

Truro community library workshop game

June
2009

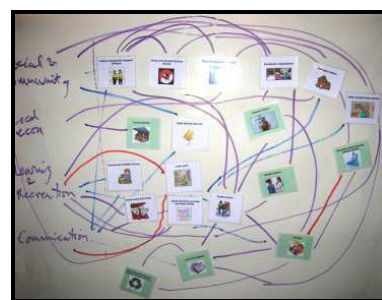
- 1 The game was run as the first part of a workshop and took about 2 hours. In plenary we invented a **small town**, which was crudely doodled on a flipchart, describing some of its demographics and features, including three neighbourhoods in outline. It was clearly an unappealing place. We identified a few main features such as a school, cemetery, waterfront, declining industrial estate, park, tower blocks, troubled housing estate, etc. The town had no library, although later it turned out that there was a disused civic building near the centre.
- 2 As residents of this imagined town, participants considered what they would regard as the attributes of their ideal neighbourhood – recognising that these were **aspirations** which might contrast sharply with the reality. The features they chose included 'crime-free', 'friendly', 'safe', 'healthy', 'tolerant', 'connected', 'clean'; with mixed employment and a viable economy; having learning, cultural and recreation opportunities; places to meet; affordable housing and so on. There were approximately 30 features which collectively were classified into the following four topic areas:
 - social and community
 - local economy
 - learning and recreation
 - communication.

So far so clear: residents had a fair idea of the kind of place they'd like to live, but this wasn't it.

- 3 Participants then discussed the **institutions** in the town and the roles that they play in addressing the four topic areas. Some of the institutions (such as the business advice centre or the local newspaper) operate town-wide; others were based in and operated mainly within a neighbourhood (eg youth centre, mother and toddler group). There were nineteen institutions altogether, represented by cards.

We then began to plot the connections between these institutions and the four topic areas (eg the business advice centre was linked to 'local economy'; the local newspaper contributes to 'communication').

Once the obvious connections had been made, secondary links followed: the drama and arts club for example was linked not just to 'learning and recreation' but was also felt to contribute to communication in the area and to 'social and community' outcomes.



Finally as the flip chart became prohibitively cluttered, we identified the partnership links between the institutions (the refugee hostel works with adult basic skills; police community support officers work

with the youth centre, and so on). It began to seem as if everything was connected to everything else; which raised the question, how come the quality of life is not higher, in these neighbourhoods?

- 4 Working at tables, each group of participants was allocated one of the three **neighbourhoods**. Their task was to describe its main features – demographics, levels of crime, housing problems, drug use, unemployment, heart disease, teenage pregnancies, school exclusions, drunk and disorderly offences, the works. They added notes on the contribution of the institutions to addressing the issues.

Using a simple matrix each neighbourhood was scored as fragile, stable or thriving for the four topic areas at this stage. The most generously-scored was called 'Hasbeen Lane' and looked like this:

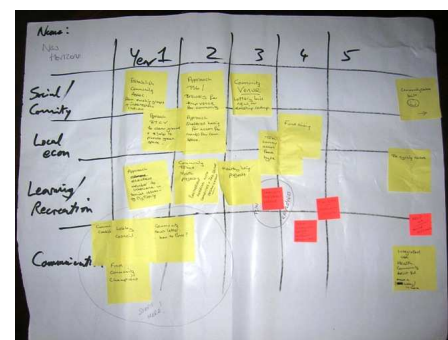
'Hasbeen Lane'			
	Fragile 1-5	Stable 6-10	Thriving 11-15
Social / community		6	
Local economy	5		
Learning / recreation	5		
Communication		7	

The two other neighbourhoods ('Q.E. Estate Villa Park' and 'New Horizons') were deeply embedded in the fragile column.

- 5 So each neighbourhood was represented by a flipchart description and a 'score' to reflect how well it was doing against the aspirations. For each neighbourhood, these were then all handed over to the adjacent group. This meant that each group of participants now had to work in a new context, bringing to the exercise some knowledge of the town as a whole and of a different neighbourhood.

