



Scottish
Older
People's
Assembly

The Big HSCN & SOPA Tea Break: Ageing Well in the Highlands

9 September 2021

Online event held via Zoom



Summary Report

The Scottish Older People's Assembly (SOPA) would usually have a programme of outreach events to hear the voices of older people across Scotland. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SOPA has been hosting events online, with various partner organisations and on different themes of importance to older people.

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.

Highland Senior Citizens Network has also found different ways to keep connected to its members during the pandemic. They have hosted a regular online Tea Break as a way for people to come together, have a chat and discuss various issues.

SOPA and HSCN held a joint event on 9th September entitled "The Big HSCN and SOPA Tea Break: Ageing Well in Highland". The programme included:

- Welcome from HSCN Chair, Ian McNamara and SOPA Chair, Diana Findley.
- Dr Martin Wilson, Consultant Physician, Raigmore Hospital, who specialises in the health-care of older people, shared his perspective on positive actions for ageing well.
- Attendees broke into 5 groups, each to focus on one of the following NHS 5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing. The groups discussed positive actions at a local, regional and national level to make this step more accessible to all older people in Highland.

NHS 5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing

1. Connect with other people
2. Be physically active
3. Learn new skills
4. Give to others
5. Pay attention to the present moment (Mindfulness)

There was a good turnout on the day, with 31 attendees, including older people from across the Highlands and elsewhere in Scotland, organisations working with older people, Older People's Champions, SOPA members and Trustees.

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

Summary of feedback

- **Connect with others - Blended** ways to come together can be positive (eg allowing remote individuals to connect more often) and likely to be here for some time, but **support with technology, good broadband connections** and **simple/ accessible vaccine passports** are key.
- **Be physically active** - It's important to **find what makes you happy**. Suggestions include **walking** on a regular basis, or **having a dog**.
- **Learn new skills** - continued **learning and engaging** with others somehow is **fundamental to maintaining our mental wellbeing**. The new technologies, in their various forms, have many positives for meetings and continued learning but the **digitally non-connected must never be forgotten**.
- **Give to others** - there is a **joy of giving, older people have things to offer**, memories and life experience to share. Need to be **willing to ask for help**, give younger people a chance to give eg support with technology. **Get over yerself and get on with it!**
- **Pay attention to the present moment – Living in the moment** protects your mental health. Try to **see 5 things, hear 4, touch 3, smell 2 and taste 1**. Get outside in **nature**, take time to see more, **go bare foot onto the grass**.

Dr Martin Wilson, Consultant Physician, Raigmore Hospital, gave us a lively and engaging “scene-setting” snapshot of the current situation in Highland. This session is included in the event recording on the SOPA website www.scotopa.org.uk

For those not online, here is a short summary:

Martin shared reflections on how the pandemic has heightened some of the pre-existing challenges to health and well-being of older people e.g.

- being at home feeling safe and losing the habit of going out
- reduced mobility having become more of an issue and a barrier to going out

Social interaction has changed – but people do need to get together for their well-being, and the way we get together (i.e. not in large groups) will need to adapt. Social interaction saves lives, and efforts to minimise isolation are of gigantic value.

Eating, drinking and exercise were also highlighted:

- Weight is an important marker – during Covid many have gained weight but more worryingly older people, especially those who live alone, have been losing weight
- A huge number of people have run into problems with alcohol during Covid lockdowns, and haven’t had recourse to their usual support
- Exercise of some sort is vital – make sure you are doing something

Martin acknowledged difficulties older people, in particular, faced in engaging with/accessing NHS services, and dispensed good advice on making the most of any health consultations:

- If attending video or phone consultation have a list of problems
- Ideally have someone else with you. Online, it’s possible to have someone else on the call
- Have a list of your medications at the ready

We were encouraged to continue making plans, to have things to look forward to – while recognising that plans may need to change and should not go ahead “at all costs”.

Martin ended with a plea that we make “those” plans and have “those” conversations: **“If ever there was a time to talk about difficult things around end of life wishes, especially with the possibility of ending up in hospital, it is now!”**

