



VITAL CONNECTIONS CONFERENCE 2011 REPORT

OVERVIEW

On Tuesday 15th November the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) and the Campaign to End Loneliness co-hosted a landmark conference, *Vital Connections: Building public and voluntary sector partnerships to tackle social isolation in later life*. The one-day event brought together over 150 of the UK's most effective local poverty-fighting charities as well as a range of key statutory agencies which often come into contact with the most vulnerable older people. The conference was sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation and held at Westminster Central Hall.

The purpose of the day was to create new alliances between statutory and voluntary bodies to reach the most isolated older people in Britain's most deprived communities. The theme of the conference came out of groundbreaking new reports on the 'loneliness epidemic' by the CSJ (*Age of Opportunity*, June 2011) and the Campaign to End Loneliness (*Safeguarding the Convoy*, January 2011).

Below is a summary of key messages from the main speakers, as well as a summary of workshops, collated as an aide memoire for those who attended and an introduction for those could not. We hope these will prove useful.

UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM: THE TRAGEDY OF SOCIAL ISOLATION

KEY MESSAGES

Penny Mordaunt MP, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ageing and Older People

- Social isolation among older people is a problem of epic proportions
- The effect of hospital visiting teams, befriending schemes and outreach programmes cannot be underestimated: people start to engage, smile, even resume eating
- As well as ending loneliness, contact with older people can help raise the issue of their unmet needs, which currently isn't on commissioners' radars.



Paul Cann, Age UK Oxfordshire and the Campaign to End Loneliness

- The isolation of older people in Britain is a 'national disgrace'
- Loneliness poses as great a risk to health as smoking and obesity, doubling the risk of Alzheimer's disease and clearly linked to depression
- In the UK there are 1.5 million widows aged 75 and over
 - The media all too often 'flirts' with the issue of loneliness in older age. But a sustained and mass movement through the Campaign to End Loneliness is required if we are to combat it



Esther Rantzen CBE

- Loneliness is a 'cast of mind' which 'has a shaming quality'. Today the social stigma around loneliness is analogous to the stigma felt by children suffering abuse 25 years ago
- The key question we face is how to build bridges for those 'too ashamed to admit to being lonely.' Just as we needed Childline two decades ago today we need a 'friendship hotline' for the most isolated older people

PIONEERING THE SOLUTION: VITAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN AGENCIES AND CHARITIES

Vital connections with...

... **Social services** – Louise Collins, *Good Neighbours* scheme, Thanet, Kent

- In two years Louise and her team have matched volunteers to befriend 500 older people across Thanet
- One indicator of how isolated people are is the fact that many volunteers go on to become their next-of-kin
- Key to the success of befriending schemes is close working with social services and GPs: over half of referrals come from these sources



... **Fire services** – Phil Garrigan, Deputy Chief, *Merseyside Fire Department*

- Merseyside Fire Department has been into the homes of 120,000 older people across Merseyside in the last decade, usually to carry out home fire safety checks.
- Identifying those at risk of social isolation must be part of a fire service's strategy to prevent fires
- Having regular access to the homes of the most vulnerable people puts firefighters in a unique position to link them into the wider community
- The Fire Service will 'absolutely not allow a person to fall through the net anymore'

... **The police** – Nick Carr-Brown, *Healthy Ardwick*, Manchester

- Charities must embrace opportunities to work with the police to reach the most isolated older people. In Manchester Healthy Ardwick volunteers have gone door-to-door with PCSOs, being personally introduced to housebound older people on the doorstep
- Charities and faith groups must share/release buildings to create more places older people can go in their local neighbourhoods

... **Health services** – Dr Michelle Hamill, clinical psychologist, *Newham mental health team*

- From a mental health point of view, 'if someone is living in a barren social environment, the impact of psychotherapy alone is going to be very limited'
- Helping isolated older people re-engage in community is a vital task in which clinical professionals can play a key role
- When it comes to the most isolated, *personal introductions* to a charity or community group stand the most chance of proving successful (Dr Hamill takes clients after her work and personally introduces them to the charity *Contact the Elderly*)

BREAKOUT WORKSHOPS

LOCAL GOVERNMENT STREAM – Which way now for local authorities and ageing policy?

