

At eight o'clock last Saturday morning I bumped into a queue of Jimmy Choo enthusiasts in the centre of Manchester. I'd gone for a walk to escape from my over-warm hotel room. Here were around 200 people who looked like they'd have appreciated the heat I'd just escaped from.

Sally and Dave, the couple at the very front of the queue had a tent. They told me that'd arrived just before ten the night before. In an hour, their patience was going to be rewarded with first pick of the new range of shoes being launched at retailer H&M. Sally seemed excited, not minding it seems that a drunk had woken her in the small hours, threatening to set fire to their tent.

I was in Manchester to take part in the BBC/Big Lottery Village SOS project. 28 rural communities from around the UK had been short-listed to enter a very exciting competition. Six eventual winners will receive a Lottery grant of up to £400,000 to transform their community. The event was a matchmaking session, at which the villagers meet and shortlist 31 champions; people who themselves have been short-listed to take part. I was flattered to be one of those short-listed champions.

The contrast between the motivation of the villagers in the hotel and the shoppers outside H&M could not be starker. The villages I met all had a very clear vision for their future. They wanted to strengthen their community, develop sustainable social enterprises and replace lost resources such as shops and community centres.

The shoppers on the other hand, had a more materialistic mindset. They considered the hardship of a night on the street to be well worthwhile if it allowed them to spend £100 on a highly desirable new pair of designer shoes.

It would be wrong of me to be critical of the shoppers' motivation. We all have the right to choose how we spend our time and money. What fascinated me was this coincidental juxtaposition of materialism and rural regeneration. The villagers were seeking to make life better in a non materialistic way. The shoppers were not.

I think the BBC and Big Lottery have recognised that the tide is turning; the transition will be slow and gradual. It needs to be. There are a lot of people whose livelihoods depend on the continuance of our current economic model. But as everyone in that Manchester hotel realised, the movement towards self-sufficient, sustainable communities is gathering pace. This project will provide valuable learning and experience to help that journey. You'll have the chance to learn too, by watching the documentary series about Village SOS that will be screened on BBC One in 2011.

But I've left the best news about this project to the end. You see one of those lucky short-listed villages is here in Norfolk. Hilgay is the only village in our region to get through to this stage. They now have to choose a champion to work with them on the project. Three have been short-listed; one of them is me!

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