



Summary

Community First Yorkshire were formerly known as Rural Action Yorkshire. Their Community Connect Project worked intensively with three village halls in rural North East Leeds over an 18 month period to enable them to become 'Community Hubs' capable of identifying and responding to the needs of their village's older residents, who were experiencing or at risk of social isolation and loneliness. Community First Yorkshire acted as the Community Builder organisation and held an Activities Budget into which unconstituted groups could bid to run activities to support older people in their villages. This budget was equally divided between the three rural communities and simple standard application forms and selection criteria were developed.

The vision for the Project was to reduce the numbers of older people resident in the rural areas of North Leeds either at risk of or experiencing social isolation and loneliness by engaging with their local community hubs, offering a range of responsive activities to best meet the needs or desires of older people.

Outputs

- 48 volunteers
- 4 village halls directly supported
- 41 community activities delivered to 262 beneficiaries
- A third of beneficiaries were men



Theory of Change

Community Connect was an Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) project built on the knowledge and experience that Community First Yorkshire had regarding community development approaches. They understood the importance of starting the project by doing asset mapping and identifying who the community connectors were. Starting with community connectors and physical assets in each area was key to the success of the project. Each of the hubs also had a strong element of co-production right from the start with older people involved in decision-making and the selection of activities.

What difference did it make for older people?

- 81% of respondents had increased wellbeing after having being involved with one of the hubs
- 35% of respondents had increased their level of social participation

Learning

- Discovered that some of their traditional methods for marketing and promotion, such as distributing posters and flyers to local venues, were not effective. They found that older people are more likely to read something that comes through their door; particularly if it is in a trusted local publication such as a parish magazine.

- It was anticipated that the majority of beneficiaries would be living alone – in fact slightly less than 50% were living alone.
- At first recruiting new volunteers was a challenge. They had a core team of volunteers but needed to increase the pool of volunteers to place less pressure and commitment on the existing volunteers, some of whom had other voluntary commitments.
- Digital Skills Hub evaluation forms were completed by 22 participants during the final session. 100% scored the course either 'good' or 'very good.' Comments from the evaluation suggested that participants enjoyed learning in a group environment and had improved their confidence, but that they still felt they had much more to learn and some would prefer one to one support. They explored how they could offer further support to those that participated in the courses as well as reaching the applicants that were not prioritised.
- The people reached by this model had lower levels of isolation to begin with, at the start of the project, but this was already recognised by the hubs. Community First Yorkshire considered what they needed to do differently at each hub to reach the more isolated.
- Using co-production principles from the outset led to the development of a wider range of activities tailored to the needs and interests of the people at each hub.



Legacy

- All four of the original hubs (Swillington, Scholes, Elmete, and East Keswick) have continued, even though funding has ceased, and are now embedded in those communities.
- The success of the project, notably in a rural area of North Leeds, resulted in a second phase being commissioned, this time in areas in the South East of Leeds.
- The project was funded for an additional two years to see if the model could be replicated in rural South Leeds and continue to succeed in areas where there were less obvious community assets.
- A 'car buddy' lift sharing scheme was developed in response to need. This was not part of the original model but was important due to a lack of community transport in rural areas.
- Community First staff helped the hubs to look for additional funding for activities (eg. for the Brass Band group at Scholes).

Sustainable Partnerships

- Community First Yorkshire now has well established partnerships with the village halls in Swillington, Scholes, Elmete, and East Keswick.
- The four hubs have all formed partnerships with other local groups.

"A safe fun and stimulating place where older people can make new friends and meet up with old friends."



Case Study

Judy was a volunteer at the Elderberries group in Scholes; she had been involved since the group started. The group met every Monday for tea and biscuits and a variety of activities. When Judy received the leaflet asking for volunteers to help set up a community group, she saw it as a chance to be involved in the village. Judy was very passionate about craft making and had been making things in her living room for years. Judy wanted to teach others and share the same pleasure in craft making that she'd had over the years.

This was an opportunity to extend and develop her passion further and 'give something back.' She ran a craft station at the Monday group where people could sit and chat whilst making something they could then take home.

Volunteering had a great impact on her life. She described her experience: "Five months down the line, by sending one email to Becky, it's opened up a whole new village life and whole new group of friends. I hope to expand on that as time goes on. I only have positive things to say about it. Volunteering for the Elderberries has changed my life completely."

The group led to other opportunities for Judy to be involved in such as the Manor House Community Centre and attending a fitness class in the church Hall. Judy said her life had been much fuller as a result of being involved in Elderberries. Before this, Judy had always been very active in many different events but these were not related to the village.

These included raising money by making craft items for The Yorkshire Ambulance Service, attending a folk music group, and a local history group. Her husband passed away four years ago and this changed her involvement in activities outside of the village because they had always socialised together. She saw the Elderberries as "the catalyst that brought me into village events." She didn't know about any of things going on in the village before volunteering at the group. As a result, Judy had formed genuine friendships and felt as though she was part of the village; something she did not feel before. She said: "I wasn't part of the village before; I've lived here for 40 years and never knew anybody except my immediate neighbours." She described the group as acting as 'a jumping off point' to other organisations to get together and that many people she knew had joined the same groups that she had, as a result of meeting people and hearing about events at Elderberries. Judy found that she had so many extra things to do that it was hard to fit them all in. She said: "I want to carry on and do as much as I can for as long as I can."

When asked what she would say to other people, who were thinking about getting involved, she said: "Do it, definitely. Tell anybody to actually be brave enough to put a toe in the water and get out there and become part of something. It's not only one thing it will have a huge effect to put you in touch with other things as well."



Time to Shine is managed by Leeds Older People's Forum (LOPF) and funded by Big Lottery Fund's Ageing Better programme to reduce social isolation and loneliness amongst people over 50.