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Community Research Report Wisbech

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Community Research Project

Supermarket Project

The Institute for Sustainability Leadership at Cambridge University (CISL) is carrying out research on how supermarkets can support community health and wellbeing. Supermarkets are stable businesses closely linked to their local area and rely on local residents both as customers and as employees. Many UK supermarkets employ staff as 'community champions', who act as a link between the store, the local community, and community groups. They can offer support, space for community groups, and goods donations, as well as developing networks to connect the community to funding opportunities. The research is funded by a donation from Asda, although it is completely independent, and the company has no influence over the research questions nor ownership of the findings.

The CISL researchers were keen to understand what support really looked like on the ground, and what difference it made. For this, they visited and spoke to people and organisations who had experienced support from supermarkets in 5 different parts of the UK. One of these was Wisbech, where they knew some interesting things were happening in communities supported by the Local Authority and the Voluntary Sector. It was really important to them that the voice and experience of community members was included in the research and so a team from the Centre for Health Promotion Research at Leeds Beckett University supported a group of residents from Wisbech to do a community research project.

About the Community Research

The opportunity for community members in Wisbech to do some community-based research with Leeds Beckett University (LBU) was shared through networks in the area, with community groups and through social media. The group could decide the focus of the project.

To explore their research topic, we used a peer research approach. Community (or peer) research involves training and working with people to do research on topics they have lived experience of – they are 'experts by experience'.

A group of 7 people who live in Wisbech expressed an interest in doing a project in their town. Leeds Beckett University ran a training session at the Queen Mary Centre in Wisbech on 10th June to introduce the group of community members to research and how to do it. They decided the topic of the research: experiences of living in Wisbech, specifically how it has changed over the last ten years. They chose interviews and focus groups as the research method and also wanted to incorporate photos of the town into the work.

The second training session was held at the Queen Mary Centre on 24th June. It covered research ethics and training on doing interviews and focus groups. The group of Community Researchers chose their questions and made a plan for who to talk to. There were 6 questions (see page 3).

The Community Researchers provided participants with information about the research at the start of the interviews and asked them to sign consent forms before taking part. The group did interviews and a focus group in person.

The group of Community and Leeds Beckett Researchers came together on 20th July and 22nd July to analyse the responses to questions and discuss the findings. This report contains a summary of the findings from the data collected and recommendations for action.

Research Aims and Questions

Aims

The Community Researchers wanted to find out about people's perceptions of Wisbech, what they feel has changed for the better in the last 10 years and what has been lost. They wanted to know what is important to people. They also were interested to find out how supermarkets can support communities.

Interview questions

1. What has been achieved for the community in Wisbech in the last 10 years?
2. What (if anything) has been lost in Wisbech along the way?
3. What matters to you?
4. Many supermarkets do a range of things that can help communities such as having community champions to support local groups/causes; donating money/products; offering staff time to volunteer; offering store space to local groups; connecting and signposting; having grants to provide funding for community groups/activities. Were you aware of this?
5. How much more could supermarkets do to help the community in Wisbech?
6. Is there anything else about living in Wisbech that you'd like to tell me?

Summary

- 7 Community Researchers – all residents in Wisbech
- Supported to do a research project by Leeds Beckett University
- Collected data using interviews and a focus group
- Topic: residents' perceptions of Wisbech, what they feel has changed for the better in the last 10 years and what has been lost.



Figure 1. Community Research Training with the Wisbech group

Youth

The topic of young people missing out came up strongly in the focus group and was also raised by interview participants. Wisbech has lost youth groups, the youth club, the youth council and the youth magazine. Participants repeatedly called for more support for young people, as well as activities or places where they can simply “just hang out.” As well as benefiting the young people, especially teenagers, one person suggested more activities for young people would also reduce anti-social behaviour in the town.

One participant felt there was a hostility to young people in the town:

“When I was young we had youth clubs and youth activities. [...] Need spaces where youth can just hang out. We seem to be scared of young because we demonise them.”

Younger children were better served with spaces such as the Spinney, a children’s play area highlighted as a local asset.

“The spinney playground is fantastic.”

Community Events

Participants were keen to have more reasons to come together in Wisbech. They mentioned several recurring events such as ‘Wisbeach’ in the Market Place, Rockfest and various others held by the museum, castle and the community orchard, but noted that many had been lost. The Rose Fair in particular was missed by many, as well as the carnival procession and the multi-cultural festival.

