

Lower Falinge In Focus

This is a story shaped by more than 350 people working together over six months – local residents and staff from scores of organisations – listening to one another, sharing their experiences and dreaming about the future to bring about transformation in one of England’s most deprived neighbourhoods.

Our challenge

Rochdale borough has many areas which suffer from severe multiple deprivation. The Index of Deprivation 2007 revealed that the relative deprivation had worsened in a number of our communities.

In response, the Local Public Service Board (LPSB) recognised that changes in service delivery were required and commissioned an innovative pilot approach to gain a level of understanding of the major issues facing these areas and their communities, which would then allow credible, joined up and sustainable solutions to be developed.

Lower Falinge – dubbed ‘sicknote capital of Britain’ by the media – was selected for the pilot. The Super Output Area is ranked the worst in England for employment deprivation, third worst for health deprivation, and sixth worst for income deprivation (ID07). The pilot method was launched as ‘In Focus’.

Our neighbourhood

Lower Falinge is an extremely diverse community, housing approximately 1000 people - predominantly in the socially-rented sector. It is home to a sizeable number of asylum seekers and refugees, mixed with some long-term tenants. One in eight people in the neighbourhood are single males and more than 30 nationalities are represented within the community – creating difficulties in engaging with the estate’s population effectively.

Another challenging feature of Lower Falinge is the transient nature of the residents - one in three people have only lived there for 12 months, so any community involvement that has taken place has often been fragmented and not particularly representative.

Our approach

Given the challenges, it was important to have a clear and structured plan in place before continuing with the pilot. A multi-agency core group was therefore set up and met weekly to lead the process. This included representatives from agencies within all key sectors the pilot would be focussing upon – such as employment, skills, health, housing and community work - and a resident to ensure our discussions were directly linked into the community.

Building on good practice from elsewhere, the core group produced a project plan, within which clear phases of work were outlined, along with timescales and measurable goals.

The structure of the plan was based around the 5 steps that together make up the appreciative inquiry technique:

- Define
- Discover
- Dream
- Design
- Deliver

This approach was chosen as it builds on the best of people's experience and allows problems to be overcome by quickly identifying the ideal solutions and working back to make these happen .

The group also agreed on several key values which were to underpin every aspect of the In Focus work:

1. Get the best possible **stakeholder involvement** and gain a **wide perspective** on every issue
2. **Get under the skin** of the issues in as much depth/detail as possible
3. Gather a **sound evidence base** so that solutions could be based on solid, credible foundations
4. Keep up **momentum**, recognising the need to maintain togetherness and the pressing need for change
5. Remain **flexible** and able to amend plans to maximise opportunities as they arise, ensuring better results at the end.

Our plan in action

Defining

Worsening deprivation levels, along with a desire to improve outcomes for people (particularly in line the LPSB's key priorities of health, well-being, jobs and prosperity), made it obvious that Lower Falinge should be the target of the In Focus pilot. The clear outcome we wanted to achieve was service change.

Discovering

We identified three strands of research that would make up our discovery.

Firstly, to **interview residents** face to face using a questionnaire devised between the In Focus Core Group and the Housing and Urban Studies Unit of Salford University. The questionnaire was detailed to get under the skin of the persistent issues affecting the neighbourhood, seeking both quantitative and qualitative information about work, health, skills, cohesion and belonging, the neighbourhood and people's experience of services.

Residents were targeted methodically to ensure a representative sample was captured, given the diverse make up of this community. We used multilingual trained community researchers (two were Lower Falinge residents) to overcome language barriers.

The response – 200 completed interviews from a total of 516 flats – provided a superb evidence base to work from.

Secondly, to **seek the views of front-line staff** from a range of agencies that deliver services to Lower Falinge. We composed a detailed questionnaire that would give us intelligence about services offered, needs assessment, delivery methods, engagement, perceived barriers, data collection and client records.

Again, we had a great response, with 48 completed from 39 different organisations representing all themes and both public and voluntary sectors.

Thirdly, to **bring together a range of data sets** specific to the neighbourhood, to as low a level as possible.

The results from each strand of research were analysed separately, and then triangulated to identify recurring themes, conflicting information and anything else which stood out.

We then presented the results of this research to all our stakeholders. This included a summary report delivered to every household in Lower Falinge, two briefing sessions/drop in sessions for residents, two briefing sessions for staff and colleagues, and a presentation to senior management and the LPSB.

We felt that this feedback was vital. It ensured that people could see that their efforts were valued; it helped all stakeholders to understand the viewpoints of others; and, importantly, validated the shared picture that was emerging. The feedback also nurtured the collaborative relationships that had begun to develop and which are a particularly strong and positive feature of In Focus.

Dreaming

It was obvious that we had generated a huge amount of interest in the work we had started in Lower Falinge.

