Camerados the Covid years

Introduction

In March 2020 the UK entered its first lockdown as a consequence of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the model of public living rooms changed overnight and the Camerados Movement had to adapt to a physically distanced world. The movement rose to the challenge and this report covers what happened during the period of March 2020 - December 2021 and what was learnt from it by the Association of Camerados (AoC) and how it is now shaping our ongoing strategy and learning.

Key learnings

1. The pandemic hit the public living rooms that were open or due to open hard, this will take time to recover, at current box request rates this may not be until the end of 2022.
2. Parts of the movement are ready to step up and participate/organise some events but not all.
3. Online connection matters to the movement as well as in person at public living rooms.
4. The movement had hoped to continue to grow at or above the pace seen in 2019, but Covid meant this did not happen, whilst folk connected with the movement the number of public living rooms dropped significantly.
5. Being on the streets and being seen leads to new public living rooms starting.

Next steps

1. New focus on learning on a quarterly iterative basis from January 2022, so that changes can be made quickly to grow the movement. Learning partners with background in human behaviour and story collection.
2. Increase the collection of stories/experiences from the movement as a means to understand impact and grow.
3. Build on the desire of movement members to step up to create promotion and events for the movement.
4. Create more spaces for the movement to connect with each other in person and online.

Association of Camerados July 2022.

2020 - the start of the pandemic

At the beginning of 2020 the AoC published the learning evaluation of Public Living Rooms (PLRs) by Sheffield Hallam University[1]. The key findings of the evaluation report were integral to the success of the AoC's funding bid to the National Lottery Community Fund for a further 5 years of funding to continue growing the Camerados Movement. The key findings can be seen in Appendix 1, they show how PLRs lead to folk feeling more connected, confident and happier and feeling less alone, anxious and stressed. The AoC and movement were hoping to grow the numbers of PLRs, however the arrival of a national lockdown on 23 March 2020 meant that all existing PLRs and those due to open had to close and the future of them became uncertain.

What happened to the network of Public Living Rooms?

In 2019 the movement grew and following a trial of the Public Living Room in a box in 2018, a newly designed box was sent out to communities. In the UK ,as of February 2020, the Public Living Rooms opened for a combined 981 hours between them a week[2].

A further 22 communities had plans in the UK to open in the Spring and Summer of 2020 and these could not happen because of lockdown restrictions.

Year	PLRs still open, based on the year they got their box	Number of boxes sent out	Number of PLRs still in development, based on year they got their box	Number of PLRs that closed or are no longer opening because of Covid and/or folk are no longer engaged.
2018	2	12	0	10
2019	14	68	12	43
2020	25	51	13	13
2021	21	34	11	2
2022	11	15	2	2
Total	**73**	**165**	**36**	**47**

Source: Internal spreadsheets and Mailchimp sign ups.

* Closed PLR's in 2022 are not actually closed, they are additional boxes to same space so put as closed to avoid double counting*

The above also includes boxes sent outside of the UK

*** 73 as of 13/4/2022, 50 permanent and 13 pop up.

63% of those receiving boxes in 2019 and 25% in 2020 are no longer actively doing Public Living Rooms - compared to only 6% no longer active in 2021 (when most restrictions were lifted).

22% of potential PLRs in the movement are yet to open.

[1] Sheffield Hallam report March 2020

[2] Lottery bid information February 2020.

Boxes sent out were 50% less in 2021 compared to 2019.

The pandemic and lockdowns, it is fair to say, decimated the growth and opening of Public Living Rooms, some reasons given by folk who could be reached are:

- Waiting for covid to finish and be over and then we will try.
- The Public Living Room in the GP surgery didn't work out as planned due to worries over infection control.
- Change of management team at the college.
- Work role has changed so now unable to pursue the idea.
- Management at work no longer see it as a priority, would like to carry on as an individual but is overwhelmed by doing it alone.
- The cafe where the space was to exist needs to recoup losses due to covid first before it can open up to other ideas.
- We're still not allowed to open our space up to the general public due to our own internal covid rules, but once we can we will.
- One community felt that Camerados didn't add anything to their space that they weren't already doing themselves.

