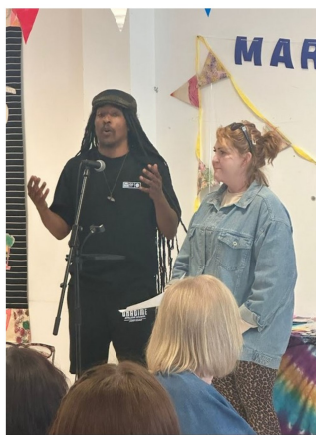




**The Marsh Farm People's Assembly
Futures House Community Centre – Saturday 25 April 2026**



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Executive Summary

The Pilot Marsh Farm People's Assembly

On Saturday, 25 April 2026, Marsh Farm held its first-ever People's Assembly at Futures House Community Centre. Instead of the standard meeting approach, where people sit in rows listening to people talk from the front with a few chipping in from the floor, this was a much more inclusive way of meeting where everybody present can feed in their thoughts and opinions.

Over 150 people showed up, and 120 sat around tables to share views, identify priorities and start to have a real say in the issues that affect our community. The whole point is to kick-start a new way of doing things where residents can regularly come together to make decisions and service providers can be more accountable to the people they serve.

This was an amazing start.

What Did Residents Choose as the Main Priorities?

Everyone got a few minutes to share their personal thoughts on the Assembly Question:

“Our Environment – what needs to happen to make our streets cleaner and our community spaces better used by and for Marsh Farm people? How do we make it happen?”

After discussing and deliberating on the question together, each table chose three priorities and shared them with the assembly. People then voted with sticky stars on a wall chart, so the assembly could pick three priorities for action. The three top priorities were:

- 1. Better access to Futures House and other local community spaces so residents can enjoy more benefit from them.**
- 2. More support, space, and resources for young people in the area.**
- 3. Bringing back the Marsh Farm Market.**

Once the voting was done, lots of people put their names down for "Assembly Action Groups" to team up and actually get to work on making these ideas a reality.

Why Did It Work So Well?

- **Real Conversations:** People didn't just show up just because of a poster or the lovely launch video on social media. Marsh Farm Outreach had face-to-face listening conversations with residents where they live and in the places they go, and knocked on many of the 3,200 doors we hand-delivered leaflets to, to make a personal neighbourly connection.
- **Teamwork:** Marsh Farm Outreach did the boots-on-the-ground organising, The Humanity Project and Marsh Farm Futures (MFF) provided funding, with other groups like Luton Council's Social Justice and Fairness teams, staff and pupils from Woodlands School, lots of community projects, and local businesses pitching in with music, art, and food.
- **Empowering the Community:** lots of people felt the assembly approach gave them space to share their views, discuss them with others and agree action priorities. The excellent turnout was important in terms of feeling powerful and having a voice.

Moving Forward

The event perfectly aligned with MFF's headline aim of: “***working with the local community to understand their needs, maintain their interest, and enabling them to play a role in delivering new services and community activities in the area***”.

We want to run four of these assemblies a year, with the next one lined up for July 2026.

- Action, not just talk: MFO is setting up the first meetings for the volunteer Action Groups to map out tasks for helping to achieve the three priorities.
- A model for the UK: If we build on the success of the pilot event and get the next three right Marsh Farm can be an inspirational blueprint for other communities across the country who share the same issues we do.

Recommendations

The report asks the MFF Board to take five quick steps to keep the momentum going:

1. Agree to underwrite the core costs for the next three assemblies so the team can confidently plan the July event while the partnership looks for extra future funding.
2. Set up an "Assembly Actions Working Party" as per section 26.2 of the Memorandum and Articles to encourage the resident volunteer groups and formalise their interactions with MFF Board.
3. Make the planned youth and resident resource area inside Futures House available and fully involve local resident volunteers in the design and delivery of it.
4. Work with the Assembly Action Groups to get the local market up and running again.
5. Put out a joint press release to show the community that MFF is fully supportive of the residents three choices and are progressing these.



