

IN CONTROL SCOTLAND PRESENTS

AGELESS COMPANIONS

A SELF-DIRECTED SUPPORT CASE STUDY

2024



Introduction

Self-directed support has been Scotland's national social care policy since 2014, and aims to promote choice, control, and flexibility for people receiving support, enabling them to use a budget allocated to their care in creative ways to reach their outcomes. With four options available to them, with varying degrees of choice and control across each, there should be significant flexibility available to supported people to design and deliver support that works for them, beyond just traditional hours of support.

This case study is part of a series which looks at organisations which have successfully provided non-traditional support services through self-directed support, with a focus on option 2 (sometimes called an Individual Service Fund). In this case study we spoke to Marlyn Baxter, Director of Ageless Companions.

To read more about option 2, and about self-directed support more generally, visit our website: <https://www.in-controlscotland.org/>

The national context

The Self-Directed Support Scotland Act 2013 had, and still has, the potential to change the landscape of social care across the country. However, one of the main challenges around this is that the legislation is implemented differently across all of the 32 local authorities in Scotland.

Our SDS legislation promotes the flexibility that people receiving support should have around how their support is delivered. However, there is

often a misconception that support has to be delivered from registered care and support services. This assumption minimises choice and control individuals and families have around their budgets. In the current landscape of diminishing budgets and scarcity of services, exacerbated by the recruitment and retention crisis that is plaguing social care providers, it is more important than ever for us to consider how unregulated and non-traditional services like Ageless Companions, which go beyond time-and-task approaches, can be an important and accessible way of supporting people to achieve their outcomes.



Who are Ageless Companions and what do they do?

Ageless Companions is a befriending organisation based in Fife that primarily supports elderly people. The people that they support are matched with a companion from the organisation based on common interests, this could include taking the person out for a walk, to a group, to play snooker or round the shops. The organisation can also provide a 'sitter service' where a companion can support them at home to enable their family members to have some respite and have some time away from their caring role.

The support Ageless Companions provides helps reduce isolation and supports people who don't have family, or at least don't have family nearby. All staff employed by the organisation are retired, often from the NHS. The organisation supports people from 18 years upwards and there is no age limit, the oldest person they have had referred to their

organisation was 102 years old. They often find the support they provide keep elderly people at home longer and out of care homes.

Marlyn, who established Ageless Companions, does not feel the need to change the structure of the organisation to include being regulated with the Care Inspectorate. She highlights that their services are more about meaningful relationships and companionship, and that is what makes them different from other support providers.

How they personalise supports through matching

When matching a person with a companion, Marlyn will go out and visit them, find out what the person enjoys and what they are looking for in their companion. She conducts all interviews so has a solid knowledge of her staff and what they can offer as companions. It is important to her that each match is right because relationships are the foundation of their support.

Companions are matched with the same person on an ongoing basis to provide consistency and enable a friendship and trust to be built. Before support starts one of Marlyn's colleagues goes to visit the person and/or the family to assess support needs and introduce the companion. They emphasise the importance of building relationships, and never send companions to provide support without making this introduction first.

How supports are structured

The support Ageless Companions provides is personalised to meet the needs of the person and/or family receiving support from them. For people who are assessed as eligible for support from the local authority, it is often the case that the support provided is an alternative to one day in a traditional day care service. This usually equates to six hours paid for by the council through their self-directed support budget. In contrast

to traditional building-based services commissioned via option 3. these six hours can be accessed flexibly, e.g. some might choose to have all the six hours in one day, whilst others might choose to have three hours of support on two days of the week.

For those who pay for support from Ageless Companions privately the hours provided may vary from person to person or family to family, depending on what they can afford, and what the supported person wants to achieve. The minimum duration of support that Ageless Companions provide is one hour. Marlyn feels that an hour of support is the minimum the organisation should provide as this is long enough to provide companionship and have a cup of tea and a chat in a person or family's home. Ageless Companions also often go into care homes and take residents out, this tends to be the type of support that is paid for privately by a family and this is likely to be because staff in care homes do not have the capacity within the work force to take residents out regularly. Marlyn shared an example of a married couple, who lived in separate care homes and had been estranged as a result, who were able to re-connect with support through their Companions.

