People contributing to this response

Outside the Box is a voluntary organisation working with community groups across Scotland. For the past 3 years we have been working with groups led by older people. This response draws on the experience and suggestions of older people and others involved in the Wisdom in Practice and in other work that we do.

We agree to all parts of the response being made public.

General view

We are pleased the Committee is looking at this topic and agree with the way you have described the issues around age and social isolation, especially the recognition of the impacts of changes in people’s lives.

We think it is important to recognise that much of the problem lies in how we organise our society, rather than in the circumstances or behaviours of individual older people – or of younger people.

For example, if there was more encouragement for people to look ahead and plan for changes such as retirement and needing more support in an appropriate and positive way, social isolation could be reduced or prevented for many people.

Similarly, if young people are encouraged to see that life has many opportunities and that academic success or keeping up with some other people are not the only things that matter, they may have fewer pressures on them, feel more confident and so better able to connect with other people.

Developing and retaining vibrant, sustainable town centres, facilities such as shops and post offices in villages and in local communities within towns, libraries and leisure facilities and so on are also part of preventing and tackling loneliness and social isolation. This is an issue for community planning and for planning across all parts of Scottish Government, local authorities and the NHS.

Best practice and good ideas
We know of many effective examples of local projects that help prevent or reduce loneliness and social isolation for older people. We think that sharing ideas and experience is good, but we would not want to see a few ‘best practice’ models or services being used at the expense of the many local activities that people have developed to reflect the circumstances of people in that area.

It is important that older people are part of identifying what they want and in planning and delivering activities, as far as each person wants this. The answer is not developing a range of ‘loneliness and social isolation services’, delivered by other organisations to older people. (We think the same also applies to young people.)

It is also important that there is as much choice and diversity as possible in the ways people find friendships and company. We often hear from local authorities and grant funders that overlap and duplication are to be avoided, when they fail to realise that this multiplicity is what gives people the opportunity to find the groups or activities that are right and convenient for them. Funding that prioritises new activities at the cost of continuing existing activities that are effective and valued also add to problems by creating lack of continuity and ending the social contacts that are valued by many people and hugely significant for some people.

Some older people like to have friendships that are based around communities of experience, or hobbies and interests, or through the internet and social media.

We also don’t want to see just activities aimed at social inclusion for older people. Activities that welcome and include young people and people of working age will provide the friendships that sustain them as they get older, as well as proving people who are already older with more opportunities for friendships. Services that are ‘older people-friendly’, and dementia-friendly, hearing-loss friendly and the like will have more impact than a few services aimed just at older people.

**Influencing policy and practice**

We are increasingly worried about the way in which health and social care services are organised being a cause of loneliness and social isolation for older people, and of making matters worse. These are some examples.

- The main form of Home Care for older people who are often housebound - and likely to be lonely and social isolated – is now 10-15 minutes (or less) visits, with no time for conversation and social interaction from care workers
• Personal care and some other aspects of people’s lives are priorities, but the criteria and assessments often say that time to enjoy someone’s company and gain confidence and wellbeing are not part of the support needs of an older person who has additional difficulties and care needs.

There are inconsistencies in policies that say there should be prevention and supporting people’s strengths, in line with the Christie Commission approach, and our current systems that are putting large resources in staff time into limit access to support until it is almost or actually an emergency. The impact on people’s wellbeing and the distress and consequences of loneliness and social isolation that people experience in the meantime do not seem to be taken into account.

**Effective awareness raising in communities**

We think it is important that the huge contribution that communities make already, and even greater contribution they could make, is valued and celebrated. We do not want to see communities being treated as, or becoming, an annex to what public services do.

Part of this is work to make communities more aware of people’s needs and how ordinary people can help as part of their ordinary lives, with sensible steps to keep everyone safe. It should be ok for a neighbour to pop in and invite someone, including a person who has more support needs, to come along to activities in that community, and feel that this is a natural thing to do. This includes informal social contacts as well as more structured groups or events.

We can at the same time do more as a society to recognise that some people do have more needs and there are people who are at risk – which can include from people close to them and from workers in care services. Scotland has very good Adult and Child Protection systems, including advice for the public about what to do if they are concerned about someone. However, the experience of many of the community groups and individuals we work alongside is that they are not aware of the advice and many people feel that these are situations where it is best to back away and leave matters to professionals – which adds to the social isolation and vulnerability of the people affected. We know that increased social inclusion is an effective and significant part of keeping vulnerable people across the age range safe, and hope that this can be included as part of the policy and practice developments that the Committee encourages and recommends.

**About Us**

The Wisdom in Practice project includes
• Helping get new services led by older people underway: there are 28 local services involving almost 700 people.

• Producing discussion papers to raise awareness of issues that affect older people

• Developing practical guides to help more groups get new services and activities underway and extend the impact of community-led activities

• Raising awareness with policy makers and practitioners in Councils, the NHS and national settings about the contribution of services led by older people

• Raising awareness among older people’s groups of the range of circumstances of older people and helping groups be more confident at reflecting the needs of older BME and LGBT people and of people with higher support needs

• Promoting good practice in co-production with older people and stranger partnerships between older people and staff in public services.

Wisdom in Practice has been grant-funded by the Scottish Government through the Equalities Fund.

The reports and other materials from the project are at: www.wisdominpractice.org.uk

There is a discussion paper on Social Inclusion, which we published in early 2014 as our contribution to this debate: http://www.wisdominpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/WiP-discussion-paper-social-inclusion1.pdf

The Hints and Tips bring together people’s experience and suggestions on practical ways to tackle many of the issues we have raised in the response to the Equal Opportunities committee: http://www.wisdominpractice.org.uk/hints-and-tips-resources/

Anne Connor, Chief Executive

Outside the Box

13 March 2015