

# NEIGHBOURHOOD APPROACHES TO LONELINESS

INSPIRING  
SOCIAL  
CHANGE

OUR STORIES





# FOREWORD

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We can all feel lonely, whatever our age or situation. Loneliness can take us by surprise or can follow naturally in the wake of life's transitions: bereavement, redundancy, illness or some other change of circumstance such as moving house, starting school or university.

We can't hope to eradicate loneliness and we need the experience as it is a natural appetite, like thirst and hunger, prompting us to take action, to seek company. Feeling lonely will always be painful, but it is usually transient. Problematic, deep-seated, on-going and – all too often – unacknowledged loneliness, however, is a more serious concern and JRF/JRHT's Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme has spent three years exploring it, looking at the factors that make us feel lonely, identifying possible solutions and helping to facilitate community action.

Loneliness can affect us wherever we live and work, in the places and communities where we spend our lives, so it is no coincidence that this programme began with a place: Hartrigg Oaks, a retirement village built and supported by JRHT. When it became apparent that fewer residents than expected were making the transition from independent living to the extra supported care available to them JRF/JRHT adopted a joint approach to consider why this might be. If, as seemed likely from what residents said, it was because people felt comfortable and connected where they lived,

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could this be replicated within other communities, other neighbourhoods?

The stories you will read here come directly from just some of the many people who have carried out the fieldwork, speaking to 2,000 people across four very different neighbourhoods, two in Bradford, two in York. Local people, trained and supported in action research methods and practice, also developed links with over 100 local stakeholders and are already putting local ideas into practice in their neighbourhoods. You will also read about the experience of others who have worked with the community members, supporting and facilitating this tremendous piece of work.

They each talk about their involvement and motivation, offer advice on how best to avoid or reduce loneliness and suggestions born of practical, heartfelt experience to others who might – like you? – be considering doing something similar. They also talk about some of the surprises along the way and some of the simple things we can all do, personally and professionally, to make a difference. These stories challenge us all to think differently about loneliness and about how we can best foster strong communities in which people can thrive.

Julia Unwin  
**Chief Executive**

Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Housing Trust

# INTRODUCTION

JRF and JRHT's **Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness** has been a three-year action research programme exploring and identifying what makes us feel lonely where we live and work and what we can all do about it – personally and professionally.

Based in four neighbourhoods in Bradford and York, more than 40 local people were trained in Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) methods, then supported to investigate what causes loneliness in the areas where they live. The programme wanted to compare local experience in different communities. In **Bradford** the neighbourhoods of Bradford Moor and Denholme allowed for an urban and rural comparison.

**Bradford Moor** skirts the city centre. It was the programme's only ethnically diverse neighbourhood, was the most economically deprived, and was unique in identifying childhood loneliness and children not feeling safe as key factors.

**Denholme** is a village eight miles up and out of the city. It has lost its industrial base and has a higher-than-average older population. New-build housing has attracted young families and there is something of a generational divide in the village.

In **York, New Earswick** has a long history of involvement with JRF/JRHT. York's highest level of unpaid carers' hours is provided by people living in the village.

The **Carr Estate** by contrast has little by way of community focus, social amenities or natural meeting places other than the local school, Children's Centre and, more recently, Lidgett Grove Church. There is a high proportion of young families. Carr has little sense of its own identity and a feeling that it isn't on the York map.

With more than 6,000 individual comments from almost 2,000 local people, there is no shortage of powerful, often highly personal, messages emerging through the programme. We want to spread these messages and influence change. These changes can range from small but profound shifts in people's

individual levels of confidence and behaviour to how community groups function and statutory services shape and deliver services.

These case studies form part of our resource pack as part of this on-going process.

## How we did it

Thirty of the people who completed the PLA training have remained at the core of the programme, putting into action the priorities they identified in three of the neighbourhoods and remaining actively involved in outreach and capacity building in the fourth. We have published a separate guide to the process, but here is an overview.

### Stage one: Gathering information

Adopting an outreach approach and community fieldwork, the researchers gathered and themed the complex issues people face regarding loneliness. The washing line (**See picture on page 7**) was just one of the many community development tools they used.

### Stage two Getting solutions

Analysis, theming, more outreach and fieldwork together with community feedback sessions to discover more in-depth issues, ideas and solutions.

### Stage three Action planning

Community researchers continued to use participatory methods to engage with local partners, going on to devise and implement their local action plans.

### Stage four Putting into practice

Project management training, a little seed funding and lots of planning have seen ideas become activities, groups and events within each neighbourhood.

