



People's Health Trust - Active Communities Case Study



African Community Centre - Pamoja

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 participants, 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 2016-18 Active Communities programme evaluation, Ecorys visited the Pamoja project to find how it was being established and run, and what difference it had made to the lives of local residents. A second visit, 15 months later, explored changes over time, drawing upon interviews with the people involved and monitoring reports to the funder, People's Health Trust.

Key facts

HealthExpect

Swansea Health Community Interest Company (CIC) area

£39,331 of People's Health Trust funding

Main activities

Weekly counselling and discussion groups for men and women from Black and Minority Ethnic communities and refugee and asylum seekers who have experienced trauma

Key outcomes

- Improved social links and ties
- Collective action and control
- Increased individual and collective confidence and skills



About the project

Since 2004, the African Community Centre has been supporting African and African Caribbean people who live in Swansea and across Wales. Originally, the Centre was set up after a survey of Africans living across Wales, revealed that Africans living in the area would welcome a centre where they could meet socially and promote African culture in the community. The Centre achieved charity status in 2008 and now welcomes people from all diverse cultures. The Centre's Pamoja project supports refugees and asylum seekers from Africa and Asia, including Syria, and Albania. It offers weekly counselling and discussion groups for refugees and asylum seekers from Black and Minority Ethnic communities who have experienced trauma. The aim is to help increase people's confidence and well-being, and reduce social isolation by providing opportunities for participants to mix with people who have had similar experiences, build friendships and support each other.

Almost 70 people participate, with around a quarter attending the women and men's groups regularly and others, less frequently. The project delivers separate groups for women and men. This is important because some of the participants have experienced domestic abuse in their home country, and do not feel comfortable in a mixed group. Separate groups are also preferred for religious and cultural reasons. Each week the Centre receives more enquiries from people interested in joining. The project initially recruited participants using their mailing list, leaflets, social media and by word of mouth. Staff also held outreach and drop-in sessions to reach out to participants.

How are local people shaping and leading the project?

The project provides a range of ways for participants to contribute to its design and delivery. The participants have taken an active role in designing the sessions and they lead some of the discussion group sessions. One volunteer helps to facilitate the group therapy sessions. The inclusive approach taken by the project was evident from the first visit. Prior to the setting up of the discussions groups, the Centre consulted the participants about how they would like the group to run. The participants therefore collectively established the ground rules, and the common principles around confidentiality and trust for the counselling groups. The African Community Centre also consulted them about the best time to run these group sessions, and whether they wanted separate women and men's groups. This inclusive approach is ongoing has been one of the most successful aspects of the project.

"First we talked about how we are going to make this work. Everyone contributed in a discussion about how we are going to make this work for everybody. It's very important to make those ground rules." (Project staff)

"At the beginning it is hard, so [making the rules] helps us feel more comfortable. It is important that it is confidential so you feel you can share with the group." (Participant)

"We established ground rules. There is still some insecurity. But it is through attending the group that all of us are building our confidence because we set the rules." (Volunteer)

"First we talked about how we are going to make this work. Everyone contributed in a discussion about how we are going to make this work for everybody. It's very important to make those ground rules."

(Project staff)



What has the project achieved?

Improved social links and ties

The project has helped participants to **improve their social links and ties**, and in turn **reduced their social isolation**. Participants frequently spoke of joining the project because they **wanted to make new friends**. Others also chose to participate because they were with “people in the same situation”. The project provides a space for them to share experiences, **and meet new friends who have had similar experiences**; they also feel “encouraged” when they hear about other people’s positive stories about their asylum status.



“To know I am not the only person experiencing these feelings, different problems, but here you find people have the same feelings about life.”
(Participant)

“You feel some encouragement, to know you are not the only one.”
(Participant)

“Already you can see people buddying up...supporting one another, we are already finding that. People are developing friendships and encouraging the other person to join in conversations in the group...that is our top priority...in not feeling alone in their situation and having someone to talk with and befriend, so that kills off isolation that people tend to suffer.”
(Project staff)

“They’ve chosen that time for themselves. At the launch they had a chat about when they thought would be the best time, such as for Mums with child caring responsibilities.” (Project staff)

The case study visit highlighted the extent to which the project has **fostered a sense of trust and belonging** amongst the participants. Participants at the group sessions are encouraged to lead conversations and discuss challenges that they are currently facing. This approach has led to **stronger connections within the men and women’s groups**, which has proved empowering.

“Someone will pick an issue and start the conversation...one has started to facilitate...so they share their experiences and support one another to overcome any particular challenge. They share ideas about how they have overcome issues in their own situation, about a similar challenge.” (Project staff)

This sense of togetherness was evident from the focus group interviews at the case study visit. They all felt that the discussion groups had encouraged them to speak openly and to express their feelings.

“Some of us are lonely, no friends, no neighbours to talk to... This is one of the few places that we can exchange and meet people.” (Participant)

“You leave with some satisfaction”. (Participant)



“Some of us are lonely, no friends, no neighbours to talk to... This is one of the few places that we can exchange and meet people.”

