Sheffield Hallam University

Friends and purpose: evaluation of camerados public living rooms

BATTY, Elaine <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7524-3515>, BENNETT, Ellen <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3271-8757>, DEVANY, Chris, HARRIS, Catherine, PEARSON, Sarah <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5049-5396> and WOODWARD, Abi

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Friends and Purpose: Evaluation of Camerados Public Living Rooms

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Introduction

1.1. Context: the importance of relationships and human connections

There is a strong body of evidence that people who are better connected and experience good quality relationships have higher levels of subjective wellbeing which is associated with better mental health, lower levels of morbidity and mortality, improved academic attainment and greater levels of productivity and performance at work.

Conversely, loneliness is linked to reductions in physical and mental health, and increased risk of morbidity and mortality. It has also been linked to increased contact with primary care services, and there is emerging evidence of the importance of 'social cure' processes (through for example social prescribing) as a means of improving patient outcomes and reducing demands on public services.

As a result, interest in well-being as a legitimate policy goal is increasing and there are growing calls for the development of relational solutions to enduring social problems[1]. However, much of the available evidence relates to personal (friends and family) and professional relationships (such as those developed in therapeutic contexts). Less is known about the impact of relationships which do not fall within these parameters or whether there is potential for relationships which are less 'close' to also contribute to improved outcomes, although there is strong evidence that community or neighbourhood belonging is also an important contributor to subjective well-being. In this context, this report provides an important contribution to these debates by exploring the impact of the camerados public living rooms, which provide spaces for people to connect and form relationships which are supportive, but not solution focused.

1.2. Camerados and Public Living Rooms

The camerados movement and public living rooms are described by the Association of Camerados (AOC):

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[1] See, for example, Cottam, H. (2018) Radical help: How we remake the relationships between us and revolutionise the welfare state. London: Virago

Camerados is a movement of people in communities across the country helping each other through tough times.

It's about daily behaviour but also about coming together in places and spaces called public living rooms (in this report to referred to as PLRs) created and run by local people where they can form relationships that will lift them through a bad day or a life crisis. They are used by people at any end of the scale of tough times, from stressed students to bereaved relatives to homeless people.

The spaces run on mutual aid to create two essentials for resilient and fulfilling lives: friends and purpose. PLRs are rooted in the belief that when we look out for others we are taken out of our own problems and given a strong purpose and a connection.

This network of camerados and public living rooms in turn inspire and support each other nationally with the aid of the Association of Camerados (AOC).

A "camerado" was defined by people in the movement as "halfway between a stranger and a friend". During a prototype period (2015 - 2017) people said that what they need in a crisis is someone alongside them who isn't trying to fix them and lets them 'be a bit rubbish sometimes'. When the burden of finding a solution is lifted often the conversations end up finding a way forward.

The movement has six principles that help people to be a camerado in daily life or in a public living room. The principles were devised from years of testing and experience with people in tough situations and are constantly updated by the movement.

They are:

1. It's OK to fail.
2. We don't fix each other we are just alongside.
3. Have fun and be human.
4. We mix with people who don't look like us.
5. We level with each other respectfully.
6. If we see someone struggling ask them to help us, it gives them purpose.

After five years of testing (and 22 years of experience) they stand up as useful ways to increase human connection on a positive and productive footing. The movement finds that they are a useful adjunct to services where these principles are often absent.

The Association of Camerados (AOC) is the small team that supports the movement. It is a collection of paid staff and a team of freelance associates covering multiple disciplines.

1.3. This Report

The report is the final report from an evaluation of camerados public living rooms (PLRs). Case study reports on PLRs in four hospital settings have been produced separately.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 presents key findings.

- Section 3 provides a brief outline of the evaluation.

- Section 4 provides information on how, and why, people access public living rooms.

- Section 5 looks at the impact of PLRs, providing evidence on the difference that they are making to individuals and organisations.

- Section 6 presents learning from the PLRs, exploring what 'works' from the perspectives of those accessing, delivering and supporting them.

- Section 7 presents conclusions and questions for the Association of Camerados to consider in relation to the future development of PLRs.

Key Findings

<div style="text-align: right; font-size: huge;">2</div>

- There is a growing network of PLRs which are held in many places and spaces including hospitals, schools and colleges, community centres, prisons, libraries and in streets and alleyways. Where a PLR is held is not important, but it does matter that PLRs are locally owned and led and remain authentic to camerados principles.

- PLRs are valuable resources to the people who access them, including (but not exclusively) people who may be vulnerable because of loneliness, mental health problems or stress.

- PLRs help people to make connections and cope better with life.

- The benefits of PLRs include feeling more connected, being happier, feeling less anxious and stressed and feeling less alone. These were identified as benefits by more than 70 per cent of those who said that they had experienced a change as a result of being involved in a PLR.

- People get help in PLRs by being with and helping others, and this gives them a sense of satisfaction.

- PLRs are bringing together people from different generations and communities, and helping to make communities less atomised.

- PLRs can improve communication within organisations, by offering a calming and non-threatening space in which people can meet.

Sheffield Hallam University survey of people using Camerados' Public Living Rooms

68%

of people continue to visit a public living room to feel more connected and meet others

60%

of people felt that something had changed for them as a result of using a public living room

of the 60%

77%

of people felt less alone

83%

of people felt able to help others

90%

of people felt happier

92%

of people felt more connected to others

80%

of people felt less anxious/stressed

71%

of people felt more able to cope in everyday life

62%

said they felt more confident

About the evaluation

<div style="text-align: right; font-size: 3em;">3</div>

The evaluation of camerados public living rooms (PLRs) was carried out by Sheffield Hallam University between May 2019 and January 2020. The evaluation has adopted a co-produced approach, working with staff in the Association of Camerados to undertake a process of continuous reflection and development, informed by a number of overarching objectives:

- To work with the Association of Camerados to build robust evidence on the implementation and impact of public living rooms, identify gaps in the existing data and collect new data to inform current and future practice.

