

Working with clients who feel socially isolated

Catherine Batey and Kerry Monteith from Dumfries & Galloway Employability and Skills Service share their experience and approach to supporting young people who feel socially isolated.



As a Link worker working for The Employability and Skills Service, Dumfries and Galloway Council, I have a wealth of experience of working with clients who feel socially isolated. The area that I cover is called Upper Nithsdale and the two main villages I work with are 30 miles from the nearest town in a very rural part of Dumfriesshire.

There are lots of different reasons why people become isolated in this area which include:

- Being relocated here by housing
- Lack of privacy in a close knit community
- Leaving prison and being released to a family member who can't support them
- Peers have moved on to college, University, employment
- Lack of public transport
- Cost of public transport
- Lack of amenities
- Being Unemployed
- Financial restrictions
- Health and mobility issues
- Mental health

I have found that lack of confidence can be a huge barrier to many clients of all ages, who would like to improve themselves by gaining Employment or new skills. The fear of the first appointment or class can be too big a step for many to take. As they miss the first one; they feel guilty and embarrassed and just decide not to bother. This turns into a vicious cycle and can end with individuals facing depression and anxiety issues.

The challenges for those who are leaving school and looking for employment or training can be a shock to many young people. The expectation of leaving school and being able to find work straight away is soon changed into reality. The fact that there is a real lack of jobs and opportunities locally, also that many other people with maybe better experience or qualifications are also trying for the same jobs can be a real shock. They can soon begin to lose confidence and self-esteem, fall in motivation and start to lose hope. Some young people soon start to lose focus and can withdraw and stop trying. This in turn can lead to ill health and anxiety problems.

Many manual work employment opportunities have an early start time. Unfortunately local public transport doesn't support these start times. This restricts the employment options for many living in this area. The high cost of public transport also means that many minimum wage positions simply aren't financially viable for people to apply for. This cost needs to be factored into their budget for job searching and Job Centre Plus appointments, for many this cost results in them living on the

poverty line and social or family entertainment is no longer financially possible. The result of financial issues can isolate these people further and just add to the many other challenges this area brings.

Many people who are relocated here don't realise the rural nature of the area and public transport costs along with lack of amenities. This results in short or abandoned tenancies. For those who stay, they can find it incredibly difficult to integrate into such a close-knit community. This can lead to loneliness, anxiety and even paranoia that everyone is talking about them. If people feel that "their face doesn't fit" then they are less likely to seek agencies for support or employment opportunities.

The challenge I have as an Employment Link worker supporting clients in this area include:

- Initial engagement with new referrals
- Building confidence and motivation
- Supporting the client to Identify their skills and strengths
- Sourcing accessible training opportunities
- Sourcing funding
- Identifying other appropriate partners/agencies to support with progression
- Ensuring sustainable options are accessed

It is very important to know the other agencies and partners working in the area and build up good working links with them. If I can inform clients of who can help them further and make initial contact with the client, then they are much more likely to continue with the support. When constructing a plan of action with a client, being able to pass them seamlessly to the right agencies for their progression is essential. This helps the client to build confidence in the support they are receiving.

Having an open and friendly manner with allows the client to feel valued and heard is essential. Having "drop in sessions" for clients to access weekly gives them the freedom to seek further support without the need to make appointments. These sessions also bring people together and can provide peer support and social interaction. Being flexible with the clients and getting to completely understand their personal situations is very valuable, giving them a long enough appointment time to gain their trust and find out the real issues that they are facing enables me to make the client feel relaxed and valued as an individual.

Many clients have literacy issues or a lack of computer skills. The Job Centre agreement states that they must access an online job website to evidence their job searching. This can cause anxiety and fear. Being able to access basic computer classes quickly is necessary to help the client feel some control, more motivated to learn new skills and be able to comply with the job centre requirements.

The hardest part to someone's progression out of isolation is finding the right support initially. I get referrals from Job centre and other agencies but as many isolated people aren't accessing agencies, it is important to have a positive presence in the community. Good marketing, posters and word of mouth is needed to inform locals of what support is around them.

Activity agreements are an excellent way to engage with disengaged young people and put the positive progression steps in place for them to overcome the barriers that are currently stopping them from finding a positive destination. Working at their speed and looking at leisure activities to

help promote routine and build self-esteem initially, this approach brings them out of their homes and encourages new friendships to be built.

The Community Engagement Project that ran in Upper Nithsdale for a number of years was an excellent approach to addressing social isolation and communicating with the community. This was a door step engagement project that trained up volunteers to knock on every door in the area. Their role was to be a two way conduit of information directly between services and local residents. The volunteers would engage with locals and identify any needs, this information could then be fed into local planning and individuals could be referred to appropriate services for support.

The volunteers for this project would identify any interested unemployed people from the local community. The aim was give them training, work experience and additional support from an employment Link worker to help them grow in confidence, learn new skills and look to gain employment.

The best way our service has found to support clients and help with those feeling social isolation is to firstly be seen with in the community. Allow people to know who you are and how you can help them. Build an open and friendly service which people can access without that scary first phone call. Work in harmony with the other agencies around you. Put the clients first; give them the time to paint the full picture of their needs. Factor in transport issues and costs to client's needs. Support them to build confidence, motivation and enthusiasm to take control of their situation and build new contacts. Look at sustainable outcomes and construct realistic and person centred action plans that give the individual the flexibility to grow and achieve their goals.

Educating young people prior to leaving school on the realities of living in this area of deprivation, so that they can make informed choices and gain the practical skills needed to advance from school. Inform them of the agencies that can help support them when they need it and continue support throughout the transition stage, ensuring that all young people feel supported and valued.

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