their feelings with their family and the most common reason was because they don’t want to make a fuss or be a burden. The negative impact of loneliness and isolation on the health of older people is well-documented but the extent to which regular users of The Silver Line may reduce their dependence on doctors and other healthcare professionals is being evaluated.

“Any strategy to defeat loneliness has to be grounded in the understanding that it is not simply a matter of being alone. Loneliness is a physical and psychological pain of desiring companionship, not just activity and company.” *Dr Bill Thomas*

We believe that loneliness and isolation require different interventions and that our partnership with Age Scotland enables us to provide a holistic approach and positives outcomes for individuals and communities.

**Sharing our experiences**

The Silver Line was launched nationally on 25 November 2013 and to date we have taken more than 380,000 calls (10% of which are received from Scotland) and recruited and trained 850 volunteers to make calls to 1200 older people plus 1100 keeping in touch calls taking place every week. While 68% of calls are after 5pm or at weekends, underlining the need to be available 24/7, 40% of callers are male and 60% female. In terms of the age of callers, 34% callers between 60-69, 23% between 70-79, 18% between 80-89, 5% are over 90 but this age group are twice more likely to call than any other group as a percentage of the over 90 year old population. 67% of callers ring because they are lonely or isolated, 88% live alone and 54% say they have no one else at all to speak to (other than us). We have 120 staff at the helpline working on a 24/7 rota and work in partnership with Age Scotland to deliver the service in Scotland between 8am-8pm during the week.

The Silver Line has set up Silver Circles, conference calls for several like-minded people who want to chat in a group and Silver Letters for people who like to write and receive hand-written letters and who may be hearing impaired.

But there is a waiting list for callers who need befriending, so Silver Line staff make
an additional 1,000 calls a week to keep in touch with one thousand isolated callers who have asked to be matched with a Silver Line Friend. The helpline is urgently training volunteers to become Silver Line Friends, working from their homes, donating an hour a week to befriend older people who otherwise may spend days or weeks on end without speaking to anyone.

The value of the helpline being free has been endorsed by many callers who are attracted by the 0800 number and 90% of callers use a landline to make contact. The importance of the 24 hour nature of the organisation has been underlined by the fact that other organisations now give the telephone number of The Silver Line on their recorded message when their office is closed.

What we have learned from talking to callers

We are a new charity and a learning organisation which was demonstrated by the way in which we adapted our service after the pilot for national launch. We developed values (as follows) by listening to people who contact us and by ensuring that our service remains client centric and focussed.

Our values are:

**COMMITTED**

- To be passionate about reaching out to older people and show an understanding of the issues and challenges affecting older people today
- To be committed to delivering an excellent service to our callers and not giving up on callers even when faced with negativity and resistance to change

**EMPOWERING**

- To work in a way that enables and empowers older people to take control of their own lives by offering impartial advice and support
- To find ways to helping older people to feel valued and valuable where necessary and to restore their confidence
- To support older people to find new ways to make use of their talents and skills

**CARING**

- To genuinely care about older people and show an interest in older people’s needs and opinions
- To empathise, reassure and respond sensitively to callers
- To do the right things for our callers
- To care for and support each other as colleagues and members of the Silver Line team

**RESPECT**

- To listen empathetically to each other and treat each other with dignity and respect
- To respecting people’s individuality, ideas and experiences and to behave in
a non-judgemental way towards others

- To adapt our communication style and language to meet other people’s needs

**OPEN**

- To be open to sharing person experiences and showing a sense of humour in your work
- To be challenging of others to bring about the best outcomes for older people
- To welcome feedback and advice and be open to trying new things
- To embrace mistakes and not blame others but be open to learning from all our experiences
- To openly share what we learn with others

**TRANSFORMING**

- To recognising the importance of one call or one small thing which can make a big difference to others
- To challenge negative stereotypes and attitudes towards older people and loneliness
- To always be thinking about innovative new ways to reach out to and support older people
- To work in partnership with others to achieve better outcomes for older people and to signpost people to organisations and services that can improve their lives

