



# A Nation of Neighbours: Rebuilding Britain from the Ground Up.



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UCL Policy Lab

Demos

Lloyds Bank Foundation



## Meet the Nation of Neighbours Team

Nation of Neighbours is a programme led by UCL Policy Lab and Demos, in partnership with Lloyds Bank Foundation. Co-created with grassroots community organisations, it aims to set out a fresh narrative for national renewal, showing how trusted community groups, rooted in people's lives, hold the key to reconnecting citizens and rebuilding Britain from the ground up.

Behind the programme is a coalition of partners who support rebuilding the country one step at a time. They include:

**Tony Armstong** – Locality

**David Barclay** – Good Faith Partnership

**Emily Bolton** – Our Future

**Anoosh Chakelian** – The New Statesman

**Afzal Hussain** – Witton Lodge Community Association

**Andy Jackson** – Heeley Development Trust

**Chrisann Jarrett** – We Belong

**Lee Pennington** – Open Door Charity

**Nick Plumb** – Power to Change

**Maff Potts** – Camerados

**Nicole Sykes** – Lloyd's Bank Foundation

**Clare Wightman** – Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire

**Ros Wynne-Jones** – The Mirror

Also featured in this report with special thanks for their contributions, are;

Daniel Noruwa, Sarah Ebanja, Annoushka Deighton, Pamela Shor, Tim Jacques, Kaz McAree, Sian Lewis and Beth Powell

# Part One: A Nation of Neighbours

# We can be a nation of neighbours, not an island of strangers

*Marc Stears and Polly Curtis*

Britain feels broken right now. After the few weeks we have just seen, we know that politics-as-usual is in no shape to put it right. But that should not lead us to despair. Because fixing the country doesn't actually start in Westminster or Whitehall.

It starts with the care and graft of people who refuse to wait for permission to improve their own patches. Britain's future does not need to lie in the doom and division of the headlines or the latest political plot, but in the quiet revolution of people simply getting on with it.

Across the country there are people who believe that they can make a difference, rather than those who believe *nothing* can be done. In fact, people look at the headlines, roll their eyes, and then turn back to our communities, our neighbours, and start with the hard graft of making things better.

Real and small acts of heroism already happen in Britain, every single day. Neighbours check in on one another, we stop for a chat at the checkout till, at the school gate, or in the canteen. Small acts add up. Ask people what they think about their own community and they will talk about the neighbour who takes the bins out for someone who can't, or the friend they call to pick up their friends' kids from nursery when they are running late.

They will talk too about the people they know who raise money for the local food bank, join a PTA, start a neighbourhood WhatsApp group, or become a volunteer. It's these people who can become community enterprises, local charities, or community groups that bond and unite us. These small wins and shared experiences add up to something powerful, but they have been overlooked by those in power for too many years.

This is the spirit of health by stealth and it is time we accepted that it is what truly holds the nation together – especially in difficult times.

Far too often in politics, these everyday acts are treated as if they don't matter. They're dismissed as not "big" enough or not the path to actual change. But, the evidence is that they bind us together as a country when so many other forces threaten to pull us apart. They also offer so much more for the future. They show that we have the chance to reject the stale, business-as-usual model, which hasn't worked. That's the model where politicians say, "you vote and we run things" and drone on about "cracking on with the job" or "delivering for the country" while everything descends into chaos around them. In London, it's the mindset which says "we know best", then fails to make a difference.

To make the most of the country we can become, we need a new start. We need those in power to recognise that ordinary communities, small charities and good neighbours are not a barrier to be managed or ignored but are the answer to the huge challenges of our times. The energy of life, the passions and the beliefs we share, the joy and love in our communities – that is the only way we can truly rebuild. That is not empty sentimentalism. It is the lifeblood of change.

All of this depends on accepting a truth the whole country outside Westminster already knows Governments of all parties have let people down for years now. But that does not mean Government just has to get out of the way. Quite the contrary; local councils, mayors and national Governments still have a vital role to play. They shouldn't be meddling in everyone's 'daily lives', but they should be actively supporting and enabling communities and charities to make the changes we all want to see. Government must accept both risk and responsibility. Politicians should be fair and honest partners. They should always take on those responsible for the problems we face: the scamsters, bad employers and unaccountable foreign tech companies that want things their own way. Power should always be on the people's side.

Sharing power with communities opens up whole new ways of solving our nation's problems.. When it comes to health, for example, it recognises that prevention starts in communities, not hospitals. When people have power over their neighbourhoods, they can feel less lonely and more confident, often avoiding the ill health which now blights so many. When it comes to defence and security, an approach of this kind will make us safer and more united as a country. When national security is under threat, we need to act together, not at odds with one another. When we think this way, we realise that strong communities are the hidden wealth of nations; building social capital means building our emotional wellbeing, making us stronger and fit for work. It promises future prosperity.

There is a clear policy agenda to support this work as well. We need greater devolution – not just to mayors but throughout our communities so people feel involved and heard. We need reform of our major public services to ensure that they are freed-up from the top-down target culture that has led to micro-management from the centre and undermined trust, faith and morale. We also need a much more urgent strategy for social cohesion and anti-extremism, and more experiments in involving people in real, thoughtful and engaging democracy at all levels. Power needs to be shared differently. People need to be heard. We all need a stake in the future.

And we need genuinely relatable politics, with leaders who listen to communities, look like normal people and in whom voters of all backgrounds share a belief that they understand their communities and care about their lives.

Behind the headlines this government has made some steps in this direction. There has been the Pride in Place initiative, which promises investment in local places combined with efforts to give local people more of a say in how that money is spent. There have also been reforming efforts in some public services, including the recently announced SEND reforms, championed by Georgia Gould, and the Test, Learn and Grow initiative encouraging innovation in local councils.

But as the Prime Minister himself recently accepted, now is not the time for incrementalism. It is time to insist as loudly as possible that Britain should never be described as an “island of strangers”. We can, instead, be a nation of neighbours. It’s in our DNA. And in that promise lies our social cohesion and political and economic salvation.

*Marc Stears is director of UCL Policy Lab, Polly Curtis is CEO of Demos*

## Part Two: Connection

## Building a better brighter future together

Emily Bolton

When did we collectively give up our sense of agency and our responsibility to future generations?

Optimism feels out of fashion right now. It often feels easier, even safer, to assume the future will be worse rather than better.

I know a brighter future is possible because I see it taking shape. In Grimsby. In Rochdale. In communities across our country.

This isn't about a new central Government programme or a fresh policy initiative. It's about people choosing to take responsibility where they can. Contributing what is within their gift to give. Deciding not to pass their problems on. Choosing to leave something better behind than what they inherited. At Our Future, we work with hundreds of people who are not waiting for permission. They are already building something better. Talent and ambition are not missing. What is often missing is the infrastructure that allows that energy to grow rather than stagnate.

That is the work we have been doing alongside partners in the towns where we work. Not delivering projects to places but helping to put in place the conditions that allow people working for the common good to become more than the sum of their parts. To come together. To back one another. To attract resources. To turn shared ambition into lasting change.

### The Future We Create Together

Imagine a future where communities feel not just heard, but hopeful. Where people feel backed, connected and able to shape what comes next.

Imagine civic institutions that bring people together in practical, everyday ways. Modern equivalents of colliery clubs or working men's institutes. Places and networks where people debate, imagine and build.

Institutions that amplify local energy, wisdom and aspiration. Institutions that embody the future they are trying to create, rooted in trust, collaboration and shared responsibility.

This is not about writing a new list of what is broken. It is about recognising the potential already present in towns up and down the country and creating frameworks that allow that potential to flourish.



