Social Isolation and Older People

Demographics and Prevalence of Social Isolation

The overall population of West Lothian continues to grow year on year. In 2013 the National Records of Scotland identified the population of West Lothian as being 176,140 having increased from 175,990 in the previous year with persons aged 60 years and over making up 20.5% of the total population. By 2037 the population is projected to have increased further by 11.7% to 196,664 compared to 2012 with the most significant increase being in the age group 75+ plus. This gives a clear indication of an aging population and an increase in the associated difficulties known to be more prevalent in older age groups such as social isolation.

To identify why social isolation is more prevalent in older people especially those living within rural settings it is necessary to consider how social isolation occurs. In brief it’s known to be linked to separation from social or familial contact, community involvement or access to services. All of which can be linked with increasing age where friends may be lost; there is potentially reduced contact with younger members of family; poor health / mobility and a lower socio-economic status.

Impact of Social Isolation

Much research has been undertaken into the impact of social isolation which shows its potential to negatively affect an individual’s wellbeing, quality of life and health. For example it’s lasting negative effect on blood pressure, depression and higher rates of mortality.

Social Isolation is also a significant public health issue with research showing the influence of social relationships or the risk of death being comparable to other well established factors such as smoking and alcohol consumption.

Examples of Targeted Initiatives

In order to avoid or reduce the negative effects of social isolation it is necessary to tackle the underlying causes. Within West Lothian there are a wide number of initiatives that individually and collectively seek to do just that.

Examples include the following:

- **Golden Years (Befriending Service)**, which via a network of volunteers offers a one to one befriending service to older people living in the community as well as a telephone befriending service to older people.
Forget me not Service (Dementia Befriending Service) offers a one to one befriending service to older people with dementia living in care homes. This provision has been particularly successful in promoting successful intergenerational working via input from secondary schools. Feedback from care homes and the change they have seen in resident’s behaviour / interaction has also been very positive.

Assisted Transport Schemes include Dial a ride and Dial a bus. Dial a ride provides a door to door transport for people with limited mobility who are unable to use ordinary buses whilst Dial a bus provides transport from home to local shopping centres for people who cannot manage by ordinary bus.

Pensioner Income Maximisation Scheme comprises of a dedicated Team who offer help and advice with all types of benefits to those aged 60 years and over.

Range of Housing Options which include provision to engage with the wider community via on site facilities and services available to the public e.g. café / restaurant / hairdressing

Social Clubs / Lunch Clubs and Day Centres are located throughout West Lothian

Community Arts Team offers a programme of arts, events and activities across West Lothian targeting hard to reach areas and client groups.

Community Learning and Development provide access to computer facilities and training throughout West Lothian

Dementia Cafes are available in 9 locations throughout West Lothian

Volunteering is something which is actively promoted with older people being major contributors an example being the Food Train.

Community outreach / engagement initiatives which support individuals to identify and participate in existing activities available within the community.

Ageing Well Programme offers a wide range of activities within local communities such as singing for health; Tai Chi; Tea Dances; walking football etc.

Potential for Improvement and Influencing Policy

1. The promotion of Community Coordinators to direct and signpost older people to remain engaged and integrated within their local community.
2. Essential older people themselves are involved in planning how to address the issue of social isolation as wants needs and expectations continue to change and evolve.
3. Continued focus on adopting a more preventative approach with upstream investment.
4. Community capacity building initiatives that engage and are sustained in the longer term by the local community.
5. Future requirement that every local authority / health and care partnership has in place a strategy for addressing social isolation
6. Improved uptake and use of technology e.g. secure carer networks; SKYPE; Living it Up (web site which aims to empower people to improve their health and wellbeing, includes info on what’s happening locally and things to do.)
Effective Awareness Raising within Communities

To be effective in reducing social isolation requires a number of approaches / tools to be used to get the message across to all concerned.

a. Staff / individuals who work closely with those most at risk such as health, social care staff as well as those working within the voluntary sector would appear to have an obvious role to play. Hence it would appear advantageous to ensure this issue is contained within the training and ongoing development of staff working within these areas who deal directly with those at risk, their families as well as the wider community in general.

b. High profile campaigns led by organisations such as Age Scotland as well as resulting media coverage could offer potential access to most of the population.

c. Education within schools / youth clubs etc. and intergenerational work also offers real potential in this respect.

d. Technology e.g. computers and mobile phones could provide a portal for getting the message across. An obvious example being the ‘Living it Up’ website which seeks to empower people to improve their health and wellbeing.

e. Plasma screen displays where available can also be used effectively to raise awareness within the general population.

f. In addition to all of the aforementioned is the use of the more traditional approaches such as leaflets and displays in public places such as libraries; GP and dental surgeries etc.

g. Existing Networks such as the Scottish Older Peoples Assembly and within West Lothian the Senior Peoples Forum can also be effectively utilised to discuss issues such as social isolation and seek views directly from older people as to how this issue can be best addressed.