Detailed feedback from the breakout groups

1. Connect with other people

- No matter what area people are from, all have similar problems and challenges, and can hopefully share solutions
- Main challenge is the dramatic change in how we connect with others – no clubs, no church, restricted access to shopping, all lasted much longer than people expected
- Staying connected became more difficult, people didn't always know their neighbours
- Technological barriers – not all older people have smart phones and not always up to date with technology, unaware of help available to them. Need more advertising where people can access help.
- Poor infrastructure with getting internet connections - many areas struggle to get any kind of signal this is especially true in the Highlands. Also, many older people still nervous to use this technology.
- Many missing face to face communication.
- Some members of the group still felt nervous or unsafe to go to shops restaurants etc. Some are happy to go out, but some felt it was a personal choice and were happy and contented in their own homes with their own bubble and had plenty to occupy their time with hobbies eg knitting. We should respect that not everyone is the same and that it is up to the person to make their own choice of what they think is right for them.
- Loneliness can still be a big problem but there are organisations that you can phone if necessary. Maybe they should be advertised more so that people are aware of them.
- Getting a vaccine passport - needed for returning to clubs, holidays etc was a nightmare. Problem with one person who phoned told he was 89th on the list, phoning back was 49th on the list and overall feeling was that this must be simplified to enable people to get a passport vaccine.
- Blended ways to come together can be positive (eg allowing remote individuals to connect more often, helps mental health) and likely to be here for some time, but support with technology, good broadband connections and simple/ accessible vaccine passports are key.

2. Be physically active

- People have been less physically active over the past 18 months than they would normally have been, as a result of the restrictions put in place during lockdown. Those who have had Covid and who are now living with long Covid have also found their ability to undertake activities substantially undermined because of low energy levels and lack of motivation. In addition, their mobility may have deteriorated, impacting further on both their physical and mental wellbeing.
- Finding the right type of activity that is suited to an individual's fitness level and which they feel comfortable with, is key. The benefits of outdoor walking were acknowledged, contributing not just to physical wellbeing but also providing opportunities for social interaction. The loss of connections within the community is significantly affecting

people. For example, they may have lost their confidence and find it difficult to be proactive in taking the first step towards resuming activities. The point was made that people will have different views on what is appropriate for them and what they are comfortable with, and it is important that we all understand and respect each other's feelings and find ways to accommodate them.

- Transport is an important factor in enabling people to access fitness classes, particularly those with mobility/balance issues. And moving into winter, keeping physically active becomes more challenging. Fitness classes are available online and are an option for people who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to attend actual sessions, but they have their limitations and cannot replace real classes where the instructors can monitor the participants and ensure they are not in difficulty.
- Reference was made to Zoom meetings. While these are helpful in keeping people connected, some reservations were expressed about them. However, it was felt that people will need to adapt to the changing circumstances and learn new skills, particularly where technology is concerned in view of the benefits it brings (online shopping was one example). It was acknowledged that people who are not online or who do not have access to a computer, are disadvantaged and at risk of increasing isolation. Digital exclusion is a significant issue that needs to be addressed.
- Suggestions for positive action included slow walking on a regular basis and getting a dog.

3. Learn new skills

Several of the group are active or had been active in the University of the Third Age (u3a).

Why this step to mental well-being matters: what does it mean to people?

- Learning from each other and having fun in so doing enables us to develop and learn irrespective of age
- This is vital for our mental health
- Simply sharing memories and testing our recall is also an effective and enjoyable way of engaging our brains

What positive actions have people seen locally/regionally/nationally supporting this?

- Restarting activities is going to be a huge challenge
- Zoom meetings and phone calls alone are not enough though they do help maintaining contact and engaging with people
- One positive outcome from the explosion of technology is that people who were previously unable to meet others in a variety of settings may now be able to do so and need no longer be geographically disadvantaged

What further positive actions need to happen to make this more accessible to all older people in Highland?

- Hybrid ways of working and meeting may become the 'norm'
- U3A is opening up access to its meetings across the whole of Scotland
- We have to acknowledge we are not yet reaching out to all those with whom we need to engage

In summary, continued learning and engaging with others somehow is fundamental to maintaining our mental wellbeing. The new technologies, in their various forms, have many positives for meetings and continued learning but the digitally non-connected must never be forgotten.

4. Give to others

Why this step to mental well-being matters: what does it mean to people?

Most of the group were active volunteers and had worked or were working in third sector/caring/social work/education.

- Evidence of positive outcomes from giving to others. The feelings you get:
 - Sense of purpose
 - Self-worth
 - Connection with others
- Giving really is better than receiving – the feelings of joy you get from giving a gift last far longer than those from receiving one.
- There needs to be a balance in life between looking inwards and looking outwards – two-thirds outwards, a third inwards is a healthy balance.
- Some people may feel they have nothing to give. Three things we have:
 - Money & “stuff”
 - Time
 - Experience of life
- Time is something we have to offer: by volunteering and getting involved. This is important to me. Doing something positive and making a difference.
- I started with great enthusiasm trying to get rid of “stuff” during lockdown – but it was difficult to find somewhere to get rid of it to. Also, so many things have emotional attachments and memories which are important to me.
- Volunteers are at the heart of our service – like so many others. We particularly seek older volunteers to match with our clients’ interest – although some people do want matched with a younger person. During lockdown many of our older volunteers had to stop. Lots of younger people came forward – but found the formality of PVG checks, matching etc. challenging. It’s proving difficult to get older volunteers back.