The future of a place should not be decided in Davos, Westminster or even the Town Hall alone. It should be shaped by the people who live there and love it. It is the next chapter in a place's story, building on history, identity and shared assets.

In the summer of 2024, we worked with citizens across Grimsby, community groups, local businesses, the football club, the council and Demos to shape a ten-year vision for the town. We used Pol.is, a democratic participation tool that allows people to add and test ideas with one another. The invitation to take part was everywhere. On bus stops. In McDonald's deliveries. In places of worship. At the Citizens Advice Bureau. It was a genuinely town-wide conversation. What emerged was joyful, grounded and beautiful: a vision of a thriving place where there are opportunities for children to stay and build their lives; communities are welcoming; the green economy works for the town; arts and nature make life rich and fulfilling; and the history of the town is cherished and carried forwards into the future.

This vision feels real. It both seeks to reconnect people to the sea, the town's history and identity, while harnessing the opportunities presented by burgeoning offshore wind to ensure the town is back on the map.

This vision developed in Grimsby aligns closely with what the 80-year Harvard Adult Development study, alongside other evidence, tells us about what makes for a great life and strong community: a sense of belonging, healthy relationships and a shared sense of purpose.

This is not an abstract dream. It is a future imagined collectively, grounded in place and history, and oriented towards people flourishing where they are. It is both locally directed and firmly rooted in what we know works.

## Barriers to Transformation

If this is the future many people want, why does it still feel so hard to realise?

From what we have seen over the past four years, there are recurring blockers.

First, we have lost the habit of and often, spaces for, collaboration. In many places there are simply fewer opportunities to build relationships across difference and imagine what could be possible together. When trust thins out, everything becomes harder.

Second, communities are rarely in control of their own destinies. Decisions are often made at a distance. But proximity matters. Without it, local assets are overlooked, identity is flattened and commitment is weak. It is unsurprising so many of us feel powerless.

Third, the stories we tell about places can do real damage. Post-industrial towns are too often portrayed through the lens of decline. When Grimsby was rumoured to be applying to be the UK's first Town of Culture, parts of the media

chose to mock rather than back the ambition.

Cynicism is contagious, but so is belief. If we want people to do bold things, we need to tell the true stories of what is happening now, not just show architect's drawings of what might happen one day, or (worse) reinforce lazy generalisations of decline.

Fourth, money often works against change rather than for it. Short-term, competitive funding drains energy. Too much energy is spent bidding against neighbours, chasing pots that disappear just as initiatives begin to take root. Funding comes and goes; programmes appear and vanish; people are left wondering why nothing ever seems to stick.

The deeper problem is that our current approach funds projects rather than movements, organisations rather than ecosystems, and short-term activity rather than long-term change. It separates social capital from financial capital, when, in reality, the two need each other. Relationships, trust and shared purpose are just as important as money. Without them, investment rarely delivers lasting impact.

That is why we believe we need to rebuild the infrastructure that sits underneath change. In North East Lincolnshire we are working to do exactly that. Not by importing answers, but by building ecosystems that back people, connect assets and give places the confidence and capacity to shape their own future.

## Institutions that support the change

Our Future's focus has been on infrastructure, though perhaps not as you know it.

Since 2021, we have been working alongside people in North East Lincolnshire to build the foundations that allow ambition to stick. That work has been steady and relational: Convening. Connecting. Bringing national partners alongside local ambition. Creating the conditions where collaboration becomes the norm rather than the exception.

From that experience, three things consistently matter.

### A collective of people working for the common good

When people come together around shared purpose and values, something shifts. We see it clearly in North East Lincolnshire. New collaborations are forming across sectors, people are looking beyond their individual roles and there is a growing sense that the future of the town is something we can shape together.

In Grimsby, this has meant building a community of people committed to the long-term good of the town. For example, to turn the ten-year vision into a plan, more than 80 people volunteered their time and agreed on a simple charter to work together for the common good. This meant 24 gatherings over four

months, setting aside potential competition for money to work for the greater good of the town. That commitment matters. It changes how people show up, how disagreements are handled and how responsibility is shared.

We've also seen this play out at neighbourhood level. Working alongside residents, the council, the Health and Care Partnership (HCP) and a national funder, we supported the creation of a new kind of community plan in East Marsh. The plan is now led by people who live there, with institutions backing rather than directing the work. The HCP is now collaborating with other neighbourhoods in the same way – ensuring that the people who live there shape their own priorities and paths forward.

When you create spaces where people can come together to believe and imagine, other things start to follow. In Grimsby this has included the creation of the town's first social enterprise children's home, designed to ensure children in care can stay close to their roots and receive the right support. These initiatives don't emerge from programmes alone. They grow out of trust, relationships, a shared sense of possibility and commitment to your home town.

This is why so much of the work looks deceptively simple: creating spaces for people to connect out of the day-to-day, open-to-anyone lunches for those already getting stuck in, moments of celebration as well as challenge. These relationships become the real infrastructure of change.

### **Telling a new story about a place**

The stories we tell about a place shape what people believe is possible. For too long, post-industrial towns have been described almost entirely through the lens of decline. Changing that doesn't mean pretending challenges don't exist, but it does mean making space for pride, progress and possibility.

In Grimsby, we have contributed to a shared story that reflects what is actually happening. Open House has become an annual moment to bring people together and recognise the change underway. Alongside this, partners like the 2025 Group have been running sustained communications campaigns that highlight real improvements in the town centre and challenge the idea that 'nothing ever changes here'

What matters is that these stories illustrate the change that is happening today. When that happens, confidence grows, ambition feels legitimate again and people are more willing to invest their energy in the future.

### **Connecting people to money and resources**

None of this works if the money gets in the way. Funding systems have too often been short-term, competitive and extractive, draining energy rather than building capacity. If places are to thrive, resources need to be aligned behind long-term local goals, governed transparently and shaped by the people who have a long-term commitment to the place.

Pride in Place is a central Government programme that, in the first phase, has provided £20m to 75 towns including Grimsby. What sets Grimsby apart is how they're leveraging this support into something far larger and longer lasting. In 2025 through citizen engagement there was a collective decision to pool that resource into patient, locally governed capital to create a legacy institution. This will be a new, citizen-led fund, designed to back local ambition and support delivery of the shared ten-year vision. This is a statement of intent: that the future of the town should be stewarded locally, with wealth circulating for the benefit of the place.

Connecting people to patient, locally accountable capital is not a technical detail. It is a signal of trust in the town and a practical way of turning shared ambition into action.

From our work, one thing has become clear. Long-term change does not happen through projects alone. It happens when people have somewhere to come together and when there is money that allows them to act.

To sustain transformation, places need two simple but powerful forms of infrastructure: a collective of people and a fund that works for them.

Built together we believe these have the power to do something important. They turn individual effort into shared momentum and shared ambition into real change.

## **Social Infrastructure**

The social infrastructure for change is named and owned by a place, brings together people who care about the long-term future of that place and gives them the space to grow and create relationships and to work together differently. In practice, this looks like regular moments of connection, celebration and shared work – not committees or formal structures, but a living network.

This infrastructure brings together people from all sectors and backgrounds, recognising we all have something to contribute and none of us can do this alone. We see people build trust across sectors, develop a shared sense of direction and begin to see their individual efforts as part of something bigger. Ideas travel. Collaborations form. Ambition grows.

Sometimes this happens through events or workshops that take people out of the day-to-day. Sometimes it happens through open-to-anyone lunches, shared problem-solving, or public moments that celebrate progress and possibility. What matters is not the format, but the conditions: people feeling welcomed, supported, connected and backed to work for the common good.

