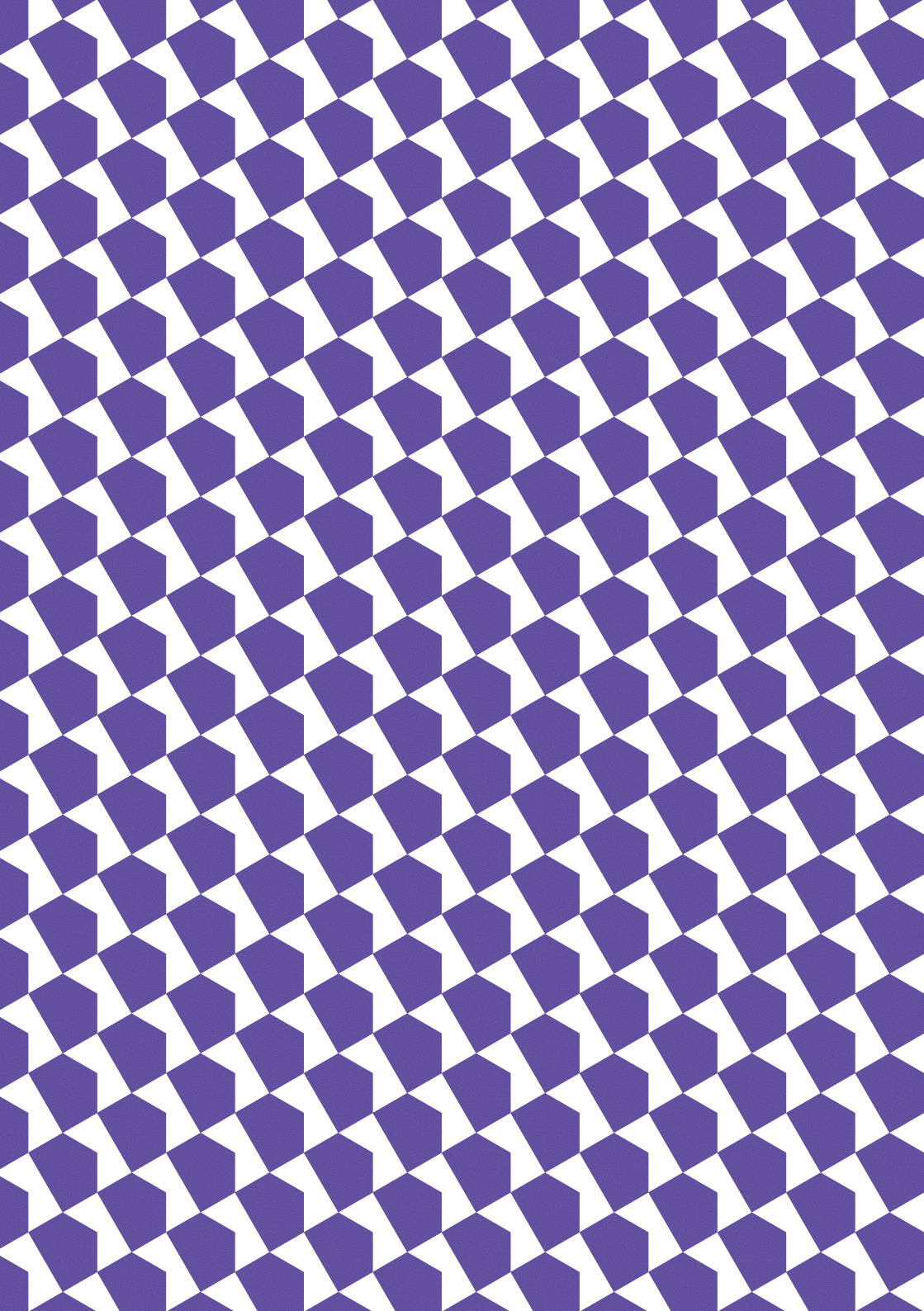


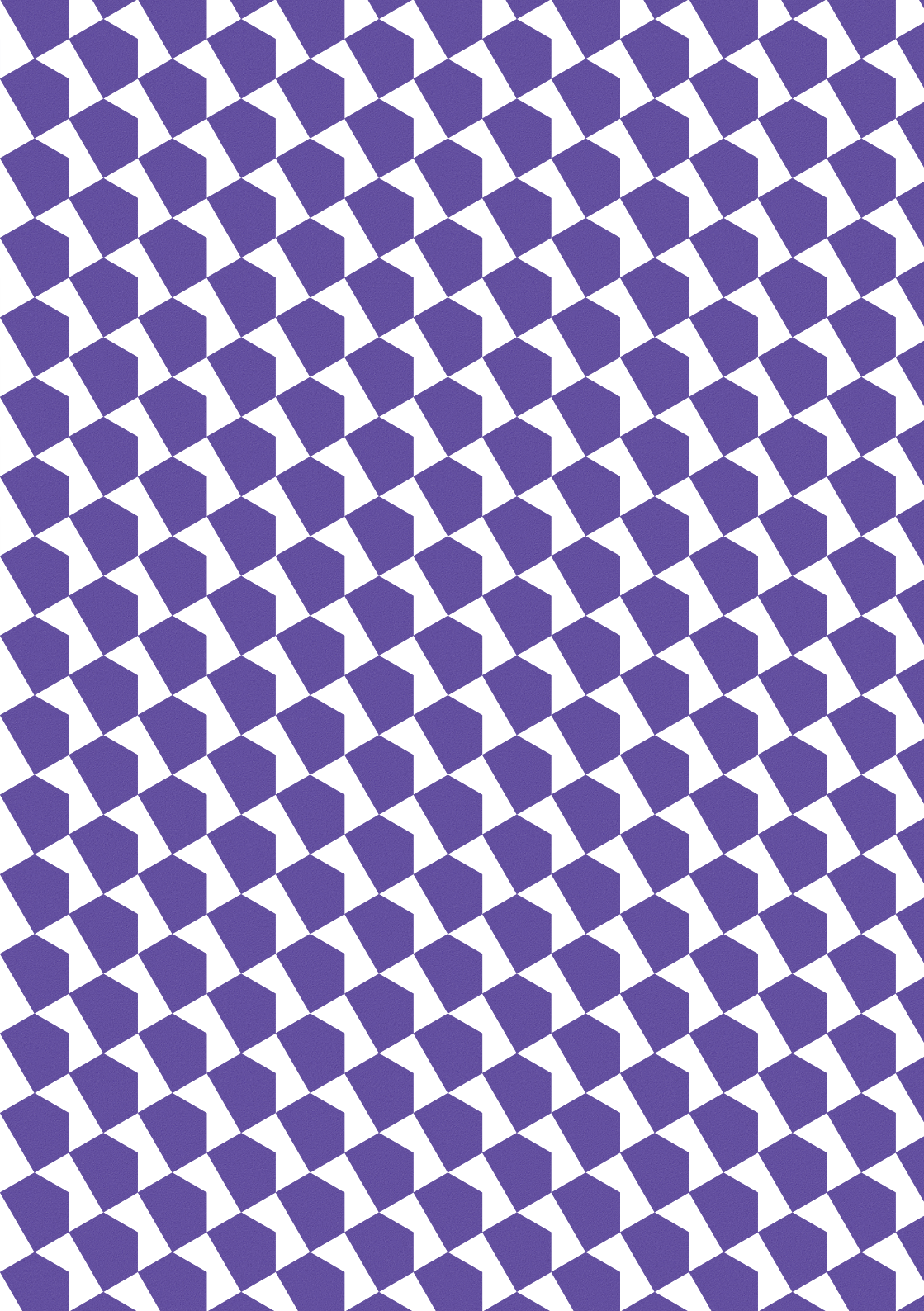
Stories from

Community

Britain

the co-operative party





Community

Britain

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Foreword

Alex Norris MP

Minister for Local Growth

Britain is made up of proud, strong communities. Again and again, in times of acute crisis, we see communities stepping up to take action. We saw it during the Covid pandemic, when mutual aid groups and community organisations protected the most vulnerable. We saw it at the height of the energy crisis, when community-led warm spaces gave solace to those at the sharp end of poverty. And we saw it last summer, in the wake of disorder, when locals came together to clean up the mess, rebuild broken walls, repaint vandalised shops.

This is a Britain we can be proud of: one where neighbours look out for one another and locals work together to improve the place they call home. And it's a Britain where communities come together to solve problems and protect one another, in the toughest times.

I am proud to be part of a Labour government that has pledged to end the status quo of an economy that hoards potential and a politics that hoards power. The work to transfer power from Whitehall to communities has already begun in earnest. Our devolution white paper set out plans to deliver a strong new Community Right to Buy, giving communities a meaningful shot at owning the assets that matter most to them. Our Local Power Plan, part of Great British Energy, will deliver the biggest expansion in support for community-owned energy in history, giving local people



a stake in our clean energy future. And our work to double the size of the co-operative and mutual sector will support businesses which create economic growth from the ground up and keep wealth within local communities.

But this cannot be the limit of our ambition. I believe communities have the power to help solve some of the most significant challenges our country faces, from the loneliness epidemic and the crisis of trust in politics to high streets and public spaces in states of decline and abandonment. The role of government is to use our tools to harness and strengthen that community power.