“Used to be a rose festival where young locals played their own music and there was a big multi-cultural festival.”

Some significant community venues have also been lost. The Corn Exchange was remembered fondly for its dances and concerts, including hosting the Rolling Stones!

One Community Researcher commented that the Community Farm should also be included under Community Events for their role in bringing the community together.

Ageing and Disabled Populations

A number of participants noted the loss of support for disabled and older people due to funding cuts over recent years. There is an ageing population in the town so there is a concern that their needs are not being met.

Participants of the focus group highlighted the importance of involving older people in planning and finding out what they actually need. They knew of funding available that wasn’t being used to make adaptations.

There were also several positive examples of support for visually impaired people, people with additional needs and learning difficulties, and older members of the community.

“Community farm and orchard - really good for people with special needs. Loads of facilities for older persons.”

Amenities and Services

Participants frequently spoke about community and statutory services in the town and the amenities and facilities they needed. Interviewees mentioned public toilets many times; they would like to see accessible toilets, that are clean and free to everyone in the centre of town. One participant highlighted the need for a better bus service and a train station.

NHS Services

A number of participants raised the issue of not being able to get appointments with NHS dentists or having difficulty accessing GPs.

“Health - GPs overstretched, NHS dentists appointments are impossible to get.”

Community Centres

Several participants cited the Queen Mary Centre, and the development of the Ferry Project services as community assets for the town. The Wisbech Community Development Trust and Children’s Centre (commonly known as the Oasis Centre) and Rosmini Centres were also praised for the services they offer, particularly supporting families and providing food. Some of those interviewed would like to have more community projects with a creative focus e.g. art or music.

Wellbeing and Support

The focus group members drew attention to the increase in community-based work and the large number of small projects being delivered. The Queen Mary Centre has 40,000 visits from the local community per year and 40 organisations regularly book the facility. The Oasis Centre offers programmes such as Homestart and the Rosmini Centre was cited a number of times as an important source of support.

One participant believed there was more support for residents now and places for everyone to meet apart from teenagers.

Community House was given as an example of a key source of support that is no longer there, and some felt the community centres and housing associations could do more to fill the gaps in provision.

Space

The theme of space has been divided into: living space, green space, the town centre and heritage.

Housing

Participants felt strongly that there was a lack of decent housing, and in particular a need for new social housing. They were aware of a lot of empty houses and buildings around the town that many thought could be used to provide homes.

“Housing for homeless people - houses 'sitting empty' is an insult - special task force needed to prepare housing for let.”

Green Space

Despite the need for new housing, there is a concern that green space, including farmland, will be used for new-build complexes rather than renovating the buildings that are empty and currently uninhabitable.

Some participants said that recreational space e.g. parks had been lost in the last ten years but positive additions to the town included the community farm and orchard.

Town Centre

Views of the town centre were generally quite negative. Participants talked about losing shops, places to eat and other businesses, and feeling less safe there now. Other problems included litter, graffiti, excess traffic, dangerous use of scooters/bikes and anti-social behaviour. One participant would like to see a “[constant presence of police in the town centre](#)” to tackle these issues. Another respondent identified having LGBTQ safe spaces as being important for the town.

The research participants wanted to have a vibrant, clean centre with places to enjoy, where they felt safe. Having a creche in the centre was suggested as a way of helping parents to go shopping with young children. A number of people raised the issue of not having public toilets in the town centre and one participant mentioned there is an information office in the shopping centre, but it is rarely open.

Despite some of the problems identified with the Market Place, one person described it as having a lot of potential.

What matters to you?

“Having a thriving and interesting town to visit as well as live in. Feeling safe and included. Keeping heritage sites alive and well and accessible.”

Practical suggestions for reducing traffic included: making deliveries in the evening, promoting use of car parks to avoid cars driving through the centre, and gates on the parks to prevent motorbikes and scooters driving through.

Heritage

Participants were proud of the heritage of the town and questioned why there was no tourism despite a wealth of local historic buildings:

“We have 278 grade listed buildings plus 11 nationally and internationally significant historic venues but few know about them.”

Opportunities

In the interviews, there was a consensus that opportunities, particularly for employment, were lacking. The employment that was available was described as low paid and there was high competition for it. The focus group participants, however, felt more positive about more general community and voluntary opportunities, specifically that “lots of volunteer groups have sprung up”. They were aware there were a lot of projects being delivered regularly, although they criticised the lack of “joined up thinking” due to work being driven by the different funding themes. One of the key achievements for Wisbech identified in the focus group was that they had “excelled in community opportunity.” Connected to that, they felt that the details of good work and ‘successes’ weren’t well publicised. One interviewee also mentioned the lack of a CVS in Fenland and a reduction in the activities of the Volunteer Centre.