Over time, these relationships become the real infrastructure for change.



## A Fund for the Place

A Fund is the financial infrastructure that makes this work possible.

Funding is needed to back local priorities with patient, community-controlled capital. Not short-term project funding, but money that works on the timescale of real change and stays rooted in the place.

The Fund can bring together grants, loans and other funding in a way that supports ideas at different stages, from early experiments to growth and scale. Decisions are shaped locally, through transparent governance, so that money flows towards what the community values, not just what fits external criteria or timescales.

Crucially, the Fund is willing to take risks that traditional funding avoids. It backs people early, learns as it goes and focuses on building shared assets and circulating wealth locally.

In doing so, it sends a powerful signal to residents, partners and investors alike, that the place believes in itself and is serious about its future.

The work we are doing during 2026 is to build this fund with citizens so that it backs and enables the collective vision and supports people across the town.

## One System, Working Together

As a model, the social infrastructure and fund are fully interlinked. The first builds the social capital that surfaces the community's vision, shapes its ambition, inspires new work and helps people back each other in this work. The Fund provides the financial capital that powers this collective ambition. These are not separate initiatives and each strengthens the other.

Together, they create a reinforcing cycle: strong social capital attracts financial capital; financial capital enables more ambitious collective action; collective action deepens trust and confidence.

This is how places move from dependency to self-determination: from being recipients of support to shapers of their own future.

Our role at Our Future is not to own these institutions or control their direction. It is to help bring them into being, support local leadership, and then step back as confidence, capability and ownership grow.

We are at the foothills of this change, excited by the promise of the work and looking forward to working with many of you in this next chapter. This work is not simple, it requires all of us to work and think differently. This paper has articulated the 'why' and the 'what' of this work. Critical to it making a difference is the 'how.' We will be sharing our learning on the "how" over the coming months and years.

This is not a blueprint but a living approach. Every community will implement these principles differently, shaped by its unique history, strengths, and aspirations. The future belongs to those willing to reimagine what is possible and to take collective action. By trusting people, aligning resources and maintaining a hopeful, pragmatic vision, we can build communities we are proud to call home. Please join us in this work, bringing your own wisdom, energy, experience and belief.

The future does not have to happen to us. We can create it together by reimagining what is possible.

## About the author:

Emily Bolton is the CEO and founder of Our Future, an organisation that supports leaders in deindustrialised communities to build a flourishing future. She says she does this work because it 'fills her with hope to collaborate with others who are rolling up their sleeves to make the country a better place'.

Emily has a long record in social innovation through founding or co-founding several organisations and partnerships that have created widespread and lasting change. This includes setting up the first Social Impact Bond at Peterborough Prison and The Drive Project which the Government has scaled as a national response to perpetrators of domestic abuse. She has a deep understanding of the strategic, financial and operational requirements of delivering change both on the ground and systemically.

She was formerly Executive Director and board member at Social Finance, trustee at The Henry Smith Charity one of the UK's largest foundations, trustee at Safe Lives, a national domestic abuse charity and board member of Matthew Bourne's New Adventures, an organisation bringing joy, connection and wonder through dance.



## Place before party: why progressive politics needs a somewhere

James Baggaley

Before there's a politics, a party, or even a politician, there is a place. All great political journeys are rooted in one. A neighbourhood, a community, that helped cultivate our views and ideas before any institution or campaign.

Marcel Proust once spoke of the ways in which places evoke deep memory, as reflections of our own lives fractured by time and experience. He even spoke of a kind of supernatural ability for landscapes and locations to hold a collective consciousness. Faint, half-echoes of the struggles that have been – revolutions, moments of uprising and action.

We can feel it in some of the darkest of sites of our shared history; anyone who has visited the battlefields of Europe knows what Proust meant when he said: "... places we have known do not belong solely to the world of space."

Yet it is not just in the darkness that places become imprinted with this kind of power. There are streets and neighbourhoods that take us back to our earlier selves and to a moment of shared action.

We all have them: streets, buildings, and shared spaces. The field where we played football after school, and where our hearts were broken. The community centres or village halls, the familiar serving hatches worn down by little hands and spilt tea, that carry the memory of a million birthdays and anniversary celebrations. The stands and stadiums where we learnt about community, of collective struggle for victory, no matter the hurt we felt along the way.

In *Nation of Neighbours*, we've sought to understand and explore how community action can shape and build a better Britain. Throughout the project, and long before, here at the UCL Policy Lab, we've been asked why we start in a community or at the grassroots, when so much of what Britain grapples with is large-scale. How do these localised approaches shift the major problems in our economy, our security, or our health system?

Firstly, for all these big things to work, politics must sustain itself long enough for change to happen. Democracy must live and thrive, generating the energy and ideas to power us through times of unrest, such as the age in which we live.

And politics must have an anchor. To withstand the shocks and storms of war and insecurity, it must have firm roots. None of this is possible without a place for political ideas to call home. Without such an approach, our politics becomes unmoored, inauthentic, and even technocratic.

This need for a 'somewhere' is often characterised as a play for the right, but in truth, all political movements find strength from a place-first approach. Be it the

socialism of South Wales, or the multiethnic communitarianism of South London.

For a democracy, renewed through collective action and change, place must play a central role. We cannot bind ourselves to the business of changing a country, an economy, or a society without a story rooted in a beginning.

We recently wrote again about how respect for ordinary people is rooted in politics' ability to act, not in technocratic ways but in radical democratic action. That is when life is hard, when social bonds are strained, people have come to demand more than just 'fixes'. And then, responding to raw anger and the demand for change with clever fixes from Whitehall politics risks doubling down on disrespect, by failure to recognise the scale of the anger and demand.

Place-based politics is part of this.

For voters, the rationale is simple – when they put their faith in conventional politicians of centralised change, with promises, sound bites, and technocratic policies, they fail to get the action they need to restore life to empty high streets and help people struggling to make ends meet.

They've seen local services disintegrate and a growing anxiety over cohesion or violence.

It is why parts of conventional 'centrism' have crumbled as a political force. It is also why any message that speaks to 'measures' and 'promises' risks doubling down on disrespect. In the end, it demonstrates it fails to understand the pain and anger voters have towards a political and economic system that has failed them. Where is their agency? Their part in shaping the system?

In South Manchester, there is a real sense of what change and agency can look like. It isn't some central state – it is local people taking action in small and big ways, enabled by a new type of politics that has emerged from the bottom up. Shared visions of what's possible.

And what Proust was to the modernist conception of place and space, Ian Brown is to Manchester's sense of communal memory. In *Longsight M1*, a song he wrote long after his heyday with The Stone Roses. He provided us with his love letter to his place; he sings of dreams that will always be imprinted with his little part of Manchester.

What drew them back after all those years? "We came out of there; it was where we became us." In the end, someone had to write the story of that place in Manchester where it all began. As Brown said with the pencil Britpop smile, "so why not me?"

Why not me? Why not us? Why not here? You see this time and time again among those who take action as communities and neighbours. You can say the same thing about the group of community organisations that operate a couple of streets over from Brown's Longsight.

Levenshulmes is made up of a close row of terraces, every so often broken by the bright lights of a corner shop. When I speak with Andy, the area's history tumbles out. He tells of the early protest against the library's closure.

The spontaneous protest in 2013 led to a sit-in. Andy, whom I speak to, is a quietly spoken kind of bloke – not an agitator.

"I needed to get home, but I ended up here with 40 others refusing to leave until the council agreed to talk to us." Like others, he became an accidental campaigner. "The library mattered to us all, and we decided we weren't just going to let it go."

