EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE
AGE AND SOCIAL ISOLATION
SUBMISSION FROM VOLUNTARY ACTION EAST RENFREWSHIRE

1. Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

East Renfrewshire is an urban and semi-urban area to the south east of Glasgow City, with a population of approximately 91,000. East Renfrewshire has high life expectancies for both men (78) and women (82), with an increasingly ageing population.

Household projections show the proportion of households headed by people aged 75 and over will increase from 16% to 26% between now and 2035. Over the same period, households headed by people living alone will increase from 29% to 37%.

In 2011/12, an analysis of all initial assessments undertaken by community care services within the Community Health and Care Partnership showed that 48% involved households headed by older people living alone, with 91% of those assessed being aged 75 and over.

Within the wider East Renfrewshire community 29% of households are headed by someone living alone, whereas for older people around 45% live alone. This suggests older people living alone are more likely to present to formal services for care and support than their population share and have a higher than average risk of experiencing isolation.

Cross-sector partnership working to develop East Renfrewshire’s Joint Commissioning Strategy (Older People) explored the “journey” of older people highlighting that community capacity building plays a crucial role in complementing preventative and anticipatory approaches in re-designed health and social care services. Such partnership approaches to planning have extended beyond time-limited projects into mainstream ways of working to help improve lives for people in East Renfrewshire. As a partnership it is recognised working together at the individual, community and organisational level is crucial to achieve this shared vision.

2. Impacts of social isolation, for instance loneliness, ill-health

The benefits of social involvement and relationships, and conversely the negative effects of social isolation, are now widely acknowledged. Good physical and mental wellbeing in later life is inextricably linked to social support and participation. Health benefits of social ties include fewer depressive symptoms, decreased risk of dementia and reduced impact of stressful life events. Social isolation can adversely impact an individual’s physical and mental wellbeing. Poor mental wellbeing in turn can limit the extent of physical recovery if or when services are required. Not being able to engage in preventative and anticipatory supports can lead to longer term deterioration in health and wellbeing, with the longer term consequence that institutional care may be the only safe option for the individual.

Social involvement affords positive affirmation, routines, a meaningful role and the opportunity to actively contribute. It provides an informal route to practical help and support to maintain independence. The quality of relationships built through activities is more important than the act of participation itself, and can improve wellbeing even when other barriers may exist – tackling exclusion from community life and reduced
access to places and services. Relationships in which older people can contribute are of greater benefit than those where they are passive consumers.

A case study, Sandra’s story (not real name), highlights the journey into isolation and the impact this can have in a short period of a person’s life. Sandra was a volunteer initially referred to Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire (VAER) by her GP.

“When I moved house I never thought my life would change so drastically...While I was settling in not one person had chapped at the door, and when venturing outside I felt people looked through me. There was little communication and I had no outlet. Depression crept in and I approached my GP in tears...there was no community spirit where I had moved to and I was desperately looking for a club to be a part of. I was in a bad place...Nerves had set in, I lost concentration, and my health deteriorated.”

Sandra highlights how becoming a befriender was her turning point. Sandra enjoyed volunteering as a befriender particularly with the frail elderly, having worked in a care background in her career. As Sandra’s confidence grew she branched off to new volunteer activities, including writing newsletters and speaking at inter-generational events. This highlights although Sandra was initially referred to receive a service, with a little help and support, she was able to become a volunteer and actively participate in shaping and delivering a service for others.

3. Best practice and ideas that could be shared across Scotland, including examples of targeted support or initiatives

Seniors Together is a big lottery funded initiative managed by VAER with a focus on collaborative approaches between the third, public and independent sector to support the most isolated older people in East Renfrewshire. This project arose to complement the mainstream change fund initiatives, to reach out further to those people living in their own homes and living isolated lives. Anyone can refer to Seniors Together; from people working in health and care to the person’s own family, ensuring it is easily and readily accessible.

Seniors Together provides a dedicated volunteer befriender matched to individuals according to motivation and interests. The development of specific local opportunities and linkages with wider community opportunities is also managed by the project. Over time, the befriender works to build the confidence in the individual to support them to participate in community activities. In one year over 53 one to one matches were made. There are now friendship groups across East Renfrewshire, movie themed mornings, music reminiscence events and outings to local museums. The social support offered by a dedicated, consistent one to one befriender who is linked in to wider local opportunities has supported the most isolated older people to begin to get involved in their communities once more.

Mousemates is another example of good practice and includes a Change Plan funded project that provides older people with access to computers and teaches them how to use them. A VAER Development Worker with three volunteers adapted an appreciate inquiry style questioning within co-production to ensure a positive interaction with elderly residents in a sheltered housing complex and importantly, to understand what they would be motivated to do. They identified an interest in learning about computing. After some preparation a number of successful Mousemates courses were run, and many were oversubscribed. Residents reported
regaining confidence and lost skills, such as typing, and the development of new skills, such as e-mail and Skype.