As a Co-operative MP, I'm proud that the Co-operative Party is leading the way in championing communities on the political stage. Community Britain provides a vision for a country where communities are supported by government to deliver locally-led solutions to the biggest challenges we face, using the voices of those already leading the way to prove just how powerful community can be. We have an opportunity to transform communities and the role they play in our politics. A Labour government with a bold agenda for the redistribution of power, working in partnership with a co-operative movement made up of community leaders in every nation and region, has the potential to do just that.

Introduction

Joe Fortune

General Secretary, Co-operative Party

Introduction

Introduction

During the First World War, hundreds of co-operatives came together for an emergency meeting. Against the backdrop of a political system dominated by private business, they formed the Co-operative Party, the political extension of a movement dedicated to sharing power and wealth. They decided, at that first meeting, that “we have things to safeguard, things to stand for, things to achieve”.

A century later, the challenges we face are different, but those guiding principles remain the same. Our country faces a crisis of trust – trust in each other, trust in institutions and trust in politics are all in decline. We feel increasingly disconnected and the shared spaces we once relied on have slowly disappeared. But communities are leading the fightback, working together to find solutions to some of the most serious challenges we face. There are still things to safeguard, stand for and achieve, now more than ever.

We believe communities are a serious political and economic force, not the feel-good afterthought politics has sometimes made them. We believe the work being done by communities should be something our politics pays attention to and seeks to learn from. And we believe that harnessing the power of communities connects our labour movement with the people whose lives we seek to change.

Of course, people care deeply about their local hospital, local schools, local jobs. But we believe they care too about their local sports club, their local park, their local pub, their local library. For some, these will seem like small concerns. But for



the people whose lives they touch every day, and the people who suffer when they disappear, they don't feel small at all. There is both a responsibility and a political imperative to make sure those building blocks of a community are protected, revived, celebrated and valued, not just by the communities relying on them, but by our political system.

And where governments of old have stepped back and expected communities to fill gaping holes left by their fiscal neglect, Community Britain asks government to step forward. We have the opportunity to use the tools of government to do something truly transformative and create a system where communities, working with rather than in spite of government, can thrive.

As General Secretary, I have been lucky enough to visit community projects up and down the country. I've met community leaders who dedicate hours upon hours of time to improving the places they live. I've sat in buildings owned and operated by communities, and seen just how valued they are. Community Britain tells just some of those stories – stories of communities that have the power, ownership and resource to shape and own the places they live, providing a direct alternative to division, disillusionment and decline.

On behalf of the Co-operative Party, I would like to thank all contributors for giving their time and expertise to this project, and the entire Co-operative Party team for their work pulling it together. We hope this will be a contribution towards a politics that considers communities as something worth fighting for at every level of government.

A hall, a home, a movement

Annoushka Deighton

Former Chair of Friends of Stretford Public Hall,
Community Leader with We're Right Here



Annoushka Deighton

I've spent the last ten years working on the frontline of community empowerment – firstly in my own community and now working with groups across England reclaiming and protecting the spaces that matter most to them. I've seen first-hand how communities, given the right tools, can transform neglected buildings into thriving hubs of social, economic, and cultural activity. Countless examples of projects where the involvement of communities in service design and delivery has resulted in cost effective, creative solutions to the issues they face.

The project that threw me into this world, Stretford Public Hall, was one chapter in a story that is unfolding in communities across the UK. I was part of a grassroots effort to bring a much-loved but at-risk public building into community hands. We succeeded – but it was far harder than it should have been. Too many other communities across the country are still losing their local pubs, libraries, community halls, green spaces, and historic buildings to developers or just left to rot, simply because the current laws are stacked against them.

That's why I've been involved in the We're Right Here Campaign. A national campaign, led by community leaders and national organisations advocating for meaningful new rights and powers for communities. We are seeking to decentralise power from Westminster, not just to local authority level, but down to local neighbourhoods. We believe that this will help ensure funding and policy decisions reflect local needs. The movement aims to strengthen democracy, protect community assets, and empower grassroots voices. This is about real power, economic justice, and local resilience – values that should be at the heart of Labour's mission.

I stumbled into the world of community development by mistake. With three young children, a business to run, and a husband working 60-hour shifts, my hands were already full. When I heard that Stretford Public Hall, a beautiful Victorian building and a jewel in our otherwise decrepit town centre, was set to be sold off, I didn't give it much thought. However, being a bit nosy, my friend and I decided to take a detour on our way to the pub and convinced the security guard to let us take a quick look inside. As soon as we stepped into the beautiful, tiled foyer, we fell in love. That night, we couldn't stop talking about all the things the hall could be used for—art exhibitions, community gatherings, concerts, a space for local businesses. Before we knew it, we had decided: we were going to save it, and we did.

Of course, that's not entirely true. It wasn't just us, and it certainly wasn't that easy. For starters, we had no idea what we were doing. We knew nothing about campaigning, bid writing, governance, or business planning. But what we did have was a network of people. Passionate, like-minded individuals who, like us, wanted to improve Stretford.

We started small. We raised money through jumble sales, gigs, and grants. We ran consultations and met with key stakeholders to understand what was truly needed and how the hall could fill the gaps in our town. We spread the word through leaflets, social media, and endless community meetings. The council eventually agreed to take into account the long term social and economic impact of a bid and not just a one-off lump sum from the property developers we were up against. Our newly formed co-op became the proud owners of the hall for the princely sum of a tenner.

When we finally got the keys, the real work began. Plumbers, roofers, and builders volunteered their time to make the building safe. Volunteers painted walls, scrubbed floors, and cleaned every inch of the hall. In the first year alone, over 500 individuals gave up their time and energy.

Nearly a decade later, the hall is thriving—a bustling hub of activity that has brought colour, life, and a renewed sense of community to Stretford. The beautiful ballroom, once neglected, now hosts weddings, conferences, and parties, providing jobs and generating revenue to sustain the project. The hall is alive with choirs, children's theatre, community cinema, life drawing, music nights, and a multitude of other creative events. The co-working space and artist studios provide stable revenue streams while offering affordable workspaces for local businesses. It has even become home to our local MP's office.

The hall has helped reinvigorate Stretford's nighttime economy, attracting bars and restaurants and making the town a destination again. But with that came concerns about gentrification. We were determined that the hall would support the whole community. To ensure inclusivity, we offer pay-what-you-can ticketing options, making events accessible to all. The hall also serves as a council-funded community hub, providing advice, crisis support, and working closely with the local food bank and other essential services.

To strengthen collaboration, we founded the Stretford Community Collective, bringing together the local voluntary, community, and

Annoushka Deighton

social enterprise (VCSE) sector to work more effectively. We employ a volunteer coordinator to support local volunteering initiatives, and we organise joint events with the local business community.

Looking back, what started as a wild idea between two friends has grown into something far bigger than we ever imagined. Stretford Public Hall is now more than just a building; it's a symbol of what a community can achieve when it comes together with passion, determination, and a shared vision for the future.

Project such as Stretford Public Hall have many advantages. Financially, as a social enterprise we can raise revenue through commercial activity as well as access grants and social finance. Resource-wise, we can call upon people to volunteer for us, (we have over 120 active volunteers currently), tap into other community organisations, and collaborate with local businesses. Politically, we have a level of trust with local residents that can be hard for local councils to gain. We have facilitated numerous public meetings and events aimed at shaping local development plans, acting as a mediator between the council and the community and providing a politically neutral space. In times of crisis, such as the pandemic, we can be agile, responsive, and playful in our responses and meet local need. Quite simply, local authorities that encourage and allow community power to grow do not give up any of their own power but rather add to it.

The current legislation around community ownership does not go far enough. It only gives communities a six-month window to bid for assets and raise funds but no real power to secure them. The result is that developers outbid communities time again, and cherished local spaces are lost. The inclusion of the Community Right to Buy in the upcoming English Devolution Bill is fantastic news. If all goes well, this will give local groups first refusal on assets of community value before they hit the open market and a 12-month period in which to raise the funds to do so. Labour has always stood for collective ownership, economic justice, and empowering communities – this is an opportunity to put those values into action.

Alongside legislative change, suitable support in the form of capacity building grants and capital will be required to unlock the potential that community ownership of assets and services can bring, particularly in more deprived areas.

Ownership of buildings is just one part of the equation. Communities also need more power over public services. Across the country, councils are being forced into outsourcing, breaking up essential local services and making them less accountable to the people they serve.

But we know there's another way. The Right to Shape Services proposed by the We're Right Here campaign would allow community groups, local authorities, and cooperatives to work together to co-produce services that incorporate and draw on the assets already in the local area while giving a voice to service users. This approach will produce more effective and often less expensive services. It also will help create stronger partnerships between councils and communities and ensure that public services are run for people, not profit.

Empowering communities, I believe, can help counter the rise of populism in the UK. Tackling the root causes of discontent—economic inequality, political disengagement, and social fragmentation. When people have real influence over local decisions, trust in mainstream politics increases, reducing the appeal of populist rhetoric. Devolving power to communities fosters economic resilience, improves public services, and strengthens local identity, making people feel valued and heard. Investment in grassroots initiatives, participatory democracy, and inclusive policies ensures communities thrive, reducing the frustration that fuels populist movements. A locally driven, people-powered approach can outmatch divisive narratives by offering real solutions and hope for the future.