Our pilot also taught us that we need to work in partnership with others to improve outcomes for older people and to develop preventative strategies through our early intervention and prevention services. Many people do not identify as lonely because of the stigma so our service plays a crucial role in identifying people with early signs of health related and emotional issues. We are currently in partnership with Assisted technology providers and health boards who have seen that by reducing loneliness we can have a direct impact on the wellbeing of their clients. We are also responding to the needs of our callers through the development of BME services, letters for people with hearing loss and partnership with regulators such as CQC (in England) to safeguard the most vulnerable.

We are now embarking on a new evaluation with Anglia Ruskin University where we are following the lives of 500 older people over a 12 month period. We will continue to learn and develop our services as the results of this evaluation are published.

**Partnerships and Collaborations**
Our partnership with Age Scotland has been an inspirational example of how two national charities working in partnership can deliver a “Rolls Royce” service to callers in Scotland, providing one stop advice and information and friendship 24/7.

Age Scotland actively promoted Silver Line over and above their own helpline as they saw the value in putting the older person first and promoting one number for older people in Scotland. This model of working is now being developed with other partners and in other Nations.

**The Silver Line, Harnessing Communities through Volunteering**

- Key messages from our experience of attracting and training Volunteers

At The Silver Line we have attracted the support of Individuals from every geographic area across the U.K. In response to the rapidly growing volunteer interest in Scotland we appointed a dedicated Volunteer Manager for Scotland in December 2014. We will work closely with partners, Volunteerscotland.org and local Volunteer Centres to connect potential volunteers to our current volunteering opportunities.

The Silver Line has caught the imagination of a wide spectrum of individuals. Many have advised us that they have wanted to ‘give back’ to their community for some time. The Silver Line provides people with a great opportunity to volunteer and make a difference through a simple volunteering ask of 30 minutes per week.

We have attracted a wide and diverse volunteer base, spanning all professions and age groups. We know this has been made possible by having on offer a 21st Century volunteering opportunity, home based, reflecting all demographics.

Our pilot work, and concern for each individual caller, means that we actively encourage local community engagement through volunteering alongside developing national partnerships to assist us all to deliver in a local way.

For our volunteers, we offer a simple, safe, and achievable national model. Over this start-up year we have benefited from wide Corporate support with many employers, in particular the telecoms industries, interested in promoting an Active Citizenship opportunity within their workplace. This provides us with further opportunities in Scotland to increase the participation of volunteers in the delivery of the service.

We have informed, designed and incorporated best practice in safeguarding and support to callers and volunteers. Silver Line Telephone Befrienders are committed to support the achievement of outcomes and encourage change through their contact with each caller. Over this first year we can evidence measurable positive outcomes.

Our volunteer base continues to grow and it is planned in tandem with our call
volumes. With the support of volunteers across the U.K. and with Big Lottery Grant support, we have established a volunteer pool, support infrastructure, and an effective operational model that enables us to reach the hardest to reach.

**Conclusion and Key Messages**

We have established the first free and confidential helpline and friendship service for older people, available every night and day of the year, offering information, friendship and advice. As we are able to recognise the stigma associated with admitting to being lonely, the helpline fills a huge unmet need that a chat on the phone can be life-changing.

We recognize the key to alleviating loneliness and isolation has to be:

- Providing value led holistic services
- Valuing the worth of a simple human connection by phone or letter
- Working in partnership and not in competition within the sector
- Responding to caller needs and remaining flexible and innovative with approaches
- Remaining ambitious to improve our reach and the outcomes for older people
- Sustainability by harnessing the value of community action and volunteering

Quote from one of our callers:

“You have made an almost perfect match for me and my friend. We have a lot in common to talk about and she is warm and respectful. I have tried several face to face services that haven’t worked out but your service is wonderful and changing my life for the better.”

Moira Gallagher
The Silver Line
13 March 2015