



People's Health Trust - Active Communities Case Study



## Star Association - Molokai Village

### 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, in spring 2017 Ecorys conducted a telephone case study of a Manchester-based project called 'Molokai Village', followed by a project visit in winter 2017. 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

#### HealthForm

Manchester Health Community Interest Company (CIC) area

**£37,960** of People's Health Trust funding

#### Main activities

Social activities for older men from African backgrounds including informal conversation and drinks, speakers, quizzes, raffles and entertainment, tea or dinner

#### Key outcomes

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



## About the project

Since 2012, Star Association has been delivering a range of activities to people in Harpurhey, Manchester. A community-based, grass-roots organisation, Star Association traditionally works with local women and children, offering a range of activities that aim to help people develop new friendships and social connections.

After several years, as the charity became more recognised in the local community, men increasingly started asking if the charity could develop a new group for men over 50 and Star Association responded. They named the project 'Molokai Village', which relates to "how men get together, how they support each other, how they lead one another and how they encourage each other" (Project lead).

Starting in late 2016, every Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon, different activities are held at a local community centre for 25 participants from the Harpurhey area, including cooking, health and wellbeing-related activities, walking, music and drum sessions. A paid project manager leads Molokai Village, supported by another staff member from the Star Association, as well as volunteers from the project.

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

Local people are involved in shaping and leading the project in a number of ways, in terms of both project design and delivery. Some members of the project volunteer their time by facilitating other participants to contribute to the ongoing planning of Molokai Village. Throughout the project, the volunteers have co-ordinated workshop sessions to brainstorm ideas for activities, such as walking groups or cooking sessions, which participants have then voted on. Alongside these more formal sessions, general discussions amongst the group also generate ideas for activities, because they provide an opportunity to glean an awareness of participants' common interests, which sparks ideas of things that they would like to explore in more depth. Examples of activities that have been developed through informal discussions include political debates and sessions about different health concerns.

Both the more formal and informal means of making decisions about the project enable participants to have direct involvement in shaping and leading Molokai Village, giving them control over the project and a greater sense of ownership. One participant felt that the design – where service users continue to shape and lead the activities – is one of the best aspects of the project:

"It's all worked very well but I'd have to say it [the thing that worked best] was the system that they [the project team] use to make us feel so part of the project. We are more participative, we own the project, rather than them [the project team], which is actually something that I appreciate. It's for us; we carry it." (Participant)

A member of staff highlighted that the design of the project ensures that the activities reflect the participants' needs:

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(Participant)



“The activities need to be user-led, because at the end of the day, it’s their [the men’s] need; they are the best people to address this need. Therefore you need to give them control over this.” (Project staff member)

Alongside shaping the design of the project, local people are also involved in delivering some of the group sessions, drawing on their own experiences and expertise to facilitate the groups. For example, one member of the group who is a health professional volunteers his time to speak about the risks of different health concerns that are prevalent within the target group of the older, male, African-Caribbean population.

The active involvement of local participants has not only benefitted the ongoing development of Molokai Village; the discussions amongst the participants have also helped inform Star Association on ideas of how they can tweak their wider service delivery. For example, they have highlighted the potential for the development of other groups or activities, such as a group for both older and younger men. As a project staff member highlighted:

“Getting them to give their feedback means a lot to us because it helps us to plan other activities and also try to amend or tweak the project and try and make it better. And always having the feedback opportunity there means they can always come back to us with new ideas.” (Project staff member)

## What has the project achieved?

### Improved social links and ties

Approximately six months into the delivery of the project, project-monitoring data indicates that the vast majority of participants have reported feeling **reduced social isolation and loneliness**. One participant commented on the difference that the project made to their feelings of isolation and loneliness:

“Sometimes, I’ll sit on my doorstep and wish I could have someone just to talk, and at times it was very lonely, exhausting, exasperating and sad. This project came just in time and the laughs are just wonderful. People often are surprised that someone is actually taking the time to listen. It’s very humbling.” (Participant)

Another participant had a similar experience and found that the project had helped him to have **increased friendships**. This made him feel “much happier” and he felt he had an improved quality of life.

“It’s [the project has] helped me to improve my social networks, in terms of meeting people I didn’t know. Before I was just by myself, I didn’t know many people, but since the project came into my life, it’s given me that opportunity to speak to people.” (Participant)

Several participants described the friendships they have developed as ‘lasting’, and they regularly meet up for a variety of social occasions outside of the group. This has enabled them to meet more people, and to expand their social networks across the local community.