It feels like the moment for community empowerment is now. Labour has the opportunity to bring forward legislation that, combined with the right resources and support, will give local people a meaningful say in the decisions that shape their lives and unlock the full potential of our communities.

Turning renewable energy into local power

Mark Pepper

Development Manager,
Ambition Lawrence Weston



Mark Pepper

I live in an area of high deprivation in North Bristol called Lawrence Weston. In 2012, a group of us residents came together, fed up with our lot, wanting to see some changes in the health and wellbeing of residents of Lawrence Weston. At that time, we felt voiceless, disempowered, disengaged and nobody was listening to us. Decision-makers weren't paying us any attention. Our area needed improving and nobody was going to help us, so we needed to get off our backsides and help ourselves. That was our driver to come together and set up Ambition Lawrence Weston.

We went out and doorknocked every household in the area, about 3500 homes, shared by about 7200 people, to find out what's good about living here, what's not so good, and what needs changing. That survey is what formed our development plan – our bible – that we strive to deliver on behalf of local residents.

We knew from day one that we'd be struggling for money to deliver what we wanted and needed. So when we were approached by a local community energy co-operative wanting to work with us to develop a solar farm, we needed to find out what was in it for our residents.

What we learned is that climate action and community development are one in the same, but we just came at it from different perspectives. The climate campaigners wanted to reduce carbon, we wanted to save money for our residents. There was a lot of resistance when we first started talking about climate: lots of our residents asked what this had to do with them and their daily struggles – but at the same time, many of them were suffering energy poverty and being impacted by climate change. So we embarked on a big project of making residents more aware of their energy use and climate in general.

Now, alongside the solar farm, we've developed a wind turbine to help us generate income. The wind turbine generates power, that power is then sold to the national grid and they pay us the cash for it. It's about using what we have, using our local assets to generate a sustainable income for the community. And our climate work is supported by our Men in Sheds project, a group of local ex-tradesmen who repair belongings for the community, upcycle, recycle, stop things going to landfill, and help retrofit homes to keep locals safe and warm – all while tackling mental health and social isolation among older men.

Turning renewable energy into local power

I've been involved in regeneration projects in the past that have failed, and they've failed because they've been parachuted in – it's top down and it isn't grassroots-driven. We as the community know our problems, and we know the solutions. But government also has a massive role to play in all this. Without the support of local government, we wouldn't have been able to build a brand new community hub or a wind turbine or affordable homes for local people. We rely on support from government to support us and enable us to do what we do. We need policies to be favourable to communities, to help us help ourselves.

Community-led work is also incredibly responsive. Look at Covid – it took government and local authorities weeks and weeks to get their act together. But on the second day of lockdown, our youth centre was absolutely crammed with food ready to support those who needed it.

What Ambition Lawrence Weston has done is bring people together to try and improve our lives. Off the back of that, people are voting more – they're more engaged in local politics. They're less socially isolated because they are involved in projects that allow them to spend time with other people. They're more connected because they learn about other cultures at Friday night supper clubs, challenging their own myths and false beliefs about each other.

Lawrence Weston is a proper community. We value every person and every contribution, and work together to make our lives better.

Clubs are the answer to our connection crisis

Kirsty McNeill MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary
of State for Scotland



Kirsty McNeill MP

Lots of my childhood memories involve tombola.

We're a family of joiners: when there's something needing done, we link up with others and get stuck in. So I was forever being plonked behind a table and told to sell tombola tickets in support of one cause of another.

If you're the kind of person who reads a Co-operative Party pamphlet you might well have similar memories, of evenings spent in community centres, church halls or working men's clubs. And I hope you'll share my alarm that our children are much less likely to be able to say the same.

To give some sense of the rate at which we are losing these key bits of social infrastructure, it is worth looking to the Club and Institute Union (CIU), the central co-op which supports the clubs movement. Half a century ago the CIU issued around seven million membership cards every year. Now it's about one million.

That is an enormous rate of decline for these magical places that are one part community centre, one part pub and one part extension of the family sitting room.

Their loss is terrible news for everyone as the kinds of social bonds made in clubs are crucial for our wellbeing. In a recent paper, Demos cited a literature review of 148 international research studies, concluding that strong ties have a huge bearing on our longevity. That builds on the finding from the former US Surgeon General that loneliness is as bad for us as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

In turn, Local Trust research has shown what is obvious from everyday life: access to community spaces is a necessary precondition for developing relationships beyond our families.

It just isn't good for us to spend more and more of our time behind our own front door with our algorithmically-generated Netflix, Spotify and Amazon recommendations and clubs are exactly the sort of places that help us to open up and turn strangers into friends.

We need those wider neighbourhood ties so that there's somewhere to turn when someone needs to sit with one sleeping child because another needs raced to A&E, or our houses or businesses got

Clubs are the answer to our connection crisis

battered in a storm. Online connections can be sustaining, but they are no replacement for someone who has a spare set of keys.

That matters for all of us as individuals but it has a wider impact on our ability to live together well too. As places to meet become harder to find, so too does the common ground between us.

HOPE not hate research has found that the presence of this kind of venue is a key indicator of community health and – therefore – an important inoculation against populist politics. People who don't encounter each other are less likely to trust each other, and where trust is absent, division can grow.

And as collective spaces shut, we all lose out on opportunities for shared wonder too: the Music Venue Trust's latest figures show we've lost 125 grassroots music venues in just a year.

So this stuff matters to all of us, whether we are interested in public health, community cohesion or simply the joy that comes from having an unforgettable night at a gig. That makes it possible to build a broad and enduring coalition behind an effort to save our social infrastructure.

It is incumbent on us, however, to make sure that any such movement is not stripped of its politics. If we simply ensured that local authorities provided community centres and there were enough pubs and privately-owned events spaces available for hire we would not, in my view, have succeeded.

Clubs matter because they aren't simply places we can go: clubs are places we can belong. Being rooted in a membership model they provide a microcosm of what a more co-operative economy and society could be.

Think of each of our co-operative values: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity. All of them find expression in the life of a club, making the club movement one of the greatest engines of progress in our history. It's not an accident that, at its height, the clubs movement sent even more working people to parliament than the trade unions.

Working class clubs have a proud history, but we need not think of them as simply part of our heritage. Plenty of clubs have

Kirsty McNeill MP

reimagined themselves for the 21st century, and those that are yet to do so could with a little bit of help. So if we want to have a thriving clubs sector long into the future, there is much we can do to support clubs to survive and then to thrive.

Firstly, join. Our co-operative politics informed Labour's manifesto commitment to community ownership and we look forward to a new era of communities taking the buildings and facilities that matter to them into their shared protection. Clubs, however, are already there and joining one is one of the best things you can do to help show community ownership works in practice.

Secondly, champion the policies which could have an outsized impact on clubs. Whether it's cracking down on ticket touts, reforming planning or providing funding for local growth, our Labour government already has plenty of change on the way that could benefit our clubs.

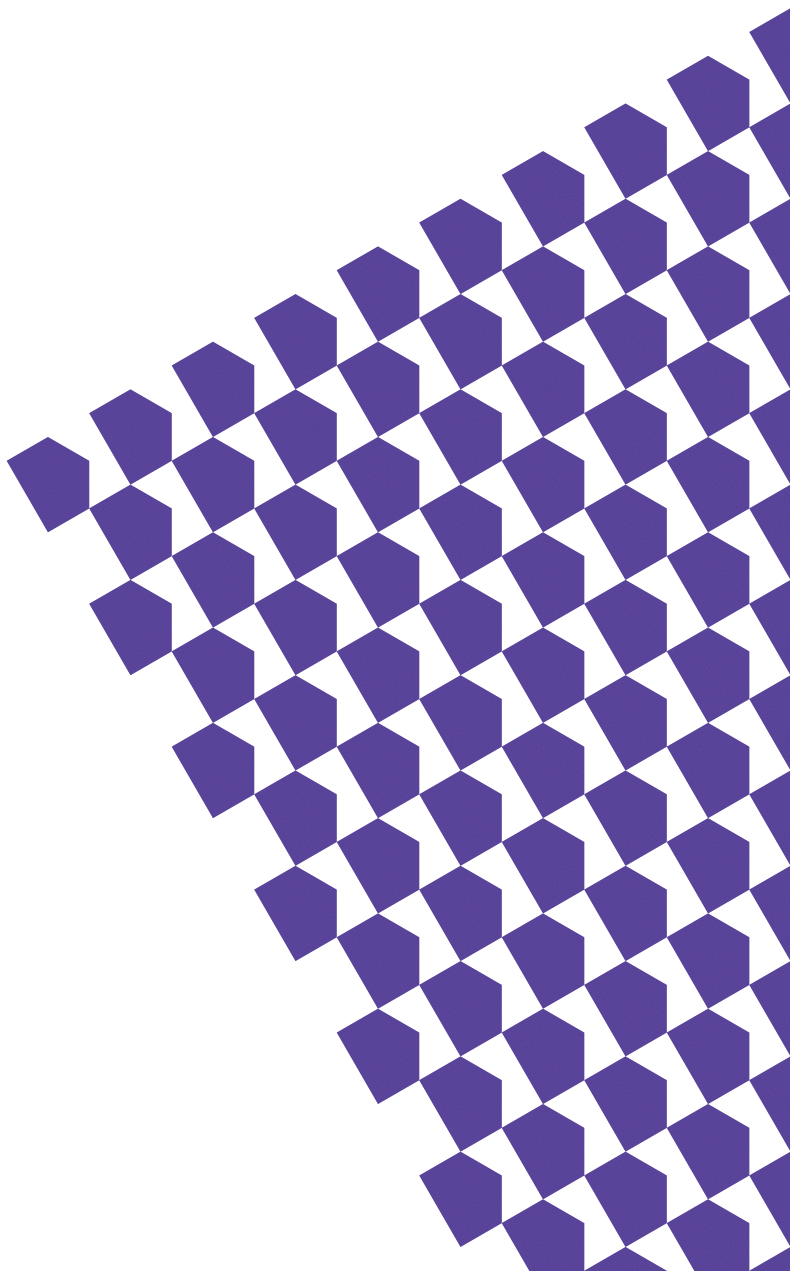
Thirdly, help locate our support for clubs in our wider politics of place. Our Labour government had a terrible economic inheritance from the Tories and it was the right thing to do to focus on emergency action to clear that up. The first phase of this government was about fixing the foundations. The next, as we implement our Plan for Change, is about advancing the decade of national renewal we promised.