Today, the Library functions as a space for all. And the campaign sparked a broader movement within this neighbourhood. Around the corner, Bluebell Green community garden and nature play space, where folks gather to get a break from the daily pressures of life. As one of the organisers explains, for many who don't have a green space, Bluebell has become a vital refuge.

This work is part of Levenshulme's long history of community action: an early allotment movement began here in the 19th century. Small unused parcels of land being taken over to grow vegetables and food for those in need.

Just like those early social pioneers, Beth Powell, the Founder and Managing Director of Creative City, has been helping develop new forms of place-based change. Showing how, through organising, you can breathe life into democracy, beyond elections. Delivering lasting change in the community she loves.

For democracy to thrive, it needs places where action is taken and change is visible. In part because, without a politics capable of allowing us in, we simply walk away or opt for ever more radical forms of action. There is almost no evidence of a return to mass party membership, but that doesn't mean Britain is incapable of building a thriving democratic culture. Party membership was as much about what happened in your community and neighbourhood as it was about the annual conference.

Often, this kind of place-based participation draws people in who have lost faith in politics but wish to find a way back to shared connection and change. Many of those who work to improve their neighbourhood, be it through volunteering at a school council, supporting other parents, or even putting up the nets on a Saturday, are able to build shared values and trust, which are central to a country's ability to flourish.

Just as in South Manchester, so many communities in Britain want to see politics recognise and talk up the achievements of ordinary people. For politics to do that, it must return time and time again to a story of place. From there, we have the capacity to build a kind of radical democratic renewal from which social and economic possibilities can flow.



## Neighbourhood renewal through history: Stretford Public Hall

What happens when communities are the highest bidder? Natalie Covino sits down with *Annoushka Deighton* to learn about the history of neighbourhood renewal and the campaign for community power in Stretford, Greater Manchester.

A dilapidated, Grade 2 listed building, at the heart of a town centre and with a 'for sale' sign outside is an image not unfamiliar to many across Britain. This was no different for Annoushka Deighton, who stumbled upon Stretford Town Hall in 2013 while out walking with a neighbour. Set against a major junction, linking South Manchester to the city centre, the three-storey, Victorian listed building stands proud. As does its community.

Bought for a mere ten pounds, Stretford Public Hall has been under community ownership for just over a decade, led by the Friends of Stretford Public Hall Group. Unhappy with the prospect of this historical landmark being sold to the highest bidder and likely displaced for nondescript town flats, a group of friends met at their local pub to begin a campaign to save the hall and its legacy.

"I probably shouldn't say pub" Annoushka laughs, tea in hand.

Sitting together in the grand lobby, sheltered from the Manchester rain, Annoushka begins to tell me the hall's history, and, with it, a much larger story of neighbourhood renewal.

### A history of neighbourhood renewal

Originally built as a gift to the town by John and Henrietta Rylands, the hall opened its doors to the public in 1879. Rooted in community from the start, the hall provided infrastructure for civic engagement, from lecture rooms, debate areas and a library for public use. Over the decades, the Hall adapted to the needs of the town, becoming Stretford Town Hall, a much-loved civic theatre following the Second World War and eventually, council offices.

Despite being listed for its architectural and historic significance, the building was at risk of permanent decline. Struck by austerity and increasing strain on its public services, the council listed the building for sale in 2013 to offset budget shortfalls, much like other local authorities across the country, from Bradford to Hastings.

Its story might have ended there, but in 2013, local people came together to form the Friends of Stretford Public Hall, with a bold ambition: to restore it not just as a heritage site, but as a living, breathing hub for the community once again.

“I was working as an acupuncturist, part-time, and looking after the kids the rest of the time. I didn’t know much about the hall at the time. Me and a mate were walking past, stuck our heads into this foyer and just fell in love. We absolutely went, well, no, they can’t sell it, they can’t sell it.”

With help from a locality advisor, local architect and support from neighbours, the community managed to write a comprehensive bid to secure the Hall and list it as an Asset of Community Value (ACV). The process was labour-intensive, nerve wracking and for many, completely new.

“We put up a few posters and organised a meeting in the local pub, where fifty people turned up. I thought wow, I had never spoken in front of anyone,” Annoushka reflects, with a small smile.

I can still sense of feeling of surprise as Annoushka recalls what happened.

“March 30th. That’s when they said that we could have the building for ten pounds. Within six weeks we had the keys.”

### Community life in Stretford

Fast forward to today and Stretford Public Hall is buzzing with activity. As I walk through the building with Annoushka, it’s clear how busy and well-loved the space has become. The hall is now home to more than 30 tenants, many of them artists and creative practitioners, who rent it for studios, workshops and co-working spaces. From dementia cafés to weekly toddler groups, the building serves a wide range of local community activities, offering an open and accessible place to come together and connect.

Speaking to Annoushka, it was clear that creating a space for expression was clear from the offset this was important from the offset.

“Stretford always had a bit of a reputation of being a bit rough and uncultured. We really wanted to put an art exhibition at the early doors for local artists to kind of go ‘yeah there is culture here, there is something to be proud of’.”

Annouska notes that the volunteering opportunities and jobs created through the Hall have played a part in revitalising the wider Stretford community, helping residents feel connected to both the building and each other.

The pandemic was a real turning point, with the Hall quickly mobilising over thirty volunteers in a matter of days to become a Community Response Hub for the Trafford region. They now co-ordinate over 140 volunteers across six hubs in Trafford.



She recalls fondly a couple volunteering, who told her they had had their wedding in the hall over 30 years earlier.

“Without this space so many of those connections wouldn’t be made.”

Annoushka tells me there is a new community history project being launched by the Hall on John Rylands, to better understand the legacy of colonialism in the town. Powered by the local community, it is just one example of how people are reclaiming the historical prominence of the Hall and understanding it through a lens reflective of present day.

### Relational public services

Annoushka is clear that without collaboration, genuine appetite for change and faith in the connections forged across civil society – between neighbours, voluntary organisations, public services – this work would not be possible.

Now advising on the Architectural Heritage Fund, Annoushka says there are countless cases where bids to secure community assets face the same hurdles, be it capacity or cost related. Where properties are sold to the highest bidder, as opposed to what might boost the local economy and strengthen local pride.

*“The process actually in itself creates community cohesion. It creates the ability for partnership working to be on a much more equal and in-depth level, and if you get service users involved as well, not only do they feel more empowered, but the services that are also created tend to be a better fit for purpose, let alone much more cost effective. So, it’s sort of win-win all around.”*

This spirit of collaboration continues with the work Annoushka leads on as part of the *GM Live Well* programme. Together, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), local councils, NHS and the voluntary community sector are leading the *GM Live Well* programme, to radically transform public services and tackle the barriers that prevent people from thriving in their local area. Building on the need for a more relational approach to public services, the programme is underpinned by reforming delivery at a neighbourhood level, and across key actors.

You can hear the excitement as Annoushka speaks to the covenant they are creating. Representing areas across the Trafford region, community groups are coming together with local services, commissioners, neighbourhood health services and the regional authority to address how best to help local people. Here lies genuine potential for regional change, formed on the basis that power needs to shift.

A local authority worker characterised *GM Live Well* as the glue between effective public service delivery and the work happening at a neighbourhood level. Through a relational, design-led approach, public services are able to engage directly with citizens and communities, fostering the trust necessary for sustained engagement and building more preventative, as opposed to responsive, services.

### Community power

A core leader in We’re Right Here’s campaign for the Community Power Act, Annoushka has long argued that people should have real say over the places where they live. With the Community Power Act now passed, what comes next?

