The Belonging in Batley and Spen project was inspired by The Jo Cox Foundation’s Moment to Movement work, looking at how one moment can spark ongoing change.

The project encouraged meaningful connections between local people from different backgrounds who have struggled with a sense of belonging in their area.

The 8 workshops from May to July 2022 were intended to spark change within their lives, and empower them to become ‘activators’ who are more involved within their communities.

As part of this pilot project, the 7 participants developed and delivered a Great Get Together event called The Great Create Together. Taking place over the Great Get Together weekend (24–26 June 2022), the event reached out to and engaged members of the public, creating ‘supporters’ or ‘activators’ and acting as an additional moment to spark longer term change.
A pre-project community workshop led by The Jo Cox Foundation on the theme of ‘belonging’ showed us that communities across Kirklees are disconnected and socially isolated. Community members are experiencing many barriers to feeling like they belong.

A sense of belonging and connection is essential to our daily lives. It’s a powerful emotional need that bridges social gaps and nurturing cohesive and inclusive communities.

Social connection also has many wider benefits:

**STRONG SOCIAL CONNECTION**

- Longer life expectancy
- Improved physical health
- Lower levels of anxiety and depression
- Higher self esteem
- Greater trust and cooperation with others
The participants in the project had diverse faiths, cultural backgrounds and experiences.

In creating a safe space for participants to discuss their personal feelings, experiences, and challenges, the group consistently found their preconceptions of other cultures, faiths, communities, and places changed.

When I got home I was listening to the news about the terror attack in Oslo. If there ever was a balance to that it’s what we were doing that day. Me, a middle-aged gay man and [another participant] who is clearly a proud Muslim sharing our love of ‘80s music and having a laugh. That I think is evidence we have more in common.

Without interactions, it’s easy to fall into narratives.

I learned a great deal about the area. I arrived with some preconceptions that were challenged positively.

The strength, to use, to build upon, is the diversity. The whole experience gained chimes with the ‘more in common’ slogan, and I hope this event, our planning meetings, will signal a continued effort to keep highlighting togetherness. When people stand together much can be achieved.
By the end of the project, 100% of survey respondents felt that they have the opportunity to make meaningful connections with people from different backgrounds. This is an increase of 17% from the start of the project, demonstrating how the workshops and the Great Get Together event they created were a catalyst for this.

Participants mentioned that they found a place they could connect with people experiencing similar struggles with their sense of belonging, which was something they hadn’t done before.

“All this time I thought it was only me who was different. We all came with our own stories. Our own rough edges. Learning about each other is like a tapestry.”

100% of respondents reported that the project had a positive impact on their wellbeing, with all giving it the highest rating.

Participants said that they found a place in which they could safely and openly share their thoughts and feelings. The workshops allowed space for different perspectives and disagreements without devolving into arguments.

Participants reported that the lack of more traditional meeting formats (which had always filled them with dread in other scenarios), hierarchy and ego meant they really enjoyed the meetings.
Daring to use skills I haven’t for an age. Massive positive impact on my wellbeing, thank you.

My belief in human kindness and compassion has grown.

I’m proud of myself for succeeding in a new experience. I’ve never done anything like this.

Human being, rather than human doing.

PARTICIPANTS FEEL THEY CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR COMMUNITY

By the end of the project, 100% of respondents felt that they can influence positive change in their communities (33% of participants gave highest rating). 67% of respondents said involvement in the project improved their skills in event planning.

I feel more confident to help people feel like they belong. Being genuine and friendly with people – making them feel like they matter. I can help people feel at ease.

I loved being part of something positive that can and does change peoples lives. I have learnt a lot from the planning, which I can take forward in to other areas of my work life.
Being a short term pilot project, a common theme throughout the workshops was the legacy of the project and what happens next. Participants were concerned about the longer term impact of the work and considered it essential that the Great Create Together event worked as a catalyst to drive greater social cohesion in the community.

Several group members connected on a personal level during the workshops, exchanging contact details and sharing the same desire to use the experience to do more in their community.

One participant is looking to set up an arts & craft group, and another is using the learning to expand their existing community group.

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It just proved to me that we definitely have more in common. I strongly believe that our communities across Batley and Spen are a great collection of individuals, diverse and rich (not financially obviously). Helping one another and making one another feel included and important seems to be a common thread amongst its people.

This project has also allowed my own personal growth working with the public and other organisations to expand. I have more confidence now than I did in the beginning. I am looking at expanding my workshops.”
The Jo Cox Foundation plan to use the learnings from this pilot project to embed good practices, set up additional projects and encourage other organisations to trial similar approaches.

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