



People's Health Trust - Active Communities Case Study



## Women Sharing Cornwall

### Introduction

People's Health Trust believes in a world without health inequalities. The Trust funds small and local projects in neighbourhoods that are most affected by health inequalities with funding generated through The Health Lottery. Active Communities is one of its funding programmes and grants aim to support people to create or shape local projects that will help their community or neighbourhood to become even better, and require local people to design and run these projects. Typically lasting up to two years, the grants are between £5,000 and £50,000 for each project. The programme's main intended outcomes are:

- **Collective control:** Ideas designed and led by local people. Regular participation of residents, who are empowered to lead and take ownership of the project design, delivery and development.
- **Social links and ties:** Stronger connections between people. Decreased social isolation and loneliness, and improved connection, friendships and collective support networks among participants.

As part of the second year of the Active Communities evaluation, this case study explores how local women have been involved with and helped to shape the delivery of Women Sharing Cornwall, following a successful funding application to People's Health Trust. Drawing on evidence from a telephone case study in May 2017, followed by a project visit in October 2017, the case study explores how the women came together, developed and participated in the group, and what they have learnt and achieved.

### Key facts

#### HealthPerfect

Cornwall Health  
Community Interest  
Company (CIC) area

**£10,000** of People's  
Health Trust funding

#### Main activities

A self-help group for women recovering from mental health issues who may be experiencing isolation, disability or accessibility issues

#### Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Collective action and control
- Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets



## About the project

Women Sharing Cornwall is a self-help group for women experiencing poor mental health in St Austell. There is a need for more services to support mental health in the St Austell area. Over the past decade, due to local budget cuts, the local mental health provision has dwindled, and many of the statutory services have ended or have waiting lists. The group project began as an NHS group, but statutory funding ceased in 2007 and, since then, it has been supported through various local funding pots. People's Health Trust funded Women Sharing Cornwall in October 2016 for two years to October 2018 through its Active Communities programme.

The group meets weekly, offering support for up to 12 women from the local community whom either are involved with – or are no longer engaging with – mental health services. The purpose of the group is to provide participants with the opportunity to come together and take part in different activities to help them improve their mental health and find a source of support in a safe space where they do not feel judged or labelled. There is a paid facilitator, whose role is to support the group in developing activities, and managing the diverse needs of individuals and the group to maintain the safe and caring environment.

## How are local people shaping and leading the project?

The participants are involved in all aspects of running the group; for example, one person deals with the finances, and another does the paperwork. Others were involved in the decision-making process when developing the project. They helped to arrange the advertisement for the facilitator post and they discussed, as a group, which candidates to shortlist. Two group members were then responsible for interviewing the applicants and providing feedback to the wider group so that they could discuss which candidate to choose. This process was important because it gave participants the opportunity to communicate their views and share their preferences, to ensure they appointed the most suitable facilitator for the group.

**“I think the most crucial thing [with the process] was that everybody was encouraged to own their thoughts and opinions.”** (Participant)

Participants have continued to design and develop the activities for Women Sharing Cornwall, and the facilitator supports the group's discussion and negotiation process to ensure the activities are appropriate for the diverse needs of the group. This is particularly important given that many of the group members also experience poor physical health alongside their mental health problems, so there are many things to consider to ensure an inclusive and supportive environment.

**“I facilitate the process, to enable group members to explore and say what they want to do, and then I help them to make that happen.”** (Project staff)

The group has built processes into their sessions to ensure that participants have the opportunity to suggest ideas for activities. At the beginning of each session, they talk about what they are doing, if they have any news or relevant information that they have seen, or if they have any thoughts or suggestions for activities. Sometimes, 'guest' facilitators are brought in to run a particular activity, ensuring expertise in activities such as IT skills or arts and crafts, so the group will decide collectively who they will contact for these activities.

**“I facilitate the process, to enable group members to explore and say what they want to do, and then I help them to make that happen.”**

(Project staff)



The informal nature of deciding on activities encourages the participants to discuss their views and opinions openly.