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“We meet outside of the group... At other meetings like parties, gatherings, at universities or at talks.” (Participant)

For many of the participants, the group has not only helped them to develop friendships, but it has also provided them with better **networks of support**. With their knowledge and experience combined, the group can provide support in relation to various different issues facing the men (examples include health, immigration, education or employment). One participant highlighted how invaluable this has been, giving him peace of mind about some of the issues he was facing:

“It helps you to understand that you’re not alone, worrying about things. They [the group] give you a lot of comfort, you learn a lot about what other people are going through and it helps bring things into perspective.” (Participant)

By improving their **social links and ties**, participants are reporting feeling a **greater sense of belonging** in the community. Findings from the project monitoring reporting data suggest that six months into the project, 86% of participants reported feeling more a part of their community. One participant commented on how his involvement in the project had improved his feelings of belonging:

“Through this network, I’ve built up relationships which have been expanded in such a way that I can call myself part of the community, and I couldn’t have called myself that before.” (Participant)

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### David’s story

David was living in the Harpurhey area and was experiencing social isolation and anxiety. There were few opportunities for him to meet others in the community and he struggled to expand his social networks. He heard about Molokai Village after receiving a leaflet through his letterbox, and decided to join because it was “exactly what [he] was looking for.” David attends the group on a regular basis, and gets involved with all the activities, but the drumming sessions and group walks have been his favourite. For David, the friendships developed and social networks established through Molokai Village have been the most important outcomes, as they have reduced his social isolation and made him feel a greater sense of belonging in the community.

“For me, it [an unexpected outcome] is getting to know so many people and feeling part of the community, much more than before.”

### Increased confidence, knowledge, skills and assets

Alongside **improved social links and ties** and **reduced social isolation**, the interviews highlighted that, at an individual level, there has been **increased confidence and aspiration** amongst the participants. The project lead spoke of the differences he has observed amongst many of the men in the group, in terms of improved self-confidence in social situations:

“Take Samuel<sup>1</sup> for example, before the project the man was quite shy, and now he is so easy to talk to!” (Project lead)



As a result of taking part in activities that focus on a range of different topics, the participants described having **increased knowledge** about a variety of things - such as politics, health risks and concerns, and different experiences of family life. There is evidence of participants benefitting from **project-based skills development**, as different activities have helped the participants to learn new skills – or develop existing skills - in IT, arts and crafts, music and dancing.

At the group level, the project lead felt that there has **been increased collective confidence** amongst the group to voice their opinions; not only about the project but also about the local community. The project lead said that Molokai Village has been an important tool for facilitating conversations to occur, which has led to the participants having **an increased confidence to speak up**. Bringing local men together has given them the opportunity to discuss things about the community that are of importance to them:

“It’s sometimes easy to forget that when someone has been on the fringes of the community for so long, they do lose that confidence to speak out. But once you bring them together, so they come out and interact with others, they regain or develop that ability to voice their views.” (Project lead)

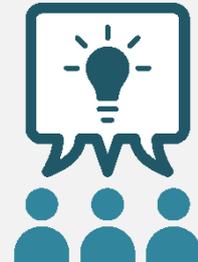
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## Collective action and control

A combination of **gaining confidence** over the course of the project and having a set time during the sessions to discuss potential activities has led to participants feeling **more empowered to take ownership** of the project. Several participants described being “motivated” to make decisions about – and changes to – the activities. In particular, they have been starting to organise events or activities beyond the group sessions; for example, they organised and held a barbeque in their local park for an end-of-summer social occasion.

Participants also described being more **empowered to take leadership** of a potential campaign or movement to share their learning from some of their activities – for example, about the risks of prostate cancer or how to maintain a healthy blood pressure – across the wider community. At an individual level, this is happening already for some participants. For example, one person explained how he tells his family and friends about what he has learned.

“It [the group] does benefit the wider community; whatever I learn [e.g. about health issues] I share with others. They wouldn’t know about it without the project.” (Participant)

Over time, **the sense of collective aspiration** amongst the group to raise awareness of health concerns to other men in the local community has continued to increase. One participant commented that in order to achieve their goal of developing a more formalised community health campaign, they would need more resources (beyond those available through Molokai Village), but the developing **sense of collective aspiration** to do this is a positive outcome for the project.

The combination of individuals sharing what they have learned through their wider community connections and the group-level aspiration to develop some sort of awareness-raising campaign indicates that the project is beginning **to reflect local needs**. The participants highlighted that health concerns relating to obesity, prostate cancer and blood pressure are particularly pertinent to their local community, and that there is a clear need to encourage other men in the community to lead healthier lifestyles.