(Participant)

Collective action and control

The follow up visit highlighted the extent to which the project had **empowered individuals to lead and take ownership of project activities**.

Increasingly, participants at the group sessions were leading the conversations at the group discussions; the counsellor's main role was to facilitate these discussions. Participants decided which topics they wished to discuss at these group sessions. In addition, the women also suggested to the project lead other activities they felt would develop their skills, taking an active role in their personal development. Participants' responsibilities in supporting the project to deliver its women's counselling sessions provides evidence of **increased participation in voluntary and community activity**.

At a group level, the project has also developed a **sense of community ownership/leadership**. Participants reported that their regular attendance and efforts to increase awareness of the project in their communities had helped to sustain activities like the counselling sessions because they were able to ensure that the **project meets local needs** as far as possible. Although, the project was not able to support all requests due to limited resources, the fact that individuals had **grown in confidence to affect change**.

Increased individual and collective confidence and skills

The new friendships developed have in turn **increased the confidence** of participants. Participants mentioned that the project had helped to **build their confidence**, and brought them "hope".

"Coming to the counselling session built my confidence.... gradually I found that someone wanted to listen to me." (Participant)

Participants talked about how the project had also **improved their quality of life** by enhancing their understanding of local services and amenities.

"It's helping them to know their community, what services are available and who to go to for what...to build independence in people, that they can take charge of their lives and feel that they can cope. It's developing people's confidence... so they can take ownership of their own livelihood and become community actors... maybe taking leadership roles in the community." (Project staff)

The discussion groups have also enabled some participants to **develop their language and communication skills**. Some of the participants at the focus group sessions felt that they could now communicate better with other people, and said that their English had improved.

"Developing language skills, basic communication skills, they want that opportunity... coming to the group they will speak English in communicating so that improves it... one of the rules is 'don't talk over the other person', so they might be struggling to talk but we will wait and allow them to convey whatever they want to say. You find that people improve their language skills... but also skills in mentoring." (Project staff)

"Coming to the counselling session built my confidence.... gradually I found that someone wanted to listen to me."

(Participant)



“Could barely speak English... Now I can... Thanks to the African Community Centre... because they open doors for me”. (Participant)

“Able to talk to different kinds of people”. (Participant)

Longer-term outcomes

The follow-up visit demonstrated some wider outcomes in relation to the changes that the project has made in participants' lives, because of their newfound confidence. Participants have increased their **participation in other community activity and social action**, through volunteering with local charities. Other participants had also progressed to further **education**.



“100% change... I first would not go out, now I volunteer at [Charity]... Go to College”. (Participant)

In one example, several women spoke at a Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) conference in Swansea. Prior to joining the women's group at the Centre, one of the women could not speak English but through the group sessions, she became more fluent and empowered.

“I completed my ESOL... Done my nursing Access course... Done my baking course... Volunteer at [Charity].... I went to Parliament to speak... I felt empowered... ” (Participant)



For many participants, the positive changes they have experienced have been gradual. One of the participants found that the more group counselling sessions she attended, the more confident she became.

“Slowly, I could be myself.” (Participant)

A few participants have also started mentoring people seeking asylum.

The staff feel the changes participants are experiencing would not have taken place had the project not existed. The project has enabled people to come together to share their experiences, and it has provided the confidence for some to volunteer with other charities, and participate in other community activities.

What has worked well?

- **Recruitment:** Word of mouth has been the most successful recruitment mechanism to date. The organisation is well connected and distributed leaflets, emails and flyers to its network of local community groups and organisations. Some participants were already familiar with the African Community Centre.
- **Community engagement activities:** The project has been marketing its activities through community events. For example, the counsellor visited Swansea Bay Asylum Seekers' support group to promote the project, and found this to be a good recruitment channel for the men's group in particular.

“I completed my ESOL... Done my nursing Access course... Done my baking course... Volunteer at [Charity].... I went to Parliament to speak... I felt empowered... ”

(Participant)

- ⇒ **Incorporating art and environmental activities into group therapy:** Including arts activities such as singing and cookery sessions into the group therapy has worked well, and has helped to reduce social and emotional isolation. The participants found it therapeutic, and felt they could express themselves better through these activities.
- ⇒ **Ability to sustain participants:** The same people attend the groups on a weekly basis. This is because the participants find support and information from the staff and each other, which helps to guide them through their asylum process. This has helped to build their trust and confidence.



What are the lessons?

- ⇒ **Be sensitive to the needs of your target group:** The project staff were keen to point out that they have to make sure that they do not become desensitised to the trauma and personal situations faced by participants, and to do the best that they can to learn from them.



The future

In the longer term, the project staff hope to continue to support refugees and asylum seekers living in Swansea by applying for further funding. The staff feel that they cannot continue to run the group without further funding. However, it is clear that some of the outcomes the project has achieved will continue to have a positive impact on the participant's everyday lives as they build on the new social connections and support networks. Participants have developed self-confidence, knowledge and skills and become more integrated with the local community, with some of the volunteering activities expected to continue. Through their involvement with the project, several participants have gone on to take part in additional activities, including creating an a cappella singing group, which has performed at local festivals and fundraising events.

