THIS WAS
TOMORROW

EMMA NICHOLLS

Whole Again Communities, Treneere resident

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Treneere Estate, Penzance, Cornwall
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Your name, what you do, where we are, and how you got here?

My name is Emma and I work at Whole Again Communities in Penzance, based on Treneere Estate. We're a community hub that runs an open house - open access for absolutely anyone. It doesn't matter what your background is, or whether you're working or not. We offer help with more or less anything really. People contact me for all sorts, and if I can't help them I can signpost them on to other organisations that can. Other support organisations come in too: food support, water, electricity, stop smoking services, health checks. We've even had the NHS here running vaccination clinics, and cancer awareness workshops. We've got a gardening group, walking groups, exercise programmes, and a lot more coming up - but our main focus is cooking. We cook with all ages, children and adults. We've had workshops just for girls, just for boys. We run children's clubs. So we're very much within the community.

I grew up on Treneere Estate and I still live on Treneere Estate. I did move away for a little while, but still within Penzance, because I wasn't entitled to a social house - I didn't have children at the time. There's another member of staff here who's from Treneere too. What I find is that people can relate to us. Nine times out of ten you go to another organisation and none of their staff live in the area at all. We all do. And we all come from various backgrounds. […] So there's always someone here who has lived experience of the common things that might be happening to people.

We have two sessional workers here. […] Both of them came along to WAC when they were children. We've trained them up and employed them, and they help in our kitchen and with our children's clubs. One of them we've now put in for training - they want to be a youth worker because they want to give back to the community. We offer people the chance to volunteer here

and then we put them in for their qualifications: safeguarding, DBS, food safety. If there's anything they're interested in, we'll always try and support them, and there aren't a lot of organisations that would.

One I can think of off the top of my head: a young person who came here to do cooking […] went to college, did catering, and now runs a restaurant. And he's just from Treneere. What we were saying before about all the bad stuff: people assume that because you're from here you can't get a good job or go to university. But there are other avenues. I count this as a good job and I enjoy it. The boundaries can get blurred because I live here and I'm in the community - it never really stops for me. But I don't mind, because I'm helping.

02 How did the project come about?

Whole Again Communities was started in 2013 by Lizzie Sullivan. She retired in November last year. She'd worked for various voluntary sector organisations […] and she found there was a lot of - how can I put this - gatekeeping. She decided enough was enough and set up Whole Again Communities. She still lives on the estate. She's not working as such, but she still runs the gardening group for the community allotments and pops in here.

Simone came in maybe 2020 or 2021 and worked alongside Lizzie, because Lizzie knew she wanted to retire. They job-shared, and Simone took over in November 2025. I came in by pure chance. My sister's a hairdresser on the estate and she was doing Lizzie's hair. I popped into my sister's house and she said, they're looking for an admin person at WAC. At the time I had a three-year-old and a two-year-old and I'd just left a job I wasn't happy in, and I thought, I can do that. I've been here since 2022 and I've grown with it - I do a lot more now than I did then.

03 Who else is here?

Simone is the CEO and she does absolutely everything - the funding bids, I do some, but not as much as her. Steph does a Friday for five hours and all the jobs we haven't got round to. Up here it's just me and Simone, and then Maggie and Louise in the kitchen. We're all part-time, that's the thing. None of us are full-time.

04 How has this place changed the community?

We're right in the heart of it, like a community centre, and it's changed over the years. When I first came across Whole Again, living here, I didn't know it was for the community. I thought you had to be unemployed or have learning difficulties to come here, and a lot of people had that same perception.

I think we were part of a programme through the job centre or something, so the people they sent along weren't from the community […], and no one really knew what was here. But it's evolved. Before, they'd do lunch once a week and maybe grow some herbs. Over time, with the funding, that's changed - now we're known and people come in from other towns. People knew about WAC but it took them a while to actually come in. They did a lot of children's stuff then, a cookery workshop with the children - I'm guessing that's where the funding was at the time. Now we have adults as well as children.

05 Has the community's view of the project changed too?

There are still people on the estate who could come here and don't, and I've spoken to a lot of them. Some might be dealing with health problems, anxiety or depression - that's why we came up with the delivery service. If someone wants lunch, they contact us and we take it out to them. We do litter picks

once a month, which gets us out and about as staff, so people see we're just normal people. At the moment I think it's the children who are bringing the families in.

