

PROJECT REPORT

2023 JUNE

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Lead: Katie Douglas, Accessibility and Inclusion Officer

Contact: Katie.Douglas@CommunityRailLancashire.co.uk

Budget: £53,720.00

Fund: Tackling Loneliness With Transport, Department For Transport

Supported by: Community Rail Network

Geography: Blackburn



Loneliness is a loaded term

Most of us will be lonely at some stage of our lives but we were concerned that we'd do more harm than good if we were overt with a word that can lead people to feelings of shame, guilt, powerlessness. As such, and with much consideration we decided to name and focus our language on 'Making Connections' rather than 'loneliness'.



CONCEPT AND AIMS

There were four broad objectives that were threaded throughout our delivery with each of them centred on supporting our participants to **increase in confidence and a sense of belonging to place and community**. We wanted to encourage and support people to use our wonderful rail network but in order to do that with people at-risk of loneliness we needed to **support the development of self-confidence, community and connectedness**. We recognise that the full realisation of the following objectives was a longer-term aspiration than that which is achievable within the timescale (and scope) of this particular project. However, we hoped that it could be a catalyst for those involved to start on the journey to achieving:

1. Independent mobility
2. Increased access to social, educational and economic opportunities
3. The benefits of using sustainable and local travel options
4. Positive mental and physical health

WHAT HAPPENED

Who Did We Want To Work With?

16-24 year olds although we incorporated intergenerational engagement opportunities with both younger and older participants as well. All age groups benefit from connecting to others and the siloing of communities into age-defined brackets is detrimental to all. By breaking up communities, in whatever way, we are creating opportunity for distrust, isolation and loneliness to take hold.

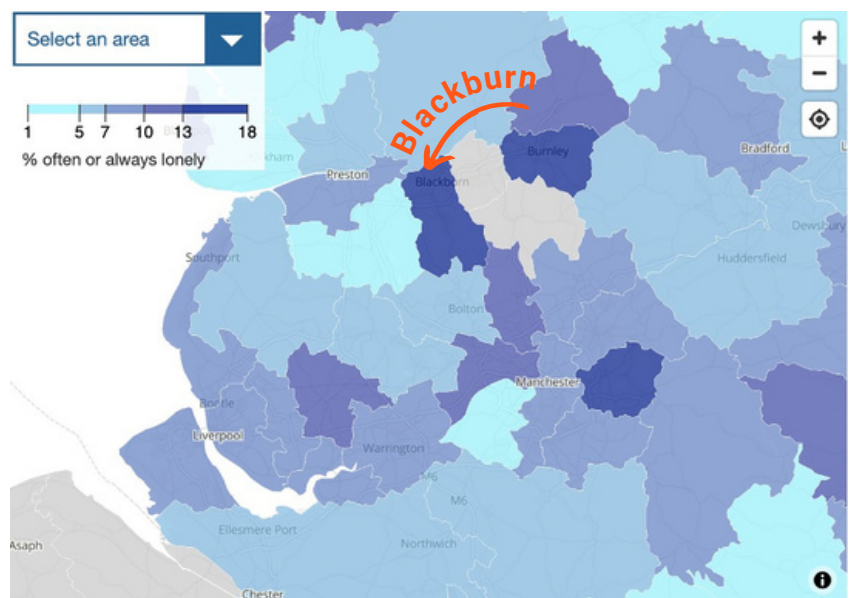
Why 16-24 year olds?

- They are disproportionately likely to report feelings of loneliness and are commonly at risk of mental health conditions.
- They were particularly exposed to loneliness and isolation due to the pandemic.

Where Did We Work?

Blackburn:

The map shows the ONS data of people saying that they are often or always lonely. The darker areas show higher concentration with 18% of people in Blackburn and Darwen saying they feel often or always lonely. That's 2 in 10 people, with young people being more significantly affected by the pandemic.



How did we want to work and why?

We split our delivery into **four creative projects** – dance, poetry, art and music – that participants took part in alongside **journey planning workshops and rail experience days**. We wanted to create opportunities for participants to connect to place, to each other, their wider community and to who they are - their skills, their interests, their feelings, their creativity, their hopes and dreams.

Loneliness is rooted in disconnection and the absence of belonging. If this project was going to reach the aim of tackling loneliness we needed to find a way for those involved to develop a positive sense of self and a sense of belonging to community and place.

PARTNERSHIP WORK

Having worked in Blackburn for some time, Community Rail Lancashire could reach out to trusted, local partners that we've previously worked with as well new groups.

We worked with **NightSafe** – a charity that supports young people who have or are experiencing homelessness. **Arts2Heal**, a local powerhouse of creativity that works with people who are either experiencing or are at risk of poor mental health. **Crosshills Special Educational Needs School**. **DanceSyndrome**, a dance company that primarily works with people who are learning disabled. **Blackburn College's** English as a Second or Other Language department, **Blackburn Youth Zone** and – of course, **Northern**.

We also recruited four creative leads that would drive the creative aspects of the four strands of the project – again, apart from Banu Adam, these were new connections for us to make and we're pleased to have expanded our pool of practitioners that understand our approach and vision to community and youth engagement.

Benefits Of Partnership Work:

- HUGE! Our community partners are embedded and trusted within their communities and have a deep knowledge and understanding of people and place.
- Project-based partnerships and connections are able to continue beyond the timescale of the project and a complete decampment doesn't have to take place.
- Enables capacity to deliver participant, location and output rich projects within short delivery periods.
- Facilitated a modular and staggered approach to delivery which helped us to manage our resources (both time and money).
- **By working with pre-existing community partners who have long term relationships with those they work with we ensure that there are networks of support during and after the project timeframe.**

BUT,...And It Is A BIG But:

Working effectively in partnership is not one-way. We needed to understand and respect the ecology of the community partners and ensure that responsibilities and expectations were not assumed. It was crucial to ensure that we were all working together and not at cross-purposes so communication was key.





OUTCOMES

- Creative and journey planning workshop and rail experience trips
- A new large-scale artwork in Blackburn Station's subway
- Poetry posters
- A new album (hosted online)
- A dance piece inspired by the movement of passengers on our network
- A series of celebration events
- Regular 'Reflections Meeting' with local rail industry partners which gave all parties opportunities to highlight potential risks and share ideas
- A collection of project films that document the various elements of the project

CHALLENGES ALONG THE WAY

This project grew and grew and it was a balancing act between responding to what was happening and keeping things on track. Word of mouth meant – that in some elements – the participant numbers increased week-on-week. Whereas in other elements recruiting participants proved tricky, even when working with local partners. We needed to remain flexible and expand the reach, partners involved and – to a certain extent – stretched some of the timescales.

As always, the weather (snow in March!) caused us some difficulties as did changes on the railway with industrial action and maintenance at Blackburn Station.

Always, avoid knee-jerk reactions and hold onto the overall objectives of the project even if it doesn't always go to plan. You will be making a positive difference even if you don't know it sometimes.

MANY THANKS

A massive thank you to all the Making Connections practitioners, supports and partners. Community Rail Lancashire would not have been able to do this project without you.



Nightsafe

BLACKBURN
YOUTHZONE



ARTS 2 HEAL
Creative approaches to healing



Blackburn
College



DanceSyndrome
Dancer Led, Disability Inspired