1. West Dunbartonshire Council welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Equal Opportunities Committee’s call for evidence into issues around age and social isolation, building on the previous enquiry into Having and Keeping a Home.

2. West Dunbartonshire is the second smallest Local Authority in terms of land area. With a population of 90,340, it is 10th smallest in Scotland but the distribution of the population is fairly dense. West Dunbartonshire is a predominately urban area, with 19% of the population aged 65 and over in a time of falling overall population figures. The area has a high rate of deprivation and above average rates of limiting long-term illness.

3. Research undertaken for the Scottish Government in 2009 noted that older generations tend to show reluctance in asking for support with problems associated with poverty and income. Associated with this perceived stigma and embarrassment of poverty, people may choose to reduce social interaction due to a lack of funds. This carries the risk of isolation and loneliness. It also makes it more difficult for support services to identify and support pensioners living in poverty.

Prevalence of social isolation in urban and rural settings

4. A small-scale survey by Care and Repair found that 10 per cent of interviewees in rural areas mentioned isolation and loneliness as an issue, compared to 20 per cent in urban areas, which could indicate that, in spite of greater physical isolation, older people in rural areas may have better networks of support. However the evidence overall is not strong in either direction.

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

5. A 2008 study from the University of Chicago found that chronic loneliness is a health risk factor comparable to smoking, obesity or lack of exercise and contributes to a suppressed immune system, high blood pressure and increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol.

6. People in later life who do not see friends or family regularly are almost 50 per cent more likely to die prematurely. The study, conducted by researchers at University College London, examined the lifestyles of 6,500 people aged 52 and over, over a seven-year period up to 2012. The researchers concluded that enabling people to get out and about more often would not only make them feel less lonely but increase their life expectancy.

7. The researchers compared two groups judged as ‘very isolated’ or as ‘well integrated’. They found that almost twice as many people in the very isolated group had died as in the well integrated group. When the figures were adjusted to take into account pre-existing health conditions or age, those who lived solitary lives were still up to 48 per cent more likely to have died.

8. A 2010 Equality and Human Rights Commission publication ‘How fair is Britain’ notes that at the Great Britain level:
- the incidence of disability rises with age and older people (65 and over) also have a higher rate of depression than younger people.
- There is evidence to suggest that the health service sometimes deals with some older people in ways that they find humiliating or distressing.
- Men are more likely than women to lack the practical support that meets their needs as they get older.
- Over the next decade there will be a steep increase in the demand for personal care for older people. At the same time, more people who might have cared for their parents will have dependent children. This often means a concentration of informal care provision falling on a relatively small group – the dutiful middle aged. Most carers are women although a significant number are also children.
- Some small studies suggest that some older Lesbian and Gay people find that care homes fail to provide them with a supportive environment. There are even less data about the care needs of transgender people.

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

9. We recognise that many areas are developing innovative approaches to supporting an ageing population. Within West Dunbartonshire, there are a number of exciting projects that will deliver improved outcomes related to age and social isolation.

10. Link UP is the Council’s partnership with the West Dunbartonshire Community and Volunteering Services and Good Morning Clydebank telephone befriending supported by Care at Home Services. This service focuses on a befriending approach to reducing social isolation in older age groups.

11. The local Community Alliance, the strategic oversight body for community engagement and involvement sees community transport as critical to reducing social isolation and improving health and wellbeing. To progress this they have set up a steering group to review West Dunbartonshire options, with a focus on increasing the provision and uptake of community transport options.

12. West Dunbartonshire Council and community planning partners are taking part in the Dementia Friendly Communities initiative that is being incrementally rolled out across the area, with the Faifley and Renton areas of the authority already established. This raises awareness and knowledge of dementia related issues and ensures a more inclusive approach.

13. Inter-generational work also brings significant benefits to all involved and can add a sense of purpose to lives of older, more isolated residents. Through the very strong third and voluntary sector groups in the area such as Seniors’ Forums and the youth focused Y Sort It, intergenerational projects are being developed and delivered.

14. There are a range of community engagement and participation groups in West Dunbartonshire including the Community Alliance, Youth Alliance, Equality Forum and Citizens Panel. These groups are committed to working together with council services, communities and residents to reduce social isolation for all age groups.

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