HOW YOU CAN REDUCE LONELINESS IN YOUR NEIGHBOURHOOD

JRF and JRHT's Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness action research programme explored and identified the causes of loneliness and what we can do about it. We worked in four neighbourhoods in Bradford and York over three years. This is how we did it, and how you might be able to do it too.

It's *all* about the process

How do we involve people who may feel isolated and unengaged in their community? Our team and more than 40 local volunteers from the four communities we worked in used the following process. While every neighbourhood will yield different results, the same process can be applied to any community.

Introducing yourself

Get out and about in the community. Deliver calling cards or leaflets door-to-door that explain who you are and what you are doing and invite people to get involved. Ask people who are already involved with the project to help you distribute the information.

Take to the streets and talk to people about themselves and their community. Take contact details of those interested. Piggybacking on established community meetings will help you reach more residents, groups and agencies.

Community researchers used a range of methods to gather information in the neighbourhoods.

H diagrams can be used to chart gaps and ideas.

Recruit people to lead the work

Outreach and street work will yield the best results – we used community researchers. Flyers, taster sessions and personal invitations may also help, as could extra sessions at the end of community courses.

Invest in your people

Providing training is crucial. We offered six days' training in Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) techniques. We also provided childcare and carers' support. All training was delivered in a supportive and accessible way, and we provided refreshments and lunch.

Gather information

Community researchers spoke to people at schools, churches, community groups, pubs and clubs, bus stops, GP surgeries, parks and shops. They planned the research and led the fieldwork, collating data and comments along the way. We attended most of the initial sessions but once the researchers were confident we left them to it.

They used a variety of PLA tools to gather different perspectives on the causes of loneliness. We re-grouped to consider what information we had and where the gaps were. We then planned to visit specific groups of people and age ranges. For example, we attended a mental health support group, went to a play park on an evening to talk to young people and met homeless people. Workers from JRF and JRHT recorded all comments and data on a spreadsheet. This was time-consuming but crucial in analysing findings.

Analyse what causes loneliness

We organised two days' further training on research analysis to identify the major factors that caused loneliness and organised them by theme. The community researchers took part in all sessions and spent four days analysing the causes of loneliness in their neighbourhood. Community researchers then helped prepare community feedback events where they presented their themed causes of loneliness.

Form a plan

Going back into the community, the researchers planned and led another round of fieldwork based around the themed causes identified. Again, different groups of people and age ranges were targeted.

Think again

Themes were analysed once again during a two-day session. This was followed by group discussions to decide which partnership meetings should concentrate on which themes. These were broadly defined as community factors or individual characteristics (see below).

Additional training sessions were provided, looking at questions such as 'what is research?' and 'why we research'. Community researchers helped plan who to share the findings with and how the information would be presented.

Share your knowledge

Two partnership days were held in each neighbourhood. Working with community researchers, we presented findings to community members, leaders and partners.

We also held partnership days for people who were interested in specific themes. These themes were presented according to the audience invited, which included partners, professionals or local people.

Causes of loneliness ranged from 56 to 180 factors depending on the neighbourhood. These were put into 11 to 30 themes, for example:

Partnership day one	Partnership day two
Community breakdown	Lack of facilities and difficulty accessing them
Lifestyle	Health
Paid and unpaid carers	Personality
Social and economic issues	Separation and loss
Social isolation	Technology

The factors were discussed in detail at the events, for example:

Theme	Separation and Loss
Factors	People moving away
	Relationship breakdown/family breakdown
	Bereavement
	Families leaving
	Lack of family
	Children affected by bereavement

Feedback and evaluations were gathered from the partnership days, during which partners were asked whether they wanted to become more involved and, if so, in what areas.

Choose your priorities

Members of the neighbourhoods came up with more than 1,000 ideas to reduce loneliness. An average of 65 ideas were prioritised in each neighbourhood and shared with community partners and local stakeholders.

A two-day residential course was held for all community researchers so they could look at their priorities and project management. Each neighbourhood reduced these ideas to five priorities to put into practice.

Maintain the momentum

Community researchers handed work over to community groups and activists. We asked volunteers to keep journals during this time to capture the positives and pitfalls, the outcome of which can be seen in a 'Can Do' guide. Each group set their own vision and aims for their neighbourhood, renamed themselves and received £7,000 of funding to put theory into practice.

At this stage, the action plans were again taken into the neighbourhoods. We summarised what people had told us, what we aimed to do and what people needed to do to help achieve the goals. This was a good point to recruit local people who could help establish new initiatives. We also organised follow-up meetings with potential partners.

Spider solutions highlight how to set about putting ideas into practice.

Ideas become reality

Community activists had to overcome many hurdles to put their priorities into practice. Some ideas did not make it into the action plans and some parts of the action plans did not get put into practice. This tended to be because of regulations, or fear of regulations. However, many of the ideas to prevent loneliness were successfully put in place, including:

From the activists:

Film clubs, walking groups, stay and play sessions, smile campaigns, welcome maps, pop-up cafés, exercise groups, fairs and fun days, confidence and community groups, cultural markets, hobby and craft fairs, health roadshows and skills sharing sessions.

From the stakeholders:

Funding applications to update and reopen community buildings, employing community development workers, changing working practices, rethinking the importance of volunteering, making loneliness a priority on parish and ward plans and on health and well-being boards.

What happened next?

The process helped all four neighbourhoods identify their own solutions, giving them a greater sense of ownership and the tools to develop their work.

Thirty local people who completed the PLA training have remained at the core of the programme, acting on the priorities they identified in three neighbourhoods and actively involved in outreach in the fourth.

Five of those involved gained the confidence and skills to help them find employment. For others it has staved off loneliness (see our case studies) and helped them with life's challenges. If the process worked in their community, it can work in yours.