The "Littlehamsters"

How residents can impact community health for the better

A Case Study for the use of Quiet Voice Methodology™ in Participative Research

Introducing the Littlehamsters …

In 2023 the Woodbury, Exmouth and Budleigh Community Health and Wellbeing Board (WEB) commissioned Interwoven Productions CIC to use Quiet Voice Methodology™ (QVM) to form an issue-based "Pod" [working group] of Littleham estate residents.

These individuals were to be specifically drawn from those who would not normally participate and who are resident on the Littleham local authority-built estate itself. Littleham falls within an area of extreme health inequalities and the JSNA Multiple Indices of Deprivation highlights higher than Devon averages for unemployment, child poverty, fuel poverty and preventable deaths.

It was intended that this Pod should become an animated group of individuals who, as a result of the project, would feel empowered to positively represent for their own community into the future.

Using QVM a community Pod was successfully formed by March 2024 and they quickly identified that anti-social behaviour presented by young people, manifesting in car vandalism and verbal and physical abuse, was causing high levels of stress and inhibiting physical activity.

The Pod created a new form of soft, neighbour-to-neighbour consultation where they were able to gather deep qualitative data from other estate residents which has since been used to inform funding applications for other projects. They hosted two inter-agency meetings with youth provision providers and local authorities that has resulted in action that has demonstrably reduced incidents of anti-social behaviour.

The project demonstrates the efficacy of Quiet Voice Methodology in the community health paradigm.

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A strong, self-identifying group of residents, calling themselves "The Littlehamsters", have come together to continue to take action for the benefit of their neighbours. They were able to share their lived-experience and close relationship with their place to **identify a significant problem with anti-social behaviour and vandalism**, particularly among young people. This was causing community stress and inhibiting physical activity in shared spaces **but was NOT apparent in the health statistics.**

Littlehamsters' logo, designed by the group

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They conceived, devised, organised and hosted a unique "Easy Speak" event in order to gather further qualitative data from their neighbours. They knew they needed to create a safe, relaxed and family-friendly environment in order to encourage people to have extended conversations with them. The rich qualitative data collected has been used in further funding applications to work with the young people of Littleham. **They have, in effect, created an entirely new type of resident-led "soft" consultation which has proved to be incredibly effective.**

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They also convened and hosted two inter-agency meetings to discuss the escalating ASB problems. At the second meeting the Anti-Social Behaviour & Community Safety Partnership Officer for East Devon District Council, was able to gather detailed information from residents. By November 2024 the Pod received word that a Community Protection Warning under Section 43 of the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 had been issued. **At the time of writing, residents have observed that this has significantly calmed anti-social activity.**

"I wasn't sure what I was walking into but last week's meeting was very positive. It tends usually to be a bit more combative". "Fantastic to see so many residents come together in a positive way"

Anti-Social Behaviour & Community Safety Partnership Officer, EDDC

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The data the collected has been used in other funding applications to support youth work by other agencies such as a regular Football 4 All initiative run by a local church worker that continues to this day.

"I appreciate the opportunity to discuss the re-framing of the Littleham Crescent play park and look forward to setting up the Football4all once the funding has been secured. Together I feel that as a group we can achieve great things, with all the different skills and knowledge within our local community."

Youth and family worker,
Exmouth Coastal Churches

How it was done

There's no doubt that this work falls within the newly emerging Community Health paradigm. This meant some of the differences had to be negotiated at the outset. Interwoven would like to record their thanks to WEB for their vision and forbearance.

What was done differently

Evaluation

We had to make it clear that we weren't going to evaluate based on number of events or activities "provided". Instead we were keen to find a measure of the degree of animation. In other words, how inspired and enabled the Littlehamsters became to take positive action for the benefit of their neighbours and to continue to do so.

This shift from "expert provision" to "community animation" is a fundamental component of Quiet Voice Methodology™ (QVM) and you can see more detail in the full Evaluation Report (details below).

Working with Pods

Another fundamental part of QVM is the formation of working groups of residents – i.e. "Pods". There's a very specific methodology for this that allows us to reach those who wouldn't normally participate. Traditionally known as hard-to-reach, we prefer the term Quiet Voice. We were provided by WEB with contacts in many stakeholder groups in Littleham and this has proved to be useful but the real assets were the Quiet Voice residents themselves. You can learn more about Quiet Voice Methodology™ and how to apply it in your community work here – www.quietvoicemethodology.uk

Being there

There had to be the kind of sensitivity to place that can only be gained from being there, i.e. doing the legwork in that place for significant periods. Time to do this legwork had to be written into the proposal. Through this, it quickly became clear that the social and environmental context of the local authority-built estate is very different from some of the more affluent parts of Littleham Village, even though geographically, they are cheek by jowl. The Littlehamsters are all closely connected to the estate itself. Interestingly though, they actively changed their name from the Littleham Estate Pod to The Littlehamsters because they felt it was more positive and inclusive. An act of animation and ownership that we welcomed.