Opinion was divided on educational and training opportunities. Some participants noted positive developments such as securing the Wisbech Campus of the College of West Anglia and the investment that had gone into it. Other training opportunities were available through housing associations for their residents. One participant felt that education was well funded but focused on ESOL and neglected other training needs.

Improved opportunities were central to what was important to participants, particularly equality of opportunity with richer areas of the county:

“People being treated fairly and have opportunities to grow and develop by taking meaningful courses, leading to qualifications for career changes.”

For several participants, there was nothing of note that had been achieved in the last 10 years, and opportunity was lacking across the board.

“Next to nothing, there's nothing to do, nothing happens.”

Politics

Participants raised concerns about where money was spent and how decisions about funding were made. People felt money for important things had been lost and there were accusations of corruption aimed at the council and politicians in general. One participant believed larger organisations were funded at the expense of smaller charities and another called for the councillors to put aside differences to collaborate.

“No CVS in Fenland and activities of Volunteer Centre Fenland have been curtailed due to re-distribution of or lack of funding.”

“That the council becomes less politically polarised and works together.”

Supermarket Action

Participants were asked if they were aware of supermarkets doing anything to support communities; of those who responded 10 people were aware of supermarket community work and 2 people were not. They were not asked to specify what work or activities they had heard of.

They were then asked: ‘how much more could supermarkets do to help the community in Wisbech?’

The most common suggestion for how supermarkets could support the local community was to reduce the price of fruit and vegetables and other essential items. The recommendations below from participants are divided into how supermarkets could improve their service and how they could support communities in addition to their core sales role.

Improving the way they work:

- Reduce food waste
- Keep prices down in general
- Offer pop-up supermarkets in villages for elderly and those unable to get to cheaper food shops
- Have a quiet shopping time for people with anxiety
- Offer a creche
- Provide support to travel to stores e.g. sponsor bus routes

Supporting the community:

- Donate surplus food (especially fruit and vegetables) to those who need them
- Donate other products e.g. microwaves
- Support community activities, sponsor events
- Open a store in the Market Place
- Offer small grants e.g. £100 for volunteer groups
- Share information on community projects and events
- Community champions could 'buddy' with community 'magnets' (people who connect others) to work together for change.

Some participants thought that supermarkets needed to publicise the work they were already doing and what they could do. Other participants were sceptical about how supermarkets could support communities because their priority is making a profit. One person also raised the issue of 'greenwashing' where businesses claim to be environmentally friendly for good publicity but do not always put their promises into practice.

The suggestions for ways supermarkets can support communities can be linked to the priorities in the overall findings:

Food/product donations could be distributed by the community centres who have a wide reach in Wisbech and this could support their free meals.

Sponsoring events – the Multicultural Festival could be reinstated to connect residents and celebrate the diversity of the town. The Rose Fair could also be relaunched.

Community activities/Small grants – there is a great need for youth activities. Offering young people positive projects to be a part of could change people's perceptions of them. Activities to support the ageing population in the town would also have a real impact. Supermarkets could partner with existing organisations who are already doing this type of work e.g. the community farm.

Buddying – collaborating with people who know the community well can be a way to start to tackle the larger problems relating to housing and employment by getting to the heart of what is most needed and who is best placed to act.

Summary

The main themes from the interviews and focus group were:

- **People and Community** – ‘people matter’ and the community needs to pull together to support each other.
- **Amenities and Services** – funding cuts have reduced a lot of support, but the Community Centres fill many essential gaps.
- **Space** – people need affordable housing but not at the expense of green space. The town centre should be a safe, vibrant place but residents don’t like it because of empty shops, litter and anti-social behaviour.
- **Ageing and Disabled Populations** – Wisbech needs to be an accessible and welcoming place and people should be involved in designing services/facilities.
- **Opportunities** – job opportunities are lacking and training is limited to particular age groups or topics. There are volunteering and community opportunities but more “joined up thinking” is needed.
- **Politics** – there is a lack of trust in politicians and the council. More transparency about how money is spent could help.
- **Supermarket Action** – they can donate products, offer small grants, support community activities, and Community Champions can work closely with community members to create change.

