

“Just ask the Lonely...”



...lessons learnt from the
Engage With Age
BIG Lottery funded
HOPE Project 2012-14



Lessons to be shared

Older people are particularly vulnerable to social isolation and loneliness owing to loss of friends and family, mobility or income. Trends in wider society, such as greater geographical mobility, reduced inter-generational living, less cohesive communities, mean that older people may become more socially isolated, potentially leading to increased loneliness. Research indicates that social isolation and loneliness have a detrimental effect on health and wellbeing.

Engaging in meaningful and reciprocal social contact has been proved to have a positive impact on combating social isolation, contributing to older people's health and well-being. The impact of loneliness and social isolation on an individual's health and wellbeing has cost implications for health and social care services.

The HOPE Project

Hubs for Older People's Engagement is an Engage With Age project, funded by Big Lottery and delivered in partnership with three Belfast housing associations - Clanmil, Trinity and Fold. The project targets isolated older people for social contact, group work and community activities to alleviate loneliness and social isolation. This position paper shares lessons learnt from the first two years of the four year project.

The aims of the **Hubs for Older People's Engagement (HOPE)** project are to:

- increase the confidence of older isolated people through involvement in group and community activities which facilitate the development of social networks and relationships;
- improve older people's quality of life and sense of wellbeing through involvement in meaningful and fulfilling activities;
- foster positive and sustainable community relationships between existing housing associations, residents and staff and the older isolated people living in local communities; and
- develop a sustainable volunteer programme which promotes intergenerational and peer support for isolated older people in the community.

Whilst the majority of older people enjoy regular social contact and are supported by family and community networks, there are older adults in our community who go to bed each night feeling alone and isolated.

HOPE targets older men and women, over the age of 50, who either live in one of the participating Belfast housing association sheltered housing schemes or surrounding neighbourhoods and who experience loneliness or socially isolation. 'Hubs' are central to the projects community development approach and involve a unique partnership between Engage With Age and housing associations to provide opportunities for social contact between the residents of the housing association and local community.

The development of each hub is critical to the project and involves three key stages: developing a working relationship with a housing association to establish the hub; a brief mapping exercise identifying existing community resources for older people, together with the promotion of the project to local services and professionals; and reaching out and engaging with isolated older people, assessing their needs and developing a diverse programme of activities planned with the older people, which facilitate social engagement.

Figure 1: The Hub Model



Table 1 Profile of the Hubs

Fold Details	Belfast Neighbourhood	Current Number of Participants	Scheme Co-ordinator	Stage of Development
Trinity Lodge	BT7	25	Louise Currell	Established April 2013
Harmony Court	BT14	39	Eleanor Girvan	Established Apr 2012
Brookvale Fold	BT15	34	Heather Walsh	Established April 2012
Culling Tree Fold	BT12	28	Kathleen Mc Elroy	Established March 2013
Elmgrove Manor	BT5	25	Beverley McCallen	Established April 2012
Inverary Fold	BT4	35	Christine McMahon	Established April 2012
Time Travellers Men's Group	BT4, BT5, BT6, BT7, BT8, BT10	25	Co-ordinated by Stephen Gourley	Established April 2012
St Elizabeths Court	BT17		Jennifer Watson	Commencing in April 2014

Evaluation

HOPE is evaluated on an on-going basis with each stage of the evaluation informing the next stage of the project. Descriptive data is collected from participants, the impact of the activities delivered and the involvement of the volunteers. Focus groups capture the views and experiences of older participants, volunteers and hub staff and provide feedback on what is working and what needs to be changed for the next stage of the project. The Older Person's Outcomes Star is used to provide a base line to measure individual participant's level of confidence and well-being before, during and on completion of their programme (see Figure 3 page 8).. Participants are encouraged to self-evaluate their confidence and wellbeing across the seven social dimensions:

- Staying As Well As You Can
- Keeping In Touch
- Feeling Positive
- Being Treated With Dignity
- Looking After Yourself
- Feeling Safe
- Managing Money

A referral and intervention flow chart tracks participant's progress through the programme. New referrals may decide not to become involved and in this case are provided with information or referral to a more appropriate service and at least one follow up call to check their progress.

