
**A Connected
Scotland: Tackling
social isolation and
loneliness and
building stronger
social connections**

Shelter Scotland
Men's Shed
consultation event

April 2018

SUMMARY

The Men's Shed is a community group in Renfrewshire, which is part of the Foundations First project run by Shelter Scotland, the national housing and homelessness charity.

A consultation event was held with the group in March 2018 as part of the Scottish Government's consultation on social isolation and loneliness.

This report presents the group's views on what needs to happen to reduce social isolation and loneliness, as well as who is key to making this change locally and what the Scottish Government needs to do.

- Isolation is an issue and was referred to as a type of torture.
- There are many compounding factors to isolation and loneliness: unemployment, poverty, poor mental health and addiction issues.
- Social groups like the Men's Shed are crucial to tackling social isolation and loneliness by providing an activity, a sense of purpose and companionship.
- There is a need to raise awareness of social groups like the Men's Shed.
- Supporting infrastructure, including funding and premises, is key to success of groups.
- More effort could be made to help new tenants integrate into their community.
- Local politicians are important for promotion and support of community activity.
- The local authority, local community centres, agencies and housing partners need to have a facilitating and communication role.
- Communities themselves and local people are very important in raising awareness of and supporting services.
- The Government needs to provide more funding for community groups and ensure this is distributed in a fair way.

INTRODUCTION

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

Foundations First is a service run by Shelter Scotland which provides support and advice to families in housing need in Renfrewshire, as well as working within the community to build up resilience. The Men's Shed is one of the projects set up and facilitated by the service.

The Men's Shed is a group of men who meet up in a local youth centre. It follows the model of Men's Sheds throughout the country which provide space and support for men. The Men's Shed provides opportunities for an informal catch up with peers, as well as taking part in community-led activities including tending to an allotment, a walking group, and joinery. Anyone from the community can attend and share their skills but primarily this project aims to help communities build social connections and work together to build community resilience. Importantly, the group and activities are designed, specified and run by the community, with support from Foundations First.

We held an event at the regular Men's Shed meeting to ask about issues of social isolation and loneliness, to feed into the Scottish Government's consultation on a strategy to tackle this and to provide an opportunity for the men to share their experiences, as well as their views on what needs to continue and what needs to change. We started with a general discussion on social isolation and loneliness then used the following three questions, suggested by Scottish Government, as a basis for discussions:

1. What needs to change in your community to reduce social isolation and loneliness and increase the range and quality of social connections?
2. Who is key at local level in driving this change, and what do you want to see them doing more (or less) of?
3. What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?

Nine men took part in the discussion, three aged 16-34 years old, five aged 35-64, and one over the age of 65. Five participants classed themselves as having a protected characteristic.

The views of the group are presented as communicated at the event, using quotes as far as possible to ensure fair representation of the discussion. They do not necessarily represent the views of Shelter Scotland.

Isolation is an issue and was referred to as a type of torture.

The consultation event started with a general discussion around social isolation and loneliness, asking whether people thought it was an issue in Renfrewshire and what the causes for it might be.

The group felt that social isolation and loneliness are an issue in Renfrewshire. People described being lonely as 'pretty grim' and made reference to it being so bad it is used as a type of torture.

If you think about it isolation is used as torture...if you've gone a week and you've not spoken to another human being, it's pretty desperate.

There are many compounding factors to isolation and loneliness: unemployment, poverty, poor mental health and addition issues.

There was a variety of reasons that the group thought might make people feel lonely, including a lack of work, and the impact this has on how people view you and as well as practical issues relating to a lack of things to do during the day and the link with poverty.

See once you lose your job you lose your social circle. Because you've no got the money to go...you can't do anything as you don't have money...

There's only so much you can do in the house all the time. You can only cut that grass in the garden once a week, sometimes two. People can be very isolated, they don't see anyone. [the Men's Shed] is probably the only time people get out once a week to see people.

It's just the way it is – when you're not working, you're no earning a wage – you're no part of society. You're ex-communicated.

Aye – if you've no got a job you're a scrounger or something. They're just a redundancy away from being like us. People who are working think if you're no working everyone is a scrounger, they're useless.

