



Reconnecting Our Communities

25 May 2021

Online event held via Zoom

Summary Report

The Scottish Older People's Assembly (SOPA) had outreach events planned for 2020 that could not happen due to the COVID-19 pandemic. SOPA rearranged the East Lothian event online, with a theme of Reconnecting Our Communities.

The event featured a local service, North Berwick Community Connections and also heard from Pilmeny Development Project, an organisation that has provided a similar Community Connecting service in Leith, Edinburgh, since 2009.

The aim of SOPA outreach sessions are:

- To raise awareness of SOPA within a particular geographic area
- To discuss a topical issue which links to SOPA's key themes and those within "A Fairer Scotland for Older People"
- To hear different voices to those already connected to SOPA
- To connect people with shared interests or agendas, or for future work and collaboration
- To share findings with members and partners, including the Scottish Government.

There was a good turnout on the day, with 46 attendees, including local older people, employees from the East Lothian Health and Social Care Partnership and local organisations working with older people, and SOPA members from across Scotland.

A **recording of the event, powerpoint slides** and **presentation notes** are available on the news section of SOPA's website <http://www.scotopa.org.uk/news.asp>

Diana Findley, Chair of SOPA, welcomed everyone to the event and provided an outline of SOPA's work.

Carol Stobie from North Berwick Coastal Community Connections gave a presentation about a project which started in 2019 before being thrown off its planned course by the pandemic. Carol explained how the project adapted very quickly to continue to support older people in a very different way and their plans for the future.

Anne Munro described the work of Pilmeny Development Project. Whilst the organisation has adapted in many similar ways to the North Berwick project, Anne reflected on some the different challenges faced by older people living in tenement flats in Leith. This reinforces the importance of local services that know their local community and can respond quickly to their needs. During the pandemic this was even more important when travel and other restrictions were in place. For many older people, local voluntary organisations were a vital lifeline of support. Anne ended on some top tips on successful community connecting.

Participants then broke into discussion groups to consider the following:

- What should be the priorities in reconnecting older people as the restrictions are eased?
- What challenges do you see facing older people post-COVID?
- What ideas and solutions do you have for tackling these – for individuals, local groups, national organisations, government?

Summary of feedback

- **Lack of confidence/ anxiety** and **physical/ mobility issues** will challenge many older people in reconnecting with people and activities
- There needs to be **joined up, local plans** to support older people to reconnect
- The **third sector, local community and faith groups** are well placed to support people to gradually reconnect
- **Transport** is key and needs to be aligned with the opening up of activities and services
- The third sector should be **recognised** for its efforts to support people throughout the pandemic and treated as an **equal partner** in planning and delivering future services
- Having **accessible information** in channels other than digital and **hearing the voices of older people** is more important now than ever.

Detailed feedback from the breakout groups

Transport

- Transport is a major issue that has been exacerbated by the pandemic.
- Older people trying to get to vaccine appointments – no community or voluntary transport options, forced to use public transport which can be difficult and cause a lot of anxiety for some.
- The risk of using public transport and the confidence to use it is a challenge as is the actual availability of suitable transport for the elderly to get to where they need to go without lengthy delays and multiple connections.
- Noted that HCL/ Dial a Bus is still running but social distancing means very limited capacity.
- Easing of restrictions needs to be joined up – there is no point in opening up community groups but not allowing transport to operate – there is currently a disconnect.
- Transport is required that is available, accessible, and affordable both to individuals and groups.
- Some voluntary transport schemes have not been able to run and may not open up again, this will be huge loss to local communities

Reconnecting

- People will really need to be supported to reconnect
- Some people are experiencing 're-entry anxiety' and also 'social fatigue' as they are not used to spending time with others.
- Get back the art of conversation and just meeting people again.
- Being able to step over their own threshold having been confined for so long and having the comfort of their own home.
- Gradual reconnections are key – start with a regular phone call, meet up with a 'coffee buddy', then a few people, then ready to take part in larger groups when they start up again. Community organisations such as Community Connections are well placed to support this approach.

Physical Activity

- Getting back out - walking, biking, going to day care centres, meeting in communities
- Helping people who 'might' start to get back out into the community but are frightened or have lost mobility and confidence
- Having spent a long time indoors – lots of anxiety around going out. Need to think about increasing confidence.
- Gradual introduction to getting outdoors.