“All of the decisions are collectively made; somebody might put an idea up and then everyone else puts their thoughts that are either for or against, and then we all come to a collective decision.” (Participant)

Given the need to balance individuals' different needs and to ensure a comfortable environment for the women, the group had a series of discussions to develop a set of group guidelines which they use and abide by. The group guidelines emphasise the importance of total confidentiality, respect and tolerance for all participants, and trying not to use any words or phrases that could be considered offensive to other members of the group. Although these guidelines cover all activities held through Women Sharing Cornwall, they are useful for the design and development of activities because they promote an inclusive dynamic. However, reaching an agreement on different aspects of the project can be quite time-consuming because of the need to manage risks.

“It can take quite a lot of time [to decide on activities] sometimes, because members have such varied and sometimes conflicting needs, aspirations and abilities.” (Project staff)

The interviews highlighted that their approach generally worked well; one participant contrasted the design of the group with a statutory mental health group that she attended, and said that she really valued how Women Sharing Cornwall gave participants the platform to decide the activities that they wanted to do.

“Sometimes [with the statutory group] it could be a bit too structured; you don't really have anything to do with the decision-making.” (Participant)

## What has the project achieved?

### Improved social links and ties

By bringing people together to help each other with their mental health, the group has enabled the participants **to develop better support networks** in a number of ways. The group recently decided to build a 'Buddy' programme into the design of the project, which involves an existing member of the group becoming 'buddies' with a new member. The two participants will meet for a coffee prior to the first group meeting, to discuss the group and to see if there is anything the person might need help or support with. As one participant highlighted, the 'Buddy' programme helps to settle new participants in and make them feel both comfortable and included:

“[The buddy role involves] support[ing] them in their first group by being there to offer reassurance or whatever is needed.” (Participant)

More generally, the women support each other within the group setting. The group's facilitator highlighted that if one of the participants is experiencing a problem, often the rest of the group are able to provide some insights or solutions from their own experiences.

“They are coming together, and supporting each other. They learn from each other quite a lot.” (Project lead/facilitator)



“All of the decisions are collectively made; somebody might put an idea up and then everyone else puts their thoughts that are either for or against, and then we all come to a collective decision.”

(Participant)

“We just support each other, really.” (Participant)

“Our group has a real sense of empathy and there are many times we have all shared and solved our problems within the group.” (Participant)

Many women have also met outside of the group setting to take part in other activities, such as swimming trips, going to the cinema or for a meal, as well as visiting some local gardens, indicating that the project has helped some women to **develop new friendships and increase their social connectedness**. For example, one participant felt that Women Sharing Cornwall has been “essential” in making her feel **less socially isolated**. She noted that attending helped her to feel more comfortable in social situations, by helping to improve her interaction, talking and listening skills.

**Stronger social connections between different groups** have also developed, as the project has also recruited younger people to join. This has helped to increase the diversity of the group and bring some new perspectives. One participant felt that including younger women in the group gives it a ‘real spark’, as it brings in fresh ideas for activities they could take part in.

### Collective action and control

Throughout the course of the project, participants have continued to put forward their views and discuss options for what activities the group should do. Although collective decision-making was been a feature of the group that pre-dated the Active Communities grant, the terms of the funding programme have encouraged participants to continue to **feel empowered to take lead of the project**.

“I think that it’s very important for us to make the decisions, because it empowers us. As a group, we all feel involved and empowered, because we are doing it ourselves.” (Participant)

The facilitator highlighted that the grant from People’s Health Trust has been important in enabling the participants to have a voice in deciding the ongoing delivery of the project:

“It’s 100% important [for the women to make the decisions]. It’s completely essential. They would not have gone for the grant if it hadn’t been an option [to have had the power for group decision-making].” (Project staff)

Members have reported feeling more empowered since the group moved into their new premises in the autumn. When the initial set of case study consultations were conducted, the group was based in an NHS community building and, under the terms of agreement, they could only have one designated key holder (the facilitator) who had to be present for every meeting. The new premises does not have this requirement allowing the group to hold multiple sets of keys between them. The facilitator highlighted that this led to participants taking **ownership of the project**:

“[In the old premises] none of the group were allowed to be there without me being there... [but being in the new premises, with more than one key] gives them more control.” (Project staff)

“They are coming together, and supporting each other. They learn from each other quite a lot.”