“We need to trust people,” she says, “to make their own decisions and do what they know is best for their neighbourhoods.”

What has unfolded in Stretford is the result of exactly that trust. A shared leap of faith, taken by neighbours, practitioners, commissioners and local institutions has revived a deep-rooted tradition of civic life. Its impact is not just visible in a busy public hall, but felt in the confidence, connections and collective power that now define the neighbourhood.

Stretford Public Hall shows that community renewal is rarely driven by buildings alone, but by the relationships built within them. From its role as a creative hub to a crisis response centre, and now as a testing ground for more relational, community-led public services, the Hall has become a living example of what can happen when power, trust and space are shared locally.

The neighbourhood taking shape in Stretford has not been engineered from the top down, but grown through connection, among neighbours, volunteers, artists and public services, grounded in the simple idea that people, when trusted, are best placed to shape the places they live.

# What do you love about Stretford?

That everybody  
take to you

My wee  
girl...  
Stretford  
Moll!

SUPPORT  
THE  
MELVILLE

EVAN'S  
STREET !!!

I love the  
new road  
layout +  
planting  
excellent.

Public Hall  
The Escalator  
The Canal  
The Parks (Shower  
about Longford Hall  
The Transpennine Trail  
The New Kingsway

People  
are  
REAL!

ARCADE  
CINEMA

THE POCKET  
Park on vine  
ROAD

Walks  
down  
the canal

P.S please visit  
and don't miss  
the change!

DECO  
+  
CANAL.

The  
vibe!

Spending  
time with  
friends and  
family.  
S sale

Going to  
dig for  
Sho...

EVERYTHING  
😊😊😊😊😊

New Resident  
up + coming!  
NOT scruffy  
Cherton

the history, it  
should be  
celebrated  
more!

New  
Mall + shops  
if you want  
more shop  
shopping on  
AMAZON

EVER  
YTHI  
NG!

So much  
effort by  
Stretford.  
People's  
providing so  
much for  
community

The new, im  
road by  
Stretford Mall

I have  
no bloody  
idea. I know  
like everything  
MCR

All the  
families!

Place that things  
are happening  
that  
centre is  
being  
regenerated.

I love the  
Community  
Spirit.  
And art de  
landmarks

The people!  
Everyone looks  
out for each  
other in  
Stretford :)

That I live  
here  
secretly  
Lola

def  
🍷

Everything  
😊😊😊  
That I love  
hear

Love the  
Public hall  
Harriet

I Love  
Shool  
!!

Victoria



## Placing joy in the heart of our health service

*Lee Pennington*

Open Door Charity is on a mission to change the way people think about mental health: to shift the personality of support, to reposition where mental health sits within the community and to spark a new, more visible and more hopeful national conversation. We want mental wellness to live in places where it has never been able to before. But we cannot do this alone.

We are fortunate to exist in a part of the world shaped by brave commissioning, ambitious third-sector leadership and a rich, varied ecosystem of organisations. Yes, the sector faces the familiar challenges – competition for funding, shrinking grants, overwhelming demand – but it is also a place where people try to work together in a way that makes the whole greater than the sum of its parts. We get along, we collaborate, we care deeply, and we learn constantly, mistakes and all.

Right now, we are at an exciting moment. We are building our core strengths and thinking in a one-system way: reimagining how public, private and third-sector services can work with greater reach, greater power and greater resources when they do it together. This part of the world has real superpowers. It is a place defined by kindness, neighbourliness and a deep instinct for community. You see it in the values of our football clubs, in everyday interactions and in the pride people take in looking out for one another. Our charity is built on that foundation.

Our model centres on shared experience, peer support and human connection, delivered through public spaces that challenge the bleak, clinical environments too often associated with mental health. Our main building is in Birkenhead, an area long affected by socio-economic disadvantage. With partners, friends and allies, we aim not only to create beautiful buildings but to spark optimism, ambition and energy in a place that deserves all three.

We believe deeply in the power of sharing, whether that's a success, a small win or the everyday magic of community champions who exist on every street. We want to flip the narrative that Britain is broken. It isn't. It is fractured. And fractures heal through love, connection, kindness, purpose and the chance for people to do things that make them feel good. Purpose doesn't just belong in corporate boardrooms; it belongs in kitchens, pubs and day-to-day life.

Over 16 years, we've shown that if you harness this invisible magic, you can reach people at scale. We are one of the most trusted mental health providers in our region, yet we have never had a waiting list, even as demand has soared. That's because we tap into the altruistic energy of our community, enabling people to channel their own challenges into positive outcomes for others.

Our newest example of radical partnership is JOY: a major capital development creating the UK's most progressive health and wellness space. Funded through Levelling Up, delivered with the council and powered by the NHS, JOY will transform how young people and families experience CAMHS by moving services into a vibrant, creative, hopeful environment shaped by everything we've learned. It's an excellent example of how the state and third sector can interact to meet needs in progressive ways at scale.

If we connect better, speak openly and treat the state as a partner rather than a rival, we can do extraordinary things and show the country a new way of knitting communities back together through kindness, experience, hope and joy.

# Part Three: Change

## Seeds of Community: building resilience where it matters most – The Ubele Initiative

*By Natalie Covino*

A growing site for years, Wolves Lane doesn't announce itself. Tucked between residential streets and a local cemetery in Wood Green, north London, the three-and-a-half-acre site takes in eight glasshouses – home to rare palms, terrapins, a cactus garden and tropical fruit – three low-carbon buildings, a community kitchen, and surrounding woodland. The London skyline, with Tottenham's White Hart Stadium in the background, suddenly feels distant.

It's a sunny day in Wood Green, where I am meeting Sarah Ebanjaa and Daniela Noruwa of the Ubele Initiative, deputy CEO and Policy and Research lead respectively, along with Pamela Shoor, head grower at Black Rootz, the multigenerational, Black-led growing project at the heart of Wolves Lane Centre.

The Ubele Initiative, founded and led by Yvonne Field, OBE, is an African diaspora-led organisation, which believes in empowering black and marginalised communities across Britain, through challenging systemic racial inequality, and tackling social, economic and environmental injustices.

Taken from Swahili meaning 'the future', The Ubele Initiative exists to strengthen community voice, resilience and power, whether through the development of sustainable infrastructure, community assets, intergenerational leadership, or flourishing local enterprises.

We meet inside the eco hall, one of three buildings designed by Studio Gil and Material Cultures from natural and reclaimed materials, timber-framed with locally sourced straw and clay, which opened in 2024. Together the buildings provide space for classrooms, workshops, offices and distribution centres. The building is crafted into a story that runs throughout the centre.

Sarah gestures at the space around us.

"There are three things that bring this ecosystem all together, the plants, people and place."

A former plant nursery run by Haringey Council, Sarah tells me that much of Wolves Lane has built around a series of 1970s greenhouses that the Council ceased using a decade ago, while retaining ownership of the site. In 2017, the newly formed Wolves Lane Consortium, led by OrganicLea CIC and The Ubele



Initiative CIC, secured a 25year tenancy, marking the beginning of community-led stewardship. Together, they co-manage the site, continuing its horticultural heritage, while attracting investment for the new eco-developments and building a range sustainable community enterprises.

Purple basil, rare cacti, snowball turnips – an abundance of crops spans three acres of land. As we walk around, Sarah introduces me to team members including volunteers and community growers who keep this place running. Only open to the public on Friday and Sunday, on the other days of the week volunteers tend to the grounds to ensure an ecosystem that thrives.