Only one space didn't connect with the idea, all of the others are pandemic related or connected to someone's work role. The reduction in boxes sent out can also be partially explained by more detailed conversations being had with those requesting them before sending.

Positively throughout the pandemic folk were still signing up to the movement to receive information and badges:

Year	Joining mailer	Requesting Badges	Joining and also requesting a badge	Total new movement mailing list members
2019	106	156	19	243
2020	343	192	50	485
2021	257	116	55	318

Source: Mailchimp sign ups, figures include all on the mailing list including those still members but unsubscribed from emails.

Folk still joining and connecting could be attributed to a shift by AoC to creating chances for the movement to get together and be seen more online, as the AoC knew that this was needed to keep momentum. It all began with a movement member in Berlin who'd received a box, who having run a successful online conference business (Conscious-U), said that they could work with us to create an online version of a Public Living Room and so SpoonRooms began.

The dawn of SpoonRoom

SpoonRooms are a space online to meet folk using the listening circle technique, where everyone gets a chance to talk uninterrupted for a specified time and then the chat naturally flows between people from the topics they raise. The Camerados principles are central to the space and define how folk behave within it.

The first SpoonRoom took place on 28 March 2020 hosted on Zoom by the AoC and Conscious-U, it was a trial to see if the idea could work, the consensus was to try it again, this led to regular SpoonRooms every Saturday morning during the first national lockdown and beyond.

Over the first lockdown, there were some iterations on the content of the meetings and how they ran, following feedback from folk:

- Playing music as a welcome, to incorporate the ‘have fun’ principle and show that this was a different online chatting space and to create a relaxed atmosphere.
- Undertaking a grounding exercise, to get folk in the frame of mind to listen to others and be present in the space.
- Posing starting questions in the chat to have as a prompt for those who may be new to the concept of chatting with strangers.
- Increasing the time by 15 minutes to allow more chatting as folk felt 1 hour was too short.
- Reading out the camerados principles so folk knew what to expect in the space, this moved on to them being posted in the chat.
- Having a ‘village notices’ section at the end of the meeting for people to exchange information on anything of interest that they thought others may wish to join in on.
- Creation and training of a group of movement members to be the technical wizards for the sessions and then these people stepping up to host the space, instead of the AoC, so SpoonRooms could become more movement led.

A huge learning came from an unexpected visitor on one Saturday morning, who Zoom bombed the space, meaning that AoC had to change from making the meeting link open to all, to only those who pre-registered. The change meant numbers of attendees did fall slightly after this and then recovered, settling at an average between 20-25 people a week, with folk joining from the UK, Germany, Italy, Portugal, New Zealand, USA,Hawaii and Canada.

Movement members enjoyed the sessions and so they were instrumental in setting up and hosting another session each week on a Wednesday evening; these began on 15 July 2020.

Year	Number of SpoonRooms	Number of individuals who took part	Number of registrations
2020	87	367	1,914 (approx as data missing, based on average 22 people per SpoonRoom)
2021	89	139	1,570

** 2021 saw fewer folk take part but all on a more regular basis, 2020 saw more folk take part but not continue regularly, so 2021 was when SpoonRoom consolidated and people stayed connected with the movement**

The concept of SpoonRooms inspired others to give them a try;

