Case Study

Oldham

Social isolation and loneliness were identified as significant issues in Oldham. Research suggests it is associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and stress, and can be triggered by major life events such as bereavement, relationship break-ups, retirement, changing jobs and moving.

The team, made up of individuals from a number of private sector organisations across Oldham, was challenged to find ways of influencing others to work on specific projects to make a bigger impact, helping to raise awareness of loneliness and isolation and support people across Oldham.

Joanne Walsh, housing and neighbourhood services manager at Regenda Homes, a Leaders in GM participant, said:

"When we looked at the data, it wasn't just the elderly that were affected by loneliness and isolation. In fact, it was mainly people from different backgrounds in terms of religion, who couldn't speak much English and didn't know the services or activities available in their communities. This was in addition to people who were in school being bullied, people in college who had left school and were struggling to make new friends, widowers who didn't know where to go or who to speak to and children who were sitting in their bedroom on computers and not really engaging in the wider world."

All of this showed the team that loneliness is an issue for everyone and is not just limited to a set age group. It isn't just an issue for elderly people. It can impact anyone, at all stages of life. Evidence shows that young people and children are affected by loneliness, but in a different way. Joanne said: "Social isolation and loneliness can have a massive

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>
> **Joanne Walsh**

impact on people's mental and physical health and wellbeing. There were a lot of lonely males, as females tend to attend groups and activities more frequently and are more comfortable with talking about how they are feeling."

Solution

Having previously set out to focus on the over 50s, after reviewing the data, the group expanded this to get a broad picture of the problem and help as many people as possible.

Joanne said: "We started by bringing everyone together to see what skills we had and what we knew about the data. This helped us determine how big the issue was and what we could influence within our own organisations to be able to do something about it."

The group was made up of a number of individuals from diverse backgrounds, including a local councillor, head of public reform for the Council, a policy manager, a police sergeant, a charity CEO, a local businessman, and a teacher.

"Looking at it as a problem as a whole rather than all going away and doing things differently meant that we were able to bring our skills and varied backgrounds together to see what we could achieve, recognising that we are stronger together."

Together, the team discussed what it would mean to them to make a difference in the area, sharing what they wanted to get out of the programme and looking at what, as individuals and as a group, they could and could not influence.

Joanne said: "Having these things to discuss helped us to bond as a group, and to focus on what outcomes we wanted to achieve. Ultimately, we were all there to make a difference in the area.

"We knew that in order to take the issue forward, we needed to look at ways of achieving quick results, but also look at the bigger picture and not allow it to be fazed out. Within Regenda, we had organised a project called Creative Credit with the Coliseum in Oldham. It had a really big impact in involving children and schools around educating people on money matters and savings.

"We decided to do something similar to get messages out about social isolation and loneliness, so we approached the Coliseum to do something similar but engaging the people in Oldham who suffered from loneliness and isolation." From this, the team organised a play at the Oldham Coliseum Theatre on isolation and loneliness, encouraging residents to come along to help raise awareness.

"It would have been a big task for us to think that we could resolve this issue at a borough-wide level. It was more about understanding what little things we could do in each of the different neighbourhoods to make small impacts and then see if we could grow that on a bigger scale."

From their research, the team understood that in order to break down the barriers or awareness around loneliness and isolation, they needed to speak directly to the people who are affected. Joanne said: "When you ask people, they don't think they are isolated or lonely. It's only when they start telling you about how they are feeling and their day to day life that triggers the fact that they are isolated. Some people prefer that way of life and they don't want to speak to people. It's important to respect that some people like to close the door and it doesn't mean that they're lonely, it means that's the way they choose to live.

"By organising this play, we were able to reach people in all situations, helping them to feel less alone, while raising awareness among those who are able to support them."

Results

Through the play and the workshops, the team were able to raise awareness of the activities and groups available for people in the local to engage with. Joanne said: "It can be hard for people to know where to go and who to contact and often, the toughest part it is stepping through the door for the first time. We were able to make people feel comfortable in those situations and get involved in their communities."

It wasn't just the local community that benefited from the programme.

Participants were also able to develop their own learning and leadership skills. Joanne commented: "For me, the programme was about how I could develop myself as a leader, working with others who I have been able to learn so much from and the relationships I have built.

"For all of us, it helped improve understanding of isolation and loneliness. It's a huge issue, but it can be simple to solve. The important take away is that the damage caused by not doing anything is significant."

Through their work, the team were able to change perceptions, encouraging organisations to ask if people are lonely as a matter of practice.

"Ultimately, it is about teaching people how to ask the right questions and to offer support to those who need it, even if they don't directly ask for it. By making small changes and putting these initiatives in place, we can make a big difference."