A volunteer, Jamie, introduces himself, beaming. One day a week volunteering quickly turned into three, he tells me. I ask him what Wolves Lane means to him.

“Everything. This feels like a second home to me. Every time I come here I feel instantly lighter. And it has helped me build my self-confidence, spending time with hard-working people who want to make a difference.”

Max, their longest resident grower, has been here for five years, working as the lead gardener for Yotam Ottolenghi’s restaurant, Rovi. The crops he nurtures and tends to, year round are freshly distributed to the kitchen in Mayfair, influencing a cultivated, seasonal menu.

Elsewhere, a group of volunteers are tucked into a space between two glasshouses, de-weeding and preparing for their next plant. It is impossible not to marvel at the wealth of activity around us.

### **Black Rootz: Intergenerational education and community enterprises**

Established in spring 2019, Black Rootz is one of The Ubele Initiative’s flagship projects, an intergenerational, black-led community enterprise dedicated to both the practice and knowledge-sharing of growing food.

With increasing threats to the spaces where knowledge around growing, particularly of cultural and exotic plants, is shared, Black Rootz aims to plug that gap.

But the project is about far more than selling produce. At its heart, Black Rootz exists to ensure that both traditional and practical growing skills and local food-growing stories tied to them, are kept alive and transferred to future generations of children and young people. Recollections from the Windrush generation are woven into the work and shared with the communities of local Londoners nearby.

This is why intergenerational practice is one of the core principles of Black Rootz. By bringing together community growers across generations in a shared space, the project recognises both the value of older generations passing on their knowledge and the profound benefits of engaging young people in their communities.





Whether through recognising the historical legacy of land exploitation, to understanding the disproportionate impacts of food insecurity today, Pam highlights that how racial and climate justice are fundamentally intersectional.

It is through the very act of coming together across generations, that greater agency is built, the legacy of Black growing culture can be sustained and communities can become more resilient.

### Community wealth building to achieve racial equality

As I sit down with Daniel, he pauses mid-conversation to help the chef of the day, who is beginning to serve a community lunch offered on Tuesday's. I later find out this is Rosamund Grant, a renowned chef, author of several books focussed on African and Caribbean cuisine and regular in the BBC television series "Hot Chefs". Rosamund is also sister to the late Bernie Grant MP, one of the first Black British MPs, and hailed community leader in Tottenham.

It is a fitting image for a place where the politics of its place and the practice of its community intersect entirely.

Daniel is Research and Policy lead at The Ubele Initiative, social enterprise that co-manages the 3.5-acre horticultural site in the heart of Wood Green. But his work extends far beyond the growing beds and glasshouses. As he explains, Ubele operates across the entire spectrum of civil society, from supporting grassroots community organisations to keep their assets alive, to influencing policy at the highest levels of Government.

"Part of my job is to marry those two often competing perspectives together," he says.

Their new national policy forum *Okun*, meaning 'thread' in Yoruba, has been set up to do exactly that.

"We've identified five key themes that affect our communities – economics, housing, health, democracy and education – and created policy forums where community members, just like some of the members you've met today, come and feed their perspectives"

Coming together in-person, community leaders from different backgrounds will have the opportunity to build effective and truly participative policy campaigns, that advocate for marginalised communities and empower people for social and economic change.

### What do we need to secure change?

When asked what conditions make this kind of systemic work succeed, Daniel's answer goes beyond the obvious. Finance matters, but the more important point, he argues, is *sustained* funding.

"What's been so key to the success of this space, which was really not in use for almost a decade, has been sustained funding and consistent commitment by local authorities and financial institutions to say: systemic change takes a long time. We're going to provide 10, 20 years of funding to address issues in this area."

He points out that just across the road from Wolves Lane, the neighbourhood sits in the top five per cent of deprivation in the entire country. These issues are not solved overnight.

The second condition is collaboration across systems: volunteers, local authority backing and the many people who give their time, often for free, to keep the site running.

The third, and perhaps most powerful, is community itself. "You can't have these thriving assets without the community behind it," he says, gesturing to the people who come from all walks of life to grow plants, visit the Sunday market, or simply be part of something.

Those circumstances, the work of Ubele suggests, do not arise by accident. They are built, carefully and over decades, through policy, community ownership, sustained investment and the daily work of keeping a space alive.

As I leave Wolves Lane, like volunteer Jamie, I too feel lighter. I also feel stronger that it is within such spaces a true spirit of community – which we we should be fighting for – lives and breathes.

I cannot help but think back to Pam, who at the start of my visit explained acclimatisation, the process in which seeds are nurtured in glasshouses to survive temperamental conditions outside.

For any person or organisation seeking real system change, it's important that the seeds of their work are acclimatised, chosen to last and tended to with genuine care.

Here at Wolves Lane, they've shown that community wealth is not only an incredible source of sustainable income and employment for communities. It also concerns a transfer of agency to local voices, too often not heard, allowing marginalised communities to set agendas, shift discourse and influence decision-making, against the status quo.

This is not a quick process. This takes time, and care, much as Pam explained.

But without it, we risk entrenching systemic inequalities, consolidating power in the hands of those least impacted by social, economic and climate changes of today.



## Where do we put our hope if the system has failed us?

By Sian Lewis

Our communities are at the brink. You can feel it on the streets when you're walking alone at night, in the air when the days get cold and our houses even colder, at your shop when bread costs double what it used to. People have lost faith in the systems that were supposedly built to support them. Things are at a turning point. But where do we put our hope if the system has failed us?

Some have turned to plastering flags everywhere, others to rapidly reposting leftist content online – but the call is the same. People are hunting for a new system to believe in and we are seeing what happens when communities are under-resourced, left behind and taken for granted. We are lost in the constant swing from right to left as people pull apart the lies they've been told and realise the system has truly failed them. Community organisations are stretching resources for unachievable goals, funders are commissioning frantic research to make sense of it and our civic infrastructure is locked in a battle of ideologies.

In Coventry, a city whose political landscape has just been redrawn, we believe the picture can look different. Grapevine Cov & Warks has had a dedicated team of Community Organisers on the ground here for years. They work alongside residents to uncover the root causes of local challenges, supporting them as they step into leadership and organise to build a city that reflects their own decisions and vision.

Place-Based Community Organising is about building distributed leadership, deepening communities' knowledge of the local systems they live in and supporting people to take back power in their areas. Recent wins include the Need The Loo Campaign taking on the city's lack of accessible toilets, Survivor Sanctuary Collective holding a vigil for 50 survivors and their stories and Destination Ball Hill bringing pride back to their area one shared decision at a time.

For seven years, the Connecting For Good (CFG) Movement has been building and mobilising people power in Coventry. Communities engaged with Connecting For Good aren't only better connected to their city but they're more ready and willing to act. Compared to the national average of just 6%, CFG members engage with civic activity at a whopping 73%. Community power is being built and wielded at a phenomenal rate and in a council chamber where no single party holds a majority, that organised voice matters more than ever.



Our next ambition is a core team of community leaders and changemakers working to put place-powered decision-making on the radar in this city and beyond and to build the structures to keep it there.

This is what hope looks like in practice. Not flags or reposts, not waiting for the next election to swing the pendulum back, but the slow, stubborn work of people in their own neighbourhoods deciding they will not be left behind any longer.

**Sian Lewis**

Senior Community Organiser  
Grapevine Coventry and Warwickshire



## Strength in shared spaces – *Roots In Nature*

How Tim and Kaz from Coventry have spent eight years fighting for a woodland, and why they're still not giving up.