- York FE college used it to communicate with their students during the lockdowns
- Camerados in Essex held their own each week during the second and third lockdowns.
- The Loss Project created 6 SpoonRooms for chatting about grief in the summer of 2021.
- Camerados in the USA, Portugal and Germany set up their own SpoonRooms.
- A camerado used the technique in their role as a facilitator at a couple of online events to create a chance for people to connect.
- …..and the Emerging Futures Fund of the National Lottery were inspired by it and used the idea during one of their monthly update sessions to hear from grantees.
- The Head of Sage Foundation & Employee Wellbeing (part of Sage Software Plc), who had heard Maff speak about Camerados at a pre-pandemic event, approached AOC to ask them to create a way to help employees connect with one another during lockdown. The idea was to work with colleagues from their UK, USA & South African offices to help them create their own SpoonRooms, which they would run for their workforce. This didn't get off the ground during the pandemic due to the resignation of the Head of the Foundation and multiple subsequent changes in personnel on their side (the idea is not closed and but progress on their side is slow).

Here's what some folk who came to SpoonRoom had to say about them……:

It's not rocket science but it does, often, feel magical. In this remarkable space where people are able to connect and share, moving from the silly to the profound and back in the most human of ways. It somehow by passes the fluff of polite conversation and lets us rediscover what it is to be human, to really listen and to care without trying to fix. ***Ruth.***

I log on, wait for the screen to be filled with small boxes of people. Then we chat, listen, laugh and hold back the ….I'll come to that later. So a year on I've made friends with a wide range of people. I've also revealed my inner thoughts, ideas, and reflections on the week, life and which superpower would you have, amongst other serious and fun questions. ***Iain***

Connection really is magic, and #SpoonRoom was brilliant for me. Just that safe space. Not work, not supervision, not having to guard my thoughts. Just to be able to say what I wanted and be accepted. ***Candice***

It's been really good for talking, and getting support, and be with other people and talk about the challenges, but also the successes. ***Tony***

SpoonRooms have really, really helped me in covid. ***Paula***

….. It wasn't all positive though, there were a small number of folk who felt that the concept may be off putting for groups of people who didn't have the confidence to jump on an online call with strangers, so the AoC held a couple of SpoonRooms for new people and then encouraged the movement to introduce it to others and bring someone with them. It's not clear whether this actually helped, numbers didn't dramatically rise or change, and so AoC concluded that other online opportunities may be needed to enable others to take part virtually (more about these later).

As Covid restrictions began lifting in Autumn 2021, the number of registrations to SpoonRoom began to decline and in November 2021 the decision to move to fortnightly spaces was taken, occurring alternatively between Saturdays and Wednesdays. Other online events were beginning to be created by the movement themselves called OverABrew (more detail about these is covered later in this report) and so in March 2022, SpoonRoom ended and merged with OverABrew as the online Public Living Room space.

Bit of Company with a tin foil hat

The Shows

One of the principles of the Camerados Movement is to 'have fun, to be silly is to be human', why? As it creates chances for connection you may not otherwise see. During the first lockdown it seemed like the opportunities for folk to have fun disappeared and so AoC, along with movement members, created a series of short 10-15 minute shows called 'A Bit Of Company' to encourage people to look out for each other.

Over 8 weeks in April - June 2020, 10 episodes of the show were filmed[3] and between them they were viewed over 1,500 times. There were contributions each week from members of the movement ranging from; original composed songs[4] to playing tunes on items around the house, ideas for activities you can do to combat isolation to sharing favourite books and films.

What did people think of them on our social media…..?

Thanks y'all loved this. Hoping for a #bitofcompany in a public living room soon. ***Kathryn***

Thanks that was enjoyable n fresh. ***Antony****.*

Brilliant! My equilibrium is back. Wondered why last week was particularly hard! Missed my #bitofcompany. ***Cat***

Thank you for another corker, loving it all (including the hat) but missed your "favourite" film and a small Scottish scout! Keep on keeping on lovely people. ***Ruth***

Bless you Maff for keeping us company (and cups of tea). You always make me smile and reflect in equal measure. ***Chris***

Love this, giggled throughout. ***Sam***

What AoC discovered from creating the shows was that they took a lot of time to create and that instead of being done by the AoC, the AoC should harness the eagerness of the movement to be part of the broadcast process through contribution as well as appearing in them. The next phases of 'A Bit of Company' - Live, Action, Lite and Chat, involved the movement taking a greater role.