Successful Pilot – What A Great Start!

The first ever Marsh Farm People's Assembly on Saturday 25 April 2026 was a landmark event which if built on, represents a turning point for the way the people of Marsh Farm feel about and get involved in local democracy and improved accountability. 120 people took part in the round table discussions and deliberations with more than 150 attending overall.



The aim wasn't to hold a one-off event and move on, but to kick start the building of a new way of doing democracy in Marsh Farm, where residents are actively involved in shaping decisions about our community, and service providers can be more accountable to the people they serve.

The plan is to hold 4 events in the year, so the hope was to get off to a good start with the pilot event, laying strong foundations for the following three assemblies.

The response was inspiring and encouraging. Attendance was bigger than expected, the hall filled up, extra tables had to be brought in, and people stayed fully engaged throughout the discussions and deliberations.



Group Facilitation

Thirteen local residents and six members of the LBC Social Justice/Fairness Task Force completed introductory assembly facilitation training through our partners at The Humanity Project, providing more than enough volunteers to facilitate every table



The Assembly Question

The question put to the assembly was: **“Our Environment – what needs to happen to make our streets cleaner and our community spaces better used by and for Marsh Farm people? How do we make it happen?”**

At each table, residents took two minutes each (timed) to share their personal take on the question being discussed, with notes taken to make a list of key issues and ideas. Groups were then asked to take 20 minutes to agree on the three issues from their list they considered most important and most deserving of priority community action.



Once each group had chosen their three priorities, someone from each table addressed the full assembly, sharing their three priorities and explaining the reasons behind their choices.



After all groups had fed back, everyone had voting stars to stick on a wall chart displaying all of the priorities identified by the table groups, giving the assembly an overall vote on the three issues people wanted to prioritise.

The three priorities receiving the most votes were:

- 1. Better resident access to and benefit from Futures House and other community assets***
- 2. Better support, space and resources for our young people***
- 3. Bring back the Marsh Farm Market***

Last but definitely not least, residents added their names to a list of ‘Assembly Action Groups’ for coming together after the assembly to take action towards making the priorities happen.

Democracy and Accountability

It’s important that all of Marsh Farm’s elected councillors were not only present, but played a full part in the round table deliberations with residents. This is democracy and accountability at it’s best. With assemblies held every 3 months, our elected representatives will be the most in touch, most accountable councillors in Luton – a change they all fully support.



Cllr Amy Nicholls, Sarah Owen MP, Cllr Babatunde Ajisola and Cllr Rob Roche

After taking part in the assembly, Sarah Owen MP gave a talk to residents about the up and coming 'Pride in Place' funding of £20 million over ten years for Marsh Farm. This was important and gave residents further encouragement and food for thought regarding the importance of meeting regularly and organising ourselves to be able to have a say in where the funding goes.



Sarah Owen MP addressing the Assembly

To bring the event towards a happy and soulful end, Marsh Farm's own Ryan Prazer left his seat at the deliberations table and got up to sing a few songs for the residents and guests. Even though the food rush intervened a bit, Ryan still managed to bring the assembly towards a musical and 100% community led close.



Reflections

At the end of the event, lots of residents told us they loved the round-table discussion approach because it gave everyone a chance to speak and be heard, very different from the usual style of meetings where a few people sit at the front talking while most spectate and go home.

The turnout and spirit of the event showed that all the outreach work beforehand really mattered, proving that when people feel their participation is genuinely valued and confident it's not just more lip service, they do want to and will get involved.

The atmosphere was warm, energetic and hopeful from the moment people started arriving. Most importantly, residents didn't just attend, they stayed, took part in discussions, shared ideas and connected with each other.

This optimism must now be harnessed and built upon, by resourcing the priorities residents identified and by working in partnership to prepare and deliver the next assembly in July.

What the Assembly Achieved

The Assembly achieved much in a relatively short time.