Valuing Older People team, Manchester City Council

- There are huge challenges for older people in urban areas. With the most affluent older people often migrating out of cities, the remaining older population tends to be poorer, with lower life expectancy and higher likelihood of acute interventions. Urban environments place older people at a heightened risk of isolation and loneliness
- Manchester has been working on its Valuing Older People Partnership for ten years, including intensive initial scoping work with a select group of older people to kickstart the process of finding out what was needed to make Manchester an age-friendly. In 2010 Manchester became the only UK city to join the World Health Organisation (WHO)'s network of Age Friendly Cities.
- Councillors and council officers must work together to reframe the opportunities of older age across a range of council departments and teams

- Collaborative working at a very local level is crucial. Establishing networks of stakeholders at a neighbourhood or ward level yields extraordinary results: better dissemination of information; development of more activities and more opportunities for interaction,
- Becoming age-friendly means councils looking beyond the social care system and pensions
- There is a leading role in this agenda for public health staff

VOLUNTARY SECTOR STREAM – ‘Marks of success – transforming lives and what it looks like’

Sheena Dunbar, Age UK Waltham Forrest

- It is crucial to offer support to those who do not meet social services’ eligibility criteria. The case-finding services Age UK Waltham Forest runs in partnership with local GPs is one way of doing that.
- GPs send questionnaires on behalf of the charity to all patients over 65+, testing for various risk factors, such as a history of falls or depression. Since the questionnaire comes from your doctor, there is a high response rate (50 per cent); the charity then contacts those flagged up as most vulnerable or at risk, visiting those people in their homes and making referrals mainly to voluntary sector groups and services. It is crucial to offer support to those who do not meet social services’ eligibility criteria. The case-finding services Age UK Waltham Forest runs in partnership with local GPs is one way of doing that.

Mo Smith, Regenerate RISE, Wandsworth

- Regenerate Rise partners with churches, schools and other community organisations to provide lunch clubs and involve older people in intergenerational projects.
- The commitment to a person has to be for *life*; even to the point of sitting with them as they die
- Integrating the disabled with the able-bodied is of critical importance for both groups of people

Louise Collins, Good Neighbours scheme, Thanet

- Training volunteers on topics such as dementia awareness and hearing loss is an important part of running transformative befriending schemes

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Peter Hay, President, Association of the Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS), Director, Adult and Community Services, Birmingham City Council

- From a social care point of view, tackling social isolation and loneliness ‘is about as preventative as it gets’
- Right now local authorities are reappraising how they meet more need with fewer resources. In this reappraisal we can see the beginnings of new approaches which prioritise preventative policies, i.e. polices geared towards building assets and strengths in communities
- Evidence shows that frequent contact with other people declines with age. Which means that the very foundations that support life at home and in the community is weakening well before the onset of care needs
- The way councils think about how the needs of its older population are met should not be restricted to a focus upon the narrow group eligible for social care funding

Next steps

- We would be delighted to hear your thoughts on the conference and ideas about tackling loneliness.
- Are you working to reduce isolation? Then join the movement of organisations working to combat loneliness. All supporters of the Campaign to End Loneliness are invited to become part of movement of organisations working to improve practice in combating loneliness and isolation. We will start by asking you about how you work in a short survey, and then support you to make the improvements to your services or partnership working through our major projects in the next two years. By being a supporter you will be the first to know about the latest information on combating loneliness. Sign up as a supporter at <http://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk/support-us/>

What is the Centre for Social Justice?

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think tank that develops and promotes effective new approaches to tackle Britain’s most acute social problems. We firmly believe that effective policy development is rooted in the experience and wisdom of the thousands of small grassroots charities that are having great success in tackling Britain’s deepest problems. The CSJ learns from these groups and champions their work, enabling them to share their hard-won expertise with senior politicians in Westminster and local government. The CSJ is not aligned to any political party, do not receive any government funding, and are run as a not-for-profit supported by corporate sponsorship and private donations.

The CSJ's review of older age poverty began in January 2010, lasted 18 months, involved thousands of hours of evidence gathered from across the UK and resulted in two landmark publications: *The Forgotten Age: Understanding poverty and social exclusion in later life* (November 2011) and *Age of Opportunity: Transforming the lives of older people in poverty* (June 2011). Any strategy to transform the lives of the poorest older people in Britain begins, we argued, with combating social isolation. To that end, there is an urgent need to build new local partnerships between statutory agencies often coming into contact with the most isolated *and* the voluntary sector groups able to provide the companionship the state cannot. To download both full reports, please go to www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk

What is the Campaign to End Loneliness?

The Campaign to End Loneliness is a coalition of individuals and organisations working together through research, policy, campaigning and innovation to combat loneliness and inspire individuals to keep connected in older age. The Campaign was launched in February 2011 by the founding partners Age UK Oxfordshire, Counsel and Care, Independent Age and WRVS and is funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. Through working with others we will:

- Raise awareness – of loneliness and why working to reduce it matters
- Build an evidence base - gather the evidence, promote what works and find the gaps in current interventions
- Share future-proofing ideas for individuals – helping us all to future-proof our own lives against loneliness in older age

Contacts

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