

Harnessing the power of stories to facilitate emergent community leadership

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This story begins in the mid-1990s, on an estate of 1500 houses, situated a stone's throw from the affluence of Falmouth marina. The ward in which the estate is located is the most deprived in Cornwall¹. Violent crime, intimidation and drug dealing were prevalent; illness rates were 18% above the national average, unemployment was at an all time high and the housing stock was poor.

Trust between residents and statutory agencies had long since broken down. Local Police admitted that community policing was non-existent, and the Local Government Housing Officer acknowledged that no improvements had been made to housing stock for decades. The result of this abandonment was a community in chaos, yet everyone seemed to be looking the other way. Everyone except two Health visitors who recognized that the real energy for change lay with the residents themselves. So began the Beacon Project.

A series of awareness raising meetings were initiated to re-engage agencies. Twenty residents were then invited to take a role in working alongside these agencies to promote change on the estate. Five accepted, and, following training, formed a residents group. They produced a newsletter, and hand-delivered it to each home on the estate, to personally invite householders to meet with statutory agencies in a local school to form an action plan to tackle the issues on the estate.

From this small beginning, big changes grew. Meetings continued, and by 1997 a tenant-led partnership between agencies and residents was formed, which went on to access significant funding that was used to renovate over 1000 of the homes. Policing improved, and Social Services provided a new estate-based presence. Community spirit was reborn. By 1999, statistics showed dramatic changes and the Beacon Project received national and international acclaim as a 'flagship' for regeneration².

Between 2000-2004 the transferable learning from the Beacon Project led to the development of the Connecting Communities (C2) programme.

Hazel Stuteley, one of the Health Visitors who initiated the changes described above, and who now delivers C2, describes one of the programme's central tenets as being a message of capacity release – not capacity building – emphasising the need to recognise, identify and work with the inherent knowledge and capacity embedded within any community.

The C2 programme, using insights from complexity science, recognises that leaders cannot



Sgt. David Aynsley, Dr. Grace Sweeney, Hazel Stuteley and Graham Jones

be imposed on a system (or in this case, a community), but that they must emerge from within it. Hazel describes how complexity theory helped her conceptualize the changes that had taken place at the Beacon Estate:

"Complexity science placed great value on widespread networking and the creation of relationships and dialogue based on trust. Conversations, humility and respect, I now realised, contributed hugely to the creation of that all-important enabling environment, which released the resourcefulness of this community to become self-organising and achieve such significant and dramatic outcomes."

Rather than design a programme that focuses on process, C2 uses story-telling to embed learning. Stories provide a means by which people come close to experiencing what others have been through in a way that goes beyond the rational, creating the opportunity for listeners to gain inspiration, and to identify their own capacity for leadership.

By chance in July 2006, Sport England South West first encountered the work that had taken place at the Beacon Estate, and Graham Jones (Development Manager, Sport England) heard in the C2 stories the potential to support Sport England and its partners to achieve their participation targets in disadvantaged communities. In May of this year, Graham, working with Hazel and the Health Complexity Group, invited leaders of the seven County Sports Partnerships (part of the 'delivery' chain for sport and active recreation¹) from the South West region to meet with their key strategic partners, for a two-day C2 event in Falmouth.

Follow-up interviews with participants, indicated that the main benefits were in: (a) networking; (b)

raising awareness; (c) developing new partnerships and relationships; (d) understanding the need to take measured risks; (e) understanding the 'bigger picture'; (f) transferable learning that enables conversations to happen between different agencies; (g) examples of good practice; and, most importantly, (h) recognition of the need to let leaders emerge from within the community.

Momentum continued when Steve Nelson who leads the West of England County Sport Partnership (Wesport) provided the opportunity for 20 community development staff to attend a C2 two-day programme at the Eden Project. This will be followed by exchange visits between residents from Cornwall and Bristol, and a series of Action Learning Set workshops will be held, as Wesport work to engage ever more fully with their communities. As one delegate said:

"There is a fantastic resource out there in the community – passion, belief, wanting to right the wrongs. We need to increase our chance of getting involved with these people."

¹ Cemlyn, S., Fahmy, E., Gordon, D. and Bennett, S. 2002 'Poverty and Neighbourhood Renewal in West Cornwall': University of Bristol and Cornwall Health Research Unit.

² 'The Nye Bevan Award for Excellence, the Queen's Jubilee Award and the Deputy Prime Ministers National Award for Sustainable Communities, amongst others.

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