The Contrasts of Wisbech

The Community Researchers took a series of photos as part of the project to illustrate some of the contrasts in the town.



Figure 3. After a ten year delay the Market Place is being re-surfaced and the electric supply has been up-graded so that it's fit for purpose.



Figure 4. The Council Chamber was re-furbished and transformed into a heritage site. Unfortunately, the Corn Exchange downstairs, where the Rolling Stones played a gig in the 60s, has been empty and unused for nearly forty years.



Figure 5. The Community Farm has an important role bringing people together.

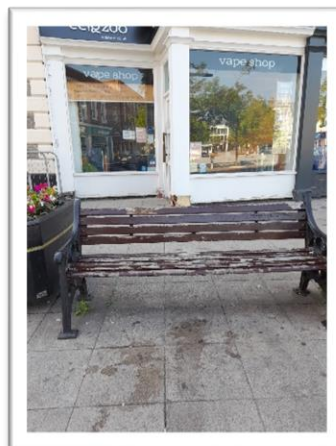


Figure 6. This bench is owned by Fenland District Council but the area in which it's situated is run by Wisbech Town Council and so although the centre has had a million-pound makeover, the bench wasn't included. There is a need for more joined-up thinking and collaboration between councils

Limitations of the Study

The project was time-limited, with data collection taking place in under 4 weeks. The response was good for a community research project, and while the researchers do not claim that the findings represent the whole of Wisbech, they do give a flavour of residents' experiences.

One survey was done in Russian/Latvian, but future work could increase the reach to include more speakers of other languages.

Reflections on the Research

In the research training sessions, some members of the group discussed previous work that had been done in the town to find out residents' priorities. The responses from 1000 people were summarised in the following six categories:

- 1) Bringing people together
- 2) Helping people in crisis
- 3) Heritage
- 4) Youthwork
- 5) Clean and safe town
- 6) Infrastructure (jobs, transport)

The Community Researchers were interested in seeing if the data from this project confirmed the previous research findings. It's clear from the summary above that these themes remain important, with people and community at the heart of the priorities.

The Community Researchers are aware of a lot of achievements over the last ten years, especially because most of the group are active in the community and voluntary sector. They are committed to supporting community members and making Wisbech a better place to live.

In the first analysis session, the Community Researchers reflected on what they had heard in the interviews and focused in particular on the focus group data.

The group came up with a response to include supermarkets:

- 1) Community Champions could be charged with connecting with existing community networks. In any community there are people who naturally connect others around them and work to support people and/or improve the local area. They might be in paid roles at a community centre or acting individually and voluntarily. By **buddying** with someone in the community, the Community Champion would have a ready-made network and a better understanding of the community's needs.
- 2) **Empty shops** in the town centre could be used by supermarkets e.g. Asda could open a small George store.
- 3) Supermarket Champions could **facilitate meetings** in the supermarket community rooms. It's important that there is a paid role so they can keep momentum going for projects.
- 4) Community Champions should **collaborate** with ones from other supermarkets to work together to make change.

More widely the group suggested that the Council could use compulsory purchase orders on city centre units and use them for craft centres and community markets. They also felt much more needed to be done to provide young people with facilities and support.

In the second analysis session, the group discussed the responses to the interviews. They were interested in a comment saying Wisbech had lost its identity and reflected on what it meant to be Wisbechian, especially when it is divided over Brexit. The Researchers had witnessed racism in the town and unpleasant attitudes to people from other countries. They agreed with participants' views on the importance of Wisbech's heritage and believe much more could be done to make use of and share information about the listed buildings and their history.

The Community Researchers recognise that all three community centres provide a wide range of support, advice and community services that are really well used, but all would benefit from additional funding support to provide youth, sports and well-being facilities.

One Researcher added some more context about the Wisbech Campus:

"[It] provides an extremely extensive and diverse range of courses. It is exceptional with a new technology centre and also incredible opportunities at the Kings Lynn campus."

Despite having these thriving organisations, there are other facilities that are underused, specifically the Wisbech Institute and the Castle which is not open to the public. The Researchers feel they could be used much more to benefit the residents of the town.

Conclusion

Wisbech has a lot to be proud of with its rich heritage and the community and voluntary work being led by three community centres, but residents face many challenges. The town would benefit from activities for the older and younger community members as well as events that would bring everyone together. Supermarkets could have a key role in funding these activities and supporting existing work helping those who need it most.