



## 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*



# Social isolation and older men – meeting the need?

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# 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



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



Northern Ireland  
Assembly



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