

Socialising can be a powerful tool

Dementia Awareness Week began on Monday 3rd June with the tagline, “Nobody should go through dementia alone”. Laura Whittall and Ann Williamson of the Shetland branch of Alzheimer Scotland spoke to ADAM CIVICO about why socialising is so important.

It isn't just for people with dementia," says Alzheimer Shetland's dementia adviser Ann Williamson.

She's talking about the local service and what it offers. "It's very inclusive and we welcome families and friends and really anybody in the community that wants to join in.

"The whole point of our activities is about social interaction and social contact. Reducing isolation and keeping people connected."

In that sense, Ann takes the view that the more people who attend Alzheimer Shetland events, the better.

The Lerwick-based branch opened in 2012 with Ann coordinating things from the dementia resource centre at the bottom of Burgh Road. She was joined by Laura Whittall a year later and the service has developed greatly over the years.

Initially all the services were based in the town, but there has been a concerted effort to take them to the outer isles and other rural communities.

"That's what we have done and some super stuff has happened," said Ann.

Perhaps the biggest success is the Memory Lane Cafe that now has regular events in the north, west and south Mainland as well as in the town. There are also other projects, including a link between the Whalsay school, which runs a cafe, and the care home on the Bonnie Isle (see separate article).

Laura explains why the cafes work well. "They're different in different areas. The one in Brae is at the Moorfield Hotel that they host for us, coming out and having morning coffee and scones and fancies. They have been very supportive that way.

"The Walls one joins in the 'cafe in the church' in Walls. The South Mainland one is a soup and snack lunch. We have got people coming from Cunningsburgh, Quarff, right down to Sumburgh."

A dementia resource centre employee, often Laura, is always on hand at the cafes but one of the main ideas behind it is to get people together, to keep folk socialising and to raise awareness.

"Social contact is really important for people with dementia," said Ann. "We find people are more motivated, more animated in a general sense of wellbeing, being out among people and having things to talk about.

"Isolation is a really bad thing for people living with dementia."

The simple act of socialising, however, can be a powerful tool to address that.

Laura adds that socialising does not have to be at events organised by Alzheimer Shetland. Continuing to go to the clubs and associations that people with dementia have always attended is equally important.

Laura and the team are happy to give people support, if necessary. "It gives people confidence that they are doing the

right thing and helping people to go to the things that they [have always] gone too, be it yoga, dance classes or whatever."

If more people felt comfortable enough to do that it would go a long way to creating the "dementia aware" community that Ann and Laura would like to see around Shetland.

Ann said, "Giving people the confidence and having a general level of dementia awareness is positive because it helps people continue doing the activities they have always done."

One thing they would like people to become more aware of is that dementia is much more than memory loss, a common misconception. Some people find the disease has an impact on their sight or hearing, or their perception of what is happening around them may change.

Laura explains, "Sometimes noise becomes overbearing for people with dementia and some carers have had that 'lightbulb' moment [when that is explained]."

The charity continues to work with groups, businesses and organisations to spread that knowledge and Dementia Awareness Week is a perfect time for them to do that.

"I suppose we are always looking for opportunities to encourage people to think about dementia."

If you have read this far, then that objective has been achieved. **■**



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Handing over a cheque, front row l-r: Ruby Hutchison, Robbie Kay, Chrissie Burgess, Hughina Eunson. Back row l-r: Magnus Williamson, Cara Montgomery, Laureen Bolger, Alison Irvine, Jeni Polson and Angela Irvine.

Top right: All hands on deck in the kitchen.

This page left: Magnus Williamson plays to Gracie and Tommy Arthur.

Photos courtesy of Laura Whittall.