- Podiatry – concern about people’s feet and bodies and physical health and ability to get about. We need to be aware that the withdrawal of some services like chiropody has an impact on people's physical capacity.
- SAFE Streets, seats, toilets litter cracks in pavements. Older people’s ability to get around.
- Enabling older people who have been shielding or limiting their involvement outside the house to return to exercise to build up their physical and mental wellbeing. We need to develop opportunities for people to join a walking group/exercise class etc in a safe and encouraging way. This also helps to combat loneliness and isolation.
- With lack of walking and exercise many have lost the ability to walk and also have suffered muscle wastage which leaves them feeling vulnerable and even more frail.
- There is the fear of a fall which might put them in hospital which is not a place they want to be.
Encouraging people to go out together in small self-supportive groups for a walk or just a blether in the local area.
- It was pointed out that telephone consultations with doctors do not encourage the doctors to see the true picture and face to face consultations should be restarted especially for older people.

Not ‘one size fits all’

- Responding to the needs in areas rather than the same across every part of a local authority.
- There are 'hidden groups' of people whose needs might be overlooked
- We need to be aware about food security which recognises that different communities need different foods and that access to them was not always easy with local shops being shut.

Access to information

- It has to be recognised by everyone that few elderly people have the equipment, connections or the knowledge to use digital devices and certainly not to their full potential.
- It was felt that more use should be made of Community information sheets which include local information on organisations there to help as well as what was on in their area. These could be posted to households or even posted in the local shops.
- In the Borders the Red Cross produce a monthly calendar of events which people can consult. Also in the Borders, “What Matters to You” Hubs are in many towns where people can speak to various council/ NHS/ third sector services, where they can seek advice and be referred to other services. It has proved very successful as particularly older people often like to speak to someone rather than go on the web.
- Contact is usually by word of mouth or by telephone but still those without community connections lose out once again.

- More and more information is going on line which excluded those that were not IT literate.
- Local Authorities and National Government need to make information more accessible and in a simpler form and not just on line. They need to be more accessible, user friendly and locality based since they have hidden away for the last 15 months.
- Access to Information technology and the training to go along with it to make it more understandable and accessible for older people to be comfortable with it.
- Much work in this area needs to be planned in the years ahead until the more literate generation embraces the “older age”.
- Showing what information technology can do and how older people can use it for their own needs. Understanding what modern mobiles can do and the various systems to make communication more interesting and enjoyable in connecting friends and family. Learn from the lessons of the past 15 months and putting these lessons into practice properly.

Volunteering

- Supporting volunteers to undertake a range of services is crucial as some will feel burnt out but we don't want to lose them. We need to be aware that for some older volunteers shielding has taken them away from the activities in which they were previously involved and could be experiencing a loss of confidence so nurturing them will be important. The consequence of shielding could lead to a loss of older volunteers going forward. The role of volunteers should be strongly recognised and appreciated.

Being Heard

- It continues to be vital for the voice of older people to be heard and to feel that they are championed at national and local level. The roll out of the Older Peoples' Champions is important allied to engaging older people to feel fully engaged and listened to given their expertise and contributions to their local communities and society in general.
- It is more important than ever for organisations like SOPA to represent the voice of older people really strongly at national level.

Third sector

- The efforts of the third sectors have been relied upon but are under-recognised
- New rounds of funding are looking arduous and time consuming despite the efforts Third Sector going the extra mile to meet unmet needs.
- There needs to be parity of esteem for the work of third sector organisations with public sector.
- Faith groups and other community groups are ideally placed to support reconnections. Befrienders and intergenerational projects with youth groups.

- Statutory services and third sector organisations should share information far more which would be helpful to them and be beneficial to their clients – more partnership working!

Future of services

- There is a risk that the attitude will be that if people "survived" without certain services they may not be reinstated.
- Concern that local authorities will use the opportunity to save money by justifying changes to services (such as sending people into homes rather than bringing people together in day care centres)
- Services are being asked to reinvent themselves and not necessarily in way they would choose or see as in best interests of people using the services.
- Connections between organisations and service providers need to be strengthened with information and building relationships.
- There is an overarching need to ensure that the policies set out in a Fairer Scotland for Older People are implemented in a collaborative way and that their inter-connectedness is recognised.

Thank you to everyone who participated in the event. This report will be shared through SOPA's networks with the Scottish Government, MSPs and policy makers.

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