



People's Health Trust - Active Communities Case Study



Futures Community Voice – Marsh Farm Makeover

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.

For the second year of the Actives Communities evaluation, Ecorys conducted a telephone case study with a Luton-based project called 'Marsh Farm Makeover'. This case study provides the background to the design and development of the project, and its achievements and changes over time, drawing on interviews with local people involved and monitoring reports to the funder, People's Health Trust.

Key facts

HealthCourage

Luton Health
Community Interest
Company (CIC) area

£32,105 of People's
Health Trust funding

Main activities

Local people
established a
community voice
steering group to plan
and take part in street
and subway makeovers

Key outcomes

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



About the project

Futures Community Voice is a group of local residents in Luton who come together to discuss issues and concerns about where they live and how they can improve the area. As a community-based, grass-roots organisation, it works with all members of the community, aiming to promote the regeneration of an area experiencing economic disadvantage through providing affordable well-managed facilities, improving education standards, supporting youth programmes and encouraging a healthy, confident community.

Marsh Farm Makeover is a new project aiming to improve the look and feel of the Marsh Farm Estate in Luton to bring back pride and a sense of community cohesion to the area. The project uses a local artist and residents to repaint the subways on the estate and makeover local streets and residents work together to pick litter to improve the appearance of the local area. It aims to bring together local people on the estate to restore a sense of pride and community, to reduce fear of crime and vandalism and to encourage people to work together towards a positive end goal, improving the physical environment of the Marsh Farm Estate and helping the community to feel safer.

The project is open and welcome to all residents of the Marsh Farm Estate. According to interviewees, the project is currently struggling to engage residents with all aspects of its activities. Although 70 volunteers took part in the repainting of the first subway, this number dropped to 30 for the repainting of the second subway. For other activities, such as litter picking, the project has struggled to engage people and is trying hard to reach out to other residents by linking with local businesses:

“We need to work out what we are doing wrong. We have a problem getting volunteers.” (Project staff)

However, those who have engaged are from all sections of the community, including some older people and school aged children (during the holidays). The majority of participants are parents and young people.

The project also works with the local council to get permission for some of its activities, such as repainting subways or walls, so this could be another way to reach increasing numbers of local residents.

How are local people shaping and leading the project?

The idea of repainting the tunnels and cleaning up the area originally came from a local resident. The project lead convinced the resident to join the group, who then applied for the funding to make it a reality.

There are no specific formal structures in place for shaping or designing the project. At its outset, two open public meetings were held where local residents brainstormed ideas that they felt would benefit the community and what kind of art work they would like to see, such as particular themes. The two tunnels painted so far have followed the themes of sea life and wildlife, both ideas that came from local residents.



“We wanted residents to come along and give ideas about themes they wanted or any objections or concerns they had...we put out a load of ideas, they added to them, changed them and then we went with a show of hands for who wants this theme. It was majority rule.” (Project staff)

The project then held art workshops where local artists worked with local residents to make drawings of their ideas. The residents were able to shape these drawings by giving their own ideas and suggestions to the artists.

Following the workshops, residents have had their say informally and helped to shape the project. Project staff described that, as time went on, people would pass through the underpass and ask how they could get involved. They would also make suggestions for the artwork and other areas of the estate that they felt would benefit from similar work. Local residents were therefore able to make the project what they wanted it to be; even without getting involved with the artwork itself.

“This has a knock on effect. Not everyone wanted to pick up a paintbrush. Some wanted to stand and watch, others would bring tea and biscuits. People would come and take pictures and share them on social media. It was a real community feel.” (Project staff)

What has the project achieved?

Improved social links and ties

One of the biggest successes of the project, according to project staff and residents, has been the creation of **social links and ties** through the development of increased **friendships and connections**. The layout of Marsh Farm Estate is such that there are a number of small alleys and underpasses, which through the project’s activities, have developed into a hub bringing people together. They have become areas where residents can meet each other, converse and make friends.

Project staff and residents described how previously neighbours who had lived on the same street for decades had “not exchanged a word with each other, until the start of this project”.

“Instead of a dark, dingy and scary tunnel we now have people congregating in the tunnels and speaking. You would never have imagined it before. It used to smell of urine. People would hold their nose and run through as quickly as possible.” (Project staff)

The Marsh Farm Estate is a particularly diverse area of Luton. Although there are many young people in the area, especially young parents with children, there are also older people and people from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. This has meant that the project has helped to develop ties both **within and between groups**. Particularly for older residents and those who live alone, this has helped to reduce their **social isolation**.



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(Project staff)

Improved sense of community

A related success of the project has been an improved sense of community developing among residents. Project staff and residents described how they are now proud of the area, which previously had a poor reputation for high levels of crime and being generally unsafe.

“We can see that Marsh Farm is more than a place where people live. It is more of a community. It is our town. Instead of Marsh Farm being known for its riots we are now known for something creative.” (Resident)

This increased sense of community and recognition of shared interest has also led to residents feeling more pride in the area, leading to an increased sense of belonging. An older local resident, for example, wanted to have her 80th birthday party held in one of the tunnels. This, according to the project lead, is testament to the better experience that walking through the repainted tunnels has now become.

