Volunteer Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliaments Equal Opportunities Committee enquiry into Age and Social Isolation.

**Summary: Volunteering, age and social isolation.**

In our response, we highlight:

- the critical role of volunteering in reducing social isolation;
- the critical role of volunteering in empowering individuals;
- the opportunity for volunteers to assist in the delivery of services to reduce social isolation;
- the realistic opportunity for social isolated individuals and communities to access volunteering;
- why a person centred approach to age and social isolation through volunteering is both possible and critical to creating a more empowered and equal Scotland.

**Our Response**

Our submission does not simply represent our organisational position. Over a number of years we have spoken directly to volunteers actively making a difference in their communities as well as volunteer involving organisations as part of our own consultation processes. Our report on “Volunteering to support older people’s care” also spoke directly to volunteers and volunteer involving organisation delivering services about the ways in which volunteering can better meet the needs of older people, including reducing isolation. This response is therefore based on our knowledge and expertise, as well as the views and experiences of volunteers and communities of volunteering.

**Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings**

Although Volunteer Scotland is not an expert in social isolation, we do have expertise in understanding the volunteer landscape and the ways in which volunteering and volunteers can be appropriately supported to help address and combat some of the major challenges, like social isolation, that people face. In this section we would draw to the Committee’s attention the complexity of Scotland’s volunteering landscape; a landscape which offers huge opportunities for volunteering to play its part in reducing social isolation and fundamentally empowering communities.

Levles of volunteering participation continues to be a stable and valuable activity for many living in Scotland. In 2013, 28% - over 1.25 million - adults volunteered formally at least once in the last year and these volunteers are estimated to contribute over £2.6 billion to Scotland’s economy. However, looking simply at volunteering masks some of the changes within volunteering participation. Those living in rural areas are significantly more likely to

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2 Scottish Household Survey, 2014
volunteer: 37% in remote rural areas compared to 25% in large urban areas\(^3\) – in fact the evidence shows that as rurality increases so too does volunteer participation. We also know that volunteers in rural areas are more likely to take on service based roles.

In the context of social isolation, it has a number of potential implications that need to be explored. It could be argued, that rural areas are more connected and empowered and therefore more ‘ready’ or capable to help address issues of social isolation. On the other hand, those living in rural areas may be unable to give more because they have reached capacity and cannot undertake any more activities. Regardless, a one-size fits all approach to volunteering and social isolation is not the answer – a flexible and tailored approach to volunteer development and management will be required to help with the different social isolation issues experienced by those living in urban and rural areas. Volunteering will also need to be appropriately resourced. Volunteering is not free - sustainable investment models are needed in order to prevent and/or tackle social isolation in the longer term.

The opportunity to enhance volunteering to better meet the needs of those who are isolated must be grasped. Policy makers must remember that adopting a person centred and assets based approach to services can identify where volunteers can help those at risk of social isolation – for example, marginalised and vulnerable young people, young single mothers, older people, those experiencing mental health problems and so on – and also where those very people at risk of, or currently experiencing, social isolation can get support from organisations to volunteer in order to become more connected, engaged and empowered. Volunteering is not a panacea but there is no doubt that it offers people and communities the opportunity to be more resilient, less isolated and more empowered. In addition, these empowered individuals will also have the opportunity to play their part in developing and growing volunteering in Scotland to generate a healthier and more equal Scotland.

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

The impacts of social isolation are well versed and evidenced. Those who are socially isolated – across all aged groups - are more likely to experience early mortality, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem. Social isolation also heightens the risk of cardiovascular disease and cognitive deterioration, and is closely associated with elevated blood pressure, as well as inflammatory and metabolic responses to stress\(^4\).

Critically, evidence suggests that loneliness can be an outcome of isolation which brings about its own unique problems\(^5\). For example, the evidence suggests that loneliness:

- Can increase the risk of death by almost 10 per cent
- Increases the risk of heart disease and puts people at greater risk of blood clots
- Is estimated to be as bad for people’s health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- Around 10% of over 65s say they are lonely or very lonely, and another 20% are occasionally lonely

In addition, older people who are lonely are:

- 3.5 times more likely to enter local authority-funded residential care,
- 1.9 times more likely to visit the GP

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\(^3\) Ibid

\(^4\) Social Isolation, Loneliness and All-Cause Mortality in Older Men and Women; p1

\(^5\) Steptoe, A et al: 2013
1.6 times more likely to visit A&E and
1.3 times more likely to have an emergency
Doubles the risk of dementia

The impact of social isolation and loneliness will be exacerbated with the increasing ageing population in Scotland and by an emerging trend in the way that we live our lives, for example the increasing number of people living in single households where: “around a third (34%) of households in Scotland contain only one person, made up of single adults (18 per cent) and single pensioners (16 per cent).” It’s interesting to note that in Scotland those living alone are more likely to volunteer.

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

Increasingly Scotland’s public policy discourse revolves around the concept of community empowerment which seeks to utilise the skills, confidence and willingness of individuals and communities to enhance Scotland’s overall health and well being through greater participation and engagement.

We welcome such an approach. We understand from the evidence that empowered communities comprise of more resilient, connected and well individuals, and that these types of communities are more likely to exist in more equal societies with its members living longer, healthier lives. Underpinning community empowerment policies is the need for greater volunteer participation and increased social capital – all of which helps us to live in socially connected, not isolated, communities.