Our distinctive co-operative contribution to that effort can be in translating these national ambitions into local plans.

Just as our allies in the trade union movement will be reminding ministers that the New Deal for Working People must come alive in individual workplaces and shift the balance of power between workforces and their actual employers, so we in the co-operative movement must anchor conversations about national policy in the neighbourhoods and local places where people mark the most important moments of their lives.

Quarter of a way through this century we have enormous challenges in our economy and wider society. The answer, as always, is to club together.

Clubs are the answer to our connection crisis



How community can fight the far right

Misbah Malik

Senior Policy Officer,
HOPE not hate



Misbah Malik

The importance of resilient communities and their role in resisting the far right has never been more apparent. The nationwide racist riots of August 2024 following the murder of three young girls in Southport made clear the current fragility of our communities and their vulnerability to far-right agitation. What should have been a time when the country united together to mourn was hijacked by those spreading anti-migrant and anti-Muslim hatred and disinformation, giving rise to the largest outbreak of far-right rioting and disorder in the post-war period. Across the UK we saw communities implode: people took to the streets to throw bricks at mosque windows, set fire to hotels housing people seeking asylum, and target racialised communities more generally. Even in towns where no rioting took place, many were afraid to leave their homes, with workplaces encouraging racialised employees to work from home or offering private transport due to concerns about safety. In the longer term, this has left many feeling unwelcome in their own neighbourhoods, towns and cities.

It was at the community level that violence flared up, but it was also at the community level that we saw radical displays of hope and solidarity. Whether it was human chains being formed around mosques or local businesses donating supplies for the clean up, people across the country self-organised and self-resourced to respond to the hate infiltrating their communities. The power of local relationships and connection in resisting and rejecting hateful narratives and instead providing alternative messages of unity and belonging shone through the hostility and hatred.

In October 2024, we released *Fear and HOPE 2024: The case for community resilience* to explore how communities can be supported to reject divisive politics. The report highlights the importance of three distinct but interrelated pillars that prop up resilient communities: social connectedness, access to resources, and agency and empowerment. These pillars are crucial for long-term, preventative, and sustainable resistance to far-right activity. Resilient communities come together to overcome strain or crisis, and have the capability to reject divisive actors that seek to exploit these crises to drive communities apart.

Fourteen years of sustained stress across social, economic, political and cultural frontiers has weakened community resilience drastically, as a result of hostile Government policy on specific issues as well as a de-prioritisation of communities in general. The social, economic and political fabric of communities that

How community can fight the far right

would otherwise hold them together is increasingly fragile, leaving them vulnerable to further erosion by inflammatory and divisive politics peddled by far-right actors. As we saw during the August 2024 riots, it has enhanced volatility when trigger events happen, increasing the potential for tensions to spill over into violence. Crucially, the people who antagonised around the Southport murders were the same people who antagonised around the disorder in Harehills, Leeds in July 2024, around the conflict in Israel and Palestine since October 2023, and beyond. Without supporting our communities to resist this agitation, divisive actors will continue to do so.

Resilient communities are a crucial component in fighting the far right, but communities cannot be left to build this resilience alone. National strategy and guidance that holistically addresses all three pillars of community resilience and empowers and invests in local ownership and delivery of this work, is essential to support communities to play the pivotal role they can play in resisting the far right.

A new vision for councils and communities

Cllr Ashley Taylor
Bolsover District Council



Cllr Ashley Taylor

Life as a local councillor here in Bolsover is far from glamorous. It is hard graft for little glory, making our way through in-trays full of concerns that may seem small in the grand scheme of politics – potholes, parking, and bin collections. And yet these are the things that touch people's lives daily. Getting these simple things wrong has a profound impact on a community.

Local government has had it rough in recent years. Against a backdrop of brutal cuts and shrinking budgets, councils have had to make tough choices – often pitted against each other for scraps of funding, struggling to even cover the basics.

With a new government in Westminster committed to transforming our country, we have the opportunity to deliver a new vision for councils. I believe local government at its best is a true partnership with the communities we seek to represent, showing that politics does not have to be something that happens to local people, but with them. It is something Co-operative councillors in particular understand deeply, that harnessing the power and skills within our communities has the potential to transform local areas.

Think of the biggest issues we look to politics to solve. We know that we need the benefits of economic growth to be felt locally, and so councils should be seeking to support and grow co-operative businesses which keep wealth local. We know that we need spaces for young people to help reduce antisocial behaviour, so councils should actively work with communities to take over empty buildings for meaningful outreach like youth clubs and training centres. And we know that reaching our net zero goals will require buy-in from the public, so councils should be scouting out opportunities for community-owned energy projects, giving local people a tangible stake in our energy future. These are things that Co-operative Councillors can and are doing right now across the country – and with further support, we could achieve even more.

We know that we need to rebuild trust in politics and drive up participation in democracy. Recent research shows that far more people have trust and faith in local representatives than they do national ones. Councillors are rooted in our communities: we know our neighbours, we understand local needs and can understand the solutions better than anyone. Working with our communities to deliver on the issues our residents care most about locally gives us an opportunity to prove that politics, when it works well, can change things for the better.

A new vision for councils and communities

Most crucially, the fightback against politicians who seek to divide us must happen locally. There are those who claim that they speak for communities like Bolsover, but you cannot lead a community by dividing it. The far-right has grown in part because people have given up on politics. These actors thrive on disillusionment, frustration, and fear. The best way to counter this is not just to challenge their rhetoric but to prove, through action, that a different kind of politics is possible. The work to rebuild faith, not just in politics but in each other, starts at the ground level.

With the right support, councils can be at the forefront of this work. But alongside pulling the right policy levers, we also need a shift in political culture to genuinely value community leadership over centralised control. If our national governments can trust councils, and councils can trust communities, we can redistribute political power back to where it belongs.

This is what community power looks like

Inayat Omarji MBE

Chair,
All Souls Bolton



Inayat Omarji MBE

The story behind All Souls Bolton starts as a bit of a history lesson. Back in the 19th century, two brothers who'd made a large fortune in the cotton spinning industry were determined that some of their wealth should go towards improving the spiritual and moral wealth of the people living and working in the industrial sprawl of Bolton. Architects were asked to design the building with a very clear view that there should be no interior obstructions, so that everyone could see and hear the sermon wherever they were sitting in the church. The building had inclusivity at its heart from the very beginning. In 1986, the parish was unable to manage the financial commitments of the church, and the last service took place in December of that year before they shut the doors.

Fast forward a few decades and this church was still sitting in my community where I lived, I knew the footprint. You go past these buildings every day and you never see the significance of them, what was behind their doors, what their story is. My job at the time was to tackle antisocial behaviour, and around the church building there was a lot of vandalism happening, graffiti, rubbish being left and a lot of fires being started. My approach was that if you clean the area up as quickly as possible, it helps reduce the antisocial behaviour because it looks nicer, cleaner, and people are less likely to want to ruin it. So I contacted the Churches Conservation Trust and starting talking to them.

At that time, there was a chief executive who had this great vision about redundant churches being put back into use and serving the community again. I still remember the day he visited Bolton: we opened the doors and were blown away by what a beautiful building it was. I then showed him around Bolton, talked about the community, the different faiths that existed, what made people tick, what the different cultures were. And together, we bought into the idea that we needed to do something with this building for the community. That started the journey. We had a bigger vision than just keeping the church in good nick. We wanted to open the doors to the community and have a living, breathing space again.

And all this comes in the context of a time when our community was losing its spaces – losing leisure centres, losing youth clubs, losing community hubs because we couldn't afford to keep them open. But sitting there was this building, with so much potential.

And so working with the community and the Churches Conservation Trust (CCT), we got some funding to make something happen.

This is what community power looks like

We brought in architects to modernise the space and get it fit for the 21st century. Today, we have a building that is functioning and there are different community activities every day of the week – for toddlers, for teenagers, for elderly people, for the NHS, for businesses, for young people in training. It serves the community and it's run by the community. And it was all made possible because there is now space to do it.

