

# Key Messages



## Ageing Well with the Open University: A Knowledge Exchange

27<sup>th</sup> January 2021

### Introduction

This online discussion was the seventh in a series of events on Ageing Well, presented jointly with the Open University from May 2020 onwards. The previous six events centred around substantive talks given by Dr Jitka Vseteckova, Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at the Open University. However, the final event was an open invitation to the 27 participants to contribute their own experience and exchange of knowledge and engagement with Dr Vseteckova, other Open University colleagues, VHS and each other.

A significant number of participants had been at previous talks in the series. We were grateful to Laura Jones, Senior Policy Officer with RNIB Scotland; Anne Macdonald, a National Community Development Officer with Age Scotland in Highland, and Dave Curry, a Diabetes Scotland volunteer and older person in Grampian, for providing opening insights that helped get discussion underway. The event was chaired by VHS's Chief Executive Claire Stevens and opening and closing remarks were provided by Derek Goldman of the Open University in Scotland.

There was a strong focus throughout the discussion on the **five pillars of ageing** that Dr Vseteckova had expounded on throughout the series, with participants keen to share how an understanding of the five pillars was now influencing their own work with older people and/or their own lives. The five pillars are: nutrition, hydration, physical activity, cognitive stimulation and social stimulation.

[This short paper highlights the main points](#) raised during the seventh event. It includes web-links to Dr Vseteckova's slide presentations from the previous events and links to additional resources.

### Topics discussed

The importance of **falls prevention** in maintaining strength and physical mobility, especially for visually impaired older people. Their sight loss puts them at particular risk of falls and fear of falling is a factor that increases the isolation of some people. The **Active Scotland** delivery plan emphasises the importance of exercise as the means to maintain strength.

Older people with learning disabilities may be less likely to exercise and to rely on other people for support and education to help them do so. [The Keys to Life](#) is

Scotland's Learning Disabilities Strategy and this emphasises the importance of exercise for this group.

The [Scottish Burden of Disease](#) study provides important data about the extent of neck and back pain in the 65+ age group and this will be a factor in some older people's reluctance to (but need to) exercise.

The **adaptation** of environments and instruction and the **development** of new digital tools to enable visually impaired people to engage much more easily with exercise is needed, and more pro-active **encouragement** and **support** is needed. The Open University would be interested in exploring this area further with participants, including those from RNIB and Sight Scotland Veterans.

Gaining an understanding, through the Ageing Well series, of the importance of **hydration** and the physiological effects of dehydration, has helped inform Sight Scotland Veterans in their provision of long cane training for visually impaired people, a key skill in maintaining **independence**.

**Age Scotland** now shares information about the five pillars of ageing to older people in Highland through its regular newsletter. Older people are really missing the opportunity to simply chat with other people during the continued coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions. Tackling isolation and providing social stimulation was the aim of **Highland Senior Citizen Network's Highland Hellos**, a social media campaign set up to connect more people across the Highlands through the simple act of saying 'hello' whether digitally or in person. [The short Highland Hellos film says it all.](#)

Ahead of Burns Night 2021 Age Scotland also distributed thousands of [Burns in A Bag packs](#) to older people all over Scotland, as Burns Supper social events could not take place during the lockdown. The packs included Burns related materials and activities to stimulate the brain and shortbread as a sweet treat.

Supporting older people to stay **socially and cognitively stimulated** during the pandemic remains challenging and demands enormous creativity on the part of organisations working with older people, especially for the 80+ group who are much less digitally engaged than others. Some older people have become very fearful and believe that 'we are not allowed to go out'. Stigma and unhelpful perceptions about older people during the pandemic have been unhelpful.

**Headway East Lothian** works with people with **communication difficulties** and is working hard to build the five pillars of ageing into its day to day work. It successfully held an online Burns Supper to provide social stimulation for 60 people. People with communication difficulties are isolated at the best of times and tend to low mental wellbeing. Supporting this group to have good nutrition and hydration is one thing, but motivating them to take physical exercise is very challenging.

Dave Curry talked about living with Type 2 Diabetes for 32 years, his role as a peer support volunteer in Grampian with Diabetes Scotland, and his ambition to age well. He had enjoyed the approachable and jargon free language in the talks and the fact that the emphasis was on **looking after yourself** – 'no-one said, you must go to

your GP'. As well as his involvement in a diabetes peer support group (currently online) he is a walk leader and has shared the Ageing Well lessons about good posture and being aware of your centre of gravity. The importance of good **hydration** was another key take-away he has shared too, as most of the people in his walking group are on medication. He is a regular walker, whatever the weather, but as an added spur to his **motivation to exercise** this year he is walking Route 66, starting with Chicago which he 'left' on 1<sup>st</sup> January and is currently 'in' Illinois.

**Strategies for keeping well and exercising whilst working from home** for such a prolonged period were highlighted by GCVS's Community Connectors worker Jane Monan (who stayed off-camera during the event so as to do yoga). She has introduced the topic of **walking tall** to her clients all aged 60+ as well as in team meetings and is more confident about explaining to people why good posture is important.

Participants agreed that we need to start the conversation about the five pillars much earlier – with people in their 20's and 30's so as to help prepare for a healthier and happier later life.

Some older people face **additional barriers to ageing well** and to living by the five pillars, we heard from Penny Stafford, who spoke about the charity Rowan Alba. They support older people who may have a history of **homelessness and brain damage** related to substance misuse. **Poverty and addiction** have a significant impact on people's ability to age well. **Sleep** can be a real issue for the people they support. **Mental health** is very important: relaxation and mindfulness can help. **Living with pain** is very debilitating; how do we support people to find alternative ways to manage pain? Yoga is useful as it is holistic and can be done from a chair and to the extent that a person's disabilities or impairments allow. Good nutrition is unaffordable to people living in poverty and Rowan Alba clients are limited in their ability to prepare healthy food. Access to **financial health and warmth and housing** are really important.

### **Last word and next steps**

Speaking on behalf of the Open University Derek Goldman thanked participants for the richness of the insights and learning they had shared over the 90 minute event. Derek said that hearing people's real experiences was 'like gold dust' for the Open University and that it had given inspiration for further action, as well as for continued partnership working between the university, VHS and its network.

[Download the presentations from the Ageing Well series of talks here.](#)



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