One person said the support they receive “was better than any medication”

How they use the SDS options

When the organization was first established all clients accessed the service and funded it privately. However, as the organization kept expanding, Marlyn realised that they could provide a service to those receiving support from social work.

People can access support from Ageless Companions under option 1 and 2 of Self-Directed Support (SDS). Marlyn previously worked within

the SDS Team in Fife council, so she has a background in this area. However, the organisation is not on the council's framework – a conscious choice made due to the organisation not providing personal care.

The main difference between option 1 and 2 of Self-directed Support for the organisation is that Ageless Companions receive payment much quicker on option 1. This is due to people receiving option 1 of SDS having their own SDS account that they manage themselves or they have an account which a third party manages on their behalf. If this is the case Ageless Companions just send an invoice directly to the individual or family or to the person managing their account who then arranges payment, this does not involve some of the other steps that need to be taken under option 2 of SDS when paying for support from Ageless Companions.

How they got started with option 2

There is a process that Ageless Companions must follow as part of being an SDS Option 2 provider. These steps include Ageless Companions taking an agreement to the supported person to sign and then it being signed off by the Local Authority and then sent on to Finance to be actioned and put in place. The process itself is not complicated, however, the time it can take between each step and the impact this has on the person or family waiting for it to be approved can be the biggest challenge.

To speed this up, Marlyn has previously offered to take the agreement to the person's home for them and Ageless Companions to sign together, reducing the steps outlined above however, this offer was declined.

Reflecting on establishing Ageless Companions, Marlyn explained that the organisation received their first contract from the council after she had submitted several documents including a range of policy and

procedure documents. The contract is up for renewal every 3 years and is due to be considered for renewal this year. The challenges that Ageless Companions have experienced around commissioning and being paid on time for their option 2 services have been highlighted to the commissioning manager within Fife Council and they are being discussed and addressed. Often, the organization start supporting an individual or the family but are not paid for providing the support until much later. This is despite providing social work with a start date.

The challenges or barriers they faced

The main challenges that Marlyn feels that Ageless Companions as an organisation face around SDS is mainly that she still finds herself having to explain what SDS is to supported people and families. She explained it is often the case that those seeking to access support from Ageless Companions highlight to her that social work has discussed SDS with them, but they don't know what it means or what their options are within it. Marlyn also feels that SDS is often explained as something that's different to social care, when it is how social care should be delivered in Scotland in line with the Self-Directed Support Scotland Act 2013. This perceived difference is something that Marlyn struggles to understand, and that it can be a barrier to people.

Marlyn didn't have to overcome any barriers and feels that offering Option 1 and Option 2 of SDS within Ageless Companions was a straightforward process. She also feels that working with commissioning within Fife Council was also straightforward. She acknowledges that her previous experience of working within the SDS team of Fife Council assisted with the process and meant that there were no barriers to overcome.

What's next for Ageless Companions?

Marlyn will be focusing on maintaining the service that Ageless Companions currently provide. She explained she's often asked if the organisation will branch out and offer services out with Fife. She has no plans for this now.

Separate to Ageless Companions Marlyn has also set up a new venture called Inspired Breaks which is a respite service within Fife Council for people with a learning disability. It has been set up in a similar way to Ageless Companions, however, the local authority have stated that Inspired Breaks needs to be on the framework, and she's currently going through the procurement process to achieve this and to be able to provide services.

What is their advice for other providers thinking about getting started with option 2?

Marlyn advises that her main piece of advice would be to be aware that they might not get paid straight away for any services they provide due to the previous highlighted steps that have to be completed when setting up an agreement to provide support. Marlyn acknowledged that, particularly for smaller businesses, this might be a challenge, as it's likely that they won't have the income to subsidise their expenditure until they receive payment. If she had been faced with this situation, she, like many other businesses, would have found it difficult to start the business, especially not knowing when payments would be received.

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