The church sits in an area that has seen a fair share of riots over the years. Bolton is now a predominantly South Asian community, and we've had the EDL, the BNP, all sorts come and go. And it's against that backdrop that we wanted All Souls to literally be for all souls, for everybody. That was the vision from day one: a space where people from all faiths, all cultures, all backgrounds could spend time together. The question has never been, is this a space for me as a Christian, or Muslim or whatever else. It's always been, what can I get from this space and what can I contribute? We've always made sure that that we have programmes that engage everybody, not just one part of the community. And I'm proud that we have people walking in from all walks of life.

The way I see it, the relationship between community and politics works both ways. Communities need to be more engaged in politics: taking active roles, campaigning for things they believe in, understanding how politics impacts them. But politics needs to be more engaged with communities too: understand what drives us, what our potential is. Politics should be putting ownership into communities, supporting us to stand on our own two feet.

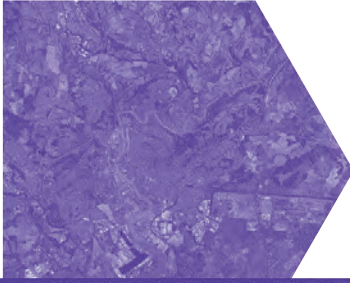
Communities understand their problems and their solutions better than anyone, but that doesn't mean politics should step back. It needs to be a partnership, letting communities drive the things that matter to them, supported by the government that has the resources to make things happen. It should be about politics and communities working together – never as a tick box, but as a real partnership. That's why I am part of the We're Right Here campaign because I believe communities should have real power over the places and decisions that shape their lives.

The English Devolution Bill presents a real opportunity to make this happen, creating a framework that shifts power to local people. At All Souls, we have seen what's possible when communities take ownership and lead the way. This is what community power looks like, and it's what we need to see more of across the country.

Pints with a purpose

Sam Dabb

Operations Manager,
Le Pub



Sam Dabb

Le Pub is a Community Benefit Society in Newport, with 72 members last time we checked. I was originally running the pub as a sole trader when the landlady sold the building from under us, and the only way we could set up anywhere else was by raising capital via community shares.

The model means that we are properly rooted in the community. Regular feedback from member shareholders helps us shape what we programme and what we do. The share offer and the model we've chosen also puts us on a far more stable financial footing, which allows us to do more. We've got freedom that many music venues don't have because we didn't have to get into any debt when we started the business. That means we can offer free venue hire to community groups and charities.

We do a Dancing Nanas class, where all the local nanas come and have dancing classes. We have homeschooled ukelele groups in. We're able to put on a lot of gigs for charities with totally free venue hire, so everything they make on the door goes straight to the charity rather than them having to pay us.

South Wales is a part of the country that has been decimated economically, sometimes it has felt like all we've got left is each other and our communities. It's always been important to work together on that to make sure we don't lose what we do have. Some of our best exports are musicians and bands, and now there's a growing Welsh-language music movement now too. Without the venues, that Welsh-language movement has got nowhere to perform and thrive. Those bands have always existed but people are getting behind it more now, and venues like ours have an important role to play in nurturing some of that.

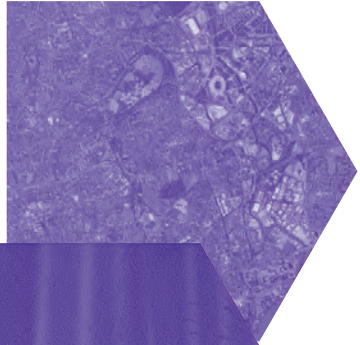
I believe Le Pub is vital for the community, not just the music community, but for everyone. It's a real community space for meeting people, spending time together and catching up. There's a huge loneliness epidemic across the UK and spaces like ours massively combat that. We've got people that pop in three or four times a week on their own and just chat to the bar staff or to each other. If we weren't here, they wouldn't have that space to come to, and the consequences of that would be awful.

For me, community ownership is all about giving people who don't necessarily have a lot of money or a lot of resource the chance to feel like they are actually properly part of something, and that you can just invest a small amount of money and be a massive part of what your community is doing. It gives them the opportunity to really take ownership of their own community.

A strategic necessity, not a feel-good afterthought

Andy Fearn

Co-Executive Director,
Protection Approaches



Andy Fearn

A few years ago, I worked with a mosque in East London that wanted to build stronger relationships with its diverse local community. They asked themselves a crucial question: how could they engage with people who might be wary of the mosque or Islam? They identified a group they had little interaction with – recent migrants, particularly from European countries. Rather than simply inviting them to mosque events, they considered what these community members most needed. Their answer: English lessons.

Recognising that local language courses were often inaccessible or too formal, they set up free drop-in English classes at the mosque three days a week, run by volunteers. Open to everyone, the sessions focused on conversation, allowing people to share their stories and experiences. Over the next years, hundreds attended. As participants practiced English, friendships formed, and barriers broke down. What started as a practical service became a powerful tool for connection and mutual understanding.

Another group I worked with ran workshops for unemployed community members, helping them build CVs, practise interviews, and apply for jobs. But they also saw an opportunity to bridge divides in their community where they identified tension between long-standing residents, and more recent migrant communities. They didn't just deliver training; they encouraged participants to support each other, to share their backgrounds and challenges, and to collaborate in building their futures. Through this, real relationships formed across lines of difference, fostering a sense of shared purpose and solidarity.

These examples show how well-resourced, community-led initiatives can transform lives. They meet immediate needs – providing skills, knowledge, resources and confidence – while also strengthening the fabric of society. They counter divisive narratives (often created by those in power outside of those communities) and demonstrate that communities are a key part of the solution to the social challenges we face.

Now is the time for the government to recognise that investing in communities is essential for national resilience. Recent events have shown that strong, cohesive communities can withstand external shocks and contribute to economic and societal stability. Research consistently shows that places with high levels of social cohesion fare better in times of crisis. Prioritising community cohesion aligns with the preventative, delivery-focused approach Labour has adopted in other areas. If the government fails to act,

A strategic necessity, not a feel-good afterthought

the populist right will exploit and seek to widen the gaps in community support and solidarity for its own ends.

UK governments have rarely viewed investment in local communities as a priority. The 1997-2010 Labour administrations became increasingly centralised, their approach embodied in the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit. The Conservative governments that followed paid rhetorical tribute to localism – through initiatives like David Cameron's "Big Society" and Boris Johnson's "levelling up" – but failed to devolve real power or resources to the local level. Unlike education or transport, community cohesion lacks a dedicated government department, reflecting a long-standing failure to take it seriously and embed a coherent approach to tackle the crises in division, cohesion and trust we face.

The widespread racist and Islamophobic rioting that swept the UK in summer 2024 should serve as a wake-up call. While the unrest was not caused solely by a lack of investment in communities, ignoring the role of local support would be a mistake. Protection Approaches has called for community cohesion to be a Cabinet Office priority, with a direct role in the department's ongoing review of national resilience. If the new government wants to set itself apart from its predecessors, it must recognise that supporting communities is not an optional extra – it is as fundamental as food security or pandemic preparedness.

Effective community cohesion is far more than organising social gatherings. Our research, including consultation with over 100 community and faith groups, shows that bringing people together is rarely an end in itself – and it is never enough on its own. True cohesion requires addressing the root causes of inequality, marginalisation, and prejudice which cannot be tackled by communities alone – and should never be put on the shoulders of the most marginalised who bear the sharpest cost. However, well-supported grassroots initiatives play a crucial role in this effort. Local organisations provide ongoing support to marginalised individuals, helping them access essential services and building trust in the process. This trust, in turn, enables community groups to advocate for policy change, ensuring that structural barriers are challenged and that people have a voice in decisions that affect them. Community cohesion must be seen not as a substitute for addressing structural inequalities but as a key component in a broader strategy for social justice and an opportunity to rebuild trust.

