



National
Academy
for Social
Prescribing

Reaching People Charity - Leicester

Interview with Bharti Mistry – Community Engagement Lead

June 2024

Key lessons

- Staff being known and trusted by communities helps build relationships resulting in participation by residents in co-designing and attending new initiatives.
- Having age and culturally appropriate processes and activities enables full engagement and a better experience for community members.
- Given the opportunity through capacity building, people can realise their leadership potential to help themselves and others.

What is Reaching People?

Reaching People is an umbrella organisation bringing other third sector organisations together behind its mission to optimise the effectiveness and impact of the Voluntary Community Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector to create positive lasting change for local people. This pilot offered an opportunity to further build our evidence knowledge and practice to do this.

What issues did you want to address?

Reaching People charity in Leicester was aware of rising financial hardship in the communities it serves as well as a variety of wider social and health issues that stem from or lead to financial issues. The Charity decided to take part in a learning pilot funded by Independent Age and commissioned by the National Academy of Social Prescribing (NASP). It identified two areas to work with New Parks and Belgrave, areas which have different demographics and issues. My colleague Rob Hunter leads work in the New Parks area.

When did your work with NASP and Independent Age start?

We started this social prescribing learning pilot for older people in 2023. Last year we co-designed social

prescribing initiatives / social prescription activities with local people aged 65+ that responded to people's needs and aspirations. We are delivering these initiatives now in 2024.

How did engage people in the co-design?

We offered local people the opportunity to take part in the co-design and had great engagement with co-designing activities in Belgrave. People who took part were drawn from those that were already using our services, word of mouth, project leader advertising, and attending local events.

Why did this work?

It worked because I already worked in the Belgrave area. People knew me, people trusted me. We already had relationships with session or activity leaders. My work is focused on Belgrave residents and as an Indian Gujarati Hindu woman myself, I understand the community, the cultures and health beliefs. I also have psychological and behavioural insights about the practical factors that encourage or discourage engagement in activities, which helped the co-design. I speak the same language, not only literally but figuratively. There are nuanced differences within the wider South Asian population, so a person reflective of the same experiences, language and culture as local residents definitely helped.

Why is an existing relationship with a local area important?

Because people don't engage if there isn't one. For example, with New Parks, we had lesser engagement during the co-design process and since then very little engagement in those co-designed social prescription activities. This is despite high levels of interactions and encouragement from a colleague with a similar age, background and experience. However, we did not have pre-existing and trusted relationships and were starting from the beginning.

What are your plans for improving engagement in New Parks?

Our focus is on developing our relationship with local residents without a physical base on the estate. With the Reaching People project being short-term, we have strategies we are going to try simultaneously over the course of the year, whilst still offering social prescription activities as we come across unmet psychosocial needs through locate and engage. We're attempting to develop an ageing better strategy in the locality by connecting with local staff from council, third sector and health organisations, for example by building on existing relationships with social prescribing link workers and Primary Care Networks. We're also working with the

existing Men in Sheds project to develop a listening culture to contribute the building of an infrastructure, and we're going to develop one or more local champions. This may be local paid staff or volunteers, but someone already trusted, such as the local Vicar.

Who is attending the social prescription activities in Belgrave?

The people who now take part in the social prescription activities are made up of those who co-designed them but also new people who were feeling low or isolated, those needing support with for example housing / benefits / age related support or guidance, older people who are experiencing financial issues, wanting to open their own bank account, or those whose doctors telling them to exercise.

What are some of the social prescription activities?

Our social prescription activities are delivered in person and on Zoom.

The Zoom sessions are offered to all but attended predominantly by Gujarati Asian women aged 65 and over but we don't say 'no' to anyone around 60. The average age of members is 70. We started during the pandemic,

and we went from one session to eventually running seventeen a week. Now we run nine sessions a week and 10-55 people, mainly women regularly attend. The difference with the sessions since we started the older people's learning pilot is that we now cover financial wellbeing in a range of ways as well as incorporating positive psychological coaching from the co-design in the delivery and development of activities. The difference with the sessions since we started the older people's learning pilot is that we now cover financial wellbeing in a range of ways as well as incorporating positive psychological coaching from the co-design in the delivery and development of activities.

Our most popular Zoom sessions are singing, yoga, dance exercise and resistance band sessions. It's all about getting together, doing something together, chatting and having fun. So, for example, with the resistance bands exercise, some of the ladies who had mobility issues were able, after a time to comb their hair. Many had not been able to reach the back of their head and carry out a downward motion before they took part in the sessions. So, they're stronger now. Happier too. And feeling less frail of body and mind. The online sessions last for 60 minutes and are delivered in either English or Gujarati or a combination, depending on the activity/ information. Family members are welcome and often seen in the background. The women know they don't have to blur their backgrounds but also that they can stay off camera and take breaks. It's all informal and comfortable.

