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# Reducing social isolation for vulnerable adults in primary care

Social isolation among older, frailer people is a health risk that increases re-hospitalisation. Durham Dales Health Federation has piloted a Wrap Around Service for vulnerable adults to reduce this risk by developing trust and social relationships between practice staff and elderly patients. The pilot has been evaluated by Fuse researchers.

To support delivery on the local and national strategy for frail elderly, Durham Dales Easington and Sedgefield Clinical Commissioning Group commissioned Vulnerable Adults Wrap Around Services (VAWAS). These services provide a comprehensive and coordinated package of care for patients aged 75 or older with the aim of reducing avoidable admissions and to enable patients to stay at home longer. For instance, a proactive care home nursing support service is included in the package.

Durham Dales Health Federation, which is a collaboration of 12 General Practices in County Durham, has developed a two-year pilot that provides these services to patients on the risk register of participating practices. Eligible patients were visited by a care coordinator, who assessed their care needs and developed a care plan for each patient. This included support from a team of health care professionals.

The pilot particularly addressed the social isolation of patients by encouraging staff to get to know each patient as a 'whole' person, within a social and physical context, as well as a frail and ailing body. The Federation was keen to evaluate the impact of the pilot.

Applying a realist approach the Fuse researchers explored potential causal pathways between the Wrap Around Services and impacts on vulnerable patients by exposing the underlying mechanisms through which different components

of VAWAS lead to achieved outcomes. This helped the Federation to understand better why these services are successful or unsuccessful in different contexts, supporting the wider roll-out of the programme across the Dales area.

The Fuse researchers conducted a review of the existing research to help identify core components and developed five causal pathways based on a focus group with the VAWAS team and interviews with five patients after reviewing their case notes.

## Key Findings

- VAWAS operates a five pronged approach to prevention of hospital admissions through the following mechanisms:
  - ⇒ Trust development and relationship building
  - ⇒ Risk minimisation in the home environment
  - ⇒ Advice on self-management
  - ⇒ Referral to preventative services
  - ⇒ Coordination of services
- These five mechanisms have enabled the Health Federation to reduce avoidable hospital admissions.
- Of these five mechanisms, trust development and risk minimisation at home—which encompass a full consideration of the social and physical environment within which people live—are the keys to the added value of VAWAS compared to others services.
- As they get to know and support frail older patients, VAWAS care coordinators begin to play a key role in their social networks. These networks support service users to live well by managing their conditions in the home environment.

## Policy relevance and Implications

- Holistic, problem solving care coordination can encourage patients to become more proactive in the management of their own care, improve their mental health and quality of life.
- Wrap Around Services for vulnerable adults particularly add value in the early stages of support by altering the social and physical environment within which older people live.
- However, it takes time to build effective relationships between General Practice staff and vulnerable patients, which needs to be included in service development.

*“Once you make that connection and build that relationship it goes a long way; it is the trust. I have a lady who is ringing me, she is just lonely and is now approaching 90 and getting frail. She has been let down a couple of times this past couple of weeks and I am the only person that she will speak to, that she feels is listening to her”*

### Focus group with VAWAS staff

## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Dr Monique Lhussier (Reader in Public Health) and Dr Sonia Dalkin (Lecturer in Public Health) at Northumbria University conducted a realist evaluation between July 2015 and August 2016 of the Durham Dales Health Federation’s Vulnerable Adults Wrap Around Services (VAWAS) pilot.

The pilot focused on social isolation as a mechanism for reducing unplanned admissions and the use of social care plans to coordinate the services effectively around social isolation needs of patients in the Durham Dales.

The report is currently being rewritten by the researchers as an article for publication in an academic peer-reviewed journal, which can be made available upon request after publication.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Dr Monique Lhussier  
 Email: [monique.lhussier@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:monique.lhussier@northumbria.ac.uk)  
 Telephone: +44 (0)191 2156036

Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

Website: [fuse.ac.uk/research/briefs](http://fuse.ac.uk/research/briefs)  
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 Twitter: @fuse\_online  
 Email: [info@fuse.ac.uk](mailto:info@fuse.ac.uk)  
 Telephone: 0191 222 729

