The evidence base for falls prevention initiatives is strong, guidance from NICE, research papers including a Cochrane review, through to the recent publication of the Falls and Fractures Consensus Statement and Resource Pack in 2017(1) (2), and is also subject to cost effectiveness models (3).

Falls prevention in older people is important for a number of reasons; falls are a major population health problem that will increase with ageing demographics, which in turn places increased pressures on the NHS and social services to provide relevant treatments and ongoing care.

People aged 65 years and older have a higher risk of falling, with 30% of people older than 65 and 50% of people older than 80 falling at least once a year. With 8.7 million people living in England aged 65 and over in 2011 this equates to over 3 million falls annually across the UK (4). The consequences for people who have fallen, and the impact on their families, can be serious (5) (6).

For Somerset, a large rural county with a higher than average ageing population, falls are predicted to have a major impact on resources and outcomes for our older population, this is exacerbated when multi-morbidities are present. Local data shows:

•An estimated 125,000 people aged 65 or older live in Somerset (2014 Mid-Year Estimates).

•Between 1984 and 2014, the number of people aged 85 or older has increased by 170% to an estimated 18,100.

•The number of people aged 75 or more is projected to double in the next two decades.

•In parts of West Somerset and Burnham-on-Sea, more than half of the population is projected to be aged 65 or older by 2033.

•In Somerset, there were 855 emergency hip fractures and an estimated 4191 people 65+ were admitted to hospital as a result of a fall in 2014/15. Of these, about a half were by people over the age of 85 (7).

Falls can result in fractures, head injuries, pain, impaired function, loss of confidence in carrying out everyday activities, a fear of future falls, loss of independence and death; approximately 30% of people who fracture a hip die within 12 months and falls are the most common cause of death from injury in people who are over 65 years old (8).

There are around 255,000 falls-related emergency hospital admissions in England each year among patients aged 65 and older and falls account for more than 4 million hospital bed days, causing a significant burden to the NHS (9) (10). Hip fractures are also associated with a median hospital stay of 20.5 days (11). Incident hip fractures alone were estimated to cost the NHS £1.1 billion annually between 2003 and 2013 (11).

The number of people aged 65 years and over is projected to increase by an average of 20% between mid-2014 and mid-2024 (12). Moreover, a higher proportion of this population will have multimorbidity which further impacts on their independence and quality of life.

The enormous burden of falls means it is important to identify actions that can reduce falls and, therefore, reduce the burden of falls for these individuals, their families and commissioners.

Assisting people with healthy ageing will reduce the future costs of health and social care, avoid distress to families and carers and help to create opportunities for older people to feel healthy, safe and connected.

Somerset has developed a community based Stay Strong Stay Steady exercise programme, using Otago, one of the evidence based exercise programmes recommended in the Return on Investment Model (3). This programme leads on from an NHS assessment and local Balance and Strength classes for some people, or can be accessed by people who feel at risk of a fall.

Currently Somerset has been selected as one of 4 areas in England for a scoping project commissioned through the Centre for Ageing Better and being delivered through the University of Manchester and Later Life Training. The aim is to identify more effective joining up of agencies, greater promotion and to create an action plan to increase uptake of attendance at falls prevention community based classes, Stay Strong Stay Steady.

The programme is expanding to provide a wider opportunity across the county in 15 local areas, this will assist with reach, however given the numbers of people who fall or have concerns, we know there is a huge, untapped audience out there, the programme is working towards sustainability, therefore expansion and increased numbers will make it more sustainable.

The proposal we have developed through some local multi-agency working, is to appoint a project manager role to engage with a variety of organisations and employers across the county to raise awareness of falls and where appropriate provide information and signposting. This includes behaviour change messages, and proactive engagement, as behaviour change is increasingly being seen as key to many interventions, for example through Making Every Contact Count (13).

We considered employers as a main gateway to target those over 40, who although may not be concerned about falls themselves, will have older relatives who they are worried about.

The project would then aim to recruit falls champions, both within employers and the wider community and agencies, for example Age UK Somerset have a huge number of volunteers who are older people themselves and are well placed to give peer messages to other older people.

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