

All Party Parliamentary Group for Ageing and Older People
Ageing Alone: combating loneliness in later life

Monday 8th February 2016 4pm-5pm
Committee Room 3, House of Lords

Present:

Parliamentarians:

Barbara Keeley MP, Rachael Maskell MP, Lord Foulkes, Fiona Bruce MP, Lord Lipsey, Steve McCabe MP, John Pugh MP and Robin Walker MP.

Chair of the meeting:

Nusrat Ghani MP

Guest Speakers:

Gregor Henderson, Public Health England, Cllr Jonathan McShane, LGA Health and Wellbeing Board/Hackney Council; Jason Connon, Zurich Insurance/Call in Time; Janet Caton.

Apologies:

Tom Brake MP, John McNally MP, Henry Bellingham MP, Caroline Lucas MP, Debbie Abrahams MP and Baroness Cox.

Introduction:

Nusrat Ghani MP welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained the running order.

Guest Speakers:

Nusrat Ghani MP introduced the first speaker, Gregor Henderson, National Lead for Mental Health and Wellbeing for Public Health England.

Gregor Henderson – Gregor introduced Public Health England’s recent report, “Reducing Social Isolation Across the Lifecourse,” and explained the links between social isolation/loneliness and mental and physical health in later life. He then went through the key details of the report, pointing out that “loneliness” was an emotional perception not dependent on a person’s breadth of social interaction. He added that retirement can bring disadvantages, for example social isolation in men and women over the age of 50 was on the increase. He explained that those in the most deprived areas were affected the most, however there were lots of different promising interventions, such as Hackney Well Families, an intergenerational scheme working to reduce social isolation that for every £1 spent, there was a £6 return on investment.

Nusrat Ghani MP introduced the second speaker, Councillor Jonathan McShane, LGA Community Wellbeing Board Member and Cabinet Member for Health and Social Care in Hackney.

Cllr McShane – Cllr McShane introduced the new Local Government Association’s guide “Combating Loneliness”, produced alongside Age UK and the Campaign to End Loneliness, which contained practical steps for local authorities to take. He pointed out that there were many simple measures and interventions that could be taken, and that funding cuts were not an excuse to do nothing. He explained that Hackney was a borough that was changing rapidly, and asked when change happens, how do you ensure you bring everyone with you? He reiterated the importance of human interactions and the need for local authorities and partners to work together to share best practice, as well as Chairs of Health and Wellbeing Boards needing to ensure that loneliness was on their agendas, as loneliness needed to be recognised for the public health issue it was.

Nusrat Ghani MP explained that she represented a rural constituency and asked what more could be done. Gregor Henderson gave the example of work being done by the Fire and Rescue Service, where members of staff were trained to identify vulnerable/isolated older people when conducting home safety checks. He added that they hoped to encourage GPs to play a more public health role and also do vulnerability checks. Cllr McShane added that community pharmacies played an important role as they were trusted by older people and they also did work around prevention. Rachael Maskell MP asked about gendered focused initiatives, and Gregor Henderson referred to Men in Sheds projects around the country, which were very popular, particularly as it wasn't advertised as a "mental health clinic", yet was very good at reducing social isolation and encouraging men to talk about any problems they were having. In relation to older people with disabilities, he commented that many councils had good local data and intelligence on those socially isolated, and more needed to be done to link such databases to ensure people had access to the services they required.

Nusrat Ghani MP introduced the next speaker, Jason Connon, National Development Manager at Zurich and a volunteer for Age UK's Call in Time telephone befriending scheme.

Jason Connon – Jason introduced the Call in Time scheme, explaining how he was matched to an older person and how they had become good friends after chatting for ten to fifteen minutes a week. He added that they both looked forward to and valued the call, and he was now an ambassador in his workplace for the scheme, encouraging more people to get involved.

Nusrat Ghani MP introduced the final speaker, Janet Caton, who had been receiving calls from a befriender through Age UK's Call in Time service for over eighteen months.

Janet Caton – Janet explained that she would be turning 70 this year, and that even though she had always had a phobia of public speaking, she wanted to speak about how the Call in Time scheme had helped her. She explained the special relationship she had with her caller, who was full of empathy and helps her get through the day. She said that it helped with her social needs and she looked forward to each call which cheers her up. She added that she used to go for days or weeks without talking at all, and would worry that she might forget how to speak, and she worried about people who suffered from this more than her. She explained that the team had supported her in her drawing and she showed the Group some of her artwork.

Nusrat Ghani MP opened the floor to questions and comments; An observer asked what those in the room could do to help. Janet Caton said that it was important not to assume things about people and Jason Connon suggested more people volunteer for Call in Time. Toni Walsh from the Silverline commented that her organisation had a similar service and their helpline received its majority of calls after 5pm, often from men who didn't want to admit they were lonely. Kellie Payne from the Campaign to End Loneliness explained the work of her organisation, working with local councils and would be launching new guidance on collecting data and identifying loneliness in May.

Barbara Keeley MP talked about some of the initiatives in her constituency, such as walking football, and health walks. She gave an example of a man in her constituency whose wife had died and as he did not know how to cook was visiting McDonalds once or twice a day, adding that these sort of gaps such as cooking skills needed to be filled. A member commented that bereavement services in hospitals could be useful at identifying these sort of things at a very early stage, as many people didn't seek help until they were in crisis.

Lord Foulkes commented that many charities were having their funding and grants cut, yet were being expected to take on more responsibility, so required proper funding.

In summing up, Barbara Keeley MP (who was now Chairing the meeting) reiterated that there were many brilliant things happening to address loneliness and social isolation around the country. She added it would be great if more companies got involved with schemes such as Call in Time.

Barbara Keeley MP thanked the speakers and group for attending and for their input. There was no further business and the meeting was closed.