- To understand 'what works' in implementation, from the perspectives of those supporting, delivering and visiting public living rooms.

- To identify the impacts of public living rooms for the people accessing and delivering them, for the organisations and communities in which they are held, and in relation to building the camerados social movement.

- To identify questions for the Association of Camerados to consider in supporting future PLRs.

The evaluation has taken a mixed-methods approach, gathering quantitative and qualitative data to build a rich narrative on how, and why, the PLRs are making a difference to the people who are using them, and in the organisations and communities in which they are held.

The report draws on research carried out in nine case study PLRs. In each case study PLR the researchers observed the PLR 'in situ', talked to the people visiting the PLR and interviewed the people who identified themselves as having a role in organising or sustaining the PLR (we have referred to these people throughout this report as 'anchor' camerados). Additional data was gathered through a survey of people accessing PLRs and postcards completed by people visiting PLRs and posted to the Association of Camerados. Interviews with people involved in other PLRs and with Association of Camerados (AoC) staff were also carried out.

Further discussion on the evaluation approach is included at Appendix One.

How people access Public Living Rooms

This section provides descriptive information on how, and why, people access PLRs, drawn from survey data collected by the evaluation team.

A survey of people visiting a PLR was carried out in January 2020. Responses were received from 140 people, representing 31 PLRs[2]. The survey included a mix of closed and open questions.

Data from the survey illustrates how and why people access the PLRs, how frequently they are visiting them, and over what time periods. This data is presented in Figures 4.1 to 4.5.

Figure 4.1 shows that people most often heard about PLRs through a friend or social media. Only a minority had passed by a PLR or seen advertising in the media or through leaflets. There were a range of reasons why people decided to visit a PLR (Figure 4.2), but the visual appeal of the PLRs and the opportunity to meet and help others were common attractions. Around a quarter of respondents indicated that they were curious to find out what a PLR was. The same proportion were also looking for peace and quiet or wanted to feel more connected. Only one per cent of respondents said that they had visited a PLR because they wanted to receive help.

"It just makes me feel OK. It's a place to go in a very busy, stressful hospital working environment where nobody is looking for something from me. I can just be me and chat with others. I love that you don't talk about work in (the PLR)! If I were in the work canteen or staff room we talk about work! It just simply lets me be even for five minutes. I love meeting other people and sometimes I feel I end up telling complete strangers things that are worrying me a vice versa! This is just so unlike me so - this place does something to make you feel 'at home', 'at peace', even for those short five minutes." (survey free text response)

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[2] Further details on the administration of the survey are included at Appendix One.

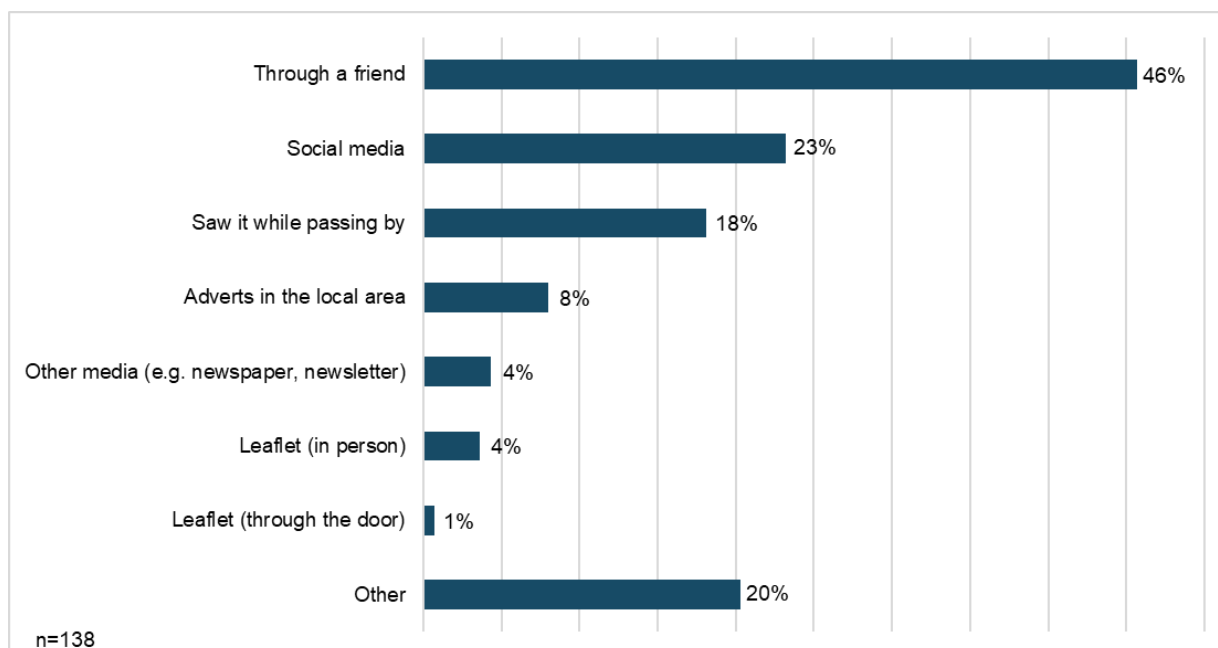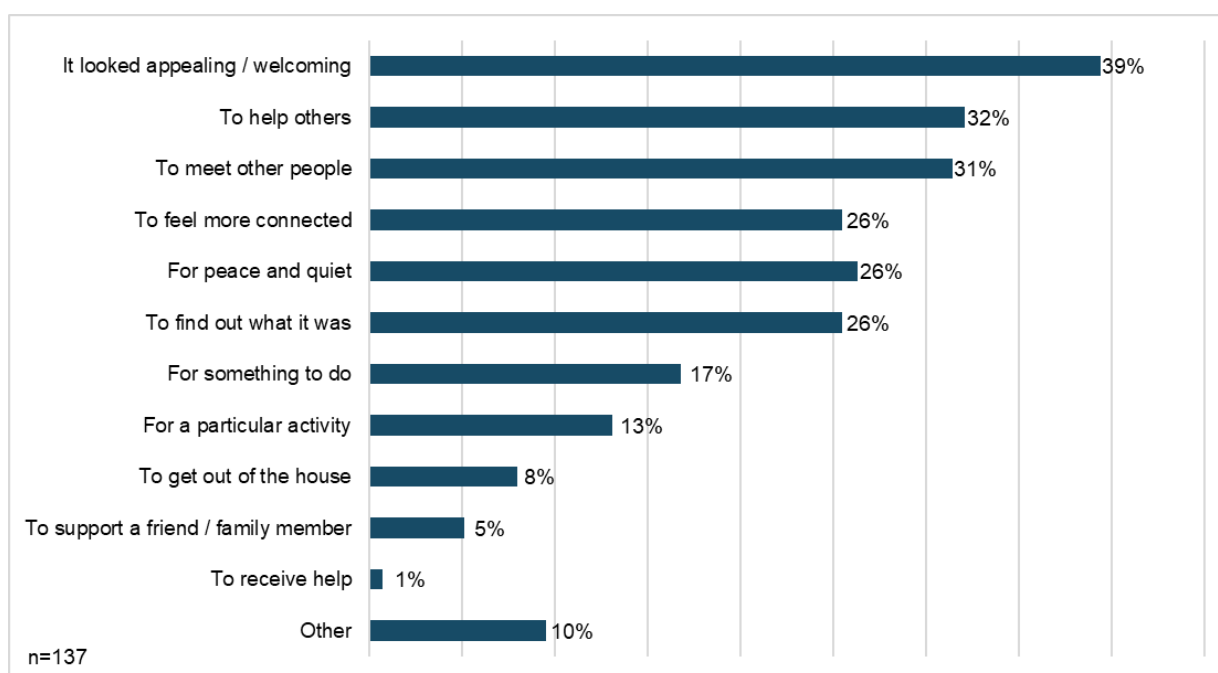**Figure 4.1: How people heard about the public living room**

