

# RECOGNISING AND REDUCING HEALTH INEQUALITIES

## COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN ACTION IN A VOLUNTARY ORGANISATION

### ABOUT US

We are a medium-size voluntary organisation, working with staff and volunteers to provide services for people living with dementia. We listen to the voices of patients and carers to help shape our plans but we know we are not reaching everyone in the community who lives with a diagnosis. We heard of the Elevate programme through a post on social media.

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT & HEALTH INEQUALITIES

Two staff members and two volunteers attended the Elevate training workshop. **The experience of meeting others, learning about the health inequalities that exist across our communities and exploring ways that we could reduce them together** was a really positive one for us. We particularly enjoyed the discussions around 'Health is...' with everyone sharing their personal thoughts and experiences. It reaffirmed the **basic need for people to have control and choice**, and how this is absent when people are living in poverty or in challenging situations. As a service provider, funded mainly by statutory agencies, we knew that we reported a lot on numbers and activity but not the stories that sit behind the statistics.

Discussing the **social determinants of health** emphasised the need for us to **think about our work in a more diverse way**. A recent survey from some of our service users and carers had told us much about what life is like for people living with dementia but

talking to others in the workshop helped us understand more about what inequalities looked like for people living with dementia.

### SURVEY RESULTS

In the survey, individuals had shared experiences about:

- Increased rates of depression for people living in isolation
- Challenges in accessible and appropriate housing for some people
- Problems with employment or access to benefits resulting in lower income levels
- Transport issues for people getting to appointments, particularly in rural areas or for older people who do not drive
- Carers putting off their own medical issues because they felt they needed to support the person they cared for, leading to increased isolation and poor health

The workshop just confirmed for us that **inequalities are unfair and avoidable** and that we needed to think about the **root causes of inequality**.

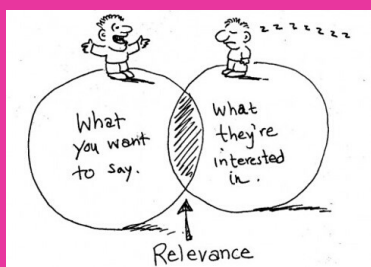
We knew that many of the people that completed our survey were living in very challenging circumstances but we had felt a bit restricted in what we could do, based on the service level agreements we had with our funders and the capacity in our staff team. Through the Elevate workshop we listened and learned from others, **felt energised and focused and knew that through collective action, we could do more.**

## REDUCING THE INEQUALITIES

When we returned to the workplace, we wanted to maintain the momentum. There were so many ideas and thoughts around who we were not reaching, how to support better those we were connecting with and how to maximise all our contacts.

It felt a bit daunting but we used the social determinants of health to map out some of the ideas and identify what contacts we already had who could help at community, voluntary and statutory level.

This approach created some **challenging discussions but a safe and inclusive space** where everyone's voice was equal. During the initial workshop, we had talked about the **power imbalances** that exist when decisions, plans and services are implemented without listening to the communities and really **understanding the relevance** of these to them. This approach showed the value in taking the time to bring everyone together in a way that no one held all the power.



Our top three asks based on the survey feedback were:

- How can we support people living with dementia to feel less isolated?
- How can we ensure that people with dementia and their carers are accessing the financial support they are entitled to?
- How can we ensure carers focus on their own health and wellbeing?

## SHARING THE LEARNING

We knew we had to take an organisational wide approach. Our volunteers, service users, delivery staff and leadership team all needed to understand the health inequalities that our communities were facing and embrace a community development approach to tackle them.

## NEXT STEPS

We arranged for the Elevate facilitator to lead workshop on health inequalities and community development for our full staff and volunteer team.

**We organised a strategy day to map and plan our 2020 work against the learning from the Elevate workshop.**

We arranged focus groups, engagement events and stakeholder meetings in communities with people living with dementia, carers, funders, planners and commissioners.

We know this is a work in progress. There are many challenges but so many more opportunities. Using the community development values of social justice, equality, anti-discrimination and collective action has shown us how we should, can and will change how we do things. This is not about us doing to the community, it is about us working with and supporting where needed. They know that need better than any of us.