Going Live

On 17 September 2020 'A Bit of Company Live' was held, a 2 hour get together of Camerados from across the movement, creating an online version of a Camerados Campfire. The last Campfire was due to be held Friday 13 - Sunday 15 March 2020 and was cancelled due to the rising concerns about covid, movement members due to come asked

[3] The entire playlist of Bit of Company is available on the Camerados Youtube Channel.
[4] I'm a little bit shit song by Dave Harrison

for more opportunities to connect in a way they used to at campfires, ‘Bit of Company Live’ was a mix of online sessions akin to that.

Some 116 registered for the event and 60 people came along to; hear Srdja Popovic speak and ask him questions, listen to a world class harpist from Italy (who became part of the movement through SpoonRooms), follow the stories of 2 people and why they joined camerados as well a general opportunity to chat in breakout rooms about all things camerados.

A challenge was thrown out to the movement at the end of the get together to go and do something in their neighbourhoods, a group of movement members banded together to begin ‘A Bit of Action’.

Action

‘A Bit of Action’ first met on Tuesday 29 September 2020, completely run and organised by movement members themselves. Fifteen folk joined the WhatsApp group and agreed to meet monthly on zoom to plan ways of promoting being a camerado and PLRs where they live. The first meeting was really positive, although numbers attending post this were much lower and by January 2021 only one person attended, despite promotion to the movement on social media and in newsletters . The Bit of Action group concluded that it wasn’t the right time and there weren’t enough folk able to commit to turning up regularly to get it off the ground.

Some barriers were:

- A sense that the movement needed permission from the AoC to be able to do activism connected to Camerados.
- Folk needing to know that building this type of group takes time and success is not immediate.
- One person felt like they were more responsible for ‘holding’ the group and they weren’t sure they could commit the time and they also felt the group should be promoted more.
- A couple of folk in the group felt that on receipt of the newsletter they should be more involved in conversations about what’s happening in other aspects of AoC work and that it felt like they were out on a limb.

AoC thought the idea could still work and so A Bit of Action was paused for a re-think. The idea of movement led action has since restarted, in November 2021 a group got together and planned events for Christmas 2021 (more on this later in the report).

Creation of Live Lite Shows

Building on the success of a Bit of Company shows and the live event, the AoC was keen to keep the online connection with the movement and especially those not attending SpoonRooms.

A series of 4 interactive shows[5] in the run up to Christmas were planned for each Friday throughout December, all streamed live on Facebook apart from a final recorded version shown on Christmas Day. The hour-long shows were each hosted by different members of the movement alongside the AoC Arts and Activism Lead and including sketches, dancing, improv games, guess that tune and got the movement involved by getting them to send in films of their party tricks.

Episode	Watching at 3 seconds	Watching at 15 seconds	Average viewing length mins	Engagement*
1	482	126	1.06	512
2	280	86	0.57	293
3	413	121	1.29	420
4	913	88	1.01	236

Source: Facebook statistics.
* reactions, comments & Share

Engagement was great over all three episodes however, disappointingly the majority of folk didn't remain on the live stream for very long, only a small group watched all the way through, the feedback on facebook comments was universally positive:

"Guys I so needed this bless you!" ***Isaac***

"Thanks y'all feeling human" ***Alan***

"Absolutely loved this, a very humorous evening, and where are your Christmas spoons?" ***Cat***

"This has been lovely! Gorgeous to hang out with you all" ***Ruth***

"It's been amazing thank you. You smashed it!" ***Carly***

[5] The entire Bit of Company Lite playlist is available on the Camerados Youtube channel.