Lessons to be shared

LESSON 1: WORKING WITH DIVERSITY

Each Hub has developed differently Each new Hub has developed different priorities and activities, reflecting the social profile of housing association residents and community participants, together with the culture, context and resources of the local neighbourhood. The current ratio of sheltered housing scheme hub to community participants is 25 : 75 .

Table 2: Description of the Hubs

Hub	Defining Characteristics
Harmony Court Group, North Belfast	Weekly meeting of the Men's Group, Residents are mostly men, smaller amount of women participants
Brookvale Fold, North Belfast	This Fold houses more married couples than the other Hubs, Residents with more disabilities issues
Cullingtree Fold, West Belfast	Weekly meeting of older people Young at Heart group mixed-genders; this fold has more younger older males than the other hubs.
Elmgrove Manor, East Belfast	'Likely Lads & Crafty Ladies' group meets weekly, includes residents of Mullan Mews supported housing scheme.
Inverary Fold, East Belfast	'Afternoon of Relaxation & Companionship' (ARC) group meets fortnightly, includes residents from Sydenham Court supported housing.
Trinity Lodge, South Belfast	Occasional activities in common room and other locations for Trinity Lodge residents and others in the local community and beyond.
'Time Travellers' Men's Group	Fortnightly group includes various cultural, historical, recreational activities for older men in South & East Belfast & Castlereagh.
St Elizabeth's Court, Dundonald, Castlereagh	Activities to start at St Elizabeth's Court from April 2014.

Diversity and Social Isolation Approximately the same numbers of men are participating in the project activities as women. Fewer than 40% of participants are aged between 65 to 74 years, with 33% over the age of 75 years. A significant proportion (14%) of participants are men between the ages of 50 to 60 years. The majority of participants reported poor physical and mental health. Factors such as gender, age, domestic circumstances, sexual preference, religious and cultural background and health shape an individual's experience of social isolation. An appreciation of social diversity is crucial to the project in order to avoid reproducing forms of discrimination and social exclusion such as ageism, sexism and dis-ableism.

Table 3: Profile of Participants

Male	Female	Age	50-65	65-74	75+	Total
101	110		59	82	70	211
Post Codes covered		BT4, BT5, BT6, BT7, BT8, BT10, BT12, BT13, BT14, BT15				

Involvement of younger older men Currently 30 males between the ages of 50 and 65 years are participating on the programme, indicating a growing need for services specifically targeting socially isolated younger, older men. The growing involvement of younger older men has shaped the nature of group work activities and outings provided and resulted in the formation of new groups.

The 'Time Travellers' group – successfully engaging older men !

The 'Time Travellers' Men's Group was formed in April 2012, designed specifically for older men referred to Engage With Age from various agencies, friends, family, health professionals etc. Having found that the programmes in the various hubs were less suitable for older men it was decided to set up a separate group focusing on mainly social, cultural, historical activities of more interest to older men. Over the past two years the group has bonded well and provides an important focal point for socially isolated older men with often poor mental and physical health, who can meet and enjoy fun, friendship and camaraderie while taking part in activities in which they share a common interest, ie. – local history hence the name 'Time Travellers'. The group also works well bringing men of different ages and social backgrounds together and feedback from all participants has indicated that it does help bring them out of isolation, improving their physical and mental health and wellbeing.

LESSON 2: WORKING AGAINST SOCIAL ISOLATION

Reaching out To date the project has over 200 participants registered on programmes. The project relies on community services and professionals to refer older isolated people to the hubs. In a sample of 148 project participants across three hubs, the main sources of referral were: 1% family, 7% Social Workers, 11% other community projects, 21% housing associations, 27% professionals and 33% self-referrals. The stigma associated with loneliness and social isolation contributes to the reluctance of older people to disclose feelings of loneliness to health and social care workers and professionals, creating a barrier to early referral. The number of self-referrals suggests that word of mouth is still a useful means of promoting services to older people. It is expected that the level of referrals from Social Workers, General Practitioners and the housing associations will increase as the result of the health and social care policy of Re-ablement and further promotion of the service

