



Malnutrition in Older People and the Policy Context in Scotland

Background

With 1 in 10 older people in the UK today either at risk of, or living with, malnutrition, the need to increase detection rates, and tackle the condition, have never been greater. Eat Well Age Well's focus is on older people living at home who are at risk of, or have, malnutrition, due to being underweight, rather than those who are malnourished due to obesity. If a person has this kind of malnutrition, they are likely to be at a higher risk of falling, have a weaker immune system, and visit their GP or be admitted to hospital. In 2017, 45,000 people aged over 65 who fell required an ambulance from the Scottish Ambulance Service.

Taken in the context of Scotland's ageing population, the benefits of tackling malnutrition would be felt not just at the individual level, but also from a financial perspective, with our increasing need to manage the public purse and reduce health and social care costs. In monetary terms the average cost of a malnourished patient is £7408 p.a., compared with £2155 for a non-malnourished patient.

Malnutrition is often unrecognised and untreated in hospitals, for both in-patients and out-patients, so the lack of detection generally may partly explain the absence of underweight malnutrition within policies that concern older people.

Crucially, malnutrition is not a normal consequence of ageing, and can be prevented from happening in the first place.

Our vision

Our vision is of a Scotland where older people living at home are supported to eat well and age well, and where social care professionals, carers, volunteers and older people themselves are more able to recognise the signs of malnutrition, and to secure the support needed to tackle this preventable condition

The Scottish policy context, and the policy gap

The Scottish Government has made 'We live longer healthier lives' a National Outcome; and a variety of legislation, strategies and policies have been launched to support the health and wellbeing of older adults. This includes policies that have, or have had, at least the potential to influence the reduction of older people at risk of malnutrition in Scotland.

Some of the existing policies are designed to support older people living at home, for example the National Dementia Strategy 2017 to 2020. However, they do not contain information about maintaining a healthy and nutritious diet, or any specific statutory obligations that might lead to the increased detection, or the tackling of, malnutrition in older people.

The Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 can also be regarded as another missed opportunity for getting the need for good nutrition in older people into legislation.

Despite the introduction of the above and other policies, some decisions about services for older people have been made on a financial basis, rather than from a policy perspective. For example, the recent withdrawal of the meals on wheels service in many parts of Scotland, has further aggravated the situation for older people living at home. It is not clear if decisions such as this have been taken into consideration, when new policies concerning the welfare and wellbeing of



older people have been under development. In the four-year period from 2014, there has been a 24% decrease in either meals on wheels or community meals provision, UK-wide.

The need for joined-up policy making

A key issue is that, historically, policy in Scotland has not been developed in a joined-up way. An example of this is the recently launched strategy to tackle loneliness and isolation 'A Connected Scotland'. The links between isolation and malnutrition, and the benefits that go with eating food in a social setting, are well recognised. Despite this there is no mention in the strategy about the benefits that sharing food can bring, nor the detrimental effects to eating and nutrition that can come about as a result of being isolated and feeling lonely. Bearing this in mind, and that many older people live alone in Scotland today, with single person households on the increase, it is concerning that obvious connections and links have not been made here.

On a more positive note, The Scottish Government have recently launched 'A Fairer Scotland for Older People: Framework for Action', which acknowledges that preventing malnutrition, and effective identification and treatment, can significantly improve the quality of people's lives and reduce demand on health and social care services. The framework includes a proposed action to "work with health and social care partnerships and other stakeholders on practical actions to ensure malnutrition is identified and managed quickly and effectively, learning from experience in Scotland and further afield". Having malnutrition included in an official government policy document like this is a huge step forward and Eat Well Age Well look forward to working with the Scottish Government and other key agencies, to help implement the necessary actions. The framework also confirms the Scottish Government's commitment to making Scotland a 'Good Food Nation'.

Connected with the above commitment, Eat Well Age Well is a member of the Scottish Food Coalition (SFC). The SFC are currently working to influence the Scottish Government on the proposed Good Food Nation legislation, which is currently in its consultation phase.

The SFC are a cross-sectoral network of organisations keen to see fundamental change to Scotland's food system. They take a holistic approach to influencing food policy, and they have been very supportive of framework legislation to help achieve the Scottish Government's 'Good Food Nation' vision for a long time. One of SFC's key priorities for new legislation on food is the incorporation of the right to food in Scottish law. This could potentially make a very positive difference if the legislation was translated into useful support and services for older people. For example, it could include ensuring access to fresh, nutritious food and, if needed, providing help with food preparation and cooking.

Eat Well Age Well – our role in tackling malnutrition by changing policy and practice

It is important for the above and for many other reasons, that healthy eating and good nutrition, and the recognition that there is a need for the diagnosis and treatment of older people with underweight malnutrition, are included in an effective way within existing and future policies and legislation. For this to happen there will need to be a concerted effort to provide clear and robust evidence, and to communicate it effectively.