A lot of people think you have to be unemployed or have a health condition to use our services. You don't - we're open access. I think that's because a lot of other organisations do have criteria for their children's groups or their services, and we're getting the word out that we don't. […] But we're finally getting the word out. In the summer we're jam-packed. People come over from St Ives, St Just, Porthleven near Helston. It's almost like we need a bigger hub now. We were based at the Salvation Army while this was being built and we had a lot more footfall there, so we're hoping to do pop-ups in town again, because we're a bit further out for some people.

06 Growing up here, you didn't have anything like this. Would you have liked to?

I would have loved something like this. I never went to after-school clubs because I wasn't into sports. If we'd had something like WAC, it just opens up your opportunities and your interests. My parents were working, but if they hadn't been and needed help, they could have come here. Years ago there was none of that.

Anyone can come here and get free food. We've got a community lunch on Friday. People come in to use the Wi-Fi, we've got hundreds of books and activities - it's somewhere people can come and chat. The NHS social prescribers use the hub to meet people. We've had events people might not otherwise get the chance to go to: a year or two ago we had professors down from Oxford University who wanted people's opinions on cancer research and trials. It was good that someone actually wanted to hear our voice.

It brings the community together. Not everyone wants to be part of the community, and that's fine. But we're finding younger adults - 30 and under, say - are starting to come, where before anything "community" was for older people. They meet on a course and become friends and have their own network. And we're community-led, so we listen to what people want. There's a big issue here - probably across the UK - around autism and ADHD. There was no support at all and there still isn't much, so we set up an ND Café once a month, and it's really, really good. We're usually the first to do something. We rarely say no. We try it first, and then other organisations do it afterwards.

07 What is a community?

Everyone helping each other, to be honest. That you're not suffering alone - there's someone you can turn to.

08 What makes this a community?

I've lived here a long time, so I know a lot of people. There isn't a day I could walk down the road without someone saying, all right, Emma. My children know people now too. If you move into a community, sometimes you have to open up to other people as well. Some people won't. But even when I walk past someone I don't know, they'll look at me and smile, and if someone smiles at you, you smile back, and then you see them the next day and say good morning. It just starts.

I'd say people who've lived on Treneere a long time, or have family on Treneere, are very proud to live on Treneere. I don't think you get that on any other estate in Penzance. And a lot of people stay.

09 So it's about the place - being from here, a kind of pride?

Yeah. And we've grown up with stigma. Before I worked here my background was in estate agency.I worked at two agencies, the second an independent one run by the owner and his wife. I was mid-twenties at the time, and his wife offered me elocution lessons. I declined. She never offered them to anyone else. At the time I thought, no, I'm Cornish, I'm going to speak how I am. It's only now I'm a bit older and wiser that I think back - was that a dig? It didn't make me any less good at my job. I was actually one of the longest-standing members of staff. I only left when I had my first child.

There was banter too, along the lines of, oh, you don't want to mess with Emma, she's from Treneere. I used to laugh along with it - I couldn't give a crap, to be honest. But now I look back and that's people's perception of you just because of your address.

As a child I got called posh by my friends on the estate - because my mum and dad were still married and they both went to work. That was classed as posh. But I've never looked down on anyone. The people I grew up with, I still speak to. We might not be as close because we've all got other lives, but we never forget our roots. We all went to the same schools, we've all been through things, and we know we're always there. I think on a social housing estate, that's where you meet your lifelong friends.

And there's a lot of green space on Treneere. We were just out to play, round the estate. You still see it - in the evening this park is full of young people, eight, nine years old. It's usually the children who start playing with each other, and that's how the parents meet. That's how the community starts.

10 Through the kids?

It is through the kids. Not always, but mostly - through the children, and at school. But I find children from social housing might have friends at school, yet they rarely venture off with them. They tend to stay within the community.

11 Do you ever feel you start behaving the way people expect you to, because of where you're from?

Yeah, I can see that. I don't think people mean anything bad by it. Some probably do.

12 Does that still happen today?

Yes. Everyone has their own perception of Cornwall as well - that we're backwards or stupid, that's a whole thing in the UK. And if we're talking about Treneere, I think that's always been there. I don't think it's going to change. But I don't care about other people's opinions, to be honest - that's me, I've always been like that. Maybe we're so used to it. I'm a very honest, sometimes brutally honest person. I live here. I want to stay on the estate. I've got two children and I wouldn't want to raise them anywhere else.

13 The damp in the houses, things crumbling - you mentioned it on the walk.

It's annoying. But what can you do? You get on with it. Even if I lived in a fancy new build in Penzance I'd have the same problem. LiveWest probably do need to do a lot of repairs to the properties […]. If they did standard cavity wall insulation it'd solve a lot of issues, but that's not going to happen. And I can't moan - I've got a roof over my head. My children have a garden to play in. I'm within walking distance of a beach. It could be a lot worse, and it's not.