Engagement and Motivation Older people who are unable to engage in regular social contact can experience loss of confidence, social skills and motivation, making it difficult to participate in social groups and community activities. Awareness of the signs of loneliness and isolation and the implications for an older person's health and wellbeing is essential for professionals working in the field. It also takes a considerable amount of time to 'connect up with' and 'get to know' older isolated people living in the community. Project workers have found that they have to make multiple visits or telephone calls to engage a newly referred older person living at home. Motivational communication techniques have been effective in encouraging older persons to take small steps towards increased confidence and social engagement. A volunteer one to one support programme which supports older participants to develop confidence and social skills and navigate services is being developed and evaluated.

Participant Involvement Events, outings and group work programmes are planned and organised by the participants themselves, using the hubs as a centre to meet. Focus group feedback suggests that group involvement is effective in motivating participants and building confidence. Below are some comments from participants about project activities:

"Don't give up. Get out"

"Go out there and give an old lady like me a hug, today"

"You feel part of what's going on"

"Encourages you to use your imagination and try new things"

"Doing things you never did before"

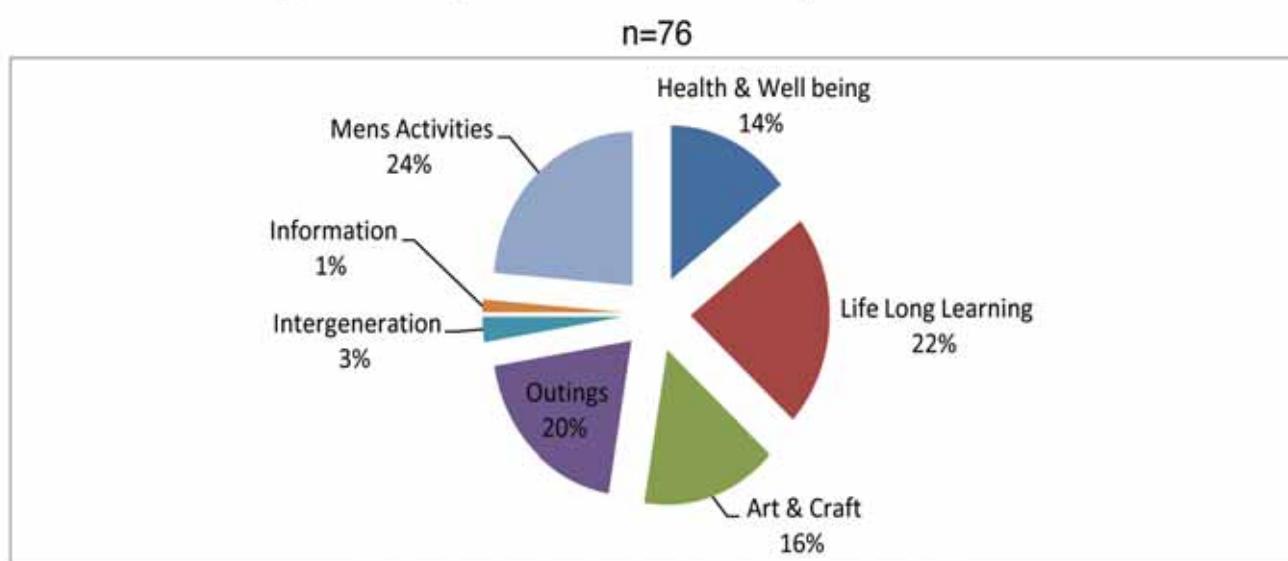
"Wish I had done this long ago"

LESSON 3: WHAT WORKS AND WHY?

Offering different types of activities Over the two years of the project 76 different activities have been delivered to 208 older participants. The Hubs have provided opportunities for social contact which can be categorised under three headings: one-to-one interventions, group services and community engagement. Examples of each are provided in the following table, see Figure 2..