Emerging Futures Fund (EFF) - stories and chat show

In the Autumn of 2020 the AoC, the movement and People's Voice Media (PVM) worked in partnership to find out how folk felt about the Covid-19 pandemic. The project was in three parts; collection of stories, producing chat shows and taking what had been learnt out to communities.

Stories

Using the Community Reporting Technique and designated SpoonRooms, the experiences and stories of over 65 folk from across the movement were collected and told in 5 insight reports[6].

- Digital connectivity and inclusion.
- Sense of loss in all forms and how life seemed on pause.
- Our wellbeing and reconnecting to our own creativity and nature.
- The impact of Isolation and lack of human connection.
- Existing inequalities were highlighted.

Chat Shows

These themes were used to create a series of 10 live chat shows[7] (2 per theme) in January and February 2021. Each show was hosted by a movement member with one person who gave their story as a guest, along with sketches, songs and snippets of stories from others on the same theme.The shows were co-created by a group of movement members who gave their time alongside staff from PVM and the AoC, showing that movement folk were happy to join in and take an active creative and organising role. In particular several movement members said that it gave them some purpose during a time of another lockdown.

What didn't work well again though was the viewing figures, even fewer folk watched than compared to the Bit of Company Lite, table below shows views on facebook but views across all social media were similar.

[6] The Insight Reports from PVM
[7] The entire Bit of Company Chat playlist is available on the Camerados YouTube channel.

Episode	Watching at 3 seconds	Watching at 15 seconds	Watching at 1 min	Av. min views	Engagement*
1	332	126	64	1.06	216
2	273	86	43	0.57	154
3	273	121	72	1.29	184
4	231	88	43	1.01	184
5	138	57	29	1.03	128
6	208	61	30	0.5	107
7	162	53	32	0.5	82
8	174	55	30	0.35	91
9	187	64	37	0.54	120
10	205	74	36	0.59	153

Source: Facebook statistics.
* reactions, comments & Share

Although great fun to create and watch, our platform and followers were perhaps not large enough to generate the interest just yet, and so the decision was taken not to make any further livestream broadcasts on this scale until the movement and audience were larger.

Taking message to communities

The last element of the EFF project was taking what had been learnt from the stories and the shows out to communities and this was done partially through the Camerados on the Streets events, which took place across the summer of 2021 and are discussed further in a later segment.

HouseParty

In early 2021 it was becoming clear that Covid was going to be around for much longer, and on entering the third lockdown the movement wanted to have the chance to come together, lift each other's spirits and keep the connections going that they had made through 2020.

The AoC and movement members came together and came up with HouseParty, an online version of a party, each one having a mix of music, craft, spoken word and the opportunity to just meet others and chat. Using Zoom as the technical platform, each breakout room being a different room at the party, the concept being trying to emulate the idea of moving from room to room as you would at a real in person event.

The first HouseParty was held on Friday 19th February 8-10pm, and of the 84 folk approved to join, over 60 came throughout the evening[8],15 of which were completely new to the movement.

Here's a few examples of what folk said about Houseparty:

"I was very anxious about joining the party at first but I put on my "mask" & grabbed enough courage to do it! I'm glad I did, everyone was very friendly. I chickened out of the dancing bit but I don't think anyone noticed!!"

"I really enjoyed it. It reminded me of going to the Arts Lab in Birmingham in the 70s to some of their events. I never thought back then that I'd end up living in a virtual world!"

"My brother has Down's syndrome and has struggled through lockdown not completely knowing what is going on he has also had covid and luckily survived it with no lasting complications .When he finally got on to the video chats he had a great time it gave him the boost he needed when it finished he couldn't wait to ring me to tell me everything he had done"

"Last night was just what I needed, to be able to just not do anything other than connect with other people and just dance, has made such a difference."