### Stage five Over to you

Groups are established (formal and informal), local partners engaged and a lasting legacy and activity within neighbourhoods. The process continues.



## JACQUELINE BIRRANE

Unique among the programme's community researchers, Jacqueline has been active in two neighbourhoods: both Bradford Moor and Denholme. Jacqueline is 40 and lives in Bradford (although not in either of the participating neighbourhoods).

**Why did you get involved?** I was very lonely myself. I had been lonely a long time. I had lived in Southampton, a city where I knew no-one, and did some volunteering. I thought I was depressed for many years. The last two years I have just pushed and pushed and pushed myself. I value myself now.

**What's kept you motivated?** I'm very passionate if I get involved in something for somebody else who might benefit. Because I've seen this through for myself it's a big deal. Nobody has an easy life really. If they have they can't cope when times get hard. Losing my parents has been massive, although it wasn't the easiest of relationships, and I have struggled with not having children but I have achieved more in the past two years than I would have thought I would in a lifetime. The people and friendships too have kept me involved.

**Has anything really surprised you about the research?** In Bradford Moor I've not been surprised but upset at how dysfunctional the area is, the lack of care and love for people but there again the Partnership Day there was very special. In Denholme many of the community researchers were already on

committees so had a vested interest in the village and there are many more people involved than in Bradford Moor. I'm surprised at the negativity of some people in Denholme, especially some of the older people. It can be cliquey.

**What do you hope for the future?** That people will open their eyes, see the problem, recognise the solutions and what's already happened in the past two years. If something hasn't worked in the past try things again with different people. People are very interested. I'm going to be involved in the health group in Denholme and already help with the Film Club. It's about socialising, being around nice people – it helps me so much. That's the big difference.

I would like to think it will carry on in Bradford Moor. It will need more volunteers, more partners. It needs new people ... fresh with massive enthusiasm.

**Have you any tips for anyone about loneliness, how to avoid it or reduce it?** Don't get wrapped up in the stigma of it all. Talk to people, your partner – be honest with yourself. I haven't got a lot of qualifications but a lot of life experience. Look at the things you can do, not what you can't do.

**What advice would you offer about how to set up something similar?** You need good guidelines, a structure. Volunteering is one of the best things ever invented as long as you're treated right.

# KATHLEEN SHACKLETON

Kathleen is 85, lives in Denholme and has been involved with the Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme from the outset – even before the introductory leaflet was produced and distributed.

**Why did you get involved?** As you grow older, loneliness can creep up unnoticed. I was interested from the first meeting. We were taught various methods, including the washing line, and it was very interesting to meet people.

**What has kept you motivated?** We found we could do something and this is coming to fruition with the setting up of the weekly Walking Group and monthly Film Club etc. I'm very, very happy to be among people, to do something about my own loneliness and that of others. Because of my age, my involvement tends to be more to the older end.

**Has anything really surprised you?** I was amazed at how little I knew my own village. I was very surprised that young people could get lonely and how lonely some school children are. I was never lonely – there was such a lot to do. Society has shattered, fragmented really. I'm sorry for young people. When I was approaching 18 the war was ending, I was married by 20, widowed at 30. My husband's asbestos business killed him. I've had two lovely marriages. Bill sang his way into my life – I said I would marry him if the dachshunds took to him!

**What do you hope for the future?** I just want to let people know that there are things to do that can help loneliness. Mingle – you never know who you'll meet. It's the only attitude. If you don't go out it grows on you like a fungus. Loneliness is a scourge, a creeping cancer because of this fragmentation.

I have a rather selfish motive, that it relieved my own loneliness. Don't feel guilty. It is a very complex emotion, not easy to come to terms with. So much impinges – health, mobility. I have very little social network (a



son, daughter-in-law, peripheral friends). Because of my age, my Christmas card list gets shorter and I will end up the only pebble on the beach.

**Any tips for anyone about how to avoid/reduce loneliness?** Live each day as it comes. I'm a great believer in living each moment if you can: there is only the moment. Mindfulness (meditation) has a lot to recommend it. It's easy but you have to practise it. Take life by the scruff of the neck and shake it – that's your mojo. Don't envy the young. We are all children of our time.

**Any advice for others thinking of doing something similar?** You mustn't be afraid to put yourself forward. Your purpose is to relieve loneliness. You are taught methods that do work – games, other approaches (the washing line always makes me laugh). Put in your contribution.



**Nageena Khan** is 27 and has worked as a Community Health Trainer and with the Extended Schools Service in Bradford. Nageena has been a key member of the team, facilitating group work in Bradford Moor, offering interpreting, training and

support to those involved with the programme and accessing networks across Bradford.