The most frequent and well attended activities include arts and crafts groups, outings and visits. There is a strong interest in health and wellbeing and lifelong learning activities. Involvement in group work activities, either short term or ongoing appears to have a motivating effect for older participants.

Figure 2 Categories of Hub Activities, HOPE 2012-2014



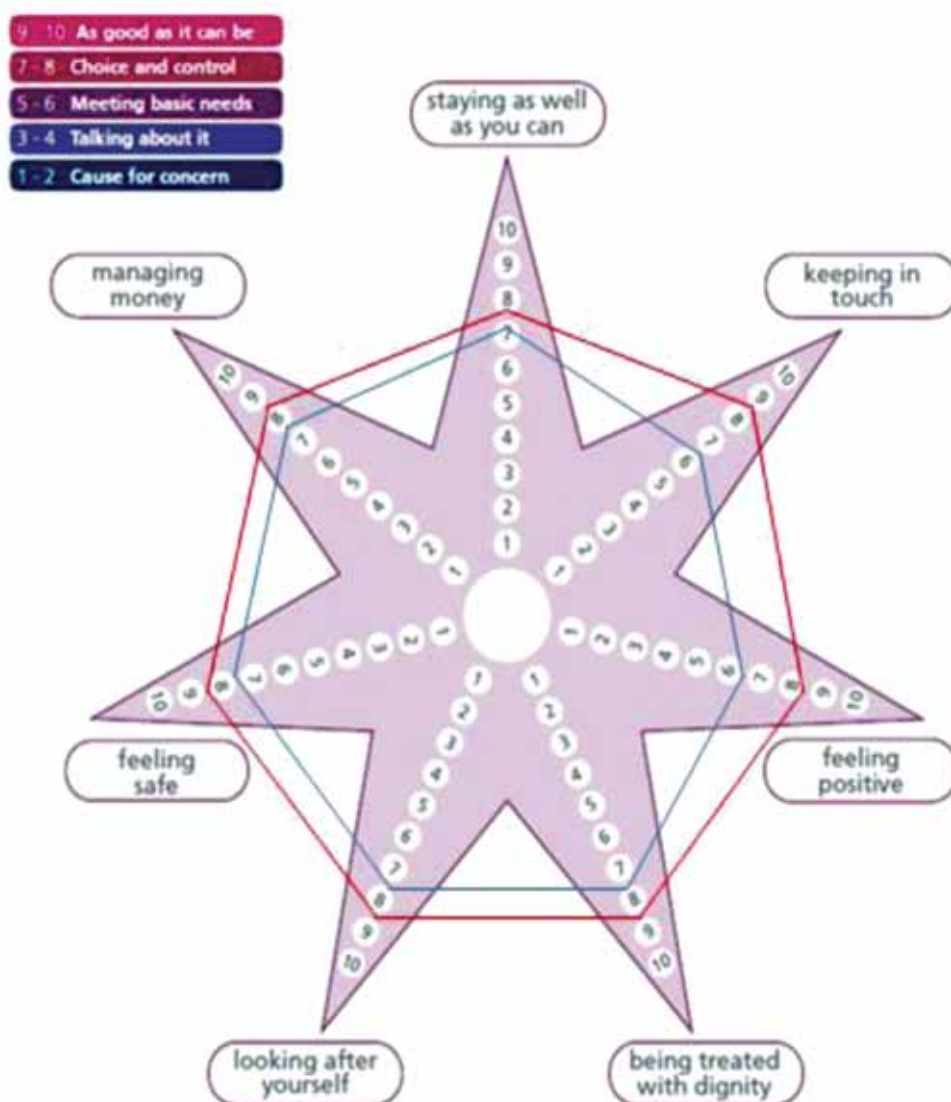
Motivating Isolated Older Men - Men who participate in the programme enjoy both mixed gendered and single gender activities. Activities involving only men account for 24% of all events and they include examples of the most innovative interventions offered in the project.