Working with trust and respect

We did not presume to know what was important to residents in terms of health and wellbeing and spent a great deal of time establishing that they had the power to identify the priorities and that they would be able to take action. This shift in the power balance is all about respect. It is possible to provide facilitation and governance without dictating the purpose or means of action. Successfully achieving this meant that the Littlehamsters came to trust Interwoven and to believe that their actions mattered. This has been highly motivating.

Working without end dates

We know from experience that project end dates have very little meaning for residents and that 12 months is a frighteningly short time in which to build the relationships and trust necessary for positive community action. More than this, repeated short-term initiatives can be viewed by residents with weariness and suspicion. So, we created a Pod Licence at the outset that would allow the Littlehamsters to continue to engage Interwoven to provide governance and mentorship, beyond the WEB commissioned activity.

This meant that we never had to talk in terms of pulling out or shutting activity down, simply shifting instead to a maintenance level of support which includes advice on how to make application for their own funds.

"the great thing about this group is that we feel that we've not just got the connection to where we live, but that we can do something positive, you know, by getting the right people together and getting them talking, whereas if we hadn't helped to make that connection, maybe that wouldn't have happened."

Littlehamster feedback

Challenges

We found it difficult, at nearly every turn, to work effectively alongside the local authority. The responses often felt drenched in red-tape and we, at Interwoven, had to work hard to ensure that the emerging Littlehamster group weren't discouraged.

We'd recommend extended conversations with the local authority, across all departments, at the point of commission to manage this.

How do you know when research is genuinely participative? – the QVM #DoWith confidence score

	The "Littlehamsters" QVM Case Study
CO-DESIGN – **Were residents asked what was important to them with open questions?** **Were they allowed to present what is great about their place and what they feel is important enough to change without pressure to fit an existing brief?**	**YES –** although the commissioners provided a "health and wellbeing" framework we opened all conversations asking "What's great enough about the Littleham estate to celebrate – What's important enough to change?" We made it specific to Littleham estate residents. ✓
CO-DESIGN – **What measures were taken to ensure that "Quiet" or resistant voices were reached?** **Was the approach Relevant, Celebratory** (**on a sliding scale to Important), Convenient and Iterative (RICI).** **One-off "consultations" are not co-design.**	**YES –** several Quiet Voice Methodology approaches, employing RICI, were made including door-knocking, open-space behavioural mapping, repeated meet-ups at different times and venues. ✓
CO-DESIGN – **What efforts were made to reach into the areas of housing/social disadvantage?** **Did the invitation reach** effectively **into the LSOA?**	**YES –** all activity was concentrated on the local authority-built estate itself brokering specific place-based assets, characteristics and challenges. ✓
CO-PRODUCTION – **Did residents design, host and implement their own events and happenings?**	**YES –** the public meetings and the Our Youth Event were themed, designed, hosted, organised and delivered by residents. ✓
CO-EVALUATION - **Were they given the opportunity to** deeply reflect **and evaluate how things have gone?** **Were they given support to collect** reliable, qualitative data from their neighbours?	**YES** – Littlehamsters gathered rich qualitative data from their neighbours to report back on Youth issues. They also actively reflected and recorded their evaluation of the funded project itself. ✓
#DOWITH CONFIDENCE SCORE	**5/5 = CONTINUED ANIMATION**

Conclusion

Quiet Voice Methodology and it's potential to create effective community animation has been thoroughly demonstrated and validated.

It's been a pleasure to work with the Littlehamster group and to watch their personal and collective development. To have achieved impact on the remedial works at the Crescent Play Park and to have demonstrably reduced anti-social behaviour are extraordinary outcomes in such a short space of time.

Their extended plans and the action they've been able to prompt in others, are true signs of **deep, informed and connected community work**.

References

A community powered NHS
New Local - https://www.newlocal.org.uk/publications/community-powered-nhs/

Quiet Voice Methodology™ in the Community Health Paradigm - A project commissioned by Woodbury, Exmouth and Budleigh (WEB) Community Health and Wellbeing Board Littleham, Exmouth 2023-2024 – Evaluation Report

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