(Project lead/facilitator)



Although the move itself was quite challenging and a big change for some participants, there is a sense of **increased collective aspiration** amongst the group, for example to branch out into new types of activities. The group has been inspired by the potential the new space offers for a wider range of activities. Some they have already discussed include cooking, baking or yoga, as well as potentially hosting some fundraising events.

Although the group has existed for more than ten years, it has evolved into something that, according to interviewees, is unlike other mental health provisions in the area. Not only does the project accept people through GP referrals, but it also allows people to self-refer. This means that people who may have disengaged from statutory services, or who do not meet the thresholds for statutory support, can still access some levels of mental health support. Although this is not a direct outcome of the Active Communities-funded project (as the referral routes had been in place prior to the grant), the funding from People's Health Trust has helped to sustain a **project that reflects local needs** and provides **better local activities and services**.

“There are no groups in the village that offer support for people experiencing mental health or wellbeing issues. I rely on the resources of [Women Sharing Cornwall] to talk, to share, to listen, to support others and to problem solve.” (Participant)

#### Improved confidence, knowledge and skills

The sessions are structured so that participants are free to speak, as long as they abide by the group's guidelines, which has been very important in terms of providing a safe and comfortable environment for people to put their views across share their views. There is evidence of participants developing increased self-confidence to express themselves as a result of this format. One participant said that the group project enabled her to speak confidently in a group setting, helping her feel more relaxed and supported. This was a in contrast to other groups that she had attended in the past:

“It [the project] gives you the confidence to put your point of view across, and makes you feel part of the decision-making. If you go to the NHS-funded projects, then you find that the decisions are made for you.” (Participant)

Taking part in the diverse selection of activities Women Sharing Cornwall offers has enabled people to increase their **project-based knowledge and skills** in a range of areas. Not only has this helped them in practical terms (for example, one person has taken the skills gained from a session on business start-ups and applied them to her own business), but it has also helped to increase participants' self-esteem as they discover new talents. As the facilitator highlighted:

“When they take on a new skill or experience, it builds [their] self-esteem. This has been quite valuable.” (Project staff)

The group's decision-making process has helped to improve participants' communications skills, both in terms of negotiation and balancing different people's views and requests. This has not only had an impact on participants' personal development and skills, but it has also helped maintain a safe environment at group level.



“It [the project] gives you the confidence to put your point of view across, and makes you feel part of the decision-making. If you go to the NHS-funded projects, then you find that the decisions are made for you.”

(Participant)

“That they make [the] decisions is really, really important. I think it builds self-esteem and self-respect, and it builds up new understandings of the processes involved in decision-making. And that’s both personal and organisational [impact].” (Project staff)

**Taking control of the project** has been important for some of the women, enabling them to develop **leadership skills and coping strategies**. One participant highlighted that making decisions and taking responsibility at the project had helped her with her communication skills (both listening to others and sharing her thoughts), provided her with organisational skills and improved her perseverance when managing different challenges in other aspects of her daily life.

The participants also provide re-assurance for one another and facilitate **increased access to assets** and other resources. For example, one participant highlighted that the group brought in a specialist facilitator for a session who taught them about business start-ups.

“Something like that [the business start-up session], I wouldn’t have done it on my own, but because it was just our group, it was much easier.” (Participant)

Additionally, the trips that the women are organising outside of the group session (such as the meals, or the swimming trips) have enabled more of the women to access local community assets that they might not have used without the group. The facilitator highlighted that some of the trips would have been a “big deal” to some of the women because they are things that they would not have normally felt comfortable doing. For example, one participant highlighted that although going out and trying out new activities pushed her out of her “comfort zone”, it was **beneficial to her mental health** because it made her focus on other things, and she felt accomplished once she had completed them. Utilising community assets has also helped participants’ friendships to strengthen and endure outside of the group setting.

