This is our submission to the Equal Opportunities Committee on Issues around age and social isolation. The following contributes to “best practice and ideas that could be shared”.

Background:
North East Sensory Services (NESS) is a charity registered in Scotland and is the leading provider of integrated joint sensory services. We provide a range of services both statutory and non-statutory to 2,500 registered blind and partially sighted (80% or more sight loss) service users, their families and carers across Grampian as well as to many other non-registered service users. NESS also supports around 300 people who are deaf or have a significant hearing impairment and live in Moray, around 700 in Aberdeen and approximately 1,000 in Tayside. It holds contracts with 5 local authority social work departments i.e. Aberdeen City, Moray, Dundee City, Angus and Perth & Kinross and has developed a range of project specific services funded from charitable and trust funded income.

Achieving Independence for blind and deaf people, NESS exists to help people overcome the potentially devastating practical and emotional effects of serious sight or hearing loss.

People with a sensory loss are at greater risk of social isolation than the sighted and hearing population. The challenges of living with a sensory loss are compounded by difficulty with communication and mobility i.e. getting out and about. NESS informs, equips and supports people in a wide range of different ways. Experience demonstrates that different individuals will often need different approaches to deal with similar issues, if they are to maximise their independence.

People can be lonely at any age, but life changes most commonly associated with aging, such as bereavement and retirement further increase that risk. As vision and/or hearing worsens, independence, confidence and self-esteem are further eroded by increasing difficulty with managing their own affairs. They may have to become reliant on family who have busy lives or live distantly, a diminishing circle of friends or professional carers to perform tasks they would previously have done themselves. Even those able to get out may not be able to engage in the pastimes and hobbies they enjoyed previously because of fear, failing sight or embarrassment and frustration caused by being unable to hear.

Resource Centres
NESS stocks equipment which assists people with serious sensory loss to overcome challenges and get on with their life. This includes flashing door bells, telephones and alarms for those who cannot hear well. For those who cannot see well, it includes magnification aids, tactile adaptations and audio indicators to help people manage their day to day life.

NESS has fully accessible resource centres in John Street in Aberdeen and Elizabeth House in Elgin which also double as a staff base for the NESS services that have a domiciliary element. NESS’ resource centres equally attract service users with both hearing and visual impairments.

Service users can access several facilities at the resource centres under the triple headings of Information, Equipment and Support. Both resource centres provide walk-in access for general information, advice and the purchase of equipment. There is a café available four mornings a week in Aberdeen and a coffee morning drop-in once a week in Elgin. There is a fully equipped air-conditioned fitness suite with shower facilities in Aberdeen, a Talking book library and an IT suite in both Aberdeen and Elgin. There are various clubs, self-help support groups, clinics, classes, and lessons aimed at service users, their carers or family members and professionals from other organisations, held in both locations. Appointments may be made with NESS’ specialist staff members for more personal or specific issues, or to be assessed for specialist equipment or instruction in using pieces of equipment.

Special classes and clubs

Losing one’s reading ability increases the sense of isolation that many people experience as they realise the impact of sight loss. Many people find their reading capacity diminishes as their progressive eye condition gets worse and there comes a stage where hand-held magnifiers no longer help. NESS demonstrates is a range of technological equipment that can help people to maintain a level of functional reading and runs serial workshops for people to learn, alongside their peers, on the equipment in the technology suite. There is a limited range of equipment which can be borrowed by people who wish to try out at home and there is also limited visiting support with equipment for those who are unable to make the journey into John Street or Elgin.

Many profoundly deaf people identify themselves as culturally Deaf, and this is why a capital letter D is correctly used to indicate members of this minority group. Historically, many Deaf British Sign Language (BSL) users have been very isolated from mainstream society, and have developed a separate culture based on this separation. The Moray Deaf Club, meets weekly at Elizabeth House, and the Aberdeen Deaf Club meets on Saturday evening at John Street.

Talking to others can be difficult and frustrating for people with a progressive hearing loss. NESS provides elementary, intermediate and advanced level lip-reading
classes aimed at adults with an acquired hearing loss to help them communicate more easily and to regain their confidence. The informal and friendly classes help them to learn to see and recognise some speech that they cannot hear.

NESS encourages and supports people to access social activities and provides opportunities for people to develop social contacts where this is appropriate. NESS’ café at John Street and the coffee morning drop-ins held at Elizabeth House in Elgin, each provide a space for people to meet as well as providing a venue for established groups and friends to get together. NESS hosts all sorts of different types of activities for people to join in with. NESS also has a role in putting people of shared experience in touch with each other so they can exchange tips and feel less isolated themselves.

**Social connections for Older people**

NESS’ Connect, Inform, Support (CIS) project, part funded by the Big Lottery Fund, has received requests for support from over 250 socially isolated older people with sensory loss since its inception nearly three years ago and has achieved its outcome of increasing social connections among elderly people with a sensory loss. For many, contact with CIS is their only social outlet and is hugely appreciated. Unlike other agencies providing social opportunities for older people in the area, CIS is able to offer a tailored package of support to meet each individual’s needs to improve both social inclusion and independence, in the context of their sensory loss.

**Activities for Children and Young people**

NESS’ Young People’s Sensory Service (YPSS) works with children and young people throughout the North East of Scotland, who have a serious sensory loss. Their sensory loss means many of them are struggling to learn to do the same things for themselves as other young people are able to do. We encourage activities where youngsters can meet with peers in similar circumstances. They learn social skills and form lasting relationships with the outcome being that their confidence grows and that better inclusion, increased resilience and independence result. If these issues are not specifically addressed, these children can become accustomed to being left out; grow up with limited ambition, and expect to perform at a lower level than their peers. This does not and should not have to be the case.

YPSS works with youngsters individually and in small groups in a relaxed social setting, both after school and in the holidays, giving them chances to try new things and develop and rehearse their life skills. NESS also runs weekly youth club activities for sensorily impaired youngsters who might find it difficult to feel accepted as equal in mainstream youth activities.

“I have met people like me and feel less lonely. Now I have a social life.”
I see how others like me cope.”

“My boy is a very different child now, he has a more positive attitude, and his confidence and self-esteem have increased. Although I know he will have his ups and downs, I know he is learning to cope with whatever comes his way.”

“I feel I am no longer the only Deaf child.”

“She’s never thought of herself as anyone’s friend before. She seems popular with the other kids here and she’s happier in herself. I’m very grateful for that. I think I see a difference in her.” – Parent of a young service user.

Isolation within the community and the family
One significant barrier faced by people who are obviously blind or deaf is that other people frequently do not know how to interact with them. There are very many misconceptions, which frequently leave them on their own, excluded from company. For some people it’s too much effort to try and make contact, whereas others may not want to run the risk of “getting it wrong”, so they don’t engage.

Just because a family member has a sensory impairment does not mean you will automatically know the best way to interact with them. It is common for family members to miss or misinterpret the intentions of their family member, particularly if they are elderly. NESS plays a part in providing information, techniques and tips to relatives and carers as well as a little insight into how their relative might be feeling.

All the above quotes are taken from: NESS’ Social Accounts April 2013 – March 2014

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