Social isolation and older men – meeting the need?

Paula Devine
(Queen’s University Belfast)
Frank Johnston
(Volunteer Now)
Background

• Northern Ireland is ageing
• Older men more visible demographically

Growing policy interest in needs of older people:
• Ageing in an Inclusive Society
• Lifetime Opportunities Strategy
• Transforming Your Care
• Active Ageing
• Gender Equality Strategy
What do we mean?

• **Loneliness**: subjective measure of unwelcome feelings or perceptions associated with lack of contact with others

• **Social isolation**: more objective concept; a continuum ranging from absence of contact with other people (social isolation) to high levels of social contact or participation

➤ Can be isolated but not lonely
Aims of study

• Review the extent and impact of current services to combat social isolation in Belfast, for men aged 50+, who are retired/unable to work and isolated

• Identify how services are meeting need and ways they may be developed to meet future requirements
Methodology

January – May 2014

• Literature review

• Audit of current services, with a specific focus on socially-isolated men aged 50+

• 10 in-depth interviews with older men aged 50+
  • Provide ‘expert’ knowledge
  • Caveat: All were members of existing services

• 6 interviews with stakeholders, eg funders
Literature review

• Outlined different interventions used to address social isolation

• Group work schemes appeared to be effective, whilst one-to-one interventions were least effective in this context

• More structural issues, such as transport and poverty, are significant factors associated with social isolation of older men
Audit of existing services

- 125 for men and women of any age (eg libraries)
- 20 actively target men of any age
- 12 services to combat isolation in men aged 50+ (including 4 Men’s Sheds)
- Many different types of services were identified, eg Men’s Sheds; one-to-one befriending schemes
- Some open to all; others for specific groups, eg dementia
- Churches often kept services going

- Limited snapshot in time
Meeting the need?

• Services provided comprehensive and diverse range of activities

• Generally met men’s self-reported needs

• 2 key messages: funding/sustainability, capacity
  • End of significant funding programmes (eg Big Lottery *Reaching Out: Connecting Older People*)
  • High demand for befriending services, but not for others
Interviews: Pathways

Pathways to, and reasons for, accessing services varied:

*Demoralised after retirement or unemployment:*
  - Importance of work, and the identity and self-esteem that come with a job
  - Home is the domain of women, and many men felt in the way

*Impact of ill-health:*
  - Mental ill health, addictions, physical ill health, cancer
  - ‘Epiphany’ after a health scare – give something back
Interviews: barriers

Masculinity and ‘pride’:

- Stigma in admitting that they are lonely or are going through difficult times, especially in mixed-sex setting
- Fear of attending a group and being unable to carry out the activities on offer

Limited engagement with very isolated men:

- Word of mouth important for making initial contact, but this misses out very isolated men
Interviews: legacy of the conflict

Strong link between conflict, masculinity and identity

For some men, the legacy of the conflict, and current events, are central in their life

• Services can be places of tension or potential reconciliation

• Specific needs of ex-prisoners, eg mental health, addiction and dealing with the past (which includes life in prison and post-release life)
Impact of services: Lives ‘transformed’

Accessing these services played a pivotal role in men’s mental and physical well-being:

• Social contact
• Friendship
• Sense of purpose in a post-work context
• Improvements to mental and physical health
• Feelings of usefulness

Other men suggested that membership of clubs sustained them in behaviours which helped to control their addictions.


**Stakeholder interviews**

- No funder had a strategic focus on services for (older) men, but will fund if need is identified.
- Men’s groups under-represented as applicants, and grantees of, funding programmes.
- Limited experience and capacity in relation to funding and governance hinders sustainability.
- Lack of knowledge of services across sectors inhibits collaboration between service providers, and service uptake by users.
Suggestions: Information and collaboration

• Increase the capacity of voluntary and community organisations in relation to funding and governance issues
• Take part in government consultations
• Join relevant networks
• Develop a clear and up-to-date directory of services for statutory and third sectors
• Involve and train health and social care professionals
• Evaluate what works
Suggestions: Policy and practice

Need for services to:

- Think about how to engage with older men as men
- Acknowledge diversity
- Think about range and type of activities offered
- Consider if men-only services are most appropriate
- What about inter-generational work?
- Recognise the legacy of the conflict
Next steps

A Review of Service Provision for MEN AGED 50+ (Belfast)

Paula Devine, Janet Carter Anand, Lorna Montgomery, Caoimhe Ní Dhónaill and Laura O’Hagan

Research report published September 2014
October 2015: Workshops to identify next steps

➢ Develop an action plan
Recommendations of action plan

Relevant to individuals, organisations and sector

• Appoint project officer
• Directory of older men’s groups – and update regularly
• Develop linkages with range of partners
• Organise and deliver engagement events
• Identify and support men to start their own groups
• Deliver capacity-building workshops to set up groups
• Set up a ‘seed capital’ fund
• Establish a Belfast Men 50+ forum
• Develop a pilot volunteer ‘buddy’ programme
• Workshops with groups to highlight good practice
• Training to recognise and signpost socially-isolated older men
Concluding thoughts

• Acute loneliness and social isolation are major challenges for many older men
• Negative effect on health puts pressure on health and social care services

➢ Need a sustained, flexible and creative multi-sectoral approach, with input from older men themselves
Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

...is a forum that encourages debate on a wide range of research findings, with the overall aim of promoting evidence-based policy and law-making within Northern Ireland.