How people heard	%
Through a friend	46%
Social media	23%
Saw it while passing by	18%
Adverts in the local area	8%
Other media (e.g. newspaper, newsletter)	4%
Leaflet (in person)	4%
Leaflet (through the door)	1%
Other	20%

n=138

Figure 4.2: Why people visited the public living room

Why people visited	%
It looked appealing / welcoming	39%
To help others	32%
To meet other people	31%
To feel more connected	26%
For peace and quiet	26%
To find out what it was	26%
For something to do	17%
For a particular activity	13%
To get out of the house	8%
To support a friend / family member	5%
To receive help	1%
Other	10%

n=137

The majority of survey respondents had been visiting PLRs for four months or longer, and 28 per cent had been visiting for six months or longer[3]. Twenty two per cent of respondents were new to PLRs, having visited for a month or less (Figure 4.3). The majority of respondents were visiting the PLR at least once a week, and 34 per cent were visiting a few times a week. Around a quarter visited less often than once a month (Figure 4.4). It should be noted however that the survey included PLRs which had different opening patterns, ranging from PLRs which were open every day, or run on a weekly basis, or once or twice a term (in schools).

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[3] PLRs had been open for varying lengths of time

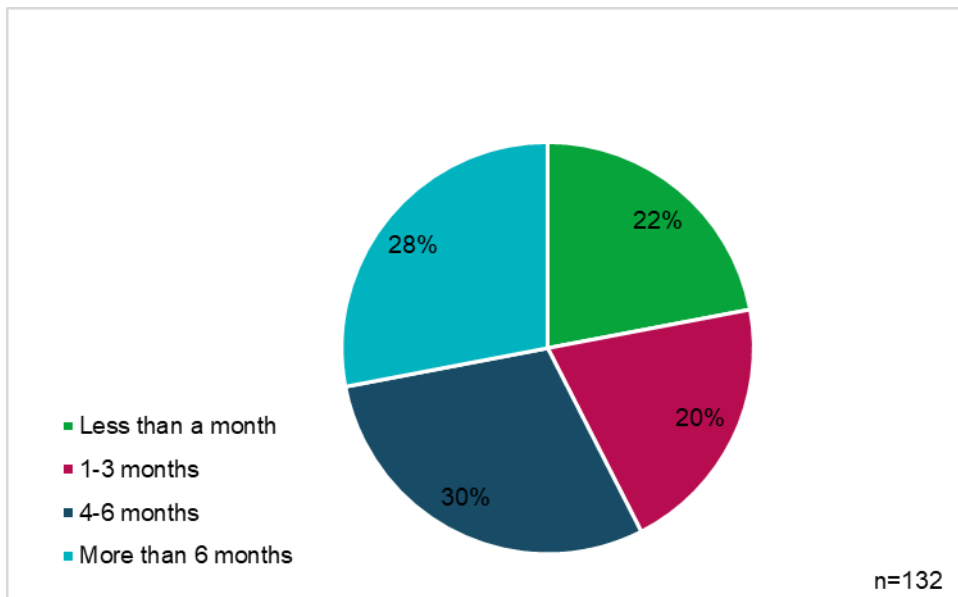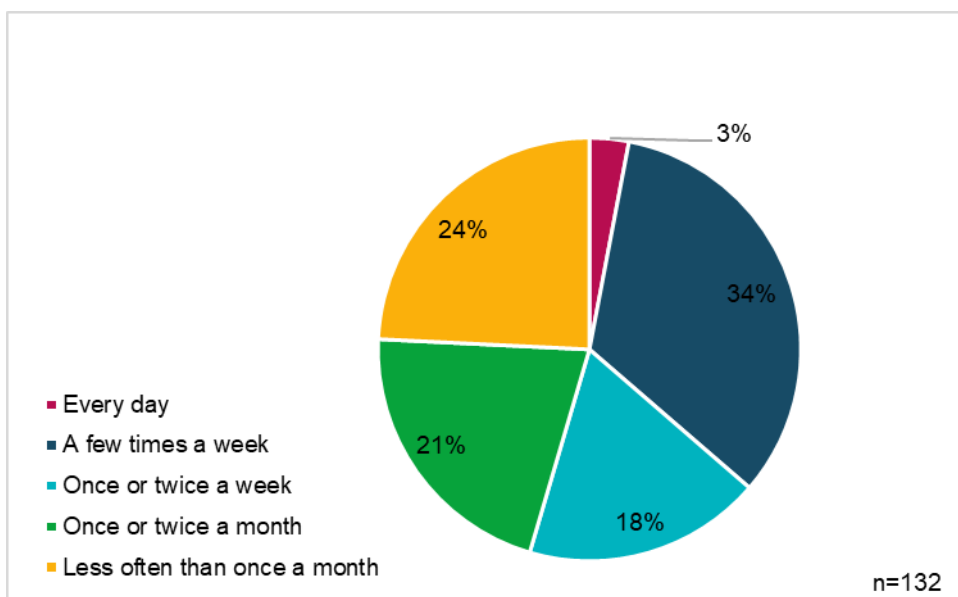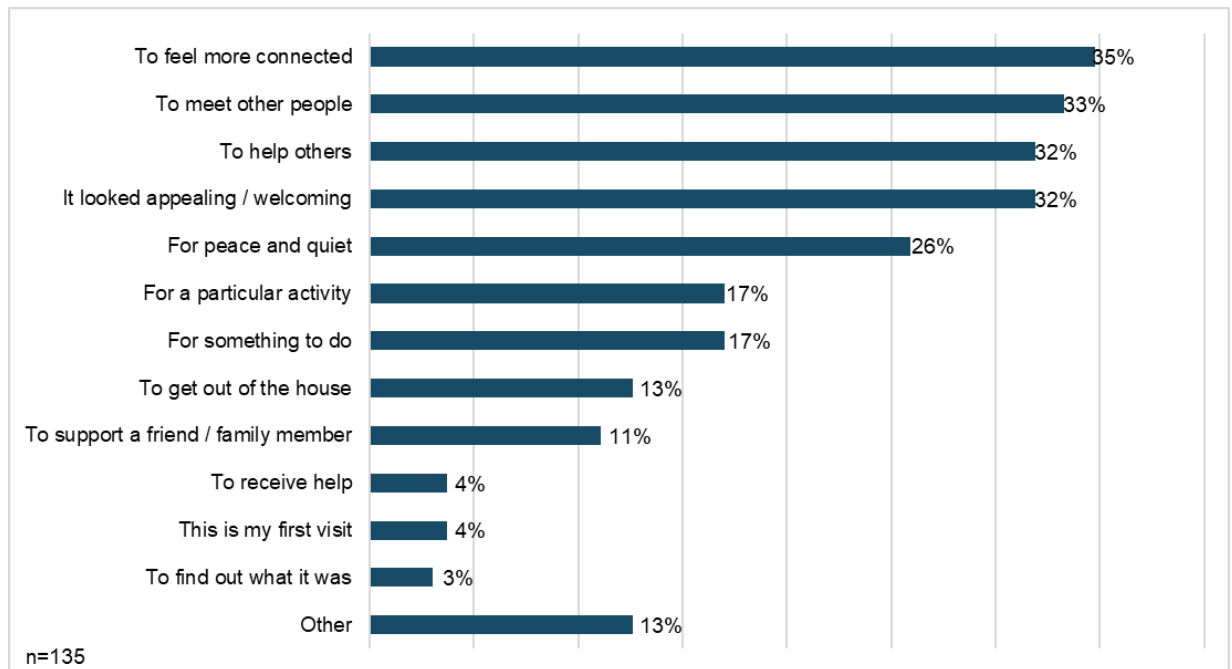**Figure 4.3: How long people had been visiting the public living room**

- Less than a month — 22%
- 1-3 months — 20%
- 4-6 months — 30%
- More than 6 months — 28%

