

## **Isolation and Older people – North Merthyr**

### **Outline of the event**

The event was intended as the start of an 8 week engagement process that is taking place between three of the artists involved in the project (a photographer, a poet and a writer) and the RA and older members of the North Merthyr community. This is the planned first step in a year-long co-production research programme that's looking at ways to address isolation and loneliness amongst older people. The final outcome of the 8 week process will be a pop-up art exhibition, however more emphasis is being placed on the work to engage older members of the community in the project. For this reason the pop-up exhibition is also being viewed as a further opportunity to engage the over 50s in a discussion about loneliness and isolation.

The launch event involved the artists and RA joining the Dowlais Walking Group on one of their planned walks in the areas surrounding Merthyr. This walk went from Butetown, Rhymney, to Brynbach Park. The artists and RA were aiming to engage older people in the project by listening to their stories, sometimes specifically about loneliness and isolation, and offering them the opportunity to have their stories presented in an exhibition space, where this was felt appropriate.

### **Participation**

The event was attended by 9 people from the Dowlais Walking Group, all in the 50+ age category. Also in attendance were the artists and the RA.

### **The outcome of the evaluation undertaken**

The event was evaluated based on the level of continued engagement with the walking group and the number of members of the group that have gone on to work with our artists on a co-produced piece of storytelling. The launch was viewed very much as a pilot event with emphasis being placed on learning outcomes.

In terms of the level of engagement, the interaction with the walking group proved challenging to begin with, with a level of discomfort and mistrust coming from members of the group. This seemed to reduce as the day went on and the artists felt that a lot of meaningful interactions took place. One individual in particular shared at length the story of her own journey through loneliness. The group also engaged collectively in discussions about how loneliness is experienced in the community. The artists and RA reflected after that some of the group discussion may have impacted negatively on individuals' willingness to disclose information, particularly where the general consensus was that loneliness and isolation was experienced more among younger people in the community than those over 50.

Since the day of the walk, only one individual from the group (the gatekeeper) has so far participated in the study and securing further access to the group has been difficult. The gatekeeper's feedback on the day was that there was a sense from the walkers that they didn't understand why we were there, especially as the consensus was that they weren't a lonely group of people. Other dynamics within the group were also disrupted. For instance, the walking group's

photographer was uncomfortable with the fact that an additional photographer was present on the day.

### **Learning/reflections on the activity**

The artists and RA have reflected together on the day and come to certain agreed conclusions, however there is also a tension within this team about the approach we take to knowledge production and distribution. It is felt strongly by at least one of the artists that we should have given the walking group more information about the project and our expectations of the day, in advance of our attendance. However, the efforts we are making to co-produce knowledge especially with older people meant that a lot of this material had yet to be produced and has only since been produced based on our experiences of the process. Even with more information to hand, there was also the unavoidable issue of no-one in the team having had the experience of engaging lonely and isolated individuals and of facilitating discussions about these topics. As there are no easy ways to approach these tasks, it is very much a personal experience and one to be worked out through trial and error. The topic itself – isolation and loneliness – is also one that brings up fear and discomfort even in the most successfully managed situations. We have also identified that members of the walking group may in fact be more lonely and isolated than any of the individuals we have worked with since, given the amount of defensiveness experienced.

As a team we have gone on to form closer connections with other groups and we have also made the decision to work more gradually towards getting to know lonely and isolated individuals by celebrating gatekeepers in the community who are already addressing loneliness and isolation by organising groups such as the Dowlais Walking Group, but doing it with very little resource available to them.

We are also having ongoing discussions about the best way to re-engage with the walking group. One way may be to focus on the ways that we can improve the amount of resource available to them.

### **Details of follow up activity after the Festival**

We are now in week 6 of the engagement process. We have gathered stories from older people via one-to-one discussions with the over 50s in various sections of the community, via the use of postcards that capture one or two lines anonymously and from our own observations (photographs and reflections). These outputs will be used in various ways. They will be displayed in the settings we have already visited, such as the care home and the bingo hall. They will also be used to form part of a public campaign to change perceptions of loneliness (permissions permitting) and finally we also aim to display the work – the photography at least- in a more traditional gallery space in the centre of Merthyr. The pop-up exhibition will provide an information and access point for older people and other members of the community to learn about the project and to get involved, either by sharing their stories or by getting more directly involved in the research.

**Links to digital record:** <http://www.productivemargins.ac.uk/voices-of-the-community-launch-event/>