What positive actions have people seen locally/regionally/nationally supporting this?

- Highland Third Sector Interface helps other charitable groups to come together and speak about things that matter to them and they can help with governance, policies and fundraising.
- The third sector is so important – and it needs to be an equal partner with statutory partners as they couldn’t do the work they do without the support provided by the community/voluntary/third sector.
- Older people sharing their experience with the Health Board. We’re not paid, so we can say what we honestly think without fear of getting sacked.
- Memories are important and something we can share. It’s important to share memories and perspectives with the younger generations – giving an understanding of how things

like communication and connecting have changed e.g. people not having had ready access to phones, the importance of letters.

- We need to get businesses involved. Some organisations had employees doing connection calls during lockdown and employees liked doing this.
- Social Good Connect is an organisation matching employee volunteering with organisations needing volunteers <https://socialgoodconnect.org/>
- Young people also have skills, perspectives and experience to offer to older people – helping older people gain confidence with new ways of doing things, connecting in different ways, discussing how things have changed in their lives. As a young person, I feel I have a lot to give, and I get so much back in return.

What further positive actions need to happen to make this more accessible to all older people in Highland?

- Finding ways of getting older people involved in their communities again. Some people who stopped volunteering or participating in local groups don't want to start again. For the good of services and for people's own health and well-being we need to motivate people to re-engage.
- As individuals, we need to be more aware of our own personal networks and keep in touch with people. We have a generational reluctance to interfere or impose ourselves on people. Covid has made this worse. We need to get over ourselves and lift up the phone, write the note and get in touch. We need to get on with it and try!
- Older people who don't have confidence may need some support to feel they have something to offer, that they are valuable and have something to give.
- We need to change our culture so that it is ok to ask for help and people aren't frightened to do so.
- We need to find ways of supporting people who find it difficult to be assertive and to get their voices heard.

5. Pay attention to the present moment (Mindfulness)

- We had a beneficial chat about how each of us have been moving towards returning to "normal" and the reassurance that it does get better and easier with practice.
- Mindfulness is a buzzword right now, but it is vital that we are present in the moment. As an example, think of my glass of water. It is so much more than that. It is quenching my thirst, it is giving me a vision of Scottish mountains giving me water, you need to use as many of your senses as you can.

What do you do to help you be in the moment?

- I go to a class and we do exercises, a bit like tai chi and we pass clouds. You use your hands to move the thoughts out of your head, and it really works. It's really hard to be in the moment though as you have all the worries about your family, friends and so on.
- I need to get the space that is clear and enjoy what I am looking forward to. I need the space at the back of my head.

- I also use meditation, concentrating on myself, and not thinking of anything else.
- There are so many things going on in my head and the needs of those needing my attention – it means I cannot find my space. For example, reading I book, I get to the bottom of a page and I cannot remember what I just read! There are distractions all the time.
- We discussed 54321 - see five things, hear four things, touch three things, smell two things, taste one thing. You need to be conscious and disciplined, but with time and practice it becomes easier and you can begin to block out the distractions, things like the banging door or the traffic sounds in the street.
- It is also really important to get out in nature. It is very grounding. I just go out the back door sometimes and stand bare foot on the grass, looking up at the clouds. An example of how this can work – I took my children out to look at the clear night sky and the next day my son told me he had dreamed about planets, so he made a connection in his sleep with his clear mind.
- It is amazing what you see when you have been oblivious for so long. Pre-covid, on a walk I would brush past things and not even see them. Now going on a slow walk with a friend and their dog, I am seeing things I have never “seen”. It is like painting a picture of freedom.
- Sometimes it can be comforting to look back on a previous difficult time and know this will pass.
- I worry about intruding on my family’s time. They don’t want to use me and I don’t want to bother them but being there after school for the grandchildren coming home makes me feel useful, but I don’t want to stay and bother them.
- I still need my parents (even if I haven’t seen them for two years), I need them and I am sure your family need and want you too.
- They ask me to bake so I will go to them – I know what they are doing!
- Key action: 54321 and being out in nature (even just out the back door with your face turned up to the rain with your tongue out to feel the rain).

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.

Particular thanks to:

Speakers: Ian McNamara, Diana Findley, Dr Martin Wilson

Group Facilitators: Susan Smith, Gillian Harris, Jenny Brogden, Iain McKenzie, Nic Goddard

Note takers: Brenda Nicholson, Irene Robertson, Ian McNamara, Jo Cowan, Elaine Thornton-Nicol

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