n=132

Figure 4.4: How often people visit the public living room

- Every day — 3%
- A few times a week — 34%
- Once or twice a week — 18%
- Once or twice a month — 21%
- Less often than once a month — 24%

n=132

When respondents were asked to identify why they continued to visit the PLR (Figure 4.5), the most frequent responses were to feel more connected (35 per cent), to meet other people (33 per cent), to help others (32 per cent) and because the PLR looked appealing and welcoming (32 per cent).

Figure 4.5: Why people continued to visit the public living room

Reason	Percentage
To feel more connected	35%
To meet other people	33%
To help others	32%
It looked appealing / welcoming	32%
For peace and quiet	26%
For a particular activity	17%
For something to do	17%
To get out of the house	13%
To support a friend / family member	11%
To receive help	4%
This is my first visit	4%
To find out what it was	3%
Other	13%

n=135

"It's been amazing, personally I have really struggled with mental health and this has become my sanctuary where I can escape and disappear into my own little world." (survey free text response)

This section has looked at how PLRs are being delivered and how people are accessing them. It has shown that factors which are important in attracting people to PLRs and keeping them involved include:

- **The appealing, welcoming and peaceful space that PLRs provide.**

- **The opportunity to meet and connect with others.**

- **The desire to help others.**

The next section explores the impacts of PLRs by assessing whether, and how, PLRs have contributed to changes for people and organisations.