Social Isolation and Young People

Demographics and Prevalence of Social Isolation

The West Lothian population continues to grow year on year and has the tenth highest rate of population growth in Scotland’s 32 Local Authority areas. West Lothian has a higher percentage of under 15’s than Scotland as a whole (20 per cent compared to 17 per cent). This population growth is expected to continue in the forthcoming years with an expected increase of 16.2% in under 16’s by 2033. West Lothian compares favourably with Scotland as a whole in areas such as employment, crime and education. However, there is room for improvement in the area of Youth employment but the relative gap between West Lothian and Scotland is narrowing. This remains a priority nationally and for West Lothian Council to prevent health and social inequalities and social isolation.
Impact of Social Isolation

There is a considerable body of research to evidence that youth unemployment is now one of the most serious challenges facing the country. Evidence strongly indicates that when young people are unemployed they are more likely to be unemployed and welfare dependant later in life. Youth unemployment is also likely to impact negatively on an individual’s mental and physical health and they are more liable to become involved in anti-social activity. There appears little doubt that social isolation is likely to be a direct result of this.

West Lothian Council strive to address the underlying causes of social isolation in young people which leads to poor mental and physical health and reduced life chances. This involves attempting to prevent family breakdown, young people becoming involved in the criminal justice system, truancy and exclusion from school, addressing substance misuse issues and domestic abuse issues within families and youth homelessness. Preventing social isolation in young people cuts across the life stages and includes the early years, school age and young people in transition.

Some Examples of Targeted Initiatives:

- **Psychology of Parenting Project** has been rolled out across West Lothian to provide parenting programmes to families with children aged 3-4 years with behavioural problems.
- **The Young Mothers Service** which provides key working support for vulnerable young mothers.
- **Positive Steps Programme** provides support for mother’s with mental health difficulties.
- **AIMS (Attendance Improvement Management Service).** This early intervention provision works with children, young people and their families to address issues around attendance and behaviour.
- **Mental Health/Mental Well-being Team** for young people exhibiting mental health issues.
- **Families Included Service** provides targeted key worker support to families facing chronic and complex difficulties that require intensive support.
- **Youth Inclusion Project** This team aims to promote young people move into employment, education or training.
- **Modern Apprenticeships** and quality **Vocational Experience** of up to 26 weeks are offered within the Council. This helps provide young people acquire the skills and experience to compete in a demanding job market.
- **Early and Effective Intervention/Whole Systems Approach** is well established in West Lothian and meets the needs of young people who offend through a holistic approach based on the GIRFEC principles.
- **Reshaping Childrens’ Services** aims to design and develop services within West Lothian to reduce the use of external resources and to provide robust packages of care for children and young people within their own community to improve outcomes.
Potential for Improvement and Influencing Policy

- Continued focus on early intervention and prevention.
- Continued community engagement to capture the views of the wider community.
- The introduction of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 should act as a platform to enhance and develop services which encourage Care Leavers and Looked After and Accommodated Children become more socially included. This should be a primary function of the Corporate Parent.
- West Lothian Council is introducing an Accommodation Strategy within its Reshaping Children’s Services agenda to address youth homelessness. Similar national initiatives should be promoted.
- Unemployment and Homelessness is being taken forward within West Lothian through developing a holistic Transitions Service. This should continue to be a national priority and focus for all Local Authorities and opportunities should be provided to share good and effective practice.

Effective Awareness Raising within Communities

Tackling social isolation in young people requires early intervention and prevention at a young age to target vulnerable groups. Holistic approaches and interventions are the methods which will address the underlying causes of social isolation in young people and reverse the trend of poor outcomes for those young people who have been Looked After.

Jennifer Scott
Head of Social Policy
West Lothian CHCP
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