

Fenland District Council

**THE MJ**  
2010  
Achievement Awards

# Tackling Health Inequalities



**100%**  
people  
driven

# MJ Awards - Tackling Health Inequalities

## Executive Summary Summary

We believe older residents should enjoy a Golden Age, where they have access to information, support and advice to lead healthier, safer and easier lives. A quarter of Fenland residents are pensioners and 1 in 7 households are pensioners living on their own. Our approach to improving health and wellbeing is not just about physical exercise, but looks to tackle wider determinants of health such as income, fear of crime, isolation and anti-social behaviour. Life expectancy has now improved; thousands of older people have claimed unidentified benefits and services are more accessible.

## The challenge

Fenland covers more than 200 square miles and consists of 4 main market towns and 29 small and remote villages. With poor transport links and a quarter of our population over 60, getting the message across about the importance of health and wellbeing is somewhat of a challenge. Fenland's elderly population is forecast to grow at a rapid pace, so tackling health inequalities for the elderly is a key priority for the Council.

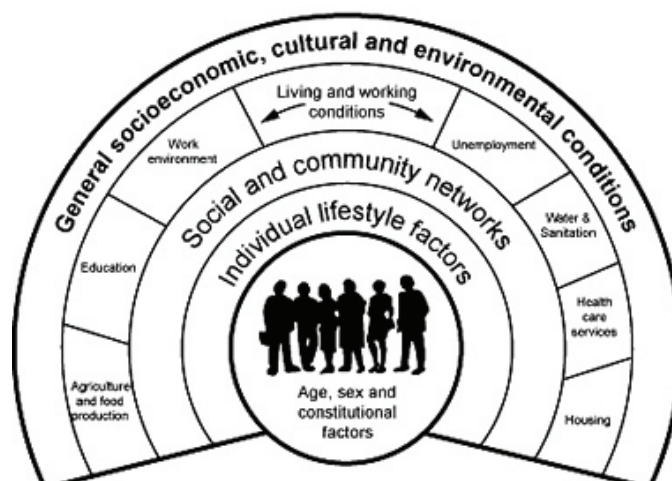
Fenland has one of the lowest male life expectancies in the country. Men from the least deprived areas can expect to live about 7 years less than those from more affluent areas. There are high levels of obesity and diabetes, coupled with low rates of healthy eating, and higher than average levels of smoking.

The Director of Public Health (Dr. Liz Robin) set out a clear need to improve the quality of life of senior citizens in Fenland and highlighted the district's severe health inequalities as one of only three authorities in the Strategic Health Authority (SHA) of Norfolk, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. The Director's report highlighted Fenland as having the lowest male life expectancy in the SHA region "The long term trend shows little improvement and Fenland is unlikely to meet the national target if the current trend continues."

## Our approach

Our research helped to form the evidence base for a multi-faceted approach to improving health in the district. Our pro-active, innovative and holistic projects involve members of the community, other public services and voluntary organisations.

We used the wider determinants of the health model to plan our approach to tackling health inequalities and to identify key partners we needed to work with to make a real impact.



Through our highly successful Health and Wellbeing partnership, we set about making sure that we had the best arrangements in place to ensure that older people can maintain independent lives for as long as possible. Within the Council, we set up a cross-cutting project team of officers to raise awareness of the vital role that services can play in improving the wider determinants of health that are currently contributing towards inequalities.

Through Indices of Multiple Deprivation maps, we have focused our projects on areas with high deprivation levels. In addition, we have used Mosaic data to target areas with a high density of older residents.

So seriously does Fenland take the views of its older residents that it has had a dedicated Cabinet Member with responsibility for senior citizens for several years. Councillor Mac Cotterell MBE, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Golden Age, recognised that there was a need for improved services for elderly people:

“People are living longer and something we all want and fear losing is our independence. Our elderly residents are in need of a support network dedicated to their needs which enables them to retain their independence for as long as possible. These Fairs provide not only important information such as benefits they are entitled to, but just as importantly provide this in a social setting, in their own communities, where they feel welcomed.”

## Taking services to our rural communities

### Golden Age Fairs

Six wards in the district are in the bottom 20% (three in the bottom 10%) in national rankings for access to services such as post offices, primary schools, GPs and food shops. As a consequence, many elderly people can feel marooned in their communities.

Our innovative Golden Age Fairs, which are the first of their kind in the country, are run consistently throughout the year in targeted villages in and around Fenland. They offer the chance for the older generation of residents to gather information on their doorstep in a secure and social setting, giving them the chance to obtain information while meeting new friends. The fairs have grown in size and are going from strength to strength. We have over 30 partner organizations attending the Golden Age Fairs, some of these include, Age Concern, St John Ambulance and the Fire Brigade.

From blood pressure checks, to benefits advice and chiropody advice to safety tips, the fairs take a holistic approach to tackling health inequalities. The events provide an excellent opportunity for older people to discuss key issues with elected members and partner organisations. With imaginative tools like the “Fenland Ferret”, a computer programme which ferrets out benefits, Fenland is now leading the field nationally in tackling rural isolation.