5

The impact of Public Living Rooms

This section reviews the impact of the public living rooms. For the purposes of the evaluation we have identified impacts for three sets of stakeholders: Firstly, we assess the impacts of PLRs for people who are accessing them. Secondly, we look at the impacts identified for the group of individuals who are involved in organising, or sustaining, PLRs - we have called these anchor camerados. Then, this section assesses the benefits of PLRs for the organisations in which PLRs are hosted.

This section draws on data from case study visits, interviews and a survey of people accessing PLRs.

The impacts of PLRs are summarised in Table 5.1. The remainder of this section provides further detail on impacts, and discusses how the PLRs are benefitting the groups of stakeholders identified.

Table 5.1: Summary of the impacts of public living rooms

For individuals	• PLRs help people to make connections, improve their wellbeing and cope better with life.
	• PLRs provide welcoming and relaxing spaces which are an important resource for many different groups, including people who are vulnerable to loneliness, those with mental health problems, and those who experiencing stressful situations.
	• The non-judgemental ethos of PLRs helps to bring together people from different generations and communities.
	• People get help through PLRs by being with and talking to others.
For anchor camerados	• Anchor camerados gain personal satisfaction from setting up and supporting PLRs which help others.
	• Some gain communication and interpersonal skills which help in their professional roles.
For organisations	• PLRs can improve organisational communication by offering a non-threatening and calming space in which people can meet.
	• They provide an opportunity for staff to relax and de-stress which is valued by those working in busy environments.

5.1. Impact for Individuals

The PLRs are accessed by a wide range of people from different backgrounds and in very different contexts. The evaluation has conceptualised changes for individuals in relation to three questions:

- Do PLRs change the way that people *feel?*

- Do PLRs change the way that people *think*?
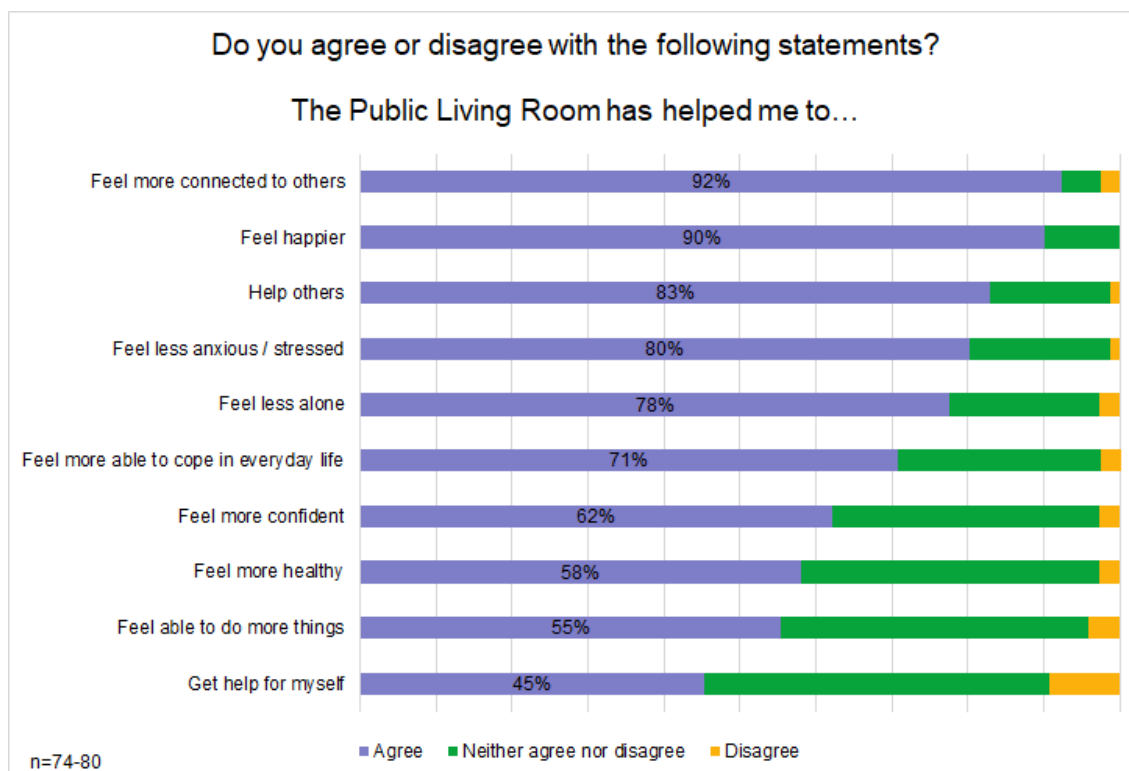
- Do PLRs change the way that people *act*?

Data has been collected through interviews and a survey (see Appendix One for further detail).

What are the benefits for Individuals?

There is good evidence from the survey that people benefit from visiting a PLR. Sixty per cent (n=82) of the respondents to the survey indicated that something had changed for them as a result of visiting a Public Living Room. Those who responded positively were then asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements about beneficial 'think, feel, act' changes which PLRs had helped them with. Their responses are outlined in Figure 5.1. A majority of respondents agreed that visiting a PLR had helped them to make connections, improve their wellbeing (improved happiness, less stress and anxiety, improved confidence) and have a better outlook on life (more able to cope and to do things).

Survey data also illustrates the impact of PLRs on peoples' capacity for help, for themselves and others. Only one per cent of respondents had indicated that they had been motivated to attend a PLR to seek help (Figure 4.2), but 45 per cent of those indicating change associated with visiting a PLR said that it had enabled them to get help for themselves. Similarly, 32 per cent of respondents identified that they had attended a PLR to help others, and 83 per cent of those who said they had experienced a change, identified this as a benefit.