14 What's good about living here, and what's bad, for you personally?

Treneere is like anywhere. […]

The good thing is it's a community. I've got everything I need - a shop, I work here, the school's up the road, my family's here. You're within walking distance of most things.

Across Penzance, crime is a big thing at the moment. […] There's not a lot for people to do, and not many job opportunities - plenty of jobs, but seasonal. You can work the summer, but come winter your hours get cut. There aren't many well-paid jobs, so a lot of people move out of Cornwall. Housing is a big issue, but I think that's nationwide. I don't think Penzance has any issue another town hasn't got. I do think we're probably a lot safer here than if I lived in the middle of London or Birmingham or Manchester. But we're noticing that's slowly changing.

15 End of the line - you mean the end of the UK?

If you get on a train, you can't go any further than Penzance. Then there's Newlyn close by, a big fishing town, with all sorts of stories. So people come down - because they're fishermen, or want a job. […] And in town a lot of shops have shut. We don't really have any major high street stores. If you want decent shopping you get the train to Truro, and even then it's not brilliant, so a lot of people shop online. But that's probably just Cornwall.

16 Has the town changed much in the last fifteen, twenty years?

It has. I don't know how to put this properly. In a way there's more, because there are more community organisations, more help. But as a whole it's still not what's needed.

17 What would be needed?

More things for people to do. Leisure, I'd say - when there's nothing to do, that can have a negative effect on a family.

Childcare is big down here. There isn't the childcare you'd get in a city, so people struggle. And Universal Credit has changed - people are now told they have to work a certain number of hours, but they can't get the childcare. […] So there's quite a lot of unemployment. I don't want to paint a bad picture, because it's not.

If you ask anyone here what the most negative thing is, they'll say there's nothing to do. But there are things to do - people just don't necessarily want to do them on their own.

18 There's a thing in the US called a food desert: there's land, but people don't have the skills to grow on it.

We had this exact conversation, me and Simone, last week. We grow herbs and vegetables outside, we've done workshops showing people how to grow, and other organisations have outside space and run gardening workshops or sell fruit and veg. The food banks drop food up to us when families don't take it - a lot of pasta, which is easy to cook, and then fruit and veg. […]

I don't grow my own fruit and veg. Sometimes I buy fresh. Half the time I buy frozen because it keeps. My children are picky eaters, my daughter especially, and otherwise it goes to waste. I don't always make sauces from scratch - I buy a jar. Why? It's quicker. Could I find the time? Possibly. But sometimes I'm working late, then I have to get the children from school, they might have swimming, and sometimes I come back here to open up for other groups. It's purely down to time. I think that's what it's like for a lot of people. They probably have got the time, but they're so tired. So yes, people

here could grow their own fruit and veg, but it takes time, and then you wait for it to grow, and we haven't always got the weather. It might work for some people. It won't work for all.

Cooking with vegetables - some people will, some won't. I think it's the children we need to target, because they're the ones who'll grow up with it. People say their children will only eat chips and a burger. […] You could go on about all sorts with that.

19 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

Yes and no. There's a lot we want to do here, but I still think it lies with the government. They don't understand real people. I'd love to say a whole lot more and actually do something real - get something out to the public, even to the government, about what people want. […] But it needs to be heard, because they need to get into real life, and they're not.

The funds that are there aren't what people need. They're not what people want. It's madness. Community hubs like us are funded by the NHS, which comes down from the government, to keep people out of hospital, hopefully. And the funding doesn't even cover running anything here for a month. From someone working in the sector: I don't think the government are doing enough to help people at all. They want to pass the buck to other organisations, but they don't fund where it needs to go. Things are slowly changing, maybe. I don't know.

20 Last thing - one thing you love. Doesn't have to be about here, or the work.

What do I love? Sweets and chocolate and all the bad stuff, usually. My two children - my life changed when I had them. Music: I listen to all sorts, but I like a bit of reggae. It's a very hard question.

21 Anything else you'd like to say that I haven't asked?

You asked me what I love, but you haven't asked me what I hate. Dishonesty, and thieves. It's something I've always said to my kids. If someone's lying to me - I'm very much an honest person, and I'll say something even if people don't like it. I can be very blunt. I've been told that a number of times, and that's just who I am. I'm not going to change.

22 So the one thing you love is honesty.

Honesty, yeah. I'm just real life. Truth.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
A long-term audio-visual investigation by Enrico Policardo.
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