Working in groups, participants began discussing ways of bridging the gap between the existing neighbourhood score and the aspirations discussed in phase 2. They used a **timeline** to see what could be achieved in five years, based on the role of institutions.

This meant they had to *address the shortfalls in the quality of community life*, and they were expected to do this without negative impact on adjacent neighbourhoods. The image shows the timeline for the 'New Horizons' estate: this group emphasised communication at the outset and worked towards integrated community facilities over five years.



6 We discussed the progress and intentions in each of the plans developed. An **announcement** was then made concerning a new funding scheme for the redevelopment of the disused civic building in the town centre: it could be some kind of single agency building, or a place with more general linked purposes. Only one bid was required, but it was expected to take account of the work that had gone on in the neighbourhoods. It would have to address the perceived needs that had emerged, and demonstrate that it would contribute to those aspirations in the four topic areas where there was an identifiable shortfall.

Participants were asked to work in three groups to draft the bid, providing (i) a statement of purpose with critical success factors, (ii) arrangements for management and governance, and (iii) suggested projects and client groups. To do this they had to demonstrate partnership so as to show awareness of what others were working on. In practice the participants readily self-organised and collaborated.



7 In the final phase the groups reported back on the different aspects of the package and discussed what they had invented, which was clearly more a multifunctional place-to-be-visited rather than a static service agency which did things for/to people.

The general purposes of the 'place' were to do with learning, social interaction and health, with an emphasis on making social interaction a sustainable basis for 'community'. The aspiration was that 'people will go there', it would contribute indirectly to improved educational attainment, reduce crime levels, and bring improvements to the local economy.

The proposed management and governance arrangements included an advisory committee, a manager employed, and representatives from the neighbourhoods involved in separate committees. There was understandable practical emphasis on fundraising and revenue sources.

The 'project' group listed key client groups (young families, teenagers, drug users and others); established building uses (advice services, library, shared spaces, adult learning); and a range of projects which could receive initial support on site, including:

- | | |
|------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Community café | Parent and toddler activities |
| Food co-op | Skills and retraining programme |
| Youth project | Reading group |
| Community action group | Yoga |
| Healthy eating project | Clean-up / green spaces project |

In discussion this became refined as a central, accessible place in the town which housed a number of static, reliable services to do with helping residents be informed and take learning opportunities: and some form of *incubation facility for community initiatives* which would occupy temporary space and then move on when strong enough to do so.

We then returned to the matrix scores for each neighbourhood and reassessed them: what was life like on the estates, after five years and with the introduction of this new resource in the town centre? It was agreed that all scores would have improved: but this was a realistic and practical group of people who recognised that significant change of this kind takes time.

Name:	Fragile 1-5	Stable 6-10	Robust 11-15
Social/Community	1 → 5		
Local Economy	8 → 2		
Learning/Recreation	3 → 6		
Communication	3 → 7		

The most significant improvements came in the 'social and community' and 'communication' categories. One neighbourhood score was deemed to have improved from 1 to 5, for instance.

In discussion we considered the extent to which the institution as designed would really deliver on the desired features of community life. As conversation moved round to discussing the developments for which participants were currently responsible, in Truro, a tension emerged. On the one hand, there was excitement about the contemporary validity of the invented 'place' and its contribution to local quality of life. On the other hand, there was sensitivity to the difficult realities of delivering what is already expected in a constrained public service.

8 Flexible and relevant?

Participants had the chance to invent something based around fluid understandings of social issues at neighbourhood level, and because of this community engagement perspective and the freedom to think outside the library box, they came up with a model which would provide a stable community library, advice and learning facility augmented with support for initiatives developed by local people on their own terms. This shows that the imagination is there, the insights are there, and there is recognition that the library's role can embrace this new flexible relevance.



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