

HIDDEN INSIGHT 19:  
BECOMING AN ACTIVE CITIZEN



**This insight considers how MutualGain enables and empowers local people to be the catalysts of change within their local communities. It outlines the experience of one local community member who, working with local statutory agencies and MutualGain, developed the confidence to build and develop her own local network and become a community changemaker building social capital and making the community a safer place.**

*#Active citizen #Community changemaker #Building social capital #Community engagement  
#Empowering local people #Facilitating change*

This insight considers the experience of one member of the public who MutualGain has worked with who decided she wanted to become an active citizen. May has been a resident of her local community for three years. She is a native of Northern Ireland and lives in the area with her daughter and granddaughter. May was born and raised in Northern Ireland and moved to the area as a result of her daughter witnessing an incident. Things seemed to be going well for May and her family. They lived in the same area for 20 years, but things started to go wrong when she started to suffer racism. You see, May is married to Ismail (a Muslim) and her daughter Allana was also going out with a Muslim boy. The incidents of name calling towards the family increased, including to her young granddaughter, Chadlea. As is often the case the family started to change their behaviour in an effort to stop the racism: her daughter stopped wearing her hijab for fear of suffering violence, but it didn't stop and the last straw came when Ismail was assaulted and someone fired a bullet through May's front window.

May recalls that the response from statutory agencies was lamentable. The family had no trust in the police or local authorities to protect them so on the advice of a friend they moved in 2010. Moving to a new area, especially a multi-cultural area was a bitter sweet experience. May felt like a foreigner – in a new place with new people and with many people who didn't speak English. The gregarious woman that she is, May enjoyed the multi-cultural aspects of the area and quickly became involved with a housing association working as a treasurer and secretary.

All seemed to be working out well until there was an increase in anti-social behaviour associated with drug taking. Complaints were made via the tenants association, but action seemed to be limited. It was at this point that May decided 'enough is enough.' She did not want to move her family again and liked the people who she had befriended. But it was another criminal act that started May's relationship with her local statutory agencies. While conducting a walkabout of the area with the housing association someone attempted to break into her house. The matter was reported to the police and her local officer, Colin, turned up on her front door.

Having heard about a scheme called Home Watch May contacted Colin to ask for details. By this stage Colin had become involved in the MutualGain training programme and knew that a community engagement event was being planned for the local area. Seeing May as a potential community activist Colin suggested that she may wish to come along to one of the planning meetings. This opened a very large door for May.

She met the people from a number of statutory agencies and other residents with a similar passion for active citizenship; the meeting opened up a whole new network of people who would be able to support her. May's first thoughts were that she was with a group of people who wanted to make a difference to the local area, wanted to make the area safer and that is exactly what she was trying to do. Colin and the neighbourhood team were acting as catalysts for social change.

One of the people who May met was Pat. Pat has been a Home Watch leader for some time and is well known to the neighbourhood policing team. Just having someone to talk to regarding Home Watch was a great help to May. Whatever they spoke about seems to have worked as to date May has recruited over 100 people in the surrounding area to become a part of her Home Watch group.

But May's story does not stop there. As well as helping Colin recruit people for the Appreciative Inquiry event, May has also become a Community Guardian for the local council and a First Responder for the local ambulance service. She acknowledges that before she became involved with MutualGain and her local policing team (NPT) she would not have known how to start a Home Watch scheme or become a Community Guardian or First Responder. MutualGain has opened up many possibilities for May and her network of support is increasing almost daily.

In essence, May has turned from a person under pressure from being a victim of hate crime and suffering a lack of action to deal with drugs and crime issues, to a full blown community changemaker working with the police and partner agencies to make her local community a safer place. And as for the MutualGain event, May says that the impact has been fantastic. In her own words *"Everyone is talking about it. People stop me in the street and ask me how they can get involved."*

There are assets in every community – people, places and resources. Opening one door and providing proper support can give the police access to many more resources. Imagine if one hundred plus residents became Mays? Community engagement has the potential to change; local communities just need the right investment.

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