There's a moment, somewhere in the middle of an eight-year campaign, when most people would have walked away. For Kaz and Tim, partners and community organisers from Coventry, that moment came more than once. There were unanswered emails, difficult, sometimes bruising meetings that seemed to speak a different language entirely, and years of voluntary effort with no guarantee of success.

We meet Kaz and Tim at Grapevine, a pioneering community organising charity in the heart of Coventry, along with Sian Lewis and Laura Fisher. Together, they have been working over the past years to campaign for something Coventry doesn't yet have: a community woodland.

Instead, they kept talking, to dog walkers, to parents at community events, to local neighbours. Their story is one of determination to make a positive impact for their community, to make a difference.

Tim and Kaz arrive at their shared project from slightly different directions, though both united in the need for shared spaces, which are truly accessible to all. Tim grew up in Coventry, trained as a welder and blacksmith, then spent two decades working for the local authority in children's services and Sure Start centres. Kaz's route wound through youth work, environmental education and a decade at the Wildlife Trust.

It was Kaz who first articulated the dream out loud.

"After Tim and I got together, we had children in close succession and sadly the second pregnancy was a twin pregnancy and one of the twins died."

She pauses.

"Coming out of that grief, with a busy life and four children in the house, I found myself having to travel half an hour to a community woodland in Leamington just to find somewhere to heal and spend time with the little ones. And I just thought – I wish there was something like this here." In Coventry. Where I'm from."

So, in 2008, she sent an email to Coventry City Council. She was looking for a piece of land.

She laughs when I ask what happened next. Nothing, she says. Nothing at all.

For four years, Kaz sent emails into what she describes, with characteristic understatement, as "a brick wall."

What shifted, eventually, was a combination of factors: Coventry's City of Culture status, newly created posts within the council focusing on green spaces and the campaign finding its footing through Grapevine.

Community organising, the model that Grapevine uses, rooted in traditions of citizens collectively exercising power, has been central to how Tim and Kaz have sustained themselves through the slow grind of the campaign.

"When you're meeting with power, and the power we're meeting is the local authority, public servants, coming to them as a group of empowered citizens is important. There's still a power imbalance. But we feel almost tangibly the fact that we're coming to them as active citizens, which they're meant to serve." Beyond strategy, both speak about Grapevine in more personal terms: as a compass, an anchor, a source of support when the work felt impossible.

"Before we've thrown in the towel and we have collectively thrown in the towel, we've always checked in with Grapevine. And they just say: take a break. Have a breather. It's that person-centred approach. Recognising that doing this work, completely unpaid and voluntary, is hard"

"For the last seven years, we've really been focused on how we build really deep-rooted local leadership" Sian says.

"Something that's come up is around the tools and tactics we teach" Laura adds. "When people come together around a common issue and try to influence policymakers or local authorities, they can get caught up in red tape and feel exhausted and defeated. So, for us, it's about teaching tools like reflection and planning for those asks, skills that benefit not just one campaign but their wider work too.

We've seen a real shift in willingness to accept a "no" and to then open negotiation. Organisers, and the relationships we collectively hold really benefits community leaders doing this work."



## The Idea

So, what, exactly, are Tim and Kaz asking for? The idea sounds simple enough: an enclosed piece of land in Coventry where community groups, scouts, choirs, mental health organisations, church groups, families with children, can meet outdoors without disturbance.

“There’s nowhere in Coventry where you can be outside with a group of people that isn’t a park, a public woodland, or an allotment. And what that means is you’ve always got dog walkers, or motorbikes, or the public wandering through your session. We want a safe, enclosed space where groups can just do whatever they need to do. In nature.”

The vision is rooted in Tim’s own experience of what outdoor community space can do. When he worked as the sole male worker in a Sure Start children’s centre in Wood End, he started a Dads’ Group on a nearby allotment.

“We ended up creating this beautiful space. What brought everybody together was the fact that they were dads who wanted to spend time with their kids. It didn’t matter where you were from.”

That insight, that place brings people together across difference, runs through everything they are trying to build.

“Having access to land is often seen as something exclusive, financially exclusive, or something you’re born into. That’s what we want to change.”

At the time of this conversation, Tim and Kaz have a lease in principle, a core team, supporters, and a site: a derelict school surrounded by ancient woodland on the edge of the city. They still need planning permission. They still have no money from the council, by design. They are, by any measure, still at the beginning.

But they are hopeful.

Towards the end of our conversation, I ask Tim and Kaz a question: if someone came from outside Coventry and wanted to understand what this campaign was really about, what would they want them to take away?

Tim: “For me it’s about human connection. Taking time to talk to people about what they actually need. A mum in Canley told me her kids are autistic and she struggles taking them to a typical park. You talk to people, you find out what’s there and you create the space for things to happen. That’s all this is.”

For Kaz, it comes back to what brought her here in the first place: a half-hour drive to another town, baby in her arm and looking for a place to connect.

“There just wasn’t anywhere here where I could go to heal, casually, with young children. That’s all I wanted. And I just think – there must be thousands of people in this city in the same position. That’s still why we’re doing it.”

With the results of the local elections still fresh, I concluded my chat with Sian and Laura by asking: do they feel like people’s voices in Coventry are heard and respected?

Laura pauses to think.

“That’s a tough question. From what I see and hear, it’s probably widely felt that no. But rather than the huge sense of apathy there used to be, people are now thinking about their own lives and their neighbours’ lives at a hyper-local level and wanting to challenge the norm.

People do still feel an element of hopelessness, and honestly, we feel that too sometimes, the weight of everything locally, nationally, globally. But there is so much good happening in this city and it’s not happening in silos. People, from professionals to those who deeply know their communities, are genuinely working together. And that feels hopeful and exciting.”

For Sian, the story we tell is important.

“We are used to Coventry being described as a post-industrial city, which has lost resource, wealth. Coventry has an incredible, long history of social justice and activism. And the success of our campaign, such as Need the Loo, has spread to cities like Birmingham where they don’t have accessible signs. We need to build our narrative and get people believing that they can make a difference.”

# Part Four: Renewal

## In Conversation: why communities matter for democratic participation

– Dan Goss, Nicola Stokes and Natalie Covino

The recent results of the local elections only cement that people have become disillusioned with a two-party system, top-down approaches and a politics that no longer speaks to them. Trust remains low and people have lost faith that democracy can deliver real change.

At Demos, they have been designing and trialing new ways for politicians and policymakers to partner with citizens and rebuild trust. From working with governments of all tiers to trial participatory and deliberative democracy, to developing new practices to further devolve power to communities.

In this piece, Dan and Nicola, senior researchers at Demos, reflect on what they learned from spending time with local organisations across the UK and why those everyday spaces of connection matter now more than ever.

**Interviewer:** One of the cores arguments behind the Nation of Neighbours project is that neighbours hold this country together. How did this motivate your research? What did you set out to explore?

**Dan:** It's important for us that the research amplifies the voice of communities themselves. We wanted to understand the story of communities, told not by people apart from them or adapted to fit a political narrative, but told directly by the community members at the beating heart of that story. That's why we immersed ourselves in the community spaces, observing and exploring how community members spoke about the space. The research reflects the perspective of communities first-hand, on-the-ground, alongside their neighbours.

**Nicola:** This work can often feel quite removed from real people. This project was about understanding people whose day-to-day reality is community work, whether they're volunteers, organisers or participants. Understanding what brings them back, what the experience gives them and how it fits into their lives felt essential if we're serious about expanding and replicating that sense of community elsewhere.