We also hold weekly 'Chit Chat' sessions, which include learning, information and chatting. The women enjoy them because they are learning together. We discuss activities, topics and speakers with the whole group and then make it happen. For example, someone within the group knows someone who could be invited, so we have invited doctors, dentists, opticians, psychiatrists to speak. They've all learnt something and taken actions because of the combination of access to quality information, expert speakers, peer support, a friendly session, and being in it together. After the experts have been on our zoom session, we always review the session the following week, this helps to sustain the learning. It also helps consolidate positive beliefs about what we can achieve because it's actually happened. I used to start the co-design sessions with positive psychological coaching, focusing the older women on their strengths and getting them to visualise as a positive thinking tool. Well, now no visualising is needed. They know they can do it.

Do you run all the sessions?

I started them but now they are voluntarily led by women who attend the sessions. The volunteers send Zoom links via two WhatsApp groups that have 400+ people. I started distancing myself as the lead, explaining I had a meeting and asked if anyone could run the session – “you just do what I do, you’ve seen me do it, it’s simple”. A few women said yes, so I trained them and built their confidence and after a few hand holding sessions they were running the Zoom sessions. We have a Zoom Admin WhatsApp group with Zoom group leads and Zoom admin. If anyone is on holiday, not well or has an appointment, they just inform in the Zoom Admin WhatsApp group, the session is either delivered by another session lead in the group or the session is cancelled. It works well, it is self-sustaining, I am not needed.

And, the Chit Chat sessions have helped different women realise they are experts in different areas, so they often take the lead and run sessions about their passions. We set up a Knit and Natter group, this was initially on Zoom and now also face-to-face. The women have used this group activity that makes them feel good to help others in the community, by donating the knitted blankets to people who need them. Sometimes people think that as they’re older, ‘that’s it, what have I got to give?’. These are older

with mobility issues, in stressful situations or with money worries but they do something for others and find it rewarding.

Overall, the people we co-designed with and other residents of Belgrave we have engaged with have attended, developed and taken over the social prescription activities. They are now mostly self-sustaining groups with peer support built in. We wanted to empower people and we did.

How do you communicate with the women about sessions?

WhatsApp. It's a great vehicle to communicate easily, share information and inform them about events and share the Zoom links. Some of our zoom sessions are recorded and posted on the two WhatsApp groups which has 400+ people. Those that missed the session have an opportunity to catch up via the recording.

What about your face to face sessions?

They're really popular too. Every Wednesday there is a Knit and Natter group that meets in the library where crochet and knitting is done, there are mentors who teach. Belgrave Wellness class meet every Tuesday and has 80 members, there are usually 40-60 people that attend each week. The attendees arrive early so they can have a chat with each

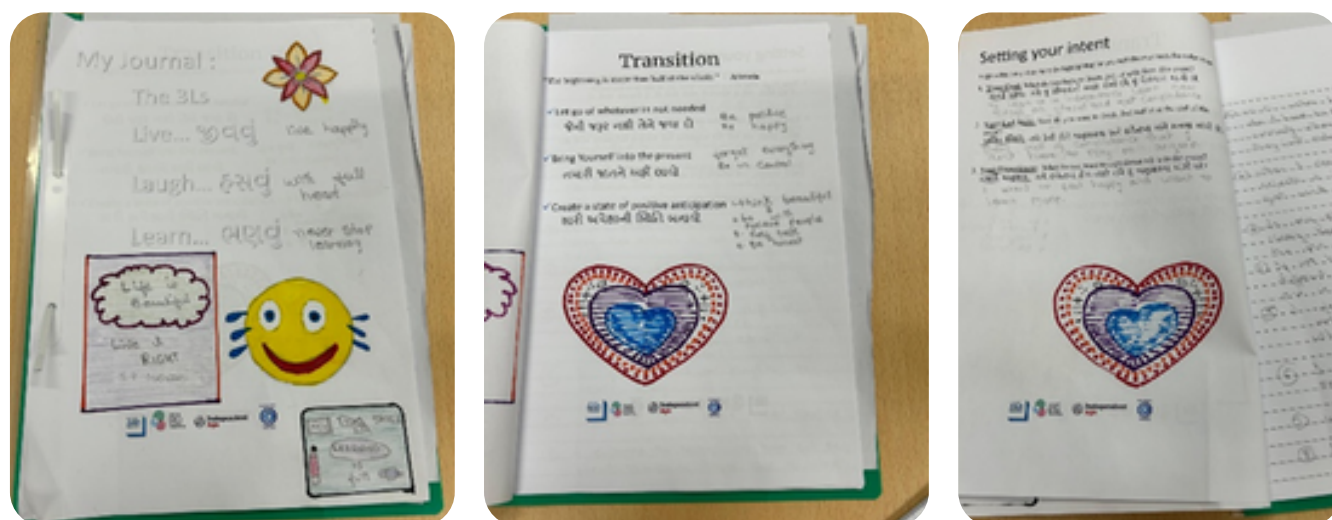
other. Belgrave Wellness class meet every Tuesday and has 80 members, there are usually 40-60 people that attend each week. The attendees arrive early so they can have a chat with each other. The other dance exercises groups run on Monday, Wednesday and Friday (300 members). They work with the Tuesday Wellness group and do celebrations together like International Women's Day. This year the groups all agreed to have one Big Birthday Celebration for all the attendees. There was some dance exercise followed by singing and birthday cake for all, A happy, fun and enjoyable event for all. We had 200 people at the celebration.



