



Wakefield Libraries



TACKLING LONELINESS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL INTERACTION

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WHAT IS THE PROJECT AT WAKEFIELD LIBRARIES ABOUT?

The 'Tackling social Loneliness Through Volunteering and Social Interaction' project at Wakefield Libraries aimed to transform twelve local libraries into inclusive community hubs.

The project focuses on supporting local people experiencing chronic loneliness through the delivery of co-produced activities tailored to key life circumstances such as bereavement, youth mental health challenges, and dementia care.

Through a comprehensive public consultation, the team engaged local residents both inside and outside library spaces to understand and map community needs, design tailored interventions, and importantly, reach individuals who may feel too isolated or intimidated to participate in public settings or felt unable to access libraries.

Volunteering is a core element of the project, with training provided to enable bespoke sessions across multiple library locations. Advertising volunteering opportunities through outreach posters, social media campaigns and partnerships with local organisations such as Live Well Wakefield, enabled libraries to train local people to deliver bespoke sessions.

These sessions ranged from bereavement craft circles to LGBTQ+ wellness groups, Active Minds sessions (originally designed for individuals with dementia but expanded to support anyone at risk of loneliness), and most notably, a Travelling Cinema introduced in care homes and independent living settings, using interactive projector technology to engage people across diverse age groups and abilities.

WHY IS THIS PROJECT IMPORTANT?: WAKEFIELD CONTEXT

There is an upward trend in loneliness and social isolation across all ages in Wakefield. Whilst traditionally viewed as an area of vulnerability among older adults, it is suggested that a much wider demographic is experiencing the impact of chronic loneliness and social isolation.

Young people experiencing bullying, people living with mental health struggles, those navigating loss and grief, new parents without support networks, people with disabilities or learning disabilities and those experiencing disconnection in a post-pandemic world often find it challenging to feel a sense of belonging and connection to their communities.

Data from the Office for National Statistics and the Cultural Participation Survey (2022) identified key gaps in local provision. Horbury and Pontefract were highlighted as having significantly higher levels of social isolation, as well as a lack of accessible local activities.

The Wakefield Libraries project is vital to addressing these challenges. By creating safe and welcoming, community-focused spaces that foster meaningful connections and creativity, the project offers accessible engagement opportunities that support wellbeing and reduce isolation.

HOW WAS THE PROJECT FUNDED?

The Wakefield Libraries project was funded by the **Department of Culture, Media and Sport** through an **Arts Council England** and **Libraries Connected** partnership. **The Know Your Neighbourhood grant**, totalling £88,000 has enabled the mobilisation of this critical work across the Wakefield district.

WHAT ASPECTS OF HEALTH DOES THE PROJECT ADDRESS?

The project addresses **loneliness, social isolation, mental health, physical health, health inequalities and prevention.**

WHO ARE THE BENEFICIARIES OF THE PROJECT?

The project engaged with individuals from diverse communities and offered opportunities **for people of all ages and abilities.**

HOW DO YOU DEMONSTRATE IMPACT AND SUCCESS?

Between August 2023 and March 2025, the project successfully delivered **1,521 sessions, reaching over 20,520 beneficiaries, exceeding initial targets.**

By **leveraging creative health approaches**, Wakefield Libraries has demonstrated the **scalability and impact of community-driven models**, fostering **social connection and enhancing well-being** across diverse groups.

The project successfully trained forty volunteers, including volunteer champions, who continue to co-deliver group sessions.

The **positive and often profound impact** of the Wakefield Libraries project has been observed in the numerous **transformational experiences** of those who participated, both **during and beyond the project.** For many, **the project became a catalyst for change.**

A male carer shared that his volunteering role had led to a more positive sense of self, which had enabled him to teach others and reconnect with his local community.

New mums discovered support networks with other women they could relate to.

Young people who had previously been confined to their bedrooms and homes began to engage through in-library support sessions.

Provided a warm space for those who could not afford to heat their homes.

HOW HAS THE PROJECT MADE A DIFFERENCE TO PEOPLE'S WELLBEING?

The Wakefield Libraries project has positively impacted individuals in diverse ways, shaped by their unique life circumstances. Each personal experience and story of change is a journey to a happier, healthier life.

"I lost my husband just before the activities started. I thought I would try the crafts, and now I have made great friends. I go on some day trips with them, and it has really helped me in my grieving journey."

-Slyvia, Project participant, Wakefield Libraries.



"The friendships, the confidence, the way people are helping each other- it speaks for itself. That is the real impact."

-Sharon, Lead Library Officer, Wakefield Libraries.



"Coming to the events gives me a break from caring for my husband, who has dementia. I feel valued by my volunteering, it is my time to be me."

-Susan, Project volunteer, Wakefield Libraries.



Photos by: Nick Singleton.

WHAT KEY LEARNINGS HAVE EMERGED FROM THE PROJECT AND HOW ARE THESE INFORMING YOUR PRACTICE?

The Wakefield Libraries' 'Tackling Loneliness Through Volunteering and Social Interaction' project has demonstrated how libraries can **evolve into essential wellbeing hubs, effectively tackling health and social challenges through community-specific co-production, inclusive design and bold action.**

While engagement varied across library locations, the initiative exceeded expectations, **proving the impact and importance of community voice and adapting services to local needs.**

The integration of health and wellbeing services into library spaces, a key finding to emerge from the project, shows how **libraries in Wakefield are already responding and evolving.** Offering blood pressure checks, physical health screenings, and mental health signposting will become part of the library service. Staff training has become a priority, with employees undertaking health and wellbeing courses to ensure they can confidently support visitors.

Libraries in Wakefield have become local hubs for wellbeing, with many of the activities, offered as part of the project, now embedded into the library's core provision.

HOW IS THE INITIATIVE ENSURING LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY?

The role of volunteers is a key focus for the future of Wakefield libraries and is being strengthened, with new pathways for engagement being built upon the project's success.

Future plans involve securing additional funding to expand these offerings, solidifying partnerships with health providers and charities, and ensuring libraries continue to play a vital role in Wakefield's wellbeing infrastructure.

The 'Tackling Loneliness Through Volunteering and Social Interaction' project leaves a lasting legacy, transforming Wakefield Libraries into sustainable community wellbeing spaces. What began as a pilot has now become an exemplar of how libraries can actively contribute to public health. Through the **provision of safe and welcoming spaces that encourage social connection, personal growth and empowerment, the project reinforces the importance of inclusive and accessible support services within local communities.**



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