Free blood pressure checks

Our partner agencies find the events extremely worthwhile, Fenland Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) says :-

*"We have attended all the Golden Age Fairs. Part of our "Outreach" remit is to bring the CAB service to people who may not otherwise know about, or be able to access, our main office. The Golden Age Fairs have been invaluable in making older people aware of the service we can provide. We usually speak in detail to clients with many more stopping at the stand to just pick up information. We bring our CAB information system with us (laptop) and can advise people actually in the hall on the night. We make people aware of information that they may not have previously had access to and at each Fair several clients will go on to have a more detailed follow up interview with an adviser."*

One attendee said:

*"I used to feel quite alone because I kept myself to myself. I enjoyed the fair as a way of getting to meet and talk with people in my village who have similar interests and concerns to me. I received more weekly housing benefit because of the Ferret. I also found out lots of useful information and was told about ways to reduce my heating bills."*

The scheme has helped nearly 4,300 people access local services. With the support of our many partner agencies, this vulnerable section of society is able to access different services not ordinarily available, and derive substantial financial aid amounting to almost £710,000. In addition to the fairs, a vast array of specialised leisure activities, equipment and events have been introduced in Fenland, with outstanding take up and noticeable health improvements in the district.

With life expectancy increasing, accessible services readily available and 83% of over 65s satisfied with the area as a place to live, Fenland is now leading the field nationally in tackling rural isolation.

Such is the reputation of the event that even fog fails to deter visitors, and turn out remains high with between 150 and 450 people at every fair, and an average customer satisfaction rating of 99%.

In 2009, The Improvement and Development Agency was so impressed with our approach to tackling health inequalities through the Golden Age programme that it showcased it as best practice at the 2009 LGA Conference.

We have also won:

- LGC & HSJ Sustainable Communities Awards - Highly Commended for Best Community Project
- Winner Monitor Award, Older People's Award

## Mobile Gym

We manage three leisure centres across the district, which are all QUEST accredited and very well regarded by local users. However, recognising the transport issues which are associated with high levels of rural deprivation, we're in the process of taking fitness facilities on the road. With a focus on deprived rural areas, we will be working with the Police, NHS, Fire Service,



Cambridgeshire County Council, Connexions and many other organisations to bring fitness opportunities to villages across the district.

## British Heart Foundation (BHF) Hearty Lives Project

Our excellent reputation and dedication to improving the quality of life of local residents has also secured a substantial grant to work with the BHF in decreasing the number of residents who suffer from heart related illnesses.

As well as producing a DVD which will be used across the country, the money has also provided us with funding to employ a Lifestyle Coach, who residents will be able to speak to on the Mobile Gym.

## Sports activities for older people

For people of all ages, physical activity improves the quality of life in many ways. Physical benefits include improved and increased balance, strength, co-ordination, flexibility and endurance. Physical activity has also been shown to improve mental health, motor control and cognitive function.

So, we've introduced a range of tailored fitness activities for over 65s in Fenland, including:

**Concessionary rates during the day** – hundreds of over 65s benefit from concessionary rates at our leisure centres and not just at off peak times!

**Fit as a Fiddle** – we joined up with Age Concern, Living Sport and the Lottery Fund to run a series of Tea Dances for older people. The dance provided older residents with the opportunity to come together and indulge in a fun packed physical exercise. The scheme began in February 2009, and so far around 600 people have attended. We're now working hard to recruit volunteers to run the sessions in their community.

**New Age Kurling** – we provide local community groups with free access and demonstrations of our New Age Kurling equipment. If they find it is popular in their area, we'll then assist them in purchasing their own equipment.

**Seated exercise classes** – staff visit Roddons Housing Association homes to teach older residents exercises that they can carry out in their chair. Once residents have built up their strength, we provide them with a tailored fitness plan at our leisure centres.



Our Fit as a Fiddle tea dance

**GP referrals** – Since April 2009, over 170 people have been referred to an exercise programme at our leisure centres by their GP.

**Free Swimming for the over 60s** – we are one of only two councils in the East that has been successful in securing two years of Free Swimming Capital Grant allocation. We've been allocated a total of £555,000 in capital improvement grants to improve facilities for free swimmers.

**Walk for health** – we organise weekly walks across the district, where many residents enjoy some light exercise whilst meeting new people in their local area.

### Improving transport provision

Recognising that transport is a particular issue for older people in Fenland, we joined forces with the Fenland Association of Community Transport (FACT) to assist them in promoting their scheme. By extending the concessionary fares scheme to include dial a ride services and by delivering a targeted marketing campaign to promote the scheme, we have helped to increase FACT ridership significantly. For October, November and December 2009 ridership increased by 43% compared with the same period in 2008. FACT now carries around 2000 passengers a month compared with less than 500 passengers a month before the start of the scheme in April 2008.



### A helping hand

We've also worked in partnership to deliver the LPSA funded Welcome Home from Hospital scheme, which assists patients returning home from hospital. In just six months, the scheme has helped over sixty patients in Fenland. The service is run by Care Network Cambridgeshire, with support for partner organisations such as Fenland District Council. Senior Direct Services Co-ordinator Hilary Johnys said:

*"We're really pleased with how well the service is taking off in Fenland. We are now helping two or three patients a week. We aim to keep growing so more and more of our older, isolated and vulnerable residents can have a welcoming visit, reassurance and practical help when they get home. We usually visit between three and five times during the person's first couple of weeks back home, but this varies to suit individual needs."*

### Conclusion

A resounding success and a shining example of partnership working, our approach to tackling health inequalities faced by the over 65s provides the opportunity for a more vulnerable section of the community to lead healthier, safer and easier, happier lives. Reducing the sense of isolation the over 60s can feel in a rural and sparsely populated area is a key priority for the Council. Having the commitment of councillors, officers and health professionals in easy to reach venues allows our older population to proactively voice their concerns such as fear of crime, give their views on council services and of course deal with health issues, saving money on heating bills and accessing local transport services.