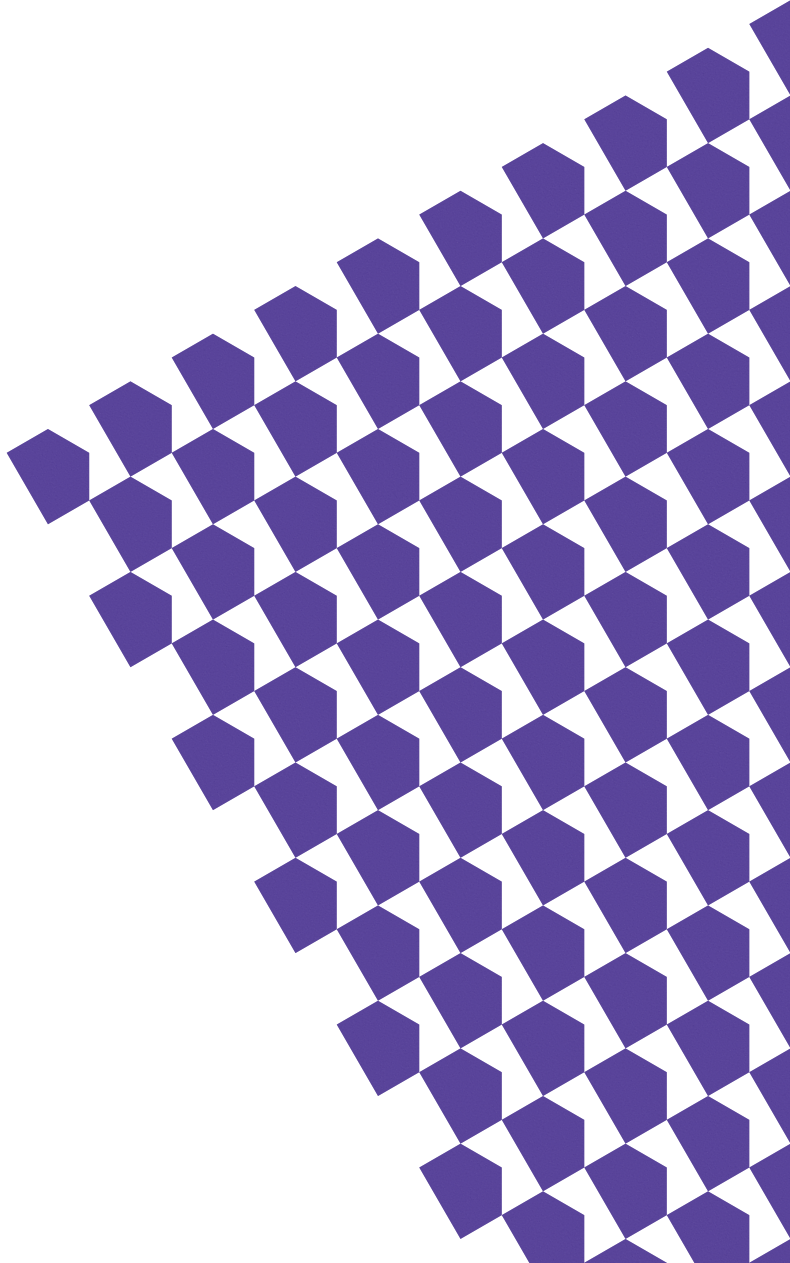
Andy Fearn

Investing in communities aligns with the government's broader strategy. Like health and education, community cohesion benefits from a preventative approach. Supporting grassroots organisations to foster cohesion would relieve pressure on public services and reduce the risk of large-scale unrest. It would also make the UK more resilient to challenges ranging from climate change to misinformation, all while contributing to economic growth. Unlike more complex policy shifts, investing in communities offers the government a way to achieve tangible, positive results with relatively modest resources.

The political case for greater investment in local communities is also becoming harder to ignore. The rising popularity of Reform UK mirrors the success of populist right-wing movements across Europe. While Reform may not have the infrastructure to contest elections nationwide, its grassroots strategy – focused as much on stoking division as on direct community engagement, including volunteering at food banks – signals a shift in the political landscape.

Since 2020, Protection Approaches has worked with over 500 community organisations across the UK, supporting their efforts to address division and build cohesion. Based on what we have learned, we believe the UK government must take a more proactive approach to community investment. We look forward to working with the Co-operative Party and others who share our commitment to strengthening communities and countering division. Investing in communities is not just the right thing to do – it is a strategic necessity for the country's future.

A strategic necessity, not a feel-good afterthought



Rebuilding neighbourhoods, rebuilding community

Baroness Hilary Armstrong

Chair,
Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods



Baroness Hilary Armstrong

Growing up in Sunderland, while the shipyards and coal mines were still at the centre of life, meant I experienced the strength of community, of being part of things, of support for those who were struggling. There were many positive aspects to community in those times, and many, if different, challenges. My Dad was a local councillor, and from the beginning he made sure I understood what was happening to people, and what could be done to support them.

There was little surprise therefore that I returned to Sunderland as a community and youth worker as the shipyards closed. I then went on to help establish the course at the then Polytechnic to train community and youth workers. We recruited people who had not done well at school but had worked in their local community. Their potential was phenomenal, and they contributed to developing new programmes for community development.

That's because community reminds us that the trendy phrases like 'levelling up' have to involve people, not just infrastructure. Of course, infrastructure and good buildings are important, but unless they are developed locally with local people, they may not contribute as much as possible to growth and development.

After decades working in and around public policy, and trying to deliver change, I've come to see community as the 'secret sauce' of social change. This happens primarily through the development of social capital – networks of relationships that allow social and economic activity to take place. The rise of new technology since my time in Sunderland, and social media have raised new challenges. Yes, new technology can drive improvement in productivity and with new enterprise, but what we have traditionally held as the building blocks of community are even more important. Without those relationships, those connections, then we simply miss out on sustainable growth and development.

More than ever, those relationships and accidents need nurturing – they are not automatic. I learned the importance of care and nurturing for growing vegetables from my Grandfather and his two allotments. People, particularly children, also need support for nurturing. It's one of the reasons I have emphasised support for the very youngest and why Sure Start was so important in the last Labour Government. Tony Blair set up the Social Exclusion Unit and made his first major speech at the Aylesbury estate, talking of our determination as a government to deal with the sort of problems to be found by people living on the Aylesbury. That led to the New Deal for Communities, a pioneering programme working

Rebuilding neighbourhoods, rebuilding community

with 39,000 communities (with an average of 10,000 residents) with around £50m in each community over 10 years. A partnership model was used for decision-making including local residents, councillors and the police – with local residents taking the majority stake.

After so much policy change and failure over recent year, we often forget that long-term, evidence based practice is possible, and that it works. New Deal for Communities did work: it reduced crime, opened up new opportunities, and saw people's satisfaction with where they were living rise. The evaluation concluded that "in many respects these neighbourhoods have been transformed in the last 10 years." The NDC was cost effective too, and we know that such approaches align closely with the Government's missions, particularly on growth, health and crime.

We can't simply repeat previous initiatives. Any new neighbourhoods programme has to take account of changes in the population, the many more older people, the role of social media particularly in young people's lives, the increase in mental health problems, and the major cutback in public service provision. Two thirds of council-funded youth centres have closed in England over the past 14 years, and at least 214 playground facilities have closed since 2014.

Also this time we need to open up opportunities not just in inner cities, but in ex-industrial towns, often at their periphery, and coastal communities. City centre growth doesn't trickle out to those isolated communities. These are places most affected by de-industrialisation and loss of manufacturing jobs, and changes in tourism patterns. These are places that are now being seduced by the rhetoric of the populist right.

We should not despair. We know what works. It won't be easy, but by tapping into our belief in the Labour movement of the power of people, with the right support to bring about change, we can work with people to turn their neighbourhood round. The last Labour Government did just that. The Independent Commission for Neighbourhoods wants to point the way for the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods to be able to develop those things, including social infrastructure that can turn their community round, and be safe places offering opportunities for people to be confident that their families will get access to those services that will mean they can make the best of themselves. Join with us on that journey.

The housing crisis is a community crisis

Florence Eshalomi MP

Chair, Housing, Communities
and Local Government Committee



Florence Eshalomi MP

By its nature, what community means to us is rooted in our sense of place and purpose.

To me, community is the Barrier block Estate in Brixton, where I grew up in a council house with my late mother and two sisters. Before arriving at the estate, we were placed in temporary accommodation in a bed and breakfast in King's Cross. My mum would not allow us to miss school for anything, so me and my sisters still needed to get the tube down to Brixton every day.

I remember the relief when we got that house, when we didn't have to wheel our bags and suitcases around and could settle down. This permanent home gave us the chance to get to know our neighbours and properly join a community.

This meant that when we faced problems with our accommodation, we faced them together. When we sensed opportunities to make our neighbourhood better, we could carry them out together.

It also meant we could be aware of the systematic problems we faced together. When we realised that the injustices and stigmas we faced as a family were also being faced by those around us, we could turn the sense of alienation from the comfortable lives of others I met into anger - that the system was set up to fail us.

This anger, the feeling that our community wasn't listened to, drove me ask how I could ensure we got the voice we needed. That's why I stood to be a councillor in 2005, and it was that same drive that led me to stand as the MP for the community I grew up in during the 2019 General Election. Yet I know that the drive that led me into politics, to be a voice for families who are not given a seat at the table when decisions are made that impact their lives, is as necessary today as it ever has been.

You only need to look at the Grenfell Disaster to see the tragic consequences when communities are not listened to. The damning Inquiry report outlined how the community of tenants were not listened to at every level of the system responsible for their safety, and concluded that that the tenant management organisation was an uncaring and bullying overlord that ignored their concerns about the safety of their homes.

Seeing the consequences of marginalising those residents, and the strength of the families who continue to fight for justice, cannot

The housing crisis is a community crisis

help but show why we must listen to and empower our communities to have their voices heard. I have had the honour of meeting some of the victims' relatives directly, an experience that will stay with me. Talking with them underlined my conviction that we must now look deeper than how we can strengthen our communities and look at how communities can be created in the first place.

I think back to how we joined the Barrier Estate community, how we managed to move out of temporary accommodation and get a council home where I had a room of my home. For too many people, this simply would not be possible today, because the reality is that temporary accommodation is no longer temporary. In parts of the country, the average stay for households with children, not maximum but average, is over three years. These families are not only staying in temporary accommodation as a stop gap, they are growing up there. How can anyone possibly be part of a local community if they don't have a home of their own?

Across society, the increasing insecurity in our housing is damaging our ability to build communities. How can we expect communities to form when landlords can evict tenants through no fault of their own, with just two months' notice? When nearly one in 5 households in our country are living with such precarious terms, how can they build a stake in the area they call home? And when those in social housing are told that they are lucky to even have a roof over their head, even as they have to keep their windows open in the dead cold of winter because their home is so vulnerable to damp.