*“Keep the community involved – don’t go off at a tangent. Here the community was always involved. We were able to recruit people locally. The action research was really good. What we found wasn’t what we expected and we still wouldn’t know if we hadn’t gone about it in this way. Don’t have too many set boundaries – improvise! Not having to prove a certain hypothesis, that’s important, particularly in communities like this. We need people to interpret, capture the way people express things in their own words.”*

**Chris Cooke** is 71 and has become more actively involved with NELLI (see page 10) as the group has started to put ideas into action, especially those associated with arts and crafts and the sharing of local skills.



*“It’s such a personal thing. Trying to make spaces open and welcoming. How do you tell people? How do you encourage them to walk through that door? Door*

*knocking? People who are already involved have been social/health workers – piggy back on that. In New Earswick the Folk Hall could be used much more and hopefully will be by the community.”*



**Alison and Steve Swiszcowski** are both 59 and have lived in Denholme for over 20 years. Alison (pictured above) worked in community development for many years and is now Clerk to the Town Council. Unlike Alison, Steve isn’t a member of One Denholme, but is very involved in their initiatives and his photographs feature in the Town Council newsletter.

**Alison:**

*“I’m surprised at how the group has come through the years and are still close, that they have stayed together, how positive everyone is and at how it has impacted on the village. Even those who’ve dropped out are still there, still interested. There are lots of really positive outcomes: the website, newsletter, Facebook. The group is made up of quite different people, with different interests, so we are able to develop the things we feel passionate about.”*

**Steve:**

*“Since retiring I’ve made new friends. Loads of people get to the Film Night half an hour early for a good chat and I’m involved in the Walking Group, which is very enjoyable. The people are very nice.”*



**Bobby Weldon** (pictured above) is 44 and works at Carr Children’s Centre in the middle of the Carr Estate. The Children’s Centre has been very supportive of the programme and she has worked closely with Carr Connectors. The Centre has changed its approach towards helping local people back into employment as a result of how volunteering their time and experience has increased the women’s confidence and helped them find jobs.

*“Don’t be afraid to take that leap, make that initial contact. You can’t always wait for someone to ask. The other person might be exactly like you. Because it’s a vicious circle you fear you might be rejected. Since being involved I’m much more likely to ask do you want to come to a film, for a coffee? People have become real friends, new partners. Someone might say no – that would be crap – but they might say yes!”*

**Chelsea Horsfall**

celebrated her 21st birthday while on placement with the programme. She was in the first year of her social work course at the University of York. Chelsea had special responsibility for promoting and co-ordinating the Big Lunch within the neighbourhoods.



*“A lot of people know they’re lonely, that they should join something but they’re too busy. A lot of people are too embarrassed. They’re not going to scream from the rooftops ‘I’m lonely!’ In future that might be different but for now – care less what people think. Volunteering is really great, even on a selfish level, learning new skills. It can be a good thing personally for your CV. Volunteering really is the biggest thing for me, especially if you are new to a city, as well as being really enjoyable and getting to know people.”*



**The ‘washing line’ is a community development tool used in the neighbourhoods – just peg a sock on the line depending on whether you think there is no loneliness or lots in your neighbourhood. It works and gets people talking.**

# STACY BOSTOCK



Stacy, aged 26, like several of the other Carr Connectors, credits the programme with the confidence she has gained and her return to work.

**Why did you get involved?** I was doing a course and just got roped into it when Tracey and Roger came along and got us to reflect on our own lives: the happy and sad times. It was a group of 30 people and it was so quiet when we looked at it all. Everyone has suffered. For myself it was quite lonely at times, at home for hours with my little girl. It was why I was doing courses, not just for the qualifications. My lifestyle had changed a lot, I had always been around other people.

**What has kept you motivated?** Passion! I believe in the cause, why we're doing it. I want to go out and make a difference but we're not going to catch everyone. I know about loneliness through my life, my family.

**Has anything really surprised you?** I knew it was big but have been surprised at just how big loneliness is, at how much emotion there is attached. It makes you think before you speak to someone. I've been surprised with the team too, how individual little ups and downs can affect the rest of the team.

I always thought life was about having children. It was such a relief when I had my daughter.

Doing what I've done with JRF has made me think everything has happened for a reason. It sounds vain but I have more to give. Some people have forgotten why they started in the first place. Realistically I've learned a lot, have got certificates and my CV.