One of the older people said Mousemates had helped reduce isolation by doing simple things such as keeping in touch with distant relatives and friends through e-mail and Skype video conferencing. Many also developed increased independence by being able to do their own online shopping. Also, by meeting with others during the course of training, residents highlighted a happier, fuller and improved quality of life enriched through socialising more. This enabled the rekindling of older friendships and the development of new ones. The activities have been sustained over time because they were coproduced so met people’s motivations for involvement.

Better by Design Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire (VAER) has played a central role in catalysing further support from Big Lottery who funded the ‘Better By Design’ initiative to develop a ‘design-led’ approach with expert support from Taylor Haig. The initiative aims to create a ‘neutral space’ for developing new perspectives, changing mindsets and building greater trust and optimism for a new, collaborative approach.

The cross sector partnership working through Better by Design has reinforced long-standing partnerships amongst the third, independent and public sector (CHCP). It brings together people working across different areas, and the older people who use services around the theme of ‘from Hospital to Home,’ to better understand the environment we are in and how we can re-shape our approaches to realise collective impact. The scale of the changes in demographics and pressures on public sector budgets means the only effective approach to improve outcomes for people is by pooling partnership and community resources and planning the way forward together.

Participants act as stewards through a journey of identifying problem areas and exploring various models to address these relying heavily on the trusting, open relationships amongst a range of organisations. We have spoken to people with real, local experiences which has highlighted areas where we can have the best collective impact. For East Renfrewshire this has meant joining up our formalised services including hospital discharge, community transport, the British Red Cross and health and social care services, and looking at the expansive resource we have through our third sector organisations and communities themselves.

Tests of change were designed around the social supports for the most vulnerable who may not have flexible and local natural familial or carer supports to allow them to remain comfortable in their own homes following a period in hospital. These social supports are crucial to the longer term picture of improved health and wellbeing for individuals, in their own home, and were recognised as an area that our communities could excel in providing the much needed support.

4. Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

Central to the successes in Reshaping Care with Older People in East Renfrewshire is the development of relationships that enable trust and confidence amongst all participants, resulting in an environment where people feel safe to talk about fears and aspirations. Our approach encompasses a wider system of interacting services, organisations, professionals, communities, individuals, families, carers and friends to
fully acknowledge the support network people have and how best to build on a fortify this network.

Conversations have demonstrated everyone knows things must change – the current systems and service won’t continue to work effectively in such a fast changing world where resources are increasingly scarce and over-stretched.

In the next phase of our journey partners have begun to explore how to scale up our approach, and have looked further afield at ‘Neighbourhood Networks’ in Leeds. Partners are also exploring ‘Backbone organisations’ in the USA which will help grow confidence in communities to influence and improve policy development and decision-making. The approach itself helps with awareness-raising within communities.

VAER is currently an East Renfrewshire Community Planning Partner and the local Third Sector Interface (TSI). It is appointed by the Scottish Government to champion the third sector’s interests in Community Planning and other strategic partnerships. VAER’s Third Sector Forum facilitates this role as well as supporting engagement, training, networking and partnership opportunities across the voluntary and community sector and the local public sector to create the conditions for collective impact in achieving positive outcomes for the people of East Renfrewshire.

As part of its evolutionary journey, there is potential to develop VAER’s role as a ‘backbone organisation’ in East Renfrewshire. Backbone organisations have at once a more neutral and more substantial role. A backbone organisation must be trusted and have the confidence of local communities, however, importantly, it is also an independent organisation, with a funded staff dedicated to the issue and responsible for providing the collective local service delivery partners with support, establishing impact measurements, mobilising resources and building public will.

In East Renfrewshire, before and during Better by Design much effort has been made to foster the right conditions for collective impact. Research conducted by the Stamford Institute for Social Innovation identifies these conditions for collective impact as:

- A common agenda
- Shared measurement – wider than service oriented performance indicators, including greater community centric measurements
- Mutually reinforcing activity
- Continuous communication
- Backbone Support

The ability to benefit from such an increased role has been time-limited to the expertise afforded through Better by Design process and could yield further positive outcomes for the partnership through additional resource to continue to build on this way of working.

5. Effective awareness-raising within communities

Partners have experienced the use of a suite of communicative approaches to be the most effective at reaching a range of people. The partners continue to use the local council and third sector internet sites, complemented by the targeted distribution of information leaflets and posters within our communities. VAER and the CHCP have collected a range of information on community activities which are now hosted on the VAER website as a Community Directory. Regular partnership events aimed at the
public and staff consistently receive positive feedback and highlight the importance of the person to person medium of communication.

Partners will continue to diversify our approach to awareness-raising with our communities, and we will continue to reinforce and revisit approaches on using our community link workers, those with the formal titles and those who are naturally connected with their communities, to spread our shared message amongst the people of East Renfrewshire.

Importantly, embedding the principles of design-led processes and leadership ensures that the opportunity for equal participation with the people of East Renfrewshire enables us to create effective community networks, connections and awareness-raising within our local communities.

For further case studies please contact Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire on 0141 876 9555 or email reception@va-er.org.uk

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