Other reasons provided on why people might be socially isolated or feel lonely were poor mental health or substance misuse problems, including again issues around stigma and losing any social connections you might have.

I just shut down, I lost my job through [depression], I lost my home through it...really tormented. And the further down the rabbit hole you get the less you're seeing people and the less you want to see people.

Alcoholism. It's a big part of my life, I'm a recovering alcoholic. It doesn't matter how long or whatever, at the moment I'm sober, but the stigma attached to alcoholism and where you go to get treated is

still very big in Paisley and the surrounding area...it's still a very very big thing.

When you're in recovery you need to let go of your pals, all your social circles you've had you've got to say cheerio to them. That's a choice you've got to make.

DISCUSSION QUESTION 1

What needs to change in your community to reduce social isolation and loneliness and increase the range and quality of social connections?

Social groups like the Men's Shed are crucial to tackling social isolation and loneliness by providing an activity, a sense of purpose and companionship.

The men we spoke to identified social groups and activities as key to reducing social isolation and loneliness. Most of the conversation focused on the Men's Shed, though there was acknowledgement of other groups too for both adults, for example, the Recovery Café in Renfrewshire, and young people.

Men's Shed, community groups. We're saying Men's Shed because we're part of the Men's Shed group but, there are other community groups that are doing stuff – kids ones.

I'm only out the house because of all the different groups set up. That's all I do now.

We need more and more groups like that, groups like this.

There was a lot of discussion about what the Men's Shed group means to them, and how it helps tackle loneliness – by providing something different to do during the day, providing a sense of purpose and achievement as well as moral and practical support and that it is voluntary so people have an element of choice and control over taking part. Most of all, people talked about companionship and the opportunity to laugh and chat with other people.

It's so hard to put into words, but it's worth something – it's worth something different to every person. It all means something different to every person.

You're not forced to come – I like it and I like coming.

We've got companionship here. A lot of the guys are living on their own. This gets them out their place once a week.

I like it because I like the people who come here as well – because we have a laugh and a joke with each other – we can talk about what you've done through the week. I'm absolutely hopeless at woodwork and things like that but that's not the point...and as I says I like the people who come here and I enjoy the conversation but I just don't want to sit in the house and just watch 24-hour news all day. Then when I go home I feel I've done something.

It's like companionship. If you need anything, ask someone and they'll be able to tell them about it. If you need something made, you can ask and they'll make it up for you.

I was 25 years at the local authority and I got made medical retirement, so I wasn't going to work again. So for me it was something to do that day, rather than doing nothing, you know, it was something. Then we heard about the walking group and things like that.

Everyone thought for one the walking group was a great thing to do. One of the guys had never been walking before. I had been but I thought it'd be good health wise.

I think this is our wee kind of community hub.

See for your mental health its good as well...see when you're amongst folk, we're social animals you've got to – we like to blether you know what I mean. And if you're just sitting in that house alone, you'll sink, sink, sink until your head goes under.

You're no bored every day, you've done something.

It's nice to go home and you've done something constructive, done some exercise and then can just sit and relax then.

There is a need to raise awareness of social groups like the Men's Shed.

Awareness was seen as a barrier for expanding the Men's Shed, with the need to share information more widely.

It would have been handy for me to know about groups like this before things got really bad. But the thing is its not until you've already jumped off that cliff that you find out about places like this.

For a few months nobody new was coming to the group, it was the same old faces. But now we've got new people here it's expanding a wee bit more but it's taken time. So you could say the information is not out there, it's out there but nobody knows how to find it.

Supporting infrastructure, including funding and premises, is key to success of groups.

The infrastructure supporting local groups was important, too, with community centres being described as a “central hub for everything that is available”.

Bring back community centres as that would just be a central hub for every organisation, every organisation would have their information in there, it would also give places for an organisation to meet up.

More effort could be made to help new tenants integrate into their community.

It was felt that more could be done to support new tenants to settle and integrate into the community, as well as highlighting local supports and groups that are available.