**What do you hope for the future?** On the Carr side: more regular community events – and hearing about them! With Lidgett Grove (the local church) I hope it keeps going, that the community hub will get used, not just as a church. I enjoy my job but know I want to be out there, doing more, talking to more people, opening things up. People could be benefiting from me even more. What we have done can have a ripple effect.

**Any tips on how to avoid or reduce loneliness?** Keep yourself out there, stay involved. Take time out to enjoy what you like doing. Just a smile – please! If everybody could spend five minutes, say over the fence, knock on a door – small things. If you take a bird's eye view it's not small. How much difference that could make.

**Any advice for people thinking of doing something similar?** Remember people aren't against you. Think positive. Listen – easier said than done. Keep open communications, flowing networks. Was it painful? Yes. Would I do it again? Yes! Amazing what you learn from it. And have fun doing it. It has been such a laugh even on so serious a matter. Believe in yourself!

# JEAN AND PAUL WINTER



Jean and Paul Winter are both 59 and live in Denholme. They are very actively involved in the 'One Denholme, One Focus' group, which was set up by the community researchers to put local ideas into practice.

## Why did you get involved?

**Jean:** There was a leaflet through the letterbox and at the Elders Group where I volunteer. I'm interested in people and in anything to help people experiencing loneliness, lacking confidence. **Paul:** I thought "That sounds interesting, go along see what it was about". I was a sceptic to start but Tracey and Roger made it fun.

## What has kept you motivated?

**Paul:** The ethos, the exercises – couldn't wait to go back. It made you more confident in putting your point across. Listening and thinking about different situations, solutions.

**Jean:** It felt comfortable, relaxed. Then we were going out, meeting people in the village!

**Paul:** I had my doubts – fear, trepidation – but came back on a high, wanting more. It was really good fun.

## Has anything surprised you?

**Paul:** The ideas, the amount of data and that anyone can be lonely. We went to the Scouts and parents were shocked to hear "I'm lonely, I get bullied". They didn't know. The children were brave about it: "I'm sad at school." **Jean:** Usually how well people responded. The first day we went out we were scared. Most of the time, most people opened up, said how they felt. One very elderly gentleman said "I'm lonely all the time, can't let anyone in the house". The next man said "There's no loneliness in this village". Wow – strange!

## What do you hope for the future?

**Paul:** I hope the Film Club and Walking Group will continue. It's still early days. If it's not laid on people won't entertain it. They need pushing. One reservation – we need more people. **Jean:** How will we measure, in a year's time, in the future? Who is going to join One Denholme at this point? I don't think we're known. We're too busy with other things, not getting ourselves out there. It's time to see how we can develop, get more people involved, otherwise it will diminish. We are very lucky to have other groups who know what's going on. I would still like to see a course on confidence for people e.g. following a bereavement.

## Any tips on how to avoid or reduce loneliness?

**Jean:** The obvious: get involved. But for someone who has lost confidence, depending on the cause, telling them to come to a film isn't enough. **Paul:** Listen to them, get them interested, keep their minds open. Let people know continually what's going on in the village. Use how we've been trained, get the word out, the message. People do have problems: accept and listen. **Jean and Paul:** You can't solve loneliness. **Jean:** Make sure people are welcomed into groups such as the Elders. It's hard if you haven't got an outgoing personality, which if you're lonely you might not have.

## Any advice for people thinking about setting up something similar?

**Paul:** Make sure you've got plenty of people doing it. My top tip is have a healthy number of volunteers because people do drop out. **Jean:** Get JRF involved! They made sure we were looked after and that was lovely. **Paul:** It's the way JRF did it: right staff, motivation – pure fun! It's been like family – we've made friends for good. It's opened my eyes. I'm a more confident person. **Jean:** In Turkey we had new neighbours in the apartments so we bought them a present to say hello. They said "You've got the Turkish customs!" I related this to the programme. We're learning that people want to be welcomed.

# ELSPETH BARRACLOUGH



Elspeth (Beth) Barraclough is 34. She lives in Huntington, the next village to New Earswick, and together with Cath Hartley from NELLI (the New Earswick Less Loneliness Initiative) has set up and runs Earwigs, a 'stay and play' group for parents and toddlers. Beth is NELLI's treasurer.

**Why did you get involved?** It was something to do after having my little boy. Tracey came along to the Children's Centre and it seemed an interesting project. I have been very affected by loneliness myself. I did a Sociology A level so had both an interest and some background. Free childcare gave me the chance to do something for myself – turn my brain back on!