“The tunnels have stopped smelling like wee. The colour has gone on. It’s now a magical place.” (Resident)

This improved sense of community has motivated residents, providing them with an increased recognition of shared interest. Project staff commented that residents are now actively interested in the project and its activities. For example, they ask when the next tunnel will be painted and suggest areas of the estate that require renovation.

Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

This active interest in the project and its activities combined with seeing first-hand the results of their efforts, has resulted in an **increase in confidence** among local people, inspiring them to engage with other residents and project staff and express their ideas for how else the local area can be improved.

“Now I’m being asked when we are doing the next tunnel, if we can do something for children, for young people, for old people. People are starting to see Marsh Farm as a place where people can try things, experiment.” (Project staff)

Collective action and control

This **development of a shared interest** and growth in confidence has also led to an increase in community activity, ultimately creating a project that reflects the aspirations of the local community. These are key indicators of **collective control**. The interviews found that it was not, however, easy for the project to achieve this, in part, because the estate has had a large amount of money promised over the years through various central government regeneration schemes that has not materialised. Residents have seen promises made and not kept, or projects that have not made any tangible difference to their lives. This led to some initial scepticism about Marsh Farm Makeover, but attitudes changed.

“Initially when we first put out on Facebook there was a lot of negativity. When people started to see that we were local residents ourselves, we were out there, we were making a physical change to the area, attitudes began to change” (Project lead)

“Now I’m being asked when we are doing the next tunnel, if we can do something for children, for young people, for old people. People are starting to see Marsh Farm as a place where people can try things, experiment.”

(Project staff)



It was with this change in attitude that more residents gained the confidence and inspiration to engage with the project, help shape the themes of the art work and suggest areas for future development. This is an example of **increased participation in voluntary and community activity**, which is helping to improve the local neighbourhood.

Better quality of life

Through the improved social links and ties and increased sense of community, the project has ultimately led to a better **quality of life** for residents. The tunnels are cleaner and are colourful with the artwork. Project staff commented that people are therefore no longer crossing the main road and now feel safe using the tunnel as an underpass.

Interviewees explained that some members of the community, such as children, are using the artwork in an educational way.

“On the first tunnel we had painted lots of bugs, birds and insects. We had some activity cards with questions like ‘How many lady birds can you find? Name the bird etc. We don’t have access to those cards all the time but you see kids walking through and counting. It has become educational.”
(Project staff)

Longer-term outcomes

The project lead said that the improved tunnels would, they hope, have a knock on effect not only on the estate as a whole but the wider Luton area. The hope is that, by cleaning up these areas previously thought of as unclean and unsafe, the overall **quality of life** in Luton will improve.

“I hope someone would recognise how good it is and pay for the other 7 tunnels to be done. We want to spread it across the town. There are a number of subways leading out of the estate and across Luton. We want to campaign to have all these spaces cleaned up.” (Project lead)

What has worked well?

- Use of social media to engage residents. A particular success, especially when engaging residents under the age of 45, has been the use of Facebook and other forms of social media, such as Twitter. The group used snowballing and links with other community groups and organisations, including a local pub, to reach as many residents as possible. The Facebook page also provided a platform for residents to engage in discussions, ask questions or express any concerns they may have had.
- On site interactions. Another successful form of engagement has been the on-site interactions, where local residents have passed through the tunnel during the painting and seen the work in progress for themselves. This has helped to generate interest and get local residents involved in the activities.
- Launch party. After the first tunnel was completed, the project held a launch party to celebrate and invited all local residents. The party included cakes, biscuits, tea and other snacks and provided an opportunity for residents to meet each other, socialise and learn about the project. The project lead commented that providing residents with ‘a combination of reasons to come out’ was more successful than earlier leafleting, which was only asking for volunteers.



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(Project lead)

What are the lessons?

- **Expectations.** The project lead commented that it was important to be flexible, especially about targets and numbers of people expected to engage. At the start of the project, they assumed that a large number of people would be willing to 'officially' volunteer. However the project found that most people did not want an official role or to share personal details with the project. Rather, they would prefer to volunteer on an ad-hoc basis. The key, therefore, is 'catching people in that moment', which cannot be systematically planned for. As mentioned, the use of social media, snowballing and on site interactions have been successful for this.
- **Flexibility.** The project lead also commented that there needed to be greater flexibility in methods of engaging local residents. Over the course of the project, the experience has been that, official meetings have been least productive with the fewest number of people engaging. The most productive engagement methods have been the earlier mentioned on site interactions and launch party.



The future

Marsh Farm Makeover is due to finish on 29th March 2018. A finite number of promises have been made and once all of the tunnels have been completed, the work will be finished. However, project lead and staff were keen to stress that they would like to continue the project and spread the work to remaining tunnels both within and outside the Marsh Farm Estate. In order for this to happen, the group believed that it would need to find additional funding. The group would also like to open the floor to residents for more, short term, ideas for how residents would like to get involved to improve the local area. In their experience, residents were more likely to engage in the first place if they knew it would only be for a short period, as this avoided the more daunting prospect of committing to a project for longer.



“We don’t want a long term plan. We prefer short-term projects where local people can get involved to get the change they want. There could be an endless list of ideas.” (Project lead)