### Longer-term outcomes

There was not much evidence of longer-term outcomes at this stage but, for some, the project has increased their confidence to participate in new activities that might previously have sat outside of their comfort zone. For some, this has led to a sense of accomplishment and pride. For others, it has enabled them to access wider community resources that they would have otherwise not accessed, indirectly providing **increased support for educational achievements**. For example, one participant highlighted the confidence she has gained through the group, which convinced her to return to college:

“I feel my experiences in the women's group have given me the tools to go to college and return to something which I really enjoy.” (Participant)

The group have also held early discussions about how to get involved in wider community activities, with plans to link up with other organisations in the local area. Examples of potential avenues for the group to explore include helping support a new women’s health group that is run at some local community gardens, or supporting a food bank project by providing fresh produce from their allotment. Not only is this an opportunity to build up participants’ skills and knowledge in other areas, it is also an opportunity to engage with other local community projects and meet other individuals.

“I feel my experiences in the women's group have given me the tools to go to college and return to something which I really enjoy.”

(Participant)



While the plans are still in their formative stages, there is clear intent shown by the group **to increasingly participate in community activity**.

### What has worked well?

- **Participants being the decision-makers.** A key success of Women Sharing Cornwall has been the empowerment of participants to decide upon the content of the project's activities, in a safe and supportive environment that allows everyone's views to be heard. Given the need for clinical supervision to appropriately manage the needs of the group, the facilitator is key in ensuring that decisions are made in the best interests of all participants. However, the participants still feel empowered and confident to speak up about the project and to lead its activities.
- **Establishing guidelines for the group.** Given the differing needs of the members of the group, setting guidelines has been crucial in ensuring participants' needs are met and all risks are appropriately managed. The project lead highlighted the importance of regularly revisiting and reviewing the guidelines with participants to ensure that everyone understands and agrees with them.



### What are the lessons?

- **Budgeting for clinical supervision.** Although the project was initially going to have a clinical supervisor, personnel changes meant that this did not happen and the role was excluded from the budget. However, in hindsight, the facilitator felt that supervision should have been included because the group is quite high-risk to manage, in relation to ensuring all participants' welfare. The facilitator for Women Sharing Cornwall is a trained clinical supervisor, but through the project she has to provide for her own supervision time and the group preparation time (including the associated costs), which is not sustainable. It should be necessary for all similar projects to have a clinical supervisor in place and budget for facilitator preparation time.
- **Implementing a project management system.** The facilitator highlighted that it would have been helpful for People's Health Trust to provide support with setting up a project management system. Although the application process did necessitate that some systems were set up, it would have been helpful to have a basic template from the Trust.



### The future

It is likely that the group will continue beyond the Active Communities funding period given the demand and need for it in the area, and discussions are beginning in the group to explore the ways in which they can continue to sustain the activities. As highlighted, the move to the new premises in autumn 2017 has led to an increased sense of collective aspiration within the group, and they have begun discussing how they might organise fundraising activities. The group have identified that it is important to build up their reserves, in the event of not being able to secure

grant funding, so that they can continue the activities. The facilitator highlighted that fundraising will not only benefit the group financially, but it will also re-energise the group, as it requires collaboration and co-operation from the members.

“One of the things they are planning to do is to fundraise, so that they can build sufficient reserves... They have a target figure of £500 to get through fundraising, which will be a good thing, because it involves some group energy and some group collaboration, and working with the community.”  
(Project staff)

As highlighted, the group is starting to discuss their options around linking with other organisations or projects in the area, as a way of branching out to, and getting involved with, the wider community, for example by engaging with the local women’s health group or the food bank project. By connecting with other local community groups in this way, Women Sharing Cornwall could potentially unlock some new options for accessing funding.

In addition to the financial sustainability of the project, the friendships and support networks developed throughout the project are likely to continue. Although as a mental health support group, Women Sharing Cornwall needs funding to support the clinical supervision of the group, there is evidence that some of the participants do continue to meet outside of the group. For example, one participant, who had recently left the group because her mental health had improved, commented on how she continues to meet some of the other participants. She felt that their friendships have lasted because they are empathetic, and they can talk about things openly and can offer fresh perspectives. This suggests that Women Sharing Cornwall has provided some participants with the skills, knowledge and practices to continue to support each other to maintain their wellbeing, once their mental health has improved through the clinically supervised support.