Figure 5.1 'Feel, think, act' changes for individuals associated with PLRs

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

The Public Living Room has helped me to…

Statement	Agree
Feel more connected to others	92%
Feel happier	90%
Help others	83%
Feel less anxious / stressed	80%
Feel less alone	78%
Feel more able to cope in everyday life	71%
Feel more confident	62%
Feel more healthy	58%
Feel able to do more things	55%
Get help for myself	45%

n=74-80

■ Agree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Disagree

How do PLRs benefit individuals?

"The Public Living Room is a genius idea. I have seen many organisations try to over complicate the support on offer for people … often what people need is a way to catalyse them being able to make positive changes that are meaningful to them. That might mean connecting with others, being a listening ear, helping other people and them helping in return or just somewhere to shout out the noise of difficult day to day lives. PLRs are that opportunity: a spark, a moment, a glimmer of hope in the darkness. It's so simple but extremely effective." (survey open text response)

The reasons people came to and carried on visiting PLRs included valuing the space (and the peace and quiet it offered), and the opportunity to meet and connect with people and to help others. These themes were strongly echoed in the case study research where interviews with people accessing the PLRs emphasised the importance of the physical space of the PLRs, and how attending a PLR challenged them to think differently about themselves and others and helped them to build relationships and make connections. We have explored the evidence under three sub-headings:

- **Being in the PLR space.**

- **Making connections.**

- **Helping each other.**

Being in the PLR space

Whilst PLRs are held in a variety of different locations and physical spaces, they share common features (which include fairy lights, comfortable seating and the visual display of the camerados principles). These were important to individuals visiting the PLRs because they created a welcoming atmosphere which was comfortable - like a living room. One anchor camerado reflected on the introduction of the public living room space:

"A living room is friendly, it's welcoming isn't it? Everybody's welcome, everybody's welcome to a living room. It's not a threatening term, this public living room and we always sell it as a public living room. We haven't given it a new name or anything like that."

The PLRs also helped people to relax, and to move around in the spaces according to their own needs. The same interviewee described how pupils interacted in a PLR in their school, reflecting the camerados principles of mixing, and having fun:

"Whenever you go in there it's such a lovely environment just people are talking, they are relaxed, they are not kind of, there's none of that kind of awkwardness that sometimes you get like in a waiting room… they are sitting there or standing or dancing sometimes and they are just enjoying being around one another sharing their experiences, supporting each other."

The pupils' sense of ownership over the PLR was also important in this context, helping the young people to take care of the PLR space and respect it.

In community settings, the unique environment of the PLR helped people to connect in ways that they did not do in formal settings. An anchor camerado in a community-based PLR reflected:

"Often, we are sitting in the PLR, we are having some of our most challenging conversations. And I think it just … it's not as intense I felt when we have those conversations in the PLR as opposed to having them in one of the offices. I think it's just there are no walls, you know there's no, there's no set way,… it's just comfort and so in that comfort it allows you to be you know a bit more honest or you know just live."

Making connections

The PLRs were a catalyst for people to build relationships, in all the contexts and settings in which they were operating. In hospital settings, for example, the PLRs helped to build relationships between colleagues working in different roles and departments.

"Relationships have been built that never were built before……..within the actual Trust itself, the whole health Trust."

In community settings, the PLRs also served as places for individuals to make connections and link with others in their communities who were not like them. The PLRs provided regular routines and space to meet others which sometimes helped potentially vulnerable people to cope day to day. In one area where the PLR was no longer in place people who had attended continued to meet up with people they had met and a new friendship group had been formed as a result.

These comments from a community-based PLR reflect how people valued the fact that they could come to the PLR and chat and meet others and feel less isolated and alone.

> "I come here often to do some writing or reading or whatever but it's to come here in company, but also company that doesn't have an agenda or an aim or a goal…. And you know that's the case, that's brilliant, that's important."

> "I'm a carer and I find that I become quite socially isolated because of that so it's nice that I can focus on…for a couple of hours a week, I can leave that all behind and I don't need to sit at home on my own and I just come along and have company and there's no pressure around it and it's just a relaxed atmosphere…it's nice to be able to connect with people."

PLRs were also places where strong community bonds and intergenerational connections were developed. In one community PLR a wide range of people were accessing the space during the day, providing opportunities for a lot of intergenerational mixing and seniors were able to speak and interact with young people and other people in the community. This was helping to break down barriers in the community.

Helping each other

Earlier in this section we highlighted the survey data which demonstrates that the PLRs have provided a space for people to help each other. Qualitative data from interviews and case studies illustrates how this has happened and why it has been important to those involved. In a pop-up PLR in a school, for instance, pupils visiting the PLR can talk to others who are not in their usual peer groups. This is important in establishing a culture in which there are open conversations around mental health.

> "It's lovely to go in there and hear year seven students talking to year nine students saying 'I am finding this really hard right now' and year nine students saying 'Oh, when I was in year seven I tried this out or the other' …. It's a kind of space where it's permissible to help one another rather than say 'Oh, you are not in my year group or you are not in my friendship circle or anything like that.'"

There have been particularly positive benefits for those students who are helping to run the PLR, some of whom are struggling with mental health and gain a sense of wellbeing from their involvement in setting up, running and promoting the PLR.

The community PLRs have been a catalyst for neighbours and community members to help each other. In one community PLR which was held in a community alleyway,

neighbours who had not met before were beginning to meet outside of the PLR for coffee and to chat, increasing the sense of community in the area.

