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Specialists in **Creative Placemaking** and Asset-Based Community Development through Pod-Working

*Connecting People-to-People and People-to-Place*

# The "Littlehamsters"

## How residents can impact community health for the better

## A Case Study for the use of Quiet Voice Methodology™ in the Community Health Paradigm

# The project starts …

In 2023 the WEB Community Health and Wellbeing Board (WEB) commissioned Interwoven to run a community health project in Littleham, Exmouth, Devon. Littleham consistently returns as an area social deprivation and health inequality and, as funds were limited, it was felt that it was worth taking a risk on an innovative approach that centred **resident-led action** rather than service provision.

The project was to run for 12 months and to have three stages:-

- The formation of a residents' "Pod", i.e. working group.
- Resident identification of issues/themes that negatively impact community health.
- Reflection on the community and individual journey.

# SIX significant project successes

## 1

**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.**

The Littlehamster name and logo were designed by the group themselves.

## 2

**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.**

## 3

Being on the ground, they were also able to report that the local play park was badly waterlogged over the winter. This was inhibiting use of the facility which, in turn, encouraged anti-social behaviour there. **The Pod successfully lobbied their councillors and local authority to undertake remedial drainage works.**

## 4

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

## 5

More than this the Pod have been actively supporting new initiatives, led by local church workers and councillors**, to create positive activity for Littleham's young people and longer-term solutions.**

*"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

## 6

They have also negotiated for themselves a regular monthly spot at the Littleham Leisure Centre, as part of the community café run by The Wave **where they can continue to provide resident-led "soft" consultation, acting as a conduit between their neighbours and the provider relationships that they have been able to broker during the project.**

## All of this was achieved within 14 months!

# 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.

*"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

**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.

# 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.

# 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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