

## Bright Ideas: Mearns and Coastal Healthy Living Network

*Sometimes, relatively simple, low-level, interventions are all that is needed in order to provide high-value support. For Mearns and Coastal Healthy Living Network this can be as simple as changing a light bulb in someone's house.*

Mearns/South Aberdeenshire is typical of many Scottish rural locations in that many older people live alone and in isolation from friends and family. In addition, many are retired and have little in the way of mainstream facilities nearby. This combination of factors can lead to reduced social participation and, over time, can lead towards depression, inability or unwillingness to self care, and even malnutrition. As a result many older people feel extremely vulnerable.

Established in 2002, the Mearns and Coastal Healthy Living Network uses a practical, hands on approach, focusing resources on the things that older people themselves say are important. Sometimes that means the most fundamental of services, for example, helping an older person head out to the shops with a volunteer and choose their own fruit and vegetables or meeting new friends at a tea dance. As in the case of one person, assistance can be as simple (yet vital) as having somebody change the light bulb in her house. In addition, because of the social connections made, the Network acts as an information service. Manager, Ed Garrett explains:



Volunteer and service user reviewing the shopping list together

“For some older people, the actual process of accessing information, whether it's on mainstream health services, social care or general day to day household questions, can be stressful. Often, information channels depend on a person being able to go on the internet or travel to a library or a doctor's surgery – these seemingly small barriers can unintentionally discourage older people from asking for help. Sometimes just 'finding out' is a problem for older people especially those that have little or no support and those that have dementia.”

Ed and his team are working to remove these barriers and so far the results have been encouraging. Much of the information is passed on in a very practical, community spirited way. Ed explains: “An older person might receive help from us in terms of getting assistance with their weekly food shop, but because of the way our volunteers are involved in the community, a trust and even a friendship is often built up. This means the older person feels more comfortable to chat informally and in doing so it's often the case that other needs or gaps are identified. That same older person might then realise they could also benefit from attending one of our exercise classes or could get help from our handyman.”

In essence, it's an old-fashioned method – formalising a framework for what might once have been called 'community spirit' but applying it in a very up to date, appropriate and effective way. Health is often a by-product of other activities and events, delivered by the Network's team of 80 volunteers – the majority of whom are older people themselves. These activities include exercise, computer classes and a range of other adult education courses.

s with many of the other Healthy Living Centres across Scotland the Laurencekirk based Network puts a strong emphasis on community, collaboration and partnership. An Older People's Network, which consists of representatives from groups and communities throughout the area, meets every six weeks and has taken part in several consultations including one on new planning legislation with Planning Aid Scotland. As well as supporting its own service users, the Older People's Network helps support other older peoples' groups in Aberdeenshire and advises them on issues such as funding, finance and sourcing volunteers.



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In fact, volunteers are the lifeblood of Mearns and Coastal Healthy Living Network with around 80 volunteers supporting more than 200 service users each week. "Our volunteers are mostly what we call 'younger older people'. They are part of the older population and to a large extent they themselves are our target audience, but they're also extremely keen to be part of driving the direction of the services. As older people themselves, based in local communities, they are ideally placed to help," explains Ed.

"I get even more out of it than I put in," is a common claim from many of the volunteers, says Ed. Undoubtedly, there are important social and health benefits to being a volunteer: "The very act of volunteering can be extremely empowering. Many of our volunteers are retired; having worked all their lives there's now a substantial gap. If this gap isn't filled, loneliness and isolation can creep in. Volunteering helps connect people and for many, increases self-worth," he adds.

Connectedness, participation and volunteering are at the heart of Mearns HLC Network and this helps to keep their work relevant to older people's needs. Older people – working on a voluntary basis – make up the Network's Board. Ken (a Board member) explains: "Working with other organisations and by sharing good practice, we're seeing a real difference in what it means for older people to live independently in this area. Independence need not

mean isolation. Older people are not just the recipients of services; they are a force for change. ”



The Mearns and Coastal Healthy Living Network, like many of Scotland's HLCs, is empowering communities to 'pick up and run with it'. It's a hands-on, grassroots approach and it works. An emphasis on local relationships and a practical, common sense response to the demographic changes in local communities is paying dividends. For many older people in Aberdeenshire, the 'will' is there and this Healthy Living Centre is showing the 'way'.

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