



“MEETING PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE”

Good Practice Mentors case study with: Historic England

Historic England is delivering **Common Ground**, a two-year pilot programme aiming to reduce loneliness and isolation, particularly among older men.

Across three UK locations, the programme is testing how people view and connect with local heritage, and with each other, in ways that feel relevant, accessible and meaningful.

From the beginning, there was a clear ambition: not just to create a programme, but to reach people who are often missing from these kinds of opportunities.



Thinking about who isn't in the room

A key question for the team was: who aren't we reaching, and why?

Due to common **"it's not for me"** barriers and preconceptions, many men aged 50+ are less likely to engage with formal groups, services or spaces they perceive as not being for them.

As a result, projects of this kind often reach a relatively small group of men who are already connected to existing services. Historic England wanted to take a different approach, finding and engaging the men **"no-one knows"**, who are often at greater risk of loneliness and isolation.

Without a different approach, there was a risk that the programme would attract people already engaged in similar activities:

"Without GPM's input our project would very likely have attracted older people who already attend other groups."

To move beyond this, Historic England brought in GPM early to help shape how engagement would happen from the outset.



Building confidence to do things differently

GPM delivered a series of online sessions to all three pilot locations simultaneously, creating a shared space for learning and peer connection.

Alongside this, tailored street outreach support was provided in each location to help teams put learning into practice.

This included:

- Meeting people in everyday spaces through street outreach
- Starting informal conversations rather than promoting a set offer
- Creating opportunities that feel welcoming and accessible

For many, this meant stepping outside of familiar approaches:

"Across our internal team and the pilot organisations, I really don't think anyone would naturally have taken a street outreach approach or used the techniques GPM shared."

"The training really has led to changes in mindset and ambition."

From learning to doing

The focus wasn't just on ideas, but on putting them into practice.

“The online and in-person training our pilot projects have received has been essential. The majority of staff taking part have learnt brand new skills and practices that they will now apply to their projects”

By testing approaches in real-world settings, teams were able to build confidence, reflect on what worked and adapt their approach.



Across the pilot locations

Alongside the training, GPM worked with teams to put these approaches into practice through street outreach and pop-up activity across all three pilot locations.

This included preparing teams with practical outreach training, developing informal pop-up events as a stepping stone into engagement, and creating outreach-friendly communications to support conversations in the community.

This involved going out into local communities, starting conversations in everyday settings, and inviting people to take part in informal, accessible ways.

Activity took place in a range of community settings including streets, shops and local venues

Across the three pilot locations:

- **86 men were engaged through street outreach**, alongside 12 women
- **90% of those engaged were alone**, highlighting the extent to which outreach reached individuals outside of existing social groups
- **73% of men engaged responded positively** to the pop-up invitation

Age data across the outreach showed:

- **7 men aged under 50**
- **29 men aged 50+**
- **36 men aged 65+**
- **9 men aged 80+**

Across the pilot locations

In Swindon, where the largest volume of outreach took place, 67 men were engaged.

Of these:

- **57% were aged 65+**, including 14% aged 80+
- A further 29% were aged 50–64

This demonstrates the effectiveness of the approach in reaching older men, particularly those most at risk of loneliness and isolation.

In addition to the number of people reached, the quality of engagement was significant:

- In Swindon, around **1 in 10** interactions developed into deeper conversations
- In Bradford, this increased to around **1 in 3** interactions, even in lower footfall areas

These conversations often revealed personal connections to local heritage, interest in attending future sessions, and in some cases experiences of isolation.

While the majority of engagement took place in Swindon and Bradford, smaller-scale activity in Newcastle also provided useful insight into local networks and community spaces.

In practice: Swindon pilot

At The Engine House in Swindon, home of the Historic England Archive, this approach has shaped how the programme is developing on the ground. The team has:

- Built relationships with local partners, including Live Well Swindon
- Taken a proactive street outreach approach
- Hosted an informal drop-in session to introduce people to the space

Rather than expecting people to come to them, the focus has been on going out, starting conversations and building trust over time.

Reaching people with greater need

With these approaches in place, the team is now thinking more ambitiously about who they can engage:

“We’re being much more ambitious with who we can engage and will likely reach those with much greater need.”

This shift is central to the programme’s aim of reducing loneliness and isolation, ensuring that it reaches people who might not otherwise take part.

Conclusion

Through early, practical and ongoing support, GPM has helped Historic England to:

- Build confidence to engage people in more informal, proactive ways
- Develop new skills that can be applied across pilot locations
- Shift thinking about who they are trying to reach
- Move beyond familiar audiences to those most at risk of isolation

At its core, this work is about a simple but important shift, from creating programmes and hoping people will come, to actively find and engage people where they are.

The long-term ambition for Common Ground is to develop sustained, participant-led groups on a national scale that continue beyond the pilot period.

“Your involvement really has positioned Common Ground quite differently and means we will now be engaging those with a much greater need” - Participation Programme Manager, Historic England



If you would like to discuss how GPM could support you to reach, engage and connect with your community then please drop us an email:

✉ GPM@syha.co.uk

For more information and resources please visit our website:

🌐 [GPM Website](#)

Please see our Eventbrite page for our upcoming workshops:

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