

PROJECT REPORT

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WORK WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS IN EAST LANCASHIRE

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CONCEPT AND AIMS

Community Rail Lancashire (CRL) has been working with a variety of community groups within East Lancashire to help promote safe and confident rail travel. Some members of the community may find access to rail travel difficult due to social, cultural or language issues and this is an area in which CRL has been able to help. Having a diverse workforce can often widen the scope of reach for many community based organisations and this is true of CRL. The aim of contacting some particular community groups was to support their learning and provide access to train travel as well as rail confidence sessions.

WHAT HAPPENED

We were able to contact groups such as Al Hayat Language Centre, Aawaz Access Point and IMO (Inspire Motivate Overcome) as there was a community link through one of the Education Development Officers. Shahiesta Raja is a member of the South Asian community in Accrington and in a previous role was a secondary school teacher in Blackburn. With 20 years of teaching experience within East Lancashire, Shahiesta has been able to forge links with a variety of community groups through links with parents and other organisations. This is helped by the fact that Shahiesta speaks Urdu and Punjabi which helps with communication and accessibility with some community groups. Many of these groups run in house life skills sessions such as basic English lessons as well as lessons on how to access public transport.

Shahiesta contacted some of the local groups that are within walking distance from the station such as Aawaz Access Point to introduce herself and the work of CRL. Aawaz is an organisation that gives a voice to the women within the South Asian community in East Lancashire. (Aawaz is the Urdu word for voice) In order to gain the trust of the organisation, Shahiesta visited the centre and sat in on some of the sessions such as basic cooking and art classes. This was an important part of the linking process as it was helpful to find something in common with the service users.

A visit was arranged to Accrington Station for the centre manager and a support worker and they were shown how CRL may be able to contribute to their public transport life skills sessions. Some of the needs of the service users were discussed and then a session was planned where a group would come to the station and learn how to plan and take a short train trip. The first trip was a huge success with the service users and the management. They felt that the group had learned

much more than they would have in the classroom. The centre manager said she was impressed by the way the safety session was made accessible for the group by using the language that they could understand and how well organised the trip was. This provided a blueprint to show other community groups which made access to other organisations much easier.

Al Hayat Language Centre in Blackburn provides a variety of courses for people who are new to the UK. One of the groups they were working with was a recent arrival of families from Syria. Shahiesta contacted the language centre and explained her work with Aawaz. After a few meetings with management, Shahiesta was invited to do some rail confidence sessions at the centre with the new families. Although Arabic is not a language spoken by her, she was able to communicate through an interpreter and was able to make some cultural references being a Muslim that were much appreciated by the groups. This was another way in which confidence and trust was gained by the organisation.

IMO is a charity based in Blackburn that works across East Lancashire. It provides many services for local people focusing on health and wellbeing, education and employability and community development. IMO contacted CRL after hearing about some of the work done with Aawaz. This was a significant step forward as it showed that community groups were becoming aware of the range of work done by CRL. A course of 10 health and wellbeing sessions tailored to South Asian women was devised which included, reflexology, exercise, nutrition and of course, rail travel.



OUTCOMES

The aim of working with these organisations was to provide access to confident rail travel for people who may have struggled to access it in the past. As a result of the work done by CRL many of the service users have travelled by rail with family members. Aawaz arranged a train trip for a group to Preston that they organised themselves with some help from CRL. The successful series of sessions with IMO has helped to start a small Stations of Welcome group in Accrington, that will help other women in the community to access the railway by introducing them to their local station and walks in the surrounding area. Working with some refugee families has helped some of them to access places of work by train. It has also resulted in a local organisation known as DARE (Darwen Asylum and Refugee Enterprise) contacting CRL to work with some Afghan refugee families.

LESSONS LEARNT

The key to working with many community groups is to gain their trust and find something in common. Many community groups that work predominantly with women are cautious about the organisations they work with. It is not usually easy to walk into their working lives and try to tell them that they need your help. Social and cultural needs and sensitivities must be recognised and taken into account. For example, when working with groups of South Asian women it is often helpful if the point of access is a woman. This can help with family concerns etc. Speaking the language is helpful but not always essential as there are ways around this by using good interpreters. Knowing about the cultural needs of the community that is to be worked with is a good idea. For example some Muslim women may not shake hands with men. This is not always the norm but can be the case. Knowing this can alleviate misunderstandings.

It is extremely rewarding to teach people how to be independent, confident rail users. It can make a huge difference in their lives but it must be done in a way that does not have opposite affect where communities feel it is a threat to their way of living.

CRL has now worked with many organisations and contributed to ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) courses for people who's first language is not English. Once a group trusts the work that is being done, organisations then tend to spread the word.



FURTHER INFORMATION

DARE:

<https://learnenglishbwd.org.uk/providers/darwen-asylum-and-refugee-enterprise-dare/>

Aawaz: <https://www.aawaz.org.uk/>

Al Hayat Language Centre: <http://www.alhayatlanguages.com/>

IMO: <https://www.imocharity.org/home/>