Helianthus maximiliani  
"prairie flower of the sun"



**Interviewer:** How did that thinking shape your research approach?

**Nicola:** We were very conscious that interviews and focus groups can feel artificial, especially when a stranger turns up with a notebook. So, we deliberately used ethnographic methods; going in, sitting down, spending time and just being there as part of the group through conducting a series of listening exercises. We wanted to see how relationships formed, what people talked about when they weren't being formally interviewed and how the space itself shaped the experience.

We'd start gentle conversations, if necessary, how long someone had been coming, what they enjoyed, how long they'd lived in the area, what changes they'd noticed. That helped us understand what the group and the wider community meant in their everyday lives.

**Dan:** And there's also something you simply don't get from transcripts alone. When you're physically in a space, you pick up on expressions, moods, humour, energy, the emotional life of the place. You can feel how the space works. That was important for us, because community organisations aren't just delivering services; they're creating environments that people respond to emotionally. That emotional layer is hard to capture in a transcript, but it's central to what makes these places work.

**Interviewer:** What stories or messages from those visits have stayed with you most strongly?

**Dan:** Above all, the importance of connection. I think particularly across the participants and the volunteers, there was a sense that all groups in life can face loneliness, isolation, disconnection for a variety of reasons, be it young people facing mental health problems, elderly people living alone, young mums on maternity leave. Community organisations create spaces where people can connect and that connection often sparks something more.

What also stayed with me was the sheer richness of activity. I visited a community organisation in North Tyneside and in the space of a few hours found there was a community café, a social supermarket redistributing surplus food, a men's pie-making group upstairs, counselling sessions, digital advice, and workspaces for remote workers. You might think of it as one organisation, but it was really a whole ecosystem of connection and support happening at once.

I remember speaking to a woman involved in a repair and renewal project, fixing items that would otherwise go to waste. She saw it as helping her neighbours, using a skill she already had. The organisation gave her the platform to do that at scale and she felt deeply invested in her community because of it.

**Nicola:** For me, it was how welcoming people were. Even though I was a stranger, as soon as I walked through the door, people came over, offered tea, asked me to sit with them. I never felt like an outsider. It honestly felt like I'd been going there for months.

I was also struck by how personal volunteering was for many people. For some, it was a way out of isolation. For others, it gave a greater sense of worth and appreciation. And that appreciation really mattered. People talked about places where their efforts hadn't been acknowledged and how quickly that drained motivation. Even when people love what they're doing, being given recognition sustains it.

**Interviewer:** How does this relate to your own sense of community?

**Nicola:** For me, it's broader than just a street or postcode. Living in London, community feels like a shared sense of place across the city, shaped by everyday encounters. Community, in that sense, is about shared experience and feeling connected to people around you, even across difference.

**Dan:** For me, it's about spontaneity. Most of life is planned – meeting friends, birthdays, nights-out. Community is what happens in between: the people you bump into, the café where you recognise faces, the casual conversations you didn't organise in advance. Those everyday interactions, just from sharing space, feel special to me. Community grows from being near one another, not from planning it.

**Interviewer:** Did anything challenge your expectations?

**Dan:** I think there is a general assumption that voluntary and community organisations would express a desire for more increased funding resources of funding from government. While this is true, I found many community businesses spoke about independence and resilience. Where I visited, they were proud of being self-sustaining. What they wanted wasn't dependency, it was fairness. Recognition for the support they already provide, especially where public services rely on them informally. For example, some organisations were receiving people through social prescribing but weren't paid for that support, while other parts of the system were. It wasn't about dependency; it was about a fair deal.

**Nicola:** For me, it reinforced that what really mattered in local partnerships was trust and relationships. Often it came down to a few people who knew everyone locally and had built strong connections. Those relationships held everything together, linking businesses, schools and training opportunities and creating a shared sense of purpose around supporting the local area.

**Interviewer:** Finally, we are seeing a growing trend of disillusionment with the two-party politics citizens are used to. How can participatory democracy and empowering local communities, improve the relationship between the citizen and state?

**Dan:** When communities are given a more direct and meaningful role in shaping the decisions that affect their lives, this helps rebuild trust between citizens and the state. Policy becomes more grounded in lived experience and public institutions become more responsive and legitimate. Over time, this can help move politics beyond distant, adversarial models towards a more collaborative and enduring relationship with citizens.

## Community spaces visited

### North Tyneside Big Local

North Tyneside Big Local (NTBL) is a community-led charity focused on strengthening connections, reducing loneliness and taking action locally to address global climate concerns. It works by bringing people together and supporting residents to identify local needs and take action to address them. The organisation delivers its work through three core areas: operating accessible community spaces such as Whitley Bay Big Local, developing repair and reuse initiatives through the newly developed Renew hub and expanding community-led energy projects. These activities provide practical opportunities for people to connect, gain skills and contribute to environmental sustainability.

NTBL supports communities by offering space, advice, guidance and signposting, creating environments where people feel welcome and included. It builds the confidence and capacity of residents, enabling them to participate in decision-making, develop local projects and improve their neighbourhoods. A key feature of NTBL's approach is its commitment to the "Big Local Way", which prioritises community leadership, partnership working and long-term community capacity building. By working alongside local people, businesses and partners, NTBL helps create thriving, connected communities and supports lasting social and environmental change.

*David Carnaffan*

### St Barnabas, Knowle West, Bristol

St Barnabas, Knowle West has become a trusted and welcoming hub at the heart of its community; a place for people of all ages and backgrounds to meet with warmth, dignity and practical support. Weekly sessions of the 'BS4 foodbank' have grown into far more than a distribution point for essential supplies: it is a sanctuary where individuals can talk openly, be listened to and regain a sense of stability during difficult periods.

Alongside this, a weekly 'toddlers' group' as well as a 'safe hang out space' offer distinctly separate but friendly, accessible spaces for parents, carers and young people to gather. Many describe it as a place to connect, build confidence and find companionship in what can otherwise

be isolating chapters of family life. A self-reliant craft and creative group 'purple shoots' reflect a basis of common shared connection offering purpose and direction.

An ethos of welcome, inclusion and hospitality weave through every part of St Barnabas's vibrant activities. Whether it's the weekly community lunches and activities in the 'warm welcome space' or its other groups and provision or ad hoc 'community fundays' and 'bring your culture to the table' events, they consistently experience encouragement and a sense of belonging. The church's unwavering commitment to hospitable inclusion means people not only feel at home when they arrive, but they keep coming back.

*Reverend Clive Hamilton*

### Resound Bristol

Running alongside our food bank session every Friday morning, Resound Community Cafe offers a welcoming space for all in our community. We recognise the importance of consistency, affordability and holistic support, which is why we decided to open our building to run a Community Cafe. Each week, we welcome members of our community for coffee and pastries, a good chat and familiar company. We function on a 'pay-what-you-can' model, aiming to remove the financial and social barriers for those in our community,

and prioritise signposting throughout the cafe space. We welcome partner organisations each week to offer wider practical and holistic support for our guests and to provide opportunities to be connected to wider community life. Many in our community may not be at crisis point but do struggle with the day-to-day demands of life. This space allows us to walk alongside our community in a familiar environment, building relationships and ensuring a place where all can belong and thrive.

*Philippa Dodds*

### About UCL Policy Lab

The UCL Policy Lab brings together ideas, individuals and institutions in a collaborative method to understand and tackle the challenges facing communities in the UK and around the world. With diverse networks in politics, research, and communities, the Policy Lab facilitates dialogue between those addressing complex societal challenges.

If you have an idea or a challenge you're seeking to explore, get in touch with the team at [policylab@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:policylab@ucl.ac.uk) [www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab) @UCLPolicyLab



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