'I am a gp and have so much contact with people who do not leave their homes. This sort of remote semi- structured activity is really interesting as potential first step'

The event was a real online example of what the principle 'mix with folk not like you' can do as there were people who came that;

- lived on their own,
- joined in with their families and people they live with,
- someone came from their bed with Covid,
- live with mental health illness, chronic pain, physical disabilities, learning disabilities and non-neurotypical conditions
- All age groups
- Different ethnicities
- LGBTQ+ community

Everyone danced and joined in with their family, friends and strangers in the different rooms.

[8] From Learning notes post the event.

Over the next few months 3 more HouseParty events were thrown and over all 4 evenings 330 people registered to attend.

As restrictions lifted people fewer people registered and came to House Party, of those that did whilst they enjoyed attending the space this didn't lead to wider movement growth of folk doing it in their communities by opening PLRs. So once all restrictions disappeared the AoC returned the focus of its work to meeting in person,through Camerados on the Streets.

#OverABrew

One of the learnings from SpoonRoom was that some folk found it hard to step into an unknown space online. The movement suggested that another camerados online space offering an activity could help distract from the anxiety of coming to something new and give folk the chance to connect. #OverABrew was born.

Another learning from SpoonRoom was that AoC wanted to be able to step back quicker from hosting new online events and they be truly movement led, so from the start movement members were encouraged to organise and host the #OverABrew calls.

Starting on 28 January 2021, following a chat on SpoonRoom between a couple of camerados, Knitting#OverAbrew began, held weekly on a Thursday evening, the idea soon expanded to Book, Build, Paper Cutting, Chat Shit and Eat Cake#OverABrew.

54 #OverABrew sessions in 2021

11 movement hosts

56 individuals taking part over the year, some attending multiple events

Some folk that came along had this to say about what #OverAbrew meant to them……

"It was good because I knew I had to come because it does make you feel less alone- but it's easier said than done isn't it"

"It was a beautiful way to spend the morning, gently snipping away over a brew"

"Seeing and hearing you all was the BEST part of my day. 10 minutes that completely lifted my spirits."

"At 49 I have accomplished my Everest, learning to crochet fairy lights"

Over December 2021 a series of #OverAbrew events were put on by the movement. The success of these Christmas events led to the suggestion of changing SpoonRooms, whose numbers had dwindled, and so in March 2022 SpoonRooms ended and was replaced with ad hoc #OverABrews.

The movement #OverABrew hosts are supported by the AoC and over a period of several months have been working together to find a way for the hosts to entirely organise the spaces without input from the AoC, akin to the public living room model. Mighty Networks[9] is a platform that allows people to create their own online communities and arrange meet ups and since March 2022 #OverABrew has had its own Mighty Network, which anyone can request to join and then be able to attend any #OverABrew event.

[9] Camerados Mighty Network for #OverABrew

Camerados in Primary Schools

For some time the AoC had felt that the number of young people involved with the camerados movement needed to increase. Following a successful term spent with the pupils and staff at Church Cowley St James Primary in Oxford, there was a hunch that primary school children instinctively got what it was to be a camerado. The AoC set out to test the hunch through a pilot with 6 primary schools dotted around the UK, working alongside Dr Tessa Reardon from Oxford University.

The Pilot

During the summer term of 2020, emerging from the first lockdown, seven schools (6 primary and 1 infant, whose results were not included in the statistics) were recruited to take part in a Camerados in Primary Schools pilot starting in September 2020, using a mixture of physical, in person and website downloadable resources[10] created in conjunction with an educational consultant.

Key Results

In the Autumn of 2021, the final report from Oxford University[11] was published, below is a summary of key findings.

Children's perceptions had 4 key themes:

- Inclusion and respect: 'letting people in and not letting people left out'
- Personal qualities of a Camerado: 'being kind'
- Help, support and be there for others: 'helps me with my day'
- Friendship and fun: 'having fun is easy'

A few key statistics from the children:

54% of children think being a camerado is about inclusion and respect.

90% of children described being a camerado as helping, supporting and being there for other people.

39% of children think camerados is about friendship and fun.

68% of children described a camerado as a kind person.