The gap in policy and practice relating to older people and underweight malnutrition led to the Eat Well Age Well initiative being developed and established. To tackle malnutrition in older people living at home, and to bring about improvements in the detection and treatment of the condition, Eat Well Age Well's work will be carried out across different, but connected, approaches which are:



- listening to older people about their needs and views on food and nutrition, and finding out what their wider needs are to help them eat well and remain living at home;
- collecting evidence through research and evaluation, and supporting learning from it, so that we can influence the development of policy and practice;
- increasing the capacity of groups, health and social care professionals, carers and volunteers, by raising the issue of malnutrition, and providing relevant and effective training;
- finding out what works, by identifying, planning and implementing 'tests of change' that will help to detect, prevent, and treat malnutrition;
- reviewing and mapping the currently available evidence and, from this, highlighting the extent of malnutrition in older people and the gaps in practice and service provision;
- determining a Scottish prevalence rate for those with, or at risk of getting, malnutrition; and
- working collaboratively with partners across all sectors to influence positive change in policy and practice.

If you would like to find out more, please click on the link below.

(goes to a pdf, with key facts, references, links to policies about food and older people, and links to useful websites)

What is malnutrition and what are the key facts?

Malnutrition occurs when a person's diet does not meet their nutritional needs. It includes both under or overweight individuals, and the Eat Well Age Well project focuses on undernutrition.

The key facts about malnutrition in Scotland are listed below.

- The UK Malnutrition Task Force estimates that 1 in 10 people living in the UK today are malnourished, or at risk of being malnourished (1).
- If that proportion is extrapolated to the population of people aged 65 years or over, living in Scotland, that would mean there are 103,000 older people living in Scotland who are affected by malnutrition.
- People that are malnourished are twice as likely to visit their GP, and three times more likely to be admitted to hospital (2).
- Referral pathways are not easy for older people to access and require an appointment with and assessment by a GP, or a social work assessment followed by an onward referral for community meals.
- 54% of professionals didn't know if services were in place to tackle malnutrition, 55% didn't know about support services and 61% were unaware of a pathway to tackle malnutrition (3).
- malnutrition is often unrecognised and untreated in hospitals (both in-patients and out-patients) (4).
- It (malnutrition) leads to disease, delays recovery, and weakens the immune system (5).
- In monetary terms the average cost of a malnourished patient is £7408 p.a., compared with £2155 for a non-malnourished patient (6)
- In 2017, 45,000 people aged over 65 who fell required an ambulance from the Scottish Ambulance Service (7)
- In the four-year period from 2014, there has been a 24% decrease in either meals on wheels or community meals provision, UK-wide (8).

(1) Malnutrition Task force, State of the Nation Report, 2017.

(2) Malnutrition Task Force, State of The Nation Report 2017.

(3) "Experiences of Patient Malnutrition," Dods research for the Malnutrition Task Force, 2016, accessed January 2018,



- (4) BAPEN 'MUST' Report Executive Summary, 2012
- (5) BAPEN 'MUST' Report – 10 Key Points, 2018.
- (6) The cost of malnutrition in England and potential cost savings from nutritional interventions (short version), BAPEN, 2015
- (7) Towards 2020: 'Taking Care to the Patient', Scottish Ambulance Service, 2017
- (8) National Association of Care Catering, 'Meals on Wheels Survey 2018'

Further Reading

Below are some useful links to policies, legislation, strategies and other relevant documents that concern older people and food. Some are not intended exclusively for older people, but have, or have had, the potential to benefit other age groups as well as older people. With the exception of 'A Fairer Scotland for Older People: Framework for Action' and the 'Connecting People, Connecting Support' paper, what is apparent from reading most of these documents is the absence of information that acknowledges: 1) the need for policy and practice that support good nutrition for older people; and 2) the existence of underweight malnutrition in the older population of Scotland.

- A Fairer Scotland for Older People: Framework for Action - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-older-people-framework-action/>
- 'We live longer, healthier lives' – National Outcomes, National Performance Framework, Scottish government, March 2016 - <https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0049/00497339.pdf>;
- Older People's Outcomes Framework – 'Optimising Older People's Quality of Life: An Outcomes Framework, NHS Health Scotland 2014 - <http://www.healthscotland.scot/publications/optimising-older-peoples-quality-of-life-an-outcomes-framework>;
- ...becoming a 'Good Food Nation' 2014, part of the Recipe for Success: Scotland's National Food and Drink Policy 2009 - <https://www.gov.scot/policies/food-and-drink/good-food-nation/>;
- 2016 Global Nutrition Report - Nourish's take on what the Scottish Government could do. June 14, 2016 - <http://www.nourishscotland.org/global-nutrition-report>;
- The Global Nutrition Report 'From Promise to Impact, Ending malnutrition by 2030' 2016 - <https://globalnutritionreport.org/reports/2016-global-nutrition-report>;
- Social Care (Self-directed Support) (Scotland) Act 2013 - <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Health/Support-Social-Care/Support/Self-Directed-Support>;
- Scotland's 'National Dementia Strategy 2017 to 2020 - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-national-dementia-strategy-2017-2020/>;
- 'Connecting People, Connecting Support': Transforming the allied health professionals' contribution to supporting people living with dementia in Scotland, 2017-2020 https://www.alzscot.org/assets/0002/9408/AHP_Report_2017_Web.pdf
- Carers (Scotland) Act 2016 - <https://www2.gov.scot/Topics/Health/Support-Social-Care/Unpaid-Carers/Implementation/Carers-scotland-act-2016>;
- Health and Social Care Standards (2018); <https://www.nhsinform.scot/campaigns/health-and-social-care-standards>; and
- Free Personal Care, including Home Care for those aged over 65 - Community Care & Health (Scotland) Act 2002 - <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2002/5/contents>.