- Moved resident involvement in decision making from zero to a packed hall
- Brought large numbers of local people together
- Connected residents with Futures House and boosted sense of community ownership
- Reflected the diverse community of Marsh Farm
- Strengthened links between local organisations
- Gathered valuable insights into resident priorities
- Proved that resident-led democratic participation works in Marsh Farm
- Started the process of building resident power and agency
- Created a strong foundation for future assemblies

The assemblies will greatly help Marsh Farm Futures with it's headline mission to:

“work with the local community to understand their needs, maintain their interest, and enable them to play a role in initiating businesses, delivering new services and community activities in the area.”

The assemblies also support MFF's primary charitable objective of working for:

“4.1. The promotion for the benefit of the public of regeneration in areas of social and economic deprivation, and in particular in the Area of Benefit (Marsh Farm)”

Last but not least, by encouraging **active** resident involvement in Futures House, creating the opportunity for long-term engagement, and reaching people who don't usually take part, the assemblies also help MFF broaden participation in pursuit of another of it's core charitable objectives:

“4.1.9 The provision of recreational facilities for the public at large or those who by reason of their youth, age, infirmity or disablement, financial hardship or social and economic circumstances, have need of such facilities.”



Costs Projected and Actual

Funding for the pilot came from:

Source	Purpose	Projected	Actual	% of entire spending
Humanity Project	£7,500 pilot funding was secured to pay for 500 MFO hours covering wages for management, administration and delivery of the outreach, listening and organising work.	£7,500	£7,500	61.5%
Marsh Farm Futures	MFF provided £7,500 match funding to cover projected costs for event infrastructure: marketing, food, stands, leaflets, posters, furniture, décor, training, performers, arts materials, venue hire and playpark hire for childcare. In the event we were able to deliver the event for £4,646.14 infrastructure costs MFF provided hall hire for arts and choir rehearsals, meetings and for the assembly 'in kind'	£7,500	£4,593.26	37.7%
Luton Borough Council	LBC provided up to £1000 to cover the costs of child minders and 'X' (tbc) officer hours 'in kind' during the lead up to the assembly and on the day. In the event only 13 children needed playpark spaces totalling £91 childcare costs Childminders not required	£750	£91	0.8%
			plus in kind officer time & resources (printing, stationery)	
			TBC	
			Total Actual Project Spend	
			£12,184.26	
Marsh Farm Outreach	MFO Management and Administration team worked an extra 50% unpaid hours as an 'in kind' contribution to resourcing the assembly.		£1,800 (in kind)	

Background

When in 2025 Marsh Farm Outreach (MFO) were chosen by The Humanity Project and Community Organisers to be one of five groups across the UK to pilot a new kind of democratic participation through People's Assemblies, MFO immediately proposed a partnership with Marsh Farm Futures to pilot the model in Marsh Farm.



The idea behind People's Assemblies is simple: Communities need to create spaces where local people can come together, talk, listen, share ideas, make decisions and take action together. This community empowering approach completely aligns with the aims and missions of both organisations, so the pilot status represented a great opportunity for Marsh Farm.

In January 2026 the partnership between MFO and MFF was formally approved.

Designing the Assembly

A lot of thought had to go into designing the Assembly because we knew people wouldn't attend and crucially, stay for long, unless it felt welcoming, worthwhile and genuinely different.

The early planning discussions focussed on questions like:

- How do we make people actually want to attend?
- How do we make participation comfortable?
- How do we include people who normally avoid meetings?
- How do we make sure the event is genuinely representative of the diverse community in Marsh Farm?

Instead of creating a formal, top down event, assemblies have to be a warm, inclusive and community-led space, where people feel comfortable engaging in conversation and deliberating on issues

This meant:

- Round tables instead of rows of chairs
- Round table discussions
- Trained resident facilitators
- Properly facilitated process to make sure everyone can input
- Food and hospitality
- Music, arts and crafts
- Free spaces for kids in the playpark
- Vibrant community project stalls in the entrance foyer
- Visual displays showing what residents had said during the listening conversations



Working together on the design process not only helped get the event delivered effectively, it built stronger relationships between organisations, volunteers and residents prior to the assembly.