Men's activities have included : Fishing courses, boat trips, summer day trips, outings to places of historical interest eg. Ulster Folk & Transport Museum, the Ulster Aviation museum, , guided tour of Crumlin Road Gaol, Titanic Belfast, cinema visits, dinner nights, DVD evening with supper, intergenerational events, snooker, walking, an introduction to bowling, men's keep fit,

Two successful 'Cook It' programmes were run in Harmony Court - we had six participants in each course and they cooked dinner for 12 and invited other members of the Hubs.

Measuring Confidence and Wellbeing: The combined Older Persons Outcomes STAR scores of 20 individuals (7 men, 13 women) across the seven domains measure the average percentage of change to participant's wellbeing and confidence during their involvement on the program.

Figure 3: Average Older Persons Outcomes Star scores for a sample of 20 participants HOPE Project, 2012-2014



Note – the inner blue line represents the average scores for the 20 participants at the **assessment** stage and the outer red line is the average scores at the **review** stage.

Table 4: The Average Older Peoples Outcomes Star Scores for 20 HOPE Participants (S&E Belfast) at Initial Assessment and 3 Months Review (2012-2014)

	Assessment	Review	Change
Staying as well as you can	7.05	7.90	0.85
Keeping in touch	6.50	8.45	1.95
Feeling positive	6.25	8.25	2.00
Being treated with dignity	7.70	8.50	0.80
Looking after yourself	7.70	8.30	0.60
Feeling safe	7.90	8.40	0.50
Managing money	7.85	8.15	0.30
Average	7.27	8.28	1.00

The majority of participants experienced some sense of improved wellbeing across the seven dimensions during the course of the programme. That is not to claim that the programme was entirely responsible for this change, as there are many factors that would influence this outcome. Domains such as 'keeping in contact' and 'feeling positive', which are linked to increased social engagement, recorded the most significant level of change. 'Feeling safe' and 'management of money' did not change significantly whilst participating on the programme, although these scores were relatively positive on the initial assessment. 'Staying well as you can' and 'feeling that you were being treated with dignity' improved marginally. Despite the limitations of such a small unrepresentative sample these results suggest that involvement on the programme may either help prevent deterioration or result in a slight improvement in participant's confidence and wellbeing.

Further Discussion on Older Persons Outcomes Star: The Older Person's Outcomes STAR is a useful evaluation tool providing a holistic picture of a person's circumstances, helping to identify those most at risk of social isolation and pointing out areas in their life where they can perhaps make some improvement. The Outcomes STAR can be used retrospectively to help a person to reflect on how they have benefitted before and after getting involved in one of the various 'hubs' of activity in and around the sheltered housing schemes. It can also be used to indicate whether we are targeting the right people, i.e. – helps to identify those who are most in need of confidence building and increased social contact with others.

Other observations from the first 20 participants' (assessed using Older Persons Outcomes Star), the responses are –

- Those older people living alone in the community have benefitted most from the project compared to those living in sheltered housing schemes who have shown slightly less benefit and appear to be less at risk of social isolation, mainly due to the available support of the scheme co-ordinator and having more access to social activities in the housing scheme.
- Those having been referred from the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust Community Mental Health team have shown most benefit and the HOPE Project 'hubs' have provided an important social outlet for them having been 'discharged' from day care support services as well as improving their mental health and sense of confidence.
- The project clearly has had a great impact on all participants in keeping older people out of social isolation with some stating that it has 'given me a new lease of life' or 'made me feel a different person'. It would also appear to indicate that the right people are being included and in particular that we are meeting our objectives of targeting those most at risk of social isolation.

Why does it work?

The following case study describes one participant's personal journey and provides insight as to how social contact and engagement helps socially isolated older people improve confidence and a sense of wellbeing.

Case Study: Elaine

Elaine joined the hub at Elmgrove Manor four years ago following a referral from her family who were increasingly worried about her wellbeing. She had become extremely isolated and only left the house with family members, due to lack of confidence, depression and bereavement.

Elaine was introduced to the 'hub' at Elmgrove Manor ('Likely Lads & Crafty Ladies' group) where she started to make new friends and got the chance to take part in a wide range of activities and outings that she would not otherwise have had the opportunity to try. The friendly and welcoming hub at Elmgrove had a big impact on her wellbeing, enabling her to have the confidence to get out and about and mix with other people, again giving her something to look forward to each week as well as having good fun and enjoying a laugh! She was also able to share a taxi with friends to get to the group, reducing the cost which was an issue for her.