**What has kept you motivated?** The responses we've had from people we've asked. It has felt like we could actually change things for the better and the group dynamics have been very positive, with everyone driving each other forward.

**Has anything really surprised you?** I thought we would get a lot more negative reception when we went out onto the streets – the bit I was dreading – and then people's attitudes. They won't talk directly about being lonely: it's their friend or neighbour. It surprised me that we had to distance NELLI from JRF/JRHT, which some people see as Big Brother in New Earswick. We were able to signpost them to the housing office at The Garth.

**What are your hopes for the future?** There are a lot of things I want to see happen and I can only do daytimes at present. My bugbear is depression and I would like to see peer support sessions run at the Folk Hall. Once set up, these should just run. We could get someone like Mind involved, a qualified counsellor.

I see us becoming more of a funding body, giving out small grants. If so, there will need to be a monthly meeting, a form of assessment and advertising

**Any tips or advice about how to avoid or reduce loneliness?**

Try and get out and meet people in real life – off the internet! Volunteering is a good way to do it; meet people with something in common. You can always pretend you're helping other people, not yourself. Cath and I are tied up with Earwigs. I've told the Children's Centre they're targeting the wrong people. They should be targeting grandparents, reaching older people through Red Lodge sheltered housing. I've given the new Children's Centre staff the manager's details.

**Any advice for people thinking about doing something similar?** Childcare has been a big plus. There are a hell of a lot of professional women sitting at home. It's certainly what got me interested. Be as honest as possible with volunteers. The more honest, more realistic you are, the less will drop out. But you don't know where the research will go. Make sure everyone is on an equal footing.

# ANWAAR FATIMA



Anwaar Fatima, pictured left with Jacqueline Birrane at Bradford Moor Partnership Day, has a community development background.

**What got you involved?** Community cohesion has always been my focal point, something new. I'm always trying to keep my foot in the door, training. People drive me. I really like being involved, being a part of something at least.

**What has kept you motivated?** Again I want opportunities for myself. I want to see it through. Being in youth work for 15 years, it never has sustainability, funding runs out. Nothing's forever. Time away from the kids! If it hadn't been for the childcare I would be tearing my hair out. People's opinions and finding out what's in my head really. Hearts and minds don't always go together. Dealing with daily challenges I'm always looking for the next solution but you can't preach unless you implement it yourself. People are so dependent on a service, so much so they can't be inspirational, no room for ideas.

**Has anything really surprised you?** The definition of loneliness. People's definitions and understanding of loneliness has changed so much. I watched a conversation evolve and the penny dropped: "Oh my God, I'm lonely." Exactly the same when I met a grandparent at the Children's Centre. He was really lonely, lived in a house but lived in a room, out of sight, self defined: "I let them get on with

their lives". He felt unappreciated but was doing it for the greater good, for his grandchildren. People fade away if not treasured. We all need love, nurturing, sustenance and to see from another person's point of view.

**What are your hopes for the future?** That we have something really, really sustainable. I hope for a really rich education for my children and for me to be a part of that. A sense of adventure comes from my roots and while we're here we should be as involved in as much as possible. I'm involved with an art project promoting cohesion between different religions, art and nature. I like to have my fingers in all the pies!

**Have you any tips/advice about how to avoid/reduce loneliness?** Conflict resolution. There is always stuff going on in the community. This brings home things that are personal to everyone. In terms of loneliness, when people are feeling conflict or anxiety, be the first to make amends or let it go: a new day, a new beginning. Be forgiving. Enjoy every opportunity and be part of every opportunity you have. You've got to put the hard work in, long hours, mundane – always so rewarding to see the fruits.

**Any advice for people thinking of setting up something similar?** Being in among and around people is the most enriching thing. Personally I know that my creator is pleased when I am of service to my fellow human beings. I find it really inspirational doing the drudgery of daily life – it takes hard work!

# ABOUT THE TEAM

The programme has been led by Tracey Robbins, with other team members including staff, interns and student placements over the life of the programme: Sue Szekely, Katy Hole, Beth Hurrell, Abigail Fairbank, Jamal Blades, Susan Allen, Ilse Ammerlaan, Jagreet Soor, Chelsea Horsfall and Uzma Kazi. Roger Newton of 3 Ps Consultancy has provided training and facilitation, along with Tom Wakeford and Jasbar Singh. Nageena Khan has worked in Bradford Moor on facilitation, support and interpreting. But when we say “we” we mean the community researchers, now activists, who have been involved throughout the whole process. Thank you all!

Find out more about the JRF/JRHT Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme at: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/work/workarea/neighbourhood-approaches-loneliness>

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