The aim was to create a space where residents could:

- Talk to each other about the estate
- Share concerns and ideas
- Meet people from across the community
- Build confidence and connections
- Identify local priorities
- Start thinking about collective action
- Change the habit of non involvement into one of coming together regularly
- Connect with Futures House as a community owned space

As residents ourselves, we knew many residents were sceptical because people have heard promises before and many more feel ignored or marginalised. So it was important that the Assembly Question and agenda reflected what residents had said during listening conversations and that participation was enjoyable, welcoming and worthwhile.

Music, creativity, food and culture were all built into the event because democracy shouldn't feel cold, formal or bureaucratic, it should feel part of everyday community life.

The Marsh Farm Peoples Assembly definitely delivered on that.

Partnerships

A big part of the reason the assembly was such a success was that different people and organisations worked well together to make it a successful day.

Marsh Farm Outreach (MFO)

MFO led most of the organising work, including:

- Outreach and listening
- Resident engagement
- Volunteer organising
- Planning and delivery
- Data collection
- Filming the event
- Event coordination

As long-term local residents, the MFO team brought strong community relationships, local knowledge and decades of grassroots community organising experience to the table.

Marsh Farm Futures (MFF)

MFF's financial and space contributions were crucial to making the Assembly possible. The support from the trustees in enabling the event, attending design meetings and playing a full part in the deliberations, with and as residents, was fantastic and a great stride towards strengthening connections between Futures House and the wider community.

Luton Borough Council – Social Justice and Fairness Task Force Teams

The council teams were a brilliant help throughout the whole process. They attended design group meetings, took part in facilitation training and were a great help on the day with everything from admin to facilitating table discussions, all while totally respecting the resident-led nature of the event.

The Humanity Project & Community Organisers

The Humanity Project provided funding for outreach and listening work, and provided an additional film crew for the event. As important was the love and support, the facilitation training and sharing their years of experience in assemblies, all of which was invaluable in helping us to get the pilot assembly right.

Community Organisers linked Marsh Farm into a wider national movement focused on community organising and democratic participation.

Woodlands School

Woodlands School pupils and staff played a beautiful and really important part in the event. The children spent weeks preparing artwork and performances, working with Marsh Farm based artists Anoushka Butler and Aimi Rix, and singing practice with vocal teachers Hildia, Grace and Corene Campbell.

The children made a beautiful frieze and sang *Something Inside So Strong* bringing warmth, joy and love into the space, as well as a strong feeling that the Assembly belonged to the whole community, including our children.



The Frieze made by Woodlands School children

Community Groups and Businesses

The entrance to Futures House was blooming with local community spirit and vibrancy, with stalls hosted by volunteers from:

- Luton Urban Radio
- Streetfathers
- Wingman Mentors
- Reclassification CIC
- At10Tive
- Marsh Farm TARA
- Weekly Arts Club
- Marsh Farm Futures
- Luton Supporting You
- LBC Social Justice and Fairness Task Force Teams
- Amber Fusion
- Henge Farm
- Lugus Ceramics

Food vouchers of £7.50 were given to all participants to be spent in one of the Futures House based food businesses Café 1 and Peri Peri, so recycling the benefits of the spending back into the community centre and it's tenants. Café 1 reported their best day trading since opening.



Outreach and Listening Campaign

The listening conversations and outreach were one of the most important parts of the whole project. We knew through long experience that people wouldn't attend just because they saw a poster or liked a social media post. Many residents feel disconnected from 'official meetings' and many don't believe anything changes, so we needed to have face-to-face street level conversations with our neighbours.