Recently Elaine moved on from participating in the 'hub' at Elmgrove and has joined a local lunch club closer to her home. This suits her as she now gets picked up from home by minibus which helps since she now has poor mobility. Hers is a clear example of where the HOPE project can really make a difference in someone's life, bringing them out of isolation and giving them a new lease of life.

Volunteers offer a key to sustainability

Volunteers are an essential element of the daily success of the project as well as offering a potential key to the long-term sustainability by continuing to support the work in the hubs. Individuals get involved in volunteering for various reasons, e.g. they were already involved in the hub; personal development; wish to give something back to the local community. However their support working alongside the Development officers is crucial, particularly when supporting individuals in their own homes who are initially reluctant to attend a hub. Currently there are **22 formal volunteers** involved in the project but there are many more individuals not registered as volunteers but continue to support the work of the project in the hubs and are therefore referred to as **informal volunteers**. The volunteer roles include:

- Regular Hub Volunteers
- One-to-One Support Volunteers
- Occasional Volunteers

Volunteer Training: All volunteers must attend induction training which covers the following – overview of Engage With Age; overview of HOPE; boundaries; claiming expenses; confidentiality, policies and procedures (Lone working, Health & Safety, Data Protection). Further training is offered to all volunteers as and when they can attend on various topics such as Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults; First-Aid; Food Hygiene; Manual Handling; Stress Awareness or whatever is relevant to the individual volunteers. Although not required for the evaluation outcomes, It is hoped that volunteers will also gain confidence, make new friends, feel included in a team, try new activities and have the opportunity to develop new skills as part of their volunteering with the HOPE project.

Table 5:
Profile of the Volunteers

Total number of formal
volunteers at time of print: 22

Age range	18-25 years	4
	26-39 years	2
	40-54 years	2
	55-69 years	8
	70+ years	6
Employment	Retired	10
	Employed	4
	Unemployed	4
	Student	4
Gender	Females	18
	Males	4

Summary

Lessons Shared

Practical knowledge as to how to establish partnerships to address social isolation within local communities, how to engage and motive isolated older people from diverse backgrounds and how to measure the impact of the social engagement strategies and interventions has been gained. Lessons to be shared from the initial two years of the project include:

- Participants report increased confidence and enjoyment from involvement in regular group activities and outings that they themselves have chosen or initiated. The positive impact of social engagement on confidence and wellbeing and the prevention of further social isolation are evidenced by positive Outcomes for Older People Star and focus group results.
- Older people living in the community have benefitted more from the project than older residents of sheltered housing schemes who appear to be slightly less at risk of social isolation.
- Participants referred from mental health services have demonstrated the most benefit from involvement the project.
- The project appears to be proactive in the prevention of social isolation with participants stating that it has '*given me a new lease of life*' or '*made me feel a different person*'.
- The demand from men, particularly younger older men, for different forms of social engagement challenges the gendered nature of social support and resulted in innovative and creative approaches to combating social isolation. Specific case studies demonstrated the positive impact of diversity on the range of activities delivered.
- The Older Persons Outcome Star is a useful tool for measuring the impact of the project on individual participant's general wellbeing and engaging older people in self-assessment. It provides an effective basis for person centred planning with individual participants. However more refined measurements for social isolation and social networks may provide additional evidence as to the impact of the project on an individual's level of confidence and general wellbeing.
- Social capital existing within communities and neighbourhoods can be effectively harnessed to provide sustainable opportunities for social engagement for older residents within a locality. Social interaction between the housing association residents and community residents has increased through the joint participation in groups and outings. Housing association residents and staff have been receptive to community involvement and older people from the community have used the housing association resources. Further evaluation on the impact of the hubs on both the housing associations and the local community is required.
- The involvement of older people and younger people (students) through the volunteer training and one-to-one programme promotes intergenerational involvement and offers future sustainability the project.