Volunteer Scotland’s report ‘Volunteering to support older people’s care’ highlighted the significant role and value of volunteering in enhancing independence and resilience, and reducing social isolation among older people. The report also highlighted that the role of volunteering and volunteers to help meet the needs of older people was currently under utilised.

The Institute of Volunteering Research has also reviewed the evidence of the way in which volunteering can benefit older people. Volunteering

- Gives back to older people a role in the community, and so helps them to maintain their sense of purpose and self-respect;
- Enables older people to get out of the house and meet others, providing them with a chance to enjoy the relationships they once had in the workplace or the family; and
- Is good for the mental and physical health of older people.

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6 Scottish Household Survey (2010 to 2013)
8 Does income inequality cause health and social problems?: p7
10 Volunteering and Older People In Tayside – Desk Review: p10
Volunteer participation is at the heart of community empowerment policies and without volunteers community empowerment will fail. Volunteers undertake a wide range of roles to empower communities by reducing individual social isolation and enhancing connections among individuals and communities. For example:

Befriending services - that is, offering time to sit, to listen, to have fun, and to chat and laugh - introduce and enhance people’s social networks and connections in their life. Be it a cup of tea or a trip to the seaside, these volunteers enhance their own and their communities wellbeing.

Take DIY volunteers who fix things in older people’s home as another example. Changing a light bulb, fixing shelves and so is undoubtedly a good service. But for those older people who are at mild to moderate risk of suffering from social isolation – it’s the social contact that is of vital importance, and should not be overlooked or undervalued. The 15 minute chat and cup of tea can be the highlight and what they look forward to the most.

Volunteers delivering community based support to those with hearing loss are delivering a valuable public service and at the same time providing an opportunity for people to engage with other members of the community.

Sometimes the smallest human contact has the greatest impact. The evidence suggests that people view this volunteering help differently from that provided by professional services – the added value of volunteering is that volunteers are choosing to spend their time rather than being paid.

It is important to note that the vast majority of these types of services are community based and fundamentally designed around individuals and communities. They are a resource for those who are isolated to access new opportunities, to meet new friends and to participate in their community as empowered, and more equal members.

Potential ideas for improvement and influencing policy

It is critical that planning partnerships across sectors collaborate and work to achieve a better understanding of the impact of volunteering in their policy fields and critically in reducing social isolation and loneliness. The ability of partnerships at all levels of policy to better plan services is critical and in terms of social isolation we would ask that the committee recognise the value and worth of volunteering to these agendas. We would also ask the committee to consider and explore the following:

Volunteering is not free – volunteers and volunteer involving organisations require support and investment,

The need for long-term sustainable funding models and structure - organisations need a funding model that allows them to develop, deliver and demonstrate the impact that volunteering programmes have in reducing social isolation. A one year funding structure does not allow for this.

Volunteering is a preventative measure - through early engagement with volunteers, public bodies could ensure a cohesive, locally empowered person centred approach to reducing social isolation. Such an approach offers the potential for volunteers and
public bodies to better recognise the requirements and expectations of each other in delivering and designing public services aimed at reducing social isolation.

Equality – volunteering empowers individuals and communities and generates a more equal society. To assist policy makers to meet this objective they should affirm the role of volunteering across the full gambit of policy portfolios. The evidence suggests that the people who volunteer do not as yet reflect the diversity of Scotland: people with disabilities, those from low income households, unemployed people, those with no formal qualifications are all less likely to volunteer\textsuperscript{11}. Therefore, these groups are less empowered; less socially networked and could be more likely to suffer from the impact of social isolation.

**Effective awareness-raising within communities**

Volunteers are enablers, and as community leaders can have a central role in raising awareness of the impact of social isolation and the way in which local people and communities can volunteer to help make a difference. Although rates of volunteering have remained fairly stable over the last 7 years, we know that people are willing to help: our survey research suggests that word of mouth is the most common way in which people get involved in volunteering and that people will get involved if they are asked\textsuperscript{12}. What needs to happen is an awareness raising campaign where we ask people to act. The evidence suggests they will respond positively.

In light of our response, we would advise the committee to consider the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** The Committee should recognise and support a move toward the provision for sustainable investment to support volunteers and volunteering in a wide range of policy areas which will help reduce inequalities and importantly reduce social isolation across Scotland.

**Recommendation 2:** The Committee should challenge all Community Planning Partners to recognise the value and worth of volunteering in reducing social isolation and in the overall improvement in health and well being agenda.

**About Volunteer Scotland:**
As the national body for volunteering, we:
Provide the most comprehensive online source of volunteer opportunities in Scotland, which is free to the public: www.volunteerscotland.org.uk
Support tools to help volunteers get the most from their volunteering experiences.
Build the skills, knowledge and aptitudes of staff that engage with volunteers.
Work with organisations to connect better with volunteers; we do that by exploring where there’s a need for volunteers; we listen to people to understand how they want to make a difference; we make it easier for them to volunteer and we help volunteers and organisations make a difference and evaluate the benefits.
Have an information service for volunteers, organisations, Government, and others. This

\textsuperscript{11} Scottish Household Survey (2012)

provides insights into what volunteers are saying and experiencing, who volunteers in Scotland and demonstrates the difference this is making to our common good. Work with Change agencies in Government and funding bodies such as the Big Lottery, Third Sector Interfaces and Volunteer Centres - there’s a consensus about the value of volunteering and new opportunities such as the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games offering real potential for growth and development. Are members of a European network (CEV - link) and have a track record of European projects and relationship building.

Volunteer Scotland is a registered Scottish Charity No SC013740

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