We must remember that some new blocks of housing even force those in a social home to go through separate doors to the rest of the tenants, and forbid them from using community resources as simple as playgrounds. While these schemes have rightly been met with outrage, the fact that developers saw this as desirable in the first place should ring alarm bells about our ability to form sustainable communities.

You can see the results of the degeneration of community in the issues we are facing today. I remember, just after being elected, seeing a young boy who was slumped on the road and clearly in distress. As I went over to help, I realised he had been stabbed. What scared me about that incident, what continues to sadden me, is that so many people walked past us.

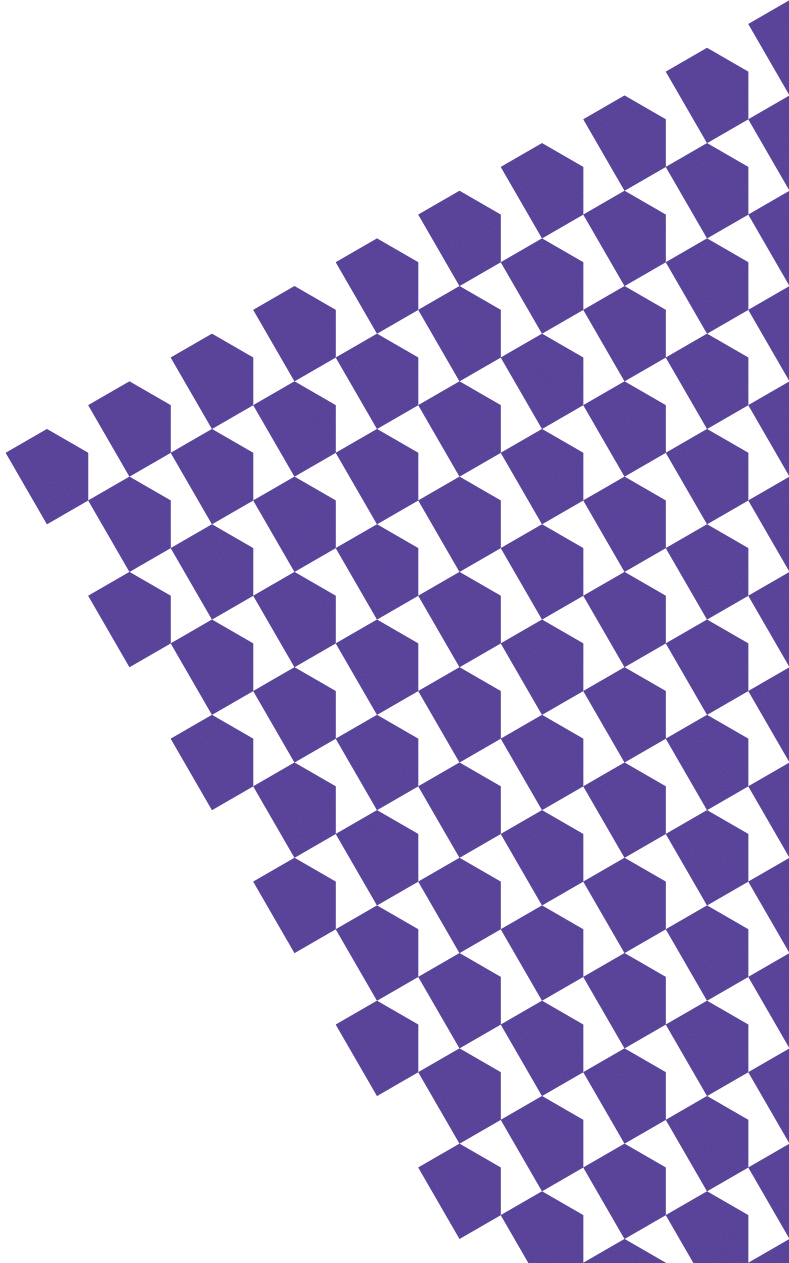
Florence Eshalomi MP

When communities die, we all become alienated to the health of our society. We don't check on neighbours we've not seen in a while. We don't notice when someone is going through a rough time and needs support. We don't see the struggles we face reflected in other people.

At their best, communities deliver resilience for all their members and empower people to create the more equal society we should all be striving for. They enable the voices of people suffering from the types of injustices and stigmas I faced growing up to be heard.

Without these voices, it is impossible to map what the issues are that we need to solve, never mind create the will to solve them. Without these voices, we cannot turn alienation into action. Empowering our communities could be transformative for society. But this will only be possible if we create a state which encourages, facilitates and reinforces this.

The housing crisis is a community crisis



Assets in community hands

Cllr Sue Woodward

Leader of the Opposition,
Lichfield District Council



Cllr Sue Woodward

Community action is something we all agree is a good thing. Councillors like me will all have projects in their patch which do vital work to support the community. We support these projects in every way we can, and we might even talk about their good work on the political stage. But too often, those projects and the lessons they offer are left unsung, except in the local community. They might be applauded and valued locally, but they need to be shared far more widely as they provide serious answers to serious questions we all face.

But it doesn't have to be that way. As a Co-operative councillor working with the Co-operative Party, the Co-operative Councils Innovation Network and the wider co-operative movement, I believe this is the moment for communities to get in the driving seat, and for government to pay real attention to what happens in communities across the country and why it matters.

And if we believe community action is a positive thing, then it should be a natural next step to take the political power we have and put as much of it as possible in the hands of those community leaders.

This means involving communities far more in local decision-making, but it should also mean giving people a proper stake in their community. Empowered communities are strong communities, and community ownership brings people together to literally own the things that matter most to them.

When community ownership works well, it also gives communities access to physical spaces they wouldn't otherwise have. It means the local mums and baby class has a space to meet, that community kitchens can be set up for cultures to be shared, that young people have a space that is safe and welcoming. Community ownership is already proving that it can provide that social connectedness that so many of us long for.

Perhaps most importantly of all, community ownership gives us the opportunity to make sure those assets are there for the long term. Too often, when times are hard and money is tight, spaces like libraries and community centres are the first to go. Across the country, there has been a slow but painful disappearing of places for communities to be. But community ownership can help change that.

Assets in community hands

Putting assets into community hands means they can't just be taken away. Those spaces are owned and operated by the community, and decisions about their future are made by the community.

I believe there is an opportunity for national and local government to work together to support community ownership to its greatest extent. This isn't about communities vs government; it's communities with government, working together to create and safeguard the places that matter so much to local people.

When isolation ends, community begins

Fr Niall Weir

Former Rector,
St Paul's Church West Hackney



Fr Niall Weir

I served as Rector of St Paul's Church in West Hackney for more than two decades. When I arrived there in 2003, the church had somewhat lost its moorings as a parish church, i.e. a church that exists for the entire community, not just for those who turn up on a Sunday morning. The whole site was surrounded by a high prickly hedge, behind which lay the church building, like a sleeping character from a fairy story – waiting to be kissed back to life. One Sunday, when a member of the church collapsed and we phoned for an ambulance, we were asked for our post code and found we didn't have one. We had well and truly slipped off the map. Our dream was to build a visible church for the whole community, and that's what we set out to do.

We began with a mapping exercise, looking at the profile of the parish, so we could see what the presenting problems in our area were. They were all the things you'd expect in an inner-city parish – homelessness, isolated elders, addiction issues, young people with nothing to do and so the list went on. History is littered with churches attempting to solve these issues, often to no avail.

Now in our case, we had a fabulous space, in which pretty much anything could happen – but we lacked the expertise with which to respond to the parish's presenting problems. What we did have, however, was a burgeoning set of relationships with individuals and organisations, all of whom had oodles of expertise with which to address the myriad presenting problems of the parish, but nowhere from which to operate. And so we started to form partnerships with those folk, offering them a space in which to flourish and to go about their wonderful work.

The result of that is that now, in an average week, St Paul's is home to multiple organisations: lunches for the homeless, using ingredients grown by volunteers in the church's garden; 12-step groups; Brownies and Guides groups; projects working with local sex workers; dance clubs; farmers' markets and multiple choirs – all of it quietly underpinned with a gentle programme of prayer.

And we can't talk about community in West Hackney without talking about The Posh Club. We knew many isolated elders in our community and we'd worked with one organisation

When isolation ends, community begins

which ran a lunch club – but it was woeful, no fun at all. Plastic flowers on the table, but no life. But then, we were approached by Duckie [London-based queer collective] who wanted to run something called The Posh Club, a space where sequins, dancing and outrageous fun are offered to all. We watched as people aged from 65 to 112 frolicked with and were welcomed by young LGBTQIA+ people – groups that probably wouldn't be considered natural bedfellows – and it was a joy to watch genuine friendships develop as a result.

By coming together in such a way, Duckie and the Posh Club have addressed social isolation in a manner that is creative and joyful and genuinely fun. It's been described as the only club in London where people get rushed to hospital for not taking their drugs, which happened when one member accidentally left their meds at home.

None of the above has never been a string of landlord-tenant relationships. Rather, we each bring our respective strengths to the table and we address the challenges of our area in partnership. We are never just a space, taken over by all these groups. Our role is to be like a chaplain – holding the overall narrative and supporting the individual projects as and when we can.