I'm at a group, every month, and we've invited our housing officer to the community hub group...we're hoping he comes along so people first of all know who he is, because nobody knows who the housing officer is, but he's key, he should be coming back on a monthly basis how are you settling in, how are you, how's everything working.

There was also an acknowledgement of the wider benefits this can bring – getting practical support in the house, for example.

You know, because you've got people who could be sitting with their boiler no working, their heating no working, and no wanting to bother anyone.

Often, for those who are isolated, the only time they have contact with anyone is when something goes wrong: *the only time you hear from somebody is if you've not paid your bills.*

DISCUSSION QUESTION 2

Who is key at local level in driving this change, and what do you want to see them doing more (or less) of?

Local politicians are important for the promotion and support of community activity.

Local elected members were identified as a key group who should be promoting and supporting local groups.

The Provost is a great advocate. Politicians should be aware of what's going on locally and encouraging community groups, asking the community what they want in their community.

The local authority, local community centres, agencies and housing partners need to have a facilitating and communication role.

The local authority, in this case Renfrewshire Council, was also highlighted as having an important facilitating role – one example given was the council starting a regular forum meeting for community groups to come together, which was thought to be an example of good practice.

It was felt local community centres and agencies could also be taking more responsibility in encouraging local groups.

I think it's up to local agencies as well who work in the area to communicate about what's missing, what's needed, to do some consultation with people about what you want in your community.

Local housing partners were identified as key, too, including the important role a housing officer can play, to provide more support to tenants in finding out what type of support was available in their local community, particularly when they've just moved in.

However, it wasn't necessarily a specific person or group – more anyone with power and resources, particularly those with local premises that could be used by groups.

Anyone with money we're looking for!

Anyone with a bit of clout – with a bit of backing.

Communities themselves and local people are very important in raising awareness of and supporting services.

The men discussed that they wanted more power themselves rather than relying on other people, and local communities and people themselves were highlighted

as playing a key role in sharing information and promoting and designing the groups to meet local need.

You shouldn't have to sit and say 'please do this for us'.

Everybody should be talking, to make connections and raise awareness.

People using the services need to be involved in spreading the word.

Word of mouth is better than all the leaflets and pamphlets. Because people look at a leaflet and say 'oh aye' and put it back down on the table. But if you speak to them...it's not just putting pamphlets down or leaflets but it's about speaking to them.

We're all saying we cannae do it without funding. But you can have all the funding in the world but if you don't have punters coming in...

DISCUSSION QUESTION 3

What does Government need to do nationally to better empower communities and create the conditions to allow social connections to flourish?

The Government needs to provide more funding for community groups and ensure this is distributed in a fair way.

A common theme on what the group thought the Government needs to do nationally to better empower communities was the provision of funding.

You'd think government could fund things a bit more, rather than cuts.

That's what it comes down to – the amount of money that's going to be used here, this amount is going to be used there.

That's all you hear – cuts this and cuts that. So much should be put aside to try to help.

The community should be doing it and setting up groups – but it's about raising awareness of what funding is available for community groups. In each local authority there should be funding available for community groups. You know because if it wasn't for the community you wouldn't have anything.

They're always saying on the TV how much community means to them – they should invest.

If the government are serious about sorting out isolation, because it is a big problem you know what I mean, so they've got to back it with money.

There is also a need to make sure that this funding is distributed fairly and more accessible to community groups.

A lot of this comes down to the money – it is about money, okay, but it is also about having the groups to dispense the money equally and properly...not just being like there's a thousand pounds, there you go. There's got to be some sort of structure to it.

It's all about equality – everyone should get a wee slice of the cake.

There is still a lot of money floating about outside but it's trying to get into these funds. And what I feel is – there's certain companies who are giving out grants of up to £1000, £2000, £5000 a year. But how do you tap into them, how do you find out about them? And I feel a lot of places, they're only sharing their information to certain groups – not everybody. So it's unfair to other groups.

There was also a plea for more awareness of the issues, and of the groups that really help people.

If the government, and the council for one thing, if the two of them got together and saw what was happening – more eyes from them, from the high heid yins [those in authority] if you like, to come and see what is happening...if they could see what's going on – come and visit!

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