How have you built financial awareness into your social prescription activity?

In the Knit & Natter sessions for example, we invited, Energy Wise Plus Project and Severn Trent support scheme to talk to the women. The talks were in Gujarati which helped the women understand and take things forward. From the Energy Wise Plus Project, they all received a free energy saving light bulb. This was to help the women save money and to access information. We provided a 'Let's Get Digital' course for beginners in partnership with Leicester Adult Learning. The women wanted to learn more about using their smart phones and tablets without depending on family. We negotiated a flexible approach to adapt the usual training by reducing the session time to an hour and a half from three hours. The provision of handouts in English were provided, so that the women learnt and retained information. The session was delivered in English, and I interpreted where necessary in Gujarati. Having a familiar face and the positive psychology at the start and end of the sessions helped with confidence and provided reassurance. And as they saw their own progress, this added to the feeling of achievement, as did the fact that sessions had become interactive and the trainer was responsive to topics that needed covering more thoroughly. We have now completed two 'Let's Get Digital' courses and in the second session we had two men attend. As part of the positive psychology, we gave each person a folder and asked them to make it their own.

Example of one of the participants folder:



What's key to your success?

We used community development and asset-based approaches to co-design and not to deliver social prescribing initiatives. One way to describe community development is – doing yourself out of a job, so local people have the capacity and confidence to take over and/or set up their own. Community development is about being known and trusted by the community because you have an ongoing interactive relationship. It's about understanding local people and the community, communicating with them and providing them with environments, situations, knowledge, capabilities, coaching and opportunities to help themselves. The approach takes a wider view to issues and recognises it takes time for changes to happen. This relationship approach has helped us bring up issues such as financial issues which can be considered personal, stigmatising, or evoke emotional responses if control of their money is not in their hands.

How do the women feel about the social prescription activities?

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I started teaching the knitting in the Knit and Natter group, but we found she has the best skill. She'd never done it before, but she's the best, a natural talent, so she teaches too. Everyone now helps new people, and we all work together. We made lots of knitted squares and put them together into blankets. We gave 21 blankets to the Ukraine appeal and 6 to the homeless charity and 5 to the Mammias Baby Project. And we still have a few to give out.

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I enjoy knitting and I have made lots of friends. I feel that I am doing something for charity. Giving something back to the community. I used to go to sleep in the afternoon and used to think who shall I phone but since I started knitting it keeps me busy. I don't get bad thoughts anymore

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I used to do a lot of knitting and crochet when I was young and forgot about it but since you started this project it reminds me of all the different things we used to do. My daughter has arthritis and since starting the knitting her arthritis feels better. Her movement is better, which is a big benefit

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I did not even know how to hold the needles and wool. I started off with 10 stitches and just learnt to knit. 2 weeks later I proudly went and gave my first square to add to the blanket. I felt very proud there are probably 100 squares to a blanket but I did one square towards the first blanket, that makes me very proud. Now I am getting better and better and now I am doing the triangle method and getting perfect

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On another occasion we worked with Leicester Adult learning to make draft excluders. We had 11+ attendees. One woman said:

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I'm so happy and proud to have made this draft excluder, its creative something I have made by myself, and I'm going to show it to my children

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What's next?

With Belgrave, it's now time to focus on the men of the ward. A good starting place is with established groups and male family members of the women involved in the older people's pilot. It may be that what works for the women will work for the men, but we'll codesign with them as we did with the women and take it from there. We are also hoping to do an Active Listening course and pass on information regarding Wills, Power of Attorney and Pension Credit.

If you would like more information, please contact hello@nasp.info