A few from the staff:

85% of school staff said a camerado was considerate towards others

[10] School resources.
[11] Evaluation report by Oxford University

55% of school staff described being a Camerado as providing help and support, and of these, more than a quarter specifically mention looking out for others and a fifth mentioned through tough times.

31% Of school staff felt that the powerful principles were a critical feature of the resources.

72% Of school staff said that Camerados had a benefit for the wider community

'It can create a happy inclusive environment where everyone is happy to be themselves'

'try to make everyone feel happy and included'

'Helps build positive relationships

What outside influences had an impact on the pilot?

Covid had an impact on the results and the roll out/participation in the pilot. Some schools were unable to fully use the resources because of the needs of the school during the pandemic. A lot of children were also in and out of school due to lockdowns as well as whole classes needing to self-isolate.

Questionnaires on mental health and resilience for year 6 needed more returns to be able to rely on the results given, matching the questionnaires before and after the pilot was difficult and so there wasn't enough evidence to demonstrate our resources had an impact upon mental health, resilience and self esteem.

Resources didn't contain enough scaffolding learning, feedback from Teachers suggested that any new resources should include scaffolding between the year groups to build upon understanding. For example, some of the language used is complicated for younger children and the concepts can be mis-understood such as no fixing was interpreted as not helping someone when they fell over.

How much any particular school embraced the resources impacted upon the opinions of the children and staff. The schools that used the most resources and did the most saw the most understanding in children and staff, Coleridge Primary School in Rotherham is a great example of what the resources could achieve.

Coleridge school case study[12]

Coleridge Primary School, a vibrant, multi-cultural school based in the centre of Rotherham, had never heard of Camerados before 2020. The Headteacher, Ian Tankard, was linked to the project on twitter by an occupational therapist, who was an ex-pupil of the school. Ian volunteered his school and the whole school community threw themselves wholeheartedly into the use of resources, assemblies, lessons and principles of 'being a camerado'.

One of the reasons Ian felt that the pilot had been so well received by his staff and students, was that the teachers were open to new ideas and to take on new concepts that were

[12] Taken from a recorded Interview with Ian Tankard, Head Teacher of Coleridge School.

different and deliver these enthusiastically to the children, the teachers also loved that they could be free to work with the resources in a way that suited them, their children and school.

Coleridge Primary School went on to develop their own ideas of a camerados bench in the playground, adding the principles to the school values mural and camerados of the week assemblies.

Since the pilot ended Coleridge Primary School has continued to be part of the camerados movement and in April 2022 a mural about Camerados was co-designed with the students and painted in the playground for the school and local community.

Camerados on the Streets (COTS)

In the summer of 2021, there was a desire from the movement and a feeling in the AoC that the time was right to start meeting face to face again, as well as a strong desire to re-ignite and get public living rooms back open.

"This is something that has stopped me in my tracks today- you have made me think, and yet it's so simple'"

The learning from the EFF story collection and broadcasts showed that many folk wanted to get together in their communities so a plan to tour towns with PLRs (or desires to start one) during July - September 2021 was hatched. Covid was still present and this influenced every aspect of what was planned, from the seating, activities and venues.

The movement were involved in designing the tour, its concept of 'When Life is Pants' came from a camerados council member, bringing the laughtervism element into why human connection is important.

"When you put giant pants on, it makes you chat with people in a different way" - Fiona

The tour went to;

Norwich, Wolverhampton, Greater Manchester, Aylesham, Middlesbrough, Hackney, and Rotherham.

Unfortunately the Greater Manchester event had to be delayed until November as the team were exposed to Covid-19 and had to self isolate. Bristol, despite best efforts by the team, wasn't given the go ahead by the local authority so did not happen.

Part of the tour was to figure out what worked for engaging folk, to inform future activism on the streets and this has led work for the summer of 2022 pop ups to promote the movement[13].

[13] COTS learning download document.

