

## Creating a Community



In Summer 2006 a group of people met in the Quaker meeting house in Exeter, all of them involved in different ways in innovative, user-led projects that had been developing within Mind in Exeter and East Devon. It was a time of excitement and anticipation because we had arrived at the moment of recognition that our future lay in our own hands: the time had come for our aspirations to be realised to be an autonomous, collectively governed and run grass-roots community.

Seven years later a small group sit in a cosy, homely room in central Exeter, now the office of The Bridge Collective Community Interest Company, planning how to write this article. Some of us were present at the beginning, others have joined since. The Bridge Collective, now with its own premises, organisational structure, employees and public profile, is the child, still not fully grown, that was conceived at that event. The creative process that brought us here is one for which we had no template or instruction manual. Someone said, "If The Bridge Collective was a work of art, it would be one of those where you throw some tins of paint at a wall and see what happens."

So how does our experience of being the real-life Bridge Collective today match up to the dreams, hopes and fears we had seven years ago? And what have we learnt along the way?

Here are some of the thoughts we recorded in the months of planning before we finally registered as a company in April 2007:

Some of our strengths: democratic and revolutionary; strong belief and commitment; strength in numbers; people-power; we stick up for ourselves and respect and look after each other; the will to find solutions and ways of working together; we

already have some well established and respected projects.

Possible weaknesses: Will we stick together? Can we resolve internal conflict? What will happen if people in key roles become unwell? Do we know how to deal with the outside world – e.g. funders? Will we get bogged down in complications rather than taking one step at a time? How will we know that actions are authorised by the community? Will we have any money?

Opportunities we saw: to enhance personal recovery, gain confidence and a sense of purpose; something to put on a CV in future; greater public awareness of the talents of the participants; to change the world in a small way through our training; a new way of thinking within mental health services; to expand our activities; more freedom of choice where we work and play; it may be harder to find places, but more fun; to work with organisations to create awareness and better understandings; to be environmentally healthy and access funding, etc. through that.

Possible threats: our different way of thinking may not be understood, trusted and funded; losing sight of our primary goals through internal politics; legal requirements and work load; staff/service user them/us culture; theft or damage.

Looking back, much of it does seem to have echoed down through the years of the development of The Bridge.

We began our existence by negotiating a small grant from Devon County Council, which has continued but not grown. We supplement this with money earned from training and with occasional one-off grants for projects, but we have held out strongly for independence and against becoming a provider of commissioned services. Through this we have learnt that being a lean organisation can help creativity – like haiku poetry, which depends on finding a way to express an idea within tight constraints. (But please don't tell our funders that!)

We have also been learning to embrace messiness – that working out what to do when things aren't as we planned or expected can also be a source of creativity, once you decide not to give in to exasperation. In a world of business plans and SMART targets, we value flexibility, room for not getting

things right every time, for playing, and sometimes abandoning the original idea and finding we have created something else we didn't expect. And we do still struggle to find the structures that can facilitate this while retaining accountability and good communication.

And we are learning about both the power and the challenges of democracy when in a tight spot. When going through internal conflict – as inevitably we have done – it has both been deeply painful and hugely empowering to be in a place where talking about dissent and hurt has been the business of the whole community and not something to be dealt with quietly in a separate room by staff. We have learnt much and still have much to learn about how this can be a safe and healing process for a community, rather than a divisive one.



From the beginning, the idea of democracy was key in The Bridge, and the point of authority and decision-making has always been the monthly meeting that we now call The Bridge Community Meeting. Our legal structure entails that we have a formal membership who elect a number of directors, and these roles are important in The Bridge because they hold accountability for the principles of the company and for running it with integrity. However, involvement in The Bridge is much wider than formal membership of the company, and (except very occasionally for discussion of sensitive personal issues) the Community Meetings are completely

open, with most decisions arrived at by consensus.

One of our most valued points of reference is our Mission Statement, distilled by the Community Meeting from attempts over the years to communicate the essence of The Bridge:

"To be a company whose members are creating: a democratic community where people who have experiences, beliefs, and feelings that have sometimes been labelled as mental illness are welcomed and can talk about these experiences freely, safely and without judgement; a place to participate in friendship, support, learning, teaching, discussion, being active, and making a valid contribution both within the collective and the wider community."

Here is a summary of the groups and activities around which our evolving community is currently formed:

The Greenwood Project gives access to the physical and mental health benefits of being in woodland and other outdoor environments. It also provides a chance to learn about traditional woodland crafts. We find that making meals and cooking on our own fire in a woodland clearing, telling stories and making music under the stars and making things by hand from natural materials we collect ourselves, all allow us to see and experience life in a new, healing way. It helps us to appreciate and fully value the natural world.

The Women's Art Group sessions aim to give women some much-needed personal space every Monday morning, offering an opportunity to explore artistic ideas. The group has a real sense of community and a relaxed and creative atmosphere.

The Sharing Circle takes place at a seasonal turning point and has a theme that reflects both the cycle of the year in nature and the cycles of change in our lives. We meet in peaceful, natural settings and share simple food around a fire. Then, after a short silence, each person who wishes to is invited to speak, maybe to put something they have brought into the circle and talk about what it means to them. This is a chance to observe the turning of the seasons, to refresh our spirits, and to reflect on what is important to us. Speaking or silent participation are equally welcome.

The Discussion Group meets once a month as a space to share

different viewpoints, with no pressure to speak. We offer the following principles for our discussions: "Everyone brings to the space valid knowledge from their own background, all knowledge is partial and incomplete, all knowledge can be questioned (from – Open Spaces for Dialogue and Enquiry).

Rainbow Mind is an informal group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people affected by mental health issues. We meet at The Bridge Collective once a month for a chat and a coffee in a safe friendly environment with like-minded people.

Underground Sound is a weekly music project primarily for people aged 18 to 30 who are experiencing or have experienced mental health difficulties, as well as their friends and other young people who have an interest in mental health issues. We have a range of musical instruments including guitars, electric drums, decks and various acoustic instruments, and a recording booth enabling us to produce good quality recordings. Within the project there are opportunities to benefit from being part of a group, learning new skills and being creative, using musical expression, developing and building upon existing talents, learning from others and forming friendships that extend outside of the project.

The Experts by Experience project works to establish the sharing of personal experiences, beliefs and feelings sometimes labelled as mental illness, as a powerful tool in the education and training of health and community workers and in the personal journeys of individuals. We aim to be a channel for everyone's voice – wherever you are at, you can take



part. We use our direct experience to explore diverse approaches to mental health. We aim to create environments where conversations happen that encourage learning from each other and understanding each other better, and you don't have to be a brilliant public speaker to have a voice. Time and again magic happens where someone understands a new point of view because they've learnt from someone else's first-hand experience.

The Bridge Collective has an open day every Thursday – the doors are open for anyone to come and have a drink and chat with whoever is about. We have no referral process and people are free to come and go as they please anytime between 10am and 4pm.

In The Bridge Collective as a whole, time and again when maybe we are bogged down in messiness, someone – who may have been part of the community for years or may have walked in that day – says something that cuts through something difficult, and we see a new path to create and travel along together.

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