5.2. Impacts for anchor Camerados

The evidence outlined above illustrates the ways in which the PLRs were helping those who visited them to connect and support each other in a comfortable and relaxing space. During the course of our fieldwork in the case study PLRs we carried out interviews with people who had key roles in establishing and supporting the PLRs. Whilst the Association of Camerados does not make a distinction between different camerados, and non-ownership is a core element of the PLRs, it became clear to us that there were additional benefits experienced by this group, and they had useful reflections on how they could be supported to develop the PLRs further. We have referred to this group as anchor camerados, to reflect their role in setting up, supporting and maintaining the PLRs. Many, although not all, of these individuals had been drawn to PLRs through professional roles and the benefits for them can be characterised as

- **Satisfaction and enjoyment gained from 'helping' others, and**

- **New perspectives on professional challenges.**

Several anchor camerados told us how they had gained personal satisfaction from seeing the benefits that PLRs brought to those who accessed them. One said that the PLR had brought her community together and that this had made a difference to her own perspective on life, helping her to slow down and be more self-aware. She also thought that the skills that had been developed in setting up the PLR could be used to support other PLRs, perhaps in different communities. Another commented:

> "For me personally there's been lots of that as well because I enjoy it as well. I am doing it because I want the community life and it's been beautiful getting to know about people and especially those little ones where I know that people have definitely made an excuse to come out the back."

Those anchor camerados who had set up PLRs in professional capacities said there was satisfaction for them in knowing that people were getting benefits from PLRs. One, who had set up a PLR in a school felt that the pupils were getting a lot of positivity from using the PLR. Discussions about mental health in the school were more open and people were using the PLR to talk to others and discuss how they were feeling. The anchor camerado was able to apply the ethos of camerados beyond the PLR and felt that she was better able to spot when pupils were struggling with mental health. She would then stop and talk to them and check they were OK. Similarly, another anchor camerado highlighted how she has learnt things through her involvement with PLRs (the principles for example) that she had brought into her own work.

Some of the anchor camerados were in touch using social media, and had begun to develop supportive networks across PLRs. One said:

> "We're all trying to do stuff that's quite difficult and so you know, being there for each other, having each other's back you know, I can't solve the problem that somebody's getting kicked out their lease and they're going to have to close their living room, but I can be there for them you know in a similar way. So we're Camerados of Camerados, meta-Camerados there you go."

There is scope for the Association of Camerados to further support this emerging network and to help anchor camerados share their experiences and learning across PLRs.

5.3. Impacts for organisations

> "Our PLR has had the most superb impact upon our hospital - people connecting, people sharing, people feeling able to take a moment of solace amongst the chaos of the hospital environment and much much more!! There are not enough words to describe how simple and yet so powerful the PLR is - a much needed concept in our hospital!" (survey open text response)

Where PLRs were set in an organisational context there was evidence of clear benefits to those organisations. This was primarily in the form of:

• **Improved communication.**

• **Reduced levels of staff stress.**

Interviewees reflected that the PLR spaces facilitated interactions which were different to those that they had in more formal environments. This was particularly the case in the PLRs which were in organisational settings, and where professionals used the space to meet and talk in ways that different physical environments did not allow for. For example, an interviewee visiting a hospital PLR said:

> "So I've had conversations with colleagues in the [PLR] that I'm sure were very different from how they would have been if they'd been in a bit more formal setting. So in that respect, for me, it's a nice environment to have conversations that you're not kind of thinking I need to watch the clock or someone else is booked in this room. So for us as a team it's been that nice safe space, really."

In a school, having a pop-up PLR has had a positive impact in terms of highlighting mental health awareness and building culture that 'it's OK to talk' amongst staff pupils and parents.

"So people who use it, people who don't use it I think just that, the general attitude in school towards mental health is much more open amongst students and staff...You have far more students come to me and I don't think it's because more students are struggling necessarily, but there are a lot more people who will come to me and say actually right now my head's not in a good place, can I talk to you on a one to one person? Whether it's in the living room, whether it's in the corridor, whereas I think a few years ago they wouldn't, they would have kept it to themselves feeling embarrassed or ashamed of it...I am more willing to have those conversations since I have been involved in the (PLR) and I think more staff. I mean there's always staff in every institution who think the mental health, it's not to be considered, but I think more and more people are receptive to it."

In busy and stressful professional environments, the PLRs provided sanctuary for staff, the opportunity to pause and de-stress and to discuss the pressures of their jobs.

"A very special place in a busy hospital setting to get away from the business of the work place and make connections with people at a human level." (survey open text box)

This section has discussed the benefits of PLRs for people visiting them, those who are involved in arranging them, and the organisations in which they are hosted. It has used data from interviews and case study visits, and a survey of people accessing PLRs, to demonstrate that benefits include more, and better quality, connections leading to improved communication, increased wellbeing and people helping each other to get on with life. The next section looks at the features of PLRs that are important in supporting these outcomes.

Learning: What works?

This section discusses 'what works' in the implementation of PLRs from the perspective of those supporting and organising them. It draws on interviews with anchor camerados and Association of Camerdos representatives.

6.1. Supporting not delivering

The AoC has a clear role in inspiring and supporting the PLRs and providing the resources for individuals and organisations to set them up, but it is important that it does not have a role in local delivery. Maintaining local ownership of PLRs is vital if they are to be meaningful to those visiting them. Over time, the AoC has reduced in size and part of this process has been a 'letting go' of delivery models (such as leading their own PLR), and acknowledging that the strength of organisational structure is in supporting the wider camerados social movement. This is not without challenges, one of which is maintaining the authenticity of the camerados and PLR 'brand', however it is appropriate that this role continues going forward. As one interviewee remarked:

> "I think we have struck kind of the right balance between giving you information and letting you run with what you want to do and just kind of touching base to make sure everything's okay."

6.2. Simplicity

A key strength of the PLR model is in its simplicity (both in terms of structure and message). There are a range of motivations for setting up a PLR, but PLRs work best when they maintain simplicity and adherence to the camerados principles. These are in contrast to complex organisational and service delivery models which frame many people's experience of accessing help. The AoC has been careful to ensure that resources for PLRs are directed to individuals and organisations with a clear understanding of how the PLR works, but there was some evidence in our fieldwork of risk that the PLR message was diluted by being strongly associated with particular organisational agendas (around for instance mental health) or activities (such as crafting or repair workshops). Of course neither of these things is inherently bad and there is a strong logic for PLRs to build on local assets in the set up and establishment phases, but it is crucial that they maintain their own identity to be successful. Maintaining oversight of PLRs may become more challenging for AoC as the movement grows.