This marked a shift in people's attitudes in realising that things had to change in Lower Falinge and that they could be part of the answer. We needed to harness the enthusiasm and commitment being shown and ensure our progress continued to be as inclusive as possible.

Following our discovery stage, it was clear that seven key themes were emerging where major change needed to happen:

- work
- skills
- health
- home and environment
- safety
- accessible services
- belonging & community

To ensure that our approach remained integrated across these themes, the core group drafted an overall vision to:

'Make Lower Falinge a healthy, happy, thriving home - a place we can all be proud of.'

The core group agreed that the best way to take the process forward cohesively would be to hold a multi-stakeholder summit. That brought together staff from differing levels of authority within a number of organisations, as well as a diverse group of residents. Together they were able to endorse the overall vision, and look at transforming these themes. This was done by dreaming of the future - using interviews, group discussion and creative feedback through drama, poems, music and pictures - to highlight then share the best of people's experiences. The session looked at what they value and current strengths to collectively form a future statement outlining an aspirational scenario in each of the seven themes.

The imaginative techniques used at the summit genuinely engaged people in the project and enabled them to have equal input into the dreaming - no matter who they were or where their talents lay.

Designing

The next step of our journey was to begin designing what we would need to do to make these future statements a reality.

We held a series of participative workshops, one for each theme. As with the summit, the stakeholder balance remained a key element of the work to ensure a range of perspectives and expertise on each theme.

Using the future statement as the starting point, each workshop identified the key aspects within each theme that would be most important in bringing about a transformation. The workshops then looked at how the transformation could be started and what actions, both in the short and longer term, could contribute.

Delivering

The core group considered the outcomes of the workshops and identified common elements that emerged across the themes. It became clear there were many challenges and opportunities that were not just specific to particular themes, but could equally be applied to each of the themes in some way.

The actions identified from the workshops were pooled into what we termed as 'key areas for transformation'. These allowed us to move away from silo working and to promote a collaborative and integrated approach towards delivering credible and sustainable solutions.

These key areas formed the structure for our action plan, which was unveiled at a launch event at Rochdale Town Hall in December 2008. Residents, frontline staff, delivery managers, senior executives and politicians again came together for the launch – highlighting the real mix of people who'd been involved in the project, and reinforcing our strategic linkages. The launch was covered by regional press and television, resulting in the first positive articles about Lower Falinge for quite some time.

At the launch, priorities were identified and commitments were made by people to take a lead on delivering specific actions.

The key areas for transformation identified were to:

- create a sense of well-being and a confident local identity
- work as a team for Lower Falinge to join up policies, investments and service delivery
- nurture the aspirations and ambitions of Lower Falinge residents
- improve understanding, appreciation and respect (within the community and from, and for, staff and services)
- bring services closer to the community
- create a high quality, sustainable and safe environment on Lower Falinge and in the surrounding area

As well as these key areas for transformation, we identified several overarching strategic level challenges, fundamental to underpinning long term change in Lower Falinge:

- Stabilising the community and reducing turnover
- Reviewing policies for impact on Lower Falinge
- Making interventions sustainable
- Customer-focused services
- Prioritise Lower Falinge – a test bed for ideas/new ways of working
- Physical improvements and estate design

These transformational areas and strategic challenges reflected the stand-out issues identified from our initial discovery stage and so offered reassurance that the In Focus journey had been thorough, in touch, and eventually validated the six months work of more than 350 people.

Several agencies have already made changes as a direct result of the Lower Falinge In Focus process:

Summary

The benefits of In Focus so far have not been restricted to services making change. The community now feel that Lower Falinge actually matters, that services care, that they have been listened to, and that they can confidently play an active part in continuing to shape the future of their own neighbourhood.

Deleted: ¶
 Greater Manchester Police have based a constable in a permanent community office. This constable is developing a 'home watch' scheme for all 26 blocks. Residents already feel safer, reflected in recent crime statistics which show significant reductions in key crimes. .
 ¶
 The Employment Links Partnership and In2Work hold weekly outreach sessions on the estate. Discussions are underway about creating a working neighbourhoods team for the area.¶
 ¶
 Rochdale Connections Trust in partnership with the Kingsway Recruitment Team are delivering 'employability' courses.¶
 ¶
 Heywood, Middleton and Rochdale NHS have prioritised Lower Falinge for a health screening programme.¶
 ¶
 Health and well-being sessions are now held in the community, designed with local residents.¶
 ¶
 The Supporting People programme is looking to allocate additional resources to fund key workers for health and employment support for vulnerable adults.¶
 ¶
 The council's Strategic Housing service has agreed to review the housing allocation policy for Lower Falinge.¶
 ¶
 The council's Youth and Children's services are delivering both youth and play sessions on the estate.¶
 ¶
 The LPSB and senior officials are to tour the neighbourhood and meet residents, which will be followed by a high level summit to consider the strategic challenges.¶