There is also evidence of participants having an **increased confidence to affect change**, where participants’ increased confidence to discuss and speak out about local community issues and politics has translated into collective action. For example, an unexpected outcome for the project lead was that many of the participants went out to vote in the 2017 General Election, which was surprising, as many of the men had not voted before. The project facilitated the men to get to the polling station by providing transport, and Star Association was proud that Molokai Village had helped raise participants’ aspirations to exercise their right to vote.

“One of the outcomes that really impressed me was the civic awareness of the men we’re working with. For example, [on the day of the 2017 general election] they actually went out and voted, you know? It was an enjoyable thing seeing people who have mostly never voted before, go out and vote... It was such an impressive thing.” (Project lead)

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## Longer-term outcomes

Linked to the outcomes of improved confidence and better social networks, is improvements in participants' **individual wellbeing** and **quality of life**. The interviews highlighted some early examples of how Molokai Village has helped to improve people's mental wellbeing. For example, one participant reported feeling "*much happier*" after he had been able to develop new friendships through the project. Another participant had been experiencing poor mental health and had suicidal thoughts prior to the project, but after engaging in the activities (which helped him to develop friendships and reduce his stress levels), has seen noticeable improvements in his mental health.

For one participant, the content of the activities has helped to boost his mental wellbeing and has helped to reduce his stress. He mentioned one activity in particular that he thought helped many of the other participants to **reduce their stress**:

"My favourite [activity] has been the drumming... we make good music, and everyone gets up and dances, and everyone is just so happy, and they have forgotten about all the stresses they had." (Participant)

The **improved social links and ties** generated through Molokai Village have **facilitated friendships** and **an increased sense of trust** amongst the participants. This has, in turn, encouraged them to speak – and encouraged others to speak – more about their health, including checking for the signs and symptoms of health conditions.

These outcomes demonstrate how a project with a primary aim of tackling social isolation (through facilitating social connections to develop) has led to participants experiencing **a better quality of life** (in terms of greater happiness and better local activities) and **improvements to health and wellbeing**.

## What has worked well?

- Using a variety of approaches to collect feedback. Project staff and participants agreed that new processes established to support local people to get involved have worked well because they allow participants to choose activities that most adequately address their needs. Although this approach requires organisation to ensure that activities are chosen and developed in a timely manner, the main advantage of the approach is that, because it is more participative, people have a greater sense of ownership over the project.
- Taking an informal approach to the groups. Participants commented that they like the informal and relaxed nature of the group, because it helps to facilitate an environment where people can talk at ease and develop friendships. One participant compared the group to another community group that they attend, which is based in a classroom setting, and felt that the relaxed group-setting works much better for the men. It enables them to talk informally amongst themselves, helping to build up their trust of each other.



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## What are the lessons?

- **Being flexible and responsive:** A key learning point for the project has been in relation to scheduling. Although the sessions on both days are well attended, there are fewer attendees on a Sunday due to other commitments such as family and church. The project team has considered whether it might be more beneficial to hold a session during the week, rather than on a Sunday, so that the timing is more suitable for all participants.
- **Planning effectively:** The project team has learned about the difficulties associated with organising the venue. To lower the costs of room hire, they have booked the room weeks in advance to use for Molokai Village. However, if they have a weekend where, for example, the weather is supposed to be very good and they end up doing an outdoors activity, they could potentially end up wasting money on a room that they do not use. The project team will continue to consider how they can alleviate this issue.
- **The importance of continuing to engage fully:** A key lesson learned through the delivery of Molokai Village so far relates to the importance of ensuring that the project has substantial input from participants about what they want to do, so that they have ownership of the project.



## The future

Molokai Village was due to finish in May 2018, although the project team felt confident that some kind of provision for men will continue beyond this date because the project has been so well received amongst the local community. As highlighted, they would like to develop a 'men and boys' project so that men and their sons/grandsons/nephews can take part in a project together, improving social connectedness between and within different groups in the community. One option includes working with national charities to continue to raise awareness of health concerns. This builds on the success of Molokai Village in terms of increasing people's confidence and aspirations to make community-wide change.

Whatever the format of the group, there is a clear appetite amongst the participants to continue their participation.

"If this project continues, or if there is a new project developed for men, I will be the first to join." (Participant)

Regardless of whether or not Molokai Village continues in its current form, it is very likely that the friendships that the men have developed throughout the course of the project will continue. Participants commented that they were confident that they would continue to meet up in the future and continue to provide support to each another.

"The friendships are now sustained. I think we will carry on talking and sharing, and caring about each other." (Participant)

"I feel that people can meet [outside the group], especially now that people have stronger bonds." (Participant)