6.3. Continuous learning

There is a strong ethos of continuous learning embedded into the AoC and the PLRs. As a result the PLRs have evolved over time, and will continue to do so. A number of mechanisms are in place to capture learning and reflection, including the use of postcards (which are completed by those attending PLRs), campfires which bring together camerados, the development of case studies and informal and formal learning activities (this evaluation being part of the latter). Each of these has strengths and challenges. For instance, the postcards work well in organisational settings (such as hospitals) where there is perhaps a stronger culture of assessment, evaluation and 'form' filling but are less well used in community settings where people may be more reluctant to write down their reflections or had concerns about privacy. A mixed approach to continuous learning therefore offers the best approach to ensuring that a wide range of learning is captured and shared across the PLR network.

6.4. Building a social movement

The PLRs are a core element of the camerados social movement. Whilst it is possible to be a camerado without being involved in a PLR, they do provide a focus and physical manifestation of the camerados principles which enable people to connect and share, and a vehicle for increasing engagement. Anchor camerados interviewed for the evaluation identified strongly with the movement and its ethos and valued feeling 'part of something'. Many referred to it as 'a lifestyle choice'. They also recognised that the sustainability of camerados lay in increasing the numbers of people involved, one remarked:

"They want it to be a movement but actually it's an organisation trying to be a movement because there is not enough movers moving at the minute."

Increasing the numbers and reach of PLRs will be an important focus for growing the camerados social movement going forward.

The final section of this report presents conclusions and poses some questions for the Association of Camerados to consider in supporting the future development of PLRs.

Conclusions and questions

This report has presented compelling evidence that PLRs are valued by those who organise and visit them and that for many people they represent an important source of support in the context of a challenging world. This is as true for those who are in crisis, as it is for those who are simply seeking respite from workplace stresses or looking for opportunities to make human connections in fractured and disconnected communities.

> "Camerados literally saved my life. Even in my deepest suicidal moments I need only think of Camerados to stop me sinking any further and doing harm to myself."

> "I think the Camerados movement strikes a chord with many people … Most of all, provision of a safe and inclusive space where all are welcome is the main attraction. It is helping our community start to become less atomized, and individuals are finding a context for building relationships."

These are important ends in themselves, but the evaluation has also demonstrated that the PLRs lead to more and better quality relationships resulting in people having improved levels of happiness, decreased levels of stress and anxiety and feeling better able to cope with life. We were struck in our evaluation by the consistency of positive feedback on the PLRs. This is perhaps to be expected given that the people we spoke to were already connected to the camerados movement (and therefore likely to identify the benefits associated with it) but whilst there were a small number of reflections on how individual PLRs might be improved there was almost universal agreement that the PLRs are a 'good thing'. There are several reasons why this is the case:

- **Local ownership of PLRs has ensured that they have value and meaning to those organising and visiting them; the simple camerados message has been important in facilitating this.**

- **PLRs are often providing a much-needed alternative to complex, hard to access and resource limited services and as such are viewed positively by those accessing them.**

- **There is flexibility in the model which allows individuals and organisations to interpret the camerados principles in ways that are relevant to them.**

The PLRs are central to the growing camerados social movement. There is more to be done in encouraging new camerados to join, and in supporting those already involved to build communication and networks across PLRs. In this context a series of potential challenges have emerged from analysis of the data, which we have presented here as questions for the Association of Camerados to consider in taking forward the development of PLRs and the camerados social movement.

- **Would it be useful to identify anchor camerados as a distinct group who bring skills, capacity and resources and who would also benefit from additional support to develop a community of PLR organisers? Most PLRs at least at the current phase would not be sustainable without an identified person or people to 'lead' them.**

- **Is there an opportunity to improve communication across and between PLRs? Given that camerados is a movement based on relationships, is there too much emphasis on the use of social and print media as means of communication? How can camerados build more opportunities for shared learning between PLRs?**

- **Given that there are (and will continue to be) limited resources in the AoC, how can camerados grow the number and reach of PLRs whilst still ensuring authenticity to the camerados principles?**

- **How can community PLRs be supported to attract more people to them? There was some evidence from our research that some are sporadically attended.**

- **Would it be useful to undertake further evaluation as part of the process of continuous learning? This report has provided a useful snapshot of the implementation and impact of PLRs at an early stage in their development. The Association of Camerados may wish to consider undertaking additional evaluation work which helps to identify the longer-term benefits of PLRs and helps top benchmark changes in the communities and organisations in which PLRs are located against those which do not have a PLR.**

App1: Evaluation Methods

The evaluation was carried out by Sheffield Hallam University between May 2019 and January 2020.

It included a survey of those attending PLRs, case studies in 8 PLRs and interviews with AoC representatives and others involved in PLRs. In addition, in hospital case study sites analysis of postcards filled in by people attending the PLRs was undertaken.

Survey

Key contacts at each of the public living rooms were asked to encourage users of the public living room to complete a short online survey. The questions explored the reasons participants used the public living rooms and any outcomes they had experienced as a result. The survey was open for approximately two months between December 2019 and February 2020 and a number of email reminders were sent out during this period to boost responses. We received 140 responses to the survey from across 31 public living rooms.

Case studies

Case studies were carried out in 9 PLRs. These included 4 hospitals, one educational setting and 4 community settings. In each site the PLR was visited and observed interviews were carried out with those involved in leading the PLR. In the hospital PLRs, interviews were also carried out with people visiting them.

Interviews

11 telephone interviews with anchor camerados and one group interview with AoC representatives was also carried out.