WORKING WITH YOUR COMMUNITY TO REDUCE LONELINESS

Simple ideas can make a big difference when it comes to reducing loneliness. Qa Research did an independent evaluation of JRF's Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme. This included talking to stakeholders who were involved in the programme. Stakeholders are those who have an interest in the work or those who can help make the programme a success. These ten tips aim to help you understand how to engage stakeholders and get the most out of their involvement in your work.

Work with the right people

Think carefully about who to involve. Engage respected, powerful and prominent local partners who will help progress your work and who will benefit in return. Remain open about how input from others could improve your work and do not ignore any offers of help.

The personal touch

Prioritise face-to-face contact above email. Recruit volunteers using face-to-face, fun methods. Unlike leafleting or posting a meeting date on a website, this will help you to reach those who are not the 'usual suspects' for volunteering or community engagement. Be practical – tailor measures depending on the community and its needs. This could mean using bilingual workers, translated materials, free crèche provision, signposting to related courses and so on. You could even invite stakeholders to be community researchers themselves.

Build on a powerful brand

Use the findings, resources and evidence from JRF's Neighbourhood approaches to loneliness programme to build on the work of others and make your case to funders, partners and other potential stakeholders.

Harness existing networks

Bring on board stakeholders already working in the community, whether local agencies, third sector organisations or residents. Take advantage of their local connections, resources and expertise. This could include encouraging them to provide a venue for community groups, crèche facilities to engage parents or support volunteers with administrative duties such as funding applications.

Establish new connections

In communities where there are fewer established networks and community capacity, think laterally. Who is trusted within the community? Who is already working with a group that may stand to benefit? It could be schools, children's centres, GPs, health trainers, employers or faith leaders.

Consider a catalyst

Consider using one person or organisation to co-ordinate and manage communication – enthusiasm and passion will help engage and retain partners and volunteers. Identify what skills are needed to make your objectives a reality and deploy the right people for the task.

Communicate expectations

Tell those involved what you expect of them at different stages and what they can hope to gain. Let them know your timescales and interim achievements as this will prevent disillusionment if things take longer than expected. Understand your neighbourhood – adapt the aims and communication to suit the local community and the pace of change that is possible there. In areas with fewer community assets expect a slow pace of change and allow more time.

Innovate at meetings

Keep it fun but focused. Concentrate on creative, participatory methods that will be enjoyable, will encourage all to contribute and will result in action. The personal touch can be powerful. Real-life stories told by community volunteers can touch and inspire hardened professionals.

Be ready to react

Different volunteers will need different styles of management and support. Identify the skill set required to sustain the project, then monitor volunteers closely and set mechanisms in place to identify when they are ready to learn new skills or take on new challenges.

Embrace renewal

At every stage be aware of the need to retain volunteers and recruit new ones. Keep a focus on attracting volunteers from a range of sources, with diverse backgrounds and skill sets. Stakeholders may value the fresh influences and the project will benefit from a variety of ideas from a range of perspectives.