What worked	What didn't
Fantastic percentage (65%) of take-up (public living room requests) from neighbourhoods where street activity took place. 11 areas followed through and set up Public Living Rooms.	No direct correlation between increase in movement/email sign ups in those areas where street activity took place.
Blackboard - Folk could write their own messages on what gets them through tough days.	Pinatas, bubbles and tik tok stage made it seem more like a children activity event less time for chatting
Setting up a cosy space for folk to sit in - meant people felt they could stop a while, sit and connect.	Being in parks had less footfall from bypassers.
Giant pants - great conversation starters and social media content, fun way to engage. Tik tok videos	Spent a lot of time creating a QR code with a microsite to engage passers by - people didn't use it. Are QR codes the right mechanism for us to use.
Being on pavements in towns - visible and no threshold to cross, folk engaged with the space.	

Folk who came across the Camerados on the Streets had this to say about it[14]:

'You've made me smile and now we've passed it on'

'I have enjoyed today and I don't normally enjoy my days- it has been random niceness' - John

'Everyone needs 5 minutes everyday to come to a place like this, I sit in this spot everyday and no-one talks to me, having this here means I've met people I'd never have known' - Dave

'We were only coming for an hour'....(they stayed all day) - Michael and Kay

'You have made space for everyone, people think that I am weird, but that's o.k here isn't it'

COTS main impact was new public living rooms starting.

The COTS days led directly to the start of new public living rooms;

'4 out of 7 COTS events started a new spaces, with 6 new PLRs in total'

[14] COTS learning download document.

Gatis Community Hub in Wolverhampton, two folk connected with the hub came across COTS in the town centre and days after the event met to chat about what they could do in their community. A public living room is now held at the Gatis hub two mornings a week, held on a sheltered spot outside the building to encourage passers-by to join them. You can listen to more about the impact of this space in a recent interview.[15]

Norwich had a keen group of local camerados who helped out on the day, who then went on later in 2021 to create a PLR in a local community hub called the ShoeBox. Meeting on the first Saturday of every month.

In Hackney a camerado liked what was planned so much that 2 weeks before the COTS day they held their first PLR in the Garden of Earthly Delights, a community garden in Hackney and pop ups have been happening since.

In Greater Manchester COTS began at an already established PLR in Marple (held on a Thursday morning), with visits to Harperhey, Moston, Rochdale and Wythenshawe. This led directly to 3 new PLRs opening and reigniting an existing one that closed due to covid:

- Rochdale, Spotland Community Centre created a permanent space in an unused room, filling it with recycled furniture and launched in January 2022. Open three mornings a week to folk in the community, Monday - Wednesday.
- Stockport Startpoint Coffee Shop in the Woodley centre, although Stockport wasn't on the COTS visit through social media they spotted what was happening and began their PLR in January 2022 on a Friday afternoon.
- Museum of Science and Industry folk joined us on our tour of Harperhey and took the idea back to the museum to see if they could introduce it as a way of connecting to the local community by the museum. Three trial pop up spaces were planned for April 2022.
- Wythenshawe, had a Public Living Room prior to the pandemic in a community cafe once a week. Due to COVID this closed along with all other PLRs, and sadly never re-opened in 2021 when folk were able to get together again. There was an active set of Camerados in and around Wythenshawe and after the COTS day in November 2021 they decided to give it another try in a different venue. Benchill Community Centre PLR opened at the start of 2022, held every Thursday afternoon. You can listen to more about this space in a recent interview.[16]

Aylesham and Middlesbrough already had active PLRs, which COTS promoted and Rotherham it was hoped to reignite a closed space at a local hotel but this did not happen. However Coleridge School (that was part of our schools pilot), in Rotherham has stayed strongly connected with the movement.

[15] Gatis interview
[16] Benchill Community Centre PLR interview

Appendix 1 Key Findings of Sheffield Hallam University report published March 2020.

- 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