

Connecting Communities and Older People: Social Capital as Critical Resource to Community Wellbeing

By Claudia Fernández, Assist Social Capital CIC (www.social-capital.net)

There is no question that that Scotland's demographics have drastically changed during the last few decades with an 'aging' overall population. People are living longer and healthier lives whilst fewer children are born. This trend is putting growing pressure on the current system of health provision through the NHS.

At the same time, older people increasingly want to remain independent at home and actively involved in the decision-making of the care they receive. Social isolation is an additional challenge that this age group faces in today's highly mobile society where families are often located far away from each other. Social isolation and loneliness are known to have a significantly negative effect on health and quality of life.

The conversation around a fairer and more equal Scotland for older people should not only be around restructuring health care, but also about how we can provide the space for older citizens to continue to be actively engaged and included in our communities.

An important aspect the new care model on 'Reshaping Care for Older People' mentions the need for a shift towards a more preventative, community-based and enabling approach overall.

So, what needs to be done to achieve this goal?

The 'Linthouse Monday Club' in the Govan area of Glasgow is an example of a project that set out to find a way to do just that.

In 2011-13 Assist Social Capital (ASC), worked in partnership with Linthouse Housing Association (LHA) with funding from the Glasgow Transformation Fund, to build an effective network of relationships that would provide easier and quicker access to community and public services for older residents.

Now, you might say that there are already a multitude of those projects all over Scotland. So what makes this one so different?

Well, what we did differently is that we used social capital strategically as a critical resource to cultivate social interactions, build trusting relationships and support people to solve issues collectively. Using social capital enabled us to take an asset based approach, tapping into already existing assets for the club namely the LUV café, the local community transport organisation and Linthous HA's newly developed IT suite.

We placed posters in the LUV Café inviting local people over 60 to come along and join the Monday Club, where they could enjoy a healthy, low cost meal each week. After that we invited them to make suggestions about what they wanted to do and what they were

Blog: Fairer Scotland

interested in. As a result the Lunch Club met at the café every week, went on trips every second week where the destinations were decided by the club's members. Finally there were IT classes which the members decided that they wanted to do to improve their computer and mobile phone skills to help them stay in touch with family and friends. The IT and mobile phone classes were based on learning circles where the group's members decided what they wanted to learn and they predominantly taught each other. Throughout these activities we actively encouraged the members to connect with each other and to engage with the activities.



The impact on the older people of the Monday Club was that they felt more happy, healthier and better connected as the club provided them a space to socialise, learn and stay active in a fun way by only doing activities decided by themselves.

So, a critical aspect of carrying out this project was not so much the activities delivered but *'the way'* the activities were delivered: we used participatory approaches to encourage and empower the club's members by entrusting them to make their own decisions and allowing them shape their own space.

And most importantly, as we knew the funding would run out, we informed the club members and they decided to become a constituted club. They are running the club themselves after ASC successfully applied for 3 grants on their behalf for activities they wished to carry out.

"It is not what they did for the people that counts most in what was achieved; it was that they led the people to 'do for themselves' that was really important"

Lyda Hanifan, 1916

(The full case study on the Monday Club is available here: <http://social-capital.net/social-capital/connecting-communities/>)