What We Did

We carried out 194 listening conversations across the estate, asking residents about:

- Their experiences living on Marsh Farm good and bad
- Ideas for improvements
- Whether they feel able to influence decisions
- Awareness of Futures House ownership and use
- Interest in and support for this and future assemblies

Some were recorded digitally at the time using mobile phone to the Plinth system, others were done on paper and uploaded later. Many more interactions and informal conversations were had but not recorded through the plinth system.

Where We Spoke to People

We met residents in the places they already go:

- Around the shopping centre
- At school gates
- At home on doorsteps
- In public spaces

Knock and Drop

We delivered 3,200 leaflets to homes across the estate using a “knock and drop” approach where time allowed for it. This involves knocking briefly before posting the leaflet and, if residents were at home, quickly introducing ourselves as “your neighbour” and handing the leaflet over in person.

Although this approach is quite a bit more time-consuming than standard leaflet drops, due to waiting for answer and people often want to talk, it is much more effective than just posting the flyer. The personal interaction helps distinguish this leaflet from the piles of other mail typically collected from residents doormats.

Social Media

We launched a social media campaign, starting off by creating a short awareness raising video to be shared on Facebook, Instagram and other social media outlets. The video featured well known Marsh Farm faces including staff from the Purley Centre shops, with a ‘United We Stand, Together We Rise’ theme. The core message of the video was *‘the more of us Marsh Farmers there are, the louder our voices will be’*

Why It Worked

The listening and informal street level conversations were not just about collecting information.

They helped to:

- Build some trust in the assembly process
- Raise awareness of the community led nature of the event and its purpose
- Assure people our voice would be heard and acted upon
- Shape the Assembly agenda around real resident concerns

Most importantly, it showed that residents are willing to engage when approached respectfully and personally.

Creativity and Culture

One of the things that made the Assembly special was its creative atmosphere and community spirit. Artists from the Weekly Arts Club painting live in the foyer, kids sat at the Lugus clay pottery stand making things, and the amazing artwork and photography exhibited by young people from

All helped turn the entrance foyer into a vibrant and welcoming space, topped off with beautiful music played by Luton Urban Radio.

Inside the assembly hall, the Woodlands School pupils singing 'Something Inside So Strong' with Hildia, Grace and Corene Campbell was something special. After weeks of practising the children sang the song in front of the beautiful frieze their classmates had made and displayed working with Marsh Farm artists Anoushka Butler and Aimi Rix.

What We Learned

A few key lessons stood out:

Listening and Relationships Matter

People are far more likely to participate when they feel like their issues are being taken seriously and shaping the agenda, rather than working to somebody else's agenda or being paid lip service to.

Face-to-face conversations in the places residents are already at, is much better than relying solely on leaflets, social media and consultation style meetings at times and places decided by the organisers. This is important generally and even more so when trying to include 'hard to reach' people or groups who feel marginalised

A Creative Atmosphere Helps Participation

Music, food, art and culture helped make the event feel warm, welcoming and accessible, and plays a part in people wanting to stay and engage

Participation Needs Investment

Good community engagement and organising takes time, energy and resources.

Partnerships Are Important

Future Assemblies will need even better communication and collaboration between all partners. The learning from the pilot will be discussed in a debrief session of all partners to improve and build upon the first assembly

Residents Want a Voice

Despite years of frustration and a lot of cynicism, residents clearly care about our community and want to be meaningfully involved in shaping its future. The turnout and the way everyone fully engaged and stayed engaged in the round table deliberations prove this

Evaluation

We are developing an evaluation framework through a participatory process. Drawing on insights from the first pilot assembly, attended by all delivery partners including a researcher from the University of Bedfordshire, the framework is being shaped in real time with partners through collective reflection and learning. It is a "learning-through-delivery" evaluation approach: using each assembly as a source of evidence, reflection, and methodological development that strengthens the evaluation framework in real time.

Conclusions

The first Marsh Farm People's Assembly was a massive step forward for democratic participation and community involvement on the estate, and a firm foundation upon which to build for the next assembly.

It showed that even where people feel disconnected, communities can come together when the approach is based on listening, inclusion, genuine resident power and leadership.

The event succeeded because of:

- The spirit of Marsh Farm people
- Months of outreach and organising
- Strong local relationships
- Creative and inclusive assembly design
- Good partnership working
- The commitment of residents, volunteers and community organisations
- Community Assets – Futures House is the “Jewel In Marsh Farm’s Crown” and we are blessed to have such a beautiful and useful space in the heart of our community.

Perhaps most importantly, the assembly reminded people who needed reminding of something we all know in our hearts: that Marsh Farm people are more than capable of shaping the future of our community when we come together.

The Way Forward

The success of the pilot people's assembly can represent a landmark shift in the way people living or working in Marsh Farm can engage in democratic and community life on the estate. Starting from a position where engagement is practically zero, the turnout and participation, and the spirit of the event, was truly remarkable and really encouraging for the future.

As one participant put it “that made me feel powerful”



The next steps are vital in terms of harnessing the spirit of the assembly, positively reacting to the wishes and priorities identified, and building towards the next assembly.

From MFO's perspective, we are currently organising and inviting volunteers to the first meetings of the Assembly Action Groups. These are intended to be action focussed work shops not talk shops, with work plans, names to tasks and deadlines for completion co-ordinated by the groups. There is a group for each of the 3 priorities with lots of really great people who signed up, so once the date has been agreed these will be publicised across the estate using social media and posters.

Forward Funding

We need to secure funding and resources for the next three Assemblies. The success of the pilot has demonstrated both the value and wider potential of these events, showing that contributions from MFF and Humanity are an investment rather than a cost.

Looking ahead, Marsh Farm has the opportunity not only to break new ground locally, but also to help shape a new model of estate- and ward-level democracy nationally. This is why the Assemblies are attracting attention from the Humanity Project and Community Organisers, who share our belief that this approach could transform how resident voice and power are built in communities with similar communities across the country.

Underwriting the Assemblies

If MFF could underwrite the core costs of the remaining Assemblies now, we are confident that, working alongside Humanity, Community Organisers, LBC and the University of Bedfordshire, additional cash and in-kind support can be secured.

An early commitment from MFF would guarantee delivery of the events, allow preparations and publicity for the July Assembly to begin, and make the Assemblies a visible reality for residents. Funding needs should be agreed jointly by MFF and MFO in advance of each Assembly.

Response to Assembly Priorities

Luton Borough Council's response to the priority of restoring Marsh Farm Market was immediate and positive, with CEO support communicated to Rob Roche alongside a supportive public statement.

A similarly positive response from MFF would reinforce the sense of empowerment residents experienced at the Assembly, showing that turning up and taking part really can lead to meaningful change. building confidence in future assemblies.

Timely and positive action by MFF on all three identified priorities: improving accessibility to Futures House, providing youth space and resources, and supporting the market, will really help maintain the momentum, optimism and "can do" spirit generated by the assembly.

Recommendations for MFF

1. Underwrite funding for the next three assemblies, while continuing to secure external funding with partner support to share delivery costs wherever possible.

2. Establish an Assembly Actions Working Party, under Section 26.2 of MFF's Memorandum and Articles, to formalise links between the Assembly Action Groups and the Board.
3. Progress the youth and residents' resource area at Futures House, and involve residents in shaping, developing and delivering the space through the Working Party and estate-wide engagement.
4. Support the re-instating of the market on Futures House land.
5. Publish a joint press release with MFO spelling out MFF's positive responses as above to the Assembly's three key priorities.

Appendices

1. Launch Video
2. Publicity Materials and Leaflets
3. Listening and Empowerment Survey
4. Summary Report and Key Outputs
5. Finances
6. Plinth Data Graphs and Images
7. Photographs
8. Media Coverage and Articles