Where the real magic happens is when those projects begin working with one another. One Monday I was in the church, hanging out with the homelessness action group, when I spotted a sex worker from Romania, whom I recognized from the sex workers' drop-in project which meets on a Thursday. It turned out that they were there helping the homelessness project with some translation work, so that they could help support Romanian people in the area. How amazing is that? You'd see the same thing with the Saturday Farmers' Market, where farmers leave leftover produce to be used by the Monday homelessness project. And all of this crosses faith boundaries too – our neighbouring mosque would turn up at our door with the biggest vats of soup you've ever seen for our night shelter project, and when they needed donations for a new carpet for the Mosque, we were pleased to make a sizeable donation.

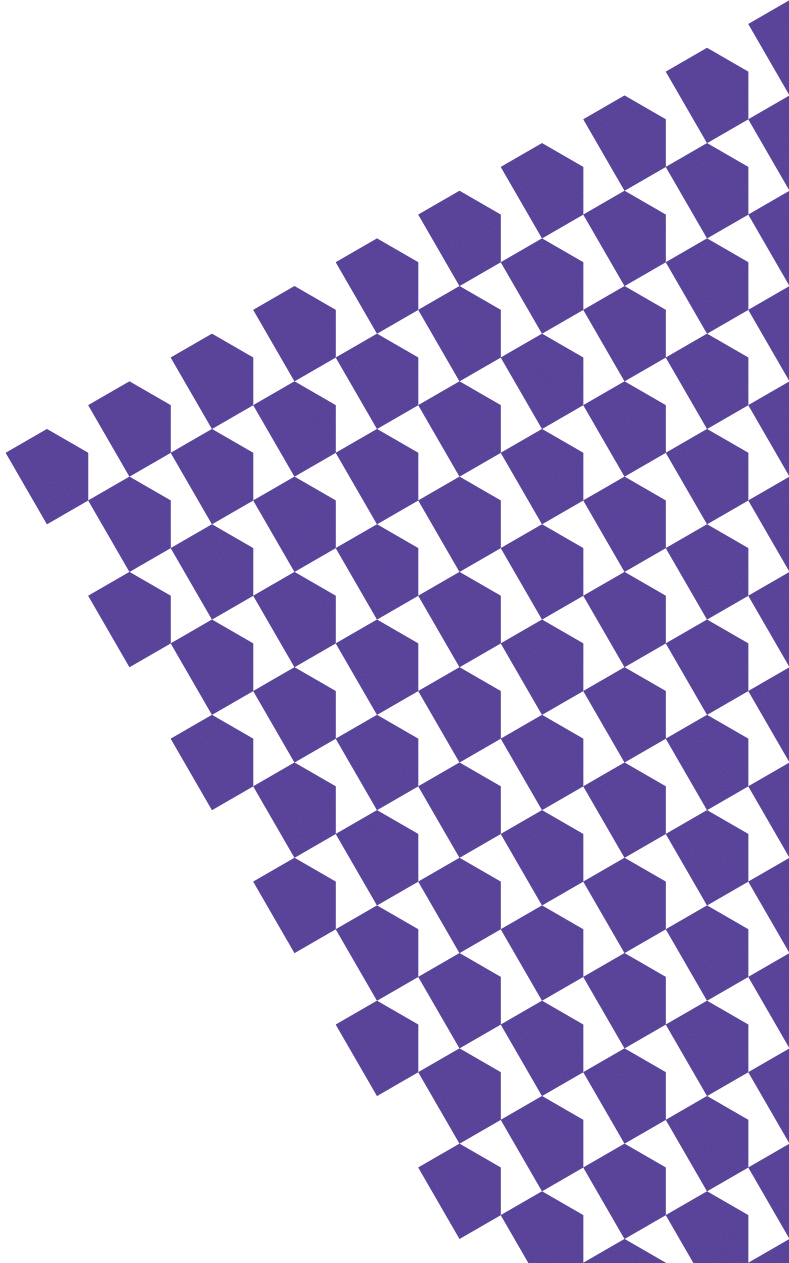
What we've learned from one another is the importance of making friends when the weather is good, so that when

Fr Niall Weir

the weather gets stormy, those relationships are already established and we have trust in one another. I remember on the morning of the 7/7 bombings, there was a meeting at our local police station and everyone was there – folk from different faith and community groups. We knew and trusted each other, which meant that we could respond to that terrible situation in a united and trusting way. We were all there ready to work together to protect our community.

Community for me is embodied by little things, such as the joyous experience of going into your local kebab shop, and they know your order before you announce it. It's the simple excitement of knowing one another. What the story of our church shows is that, when you put people or groups of people together, you may have no idea what's going to happen, but something can and usually does. We have faith in that process and that's one of the reasons that we're pleased to be known as a faith community. And I suspect that God is in there somewhere. He usually is...

When isolation ends, community begins



Owning the stage

Craig Pennington

Chief Executive and Co-Founder,
Future Yard



Craig Pennington

Future Yard is our independent live music venue in the heart of Birkenhead. It was founded on one fundamental belief – that music can change the world. We believe mobilising the power of music for our communities, for place and for people is truly transformative work.

Our building was once an abandoned nightclub, not serving the community in any way. Despite its rich cultural history, Birkenhead didn't have an independent live music venue. Our area was massively underserved when it came to arts and culture, both in terms of opportunities to get out and consume culture, but also to get involved with creating it. We set out to change that.

Today, Future Yard is a thriving live music venue in one of the poorest wards in the country. We're proving that cultural spaces aren't just something for the wealthy, they can and should be available to all.

We set Future Yard up as a community interest company. What that means is that any surplus we create is reinvested in our stated aims as an organisation – to use music for transformative change in our community. For us, it was the only model that made sense. We are driven by the positive impact we can have in our community, so it makes total sense that reinvesting into that community is literally written into the DNA of our business model. It's also what allows us financial stability that many other music venues don't have – the vast majority of independent music venues don't own their buildings, they are entirely reliant on a landlord. That's not the case for us, our building is owned by the community – for as long as the community values it, it's going to be there. It's got a longevity that just wouldn't exist in a different model.

But we don't just see Future Yard as a space to watch live music, as important as we think that is. It's also a genuine space for the community. In an average week, we'll have toddlers coming in with their parents for 'Mosh Tots', we'll have teens coming in to use our space for band practice and we'll have families popping in for a coffee. We're passionate about providing opportunity – we run both a mentorship programme for new artists and a skills and training programme targeted at young people. We have

the space and resource to teach sound engineering, light design, stage management and more. The young people who come through our doors have access too all of that for free.

Future Yard is proving that there is a model that puts communities at the heart of culture, and makes sure local people benefit from the significant power that music holds.

A Red Bridge over a Red Wall

Ros Wynne-Jones

Real Britain columnist,
The Mirror



Ros Wynne-Jones

The founder of the Shalom Youth Centre in Grimsby, Canon John Ellis, is also a poet. Whenever the words 'levelling up' come to mind, so do the Irish priest's five-line metaphor from his poem, "The Town Hall Conference".

*An expanse
of little paving blocks that cover the town
like an antibiotic virus.
They are 50 shades of grey
to remind you've been screwed.*

In 2014, Levelling Up gave Grimsby £6 million in 'crazy' paving. The paving stones were ripped up six weeks later when an electricity fault left Northern Power needing to access two cables. By 2016, sections of broken block paving were tripping pedestrians and sinking under the weight of buses.

The priest in the Timberland sweatshirt and a wooden cross, was no longer the only one with the metaphors. Imagine, Canon John's poem seemed to say, what £6 million could have done in the hands of the people.

For years, Grimsby has acted as a cypher for what's wrong with deindustrialised Britain – a lazy shorthand that relies on its first four letters, its salt-battered streets, and the whims of Channel 4 reality show commissioners. But the eastern seaport city, has something to teach all of us about a new kind of community politics, and a different kind of levelling up – human regeneration.

Led by local people like Canon John – who set up 'the Shal' in 1972 – and a band of activists known collectively as East Marsh United, the earth-based Martians of Grimsby have been buying back properties abandoned by cuckooing drug dealers, clearing gunnels blocked by fly-tipping on an industrial scale, and keeping young people from fulfilling their destiny at the end of a county line.

Change happened because the alternative was the street East Marsh United's Billy Dasein took me to back in 2020. His own street – where a neighbouring property had recently been vacated by county lines dealers.

"For weeks bluebottles were coming out through a crack in the door," he told me. "We couldn't get anyone to do anything about

it, until eventually police broke in and found a dead dog in the bath.”

Communitarianism is the story of power, not paving stones. A heavyweight, real world challenge to the ethereal marketplace of populist ideas swirling around in cyberspace. And it's needed now, because it's power, not paving stones, that can inoculate the country against authoritarian populism.

Fast-forward to 2025, and the dead dog is our politics, and Musk's X, an un-checked Facebook, and new iterations of AI are the bluebottles. Having spent even only a short time in the United States at the business end of the 2024 election – a time lapse image of what is coming here next – it is evident that the only solution is to break down the door.

The rotting corpse of the body politic needs exhuming and reinventing, before the big tech Victor Frankensteins dabble in the 'unhallowed damp'.

Trust in politics and politicians was flatlining long before the latest ice age of Conservative Austerity government. But 14 years of brutal local budget-cuts – dictated from central government but carried out locally, and affecting everything from libraries to personal human dignity and care – and a string of greed-based political sleaze allegations, from the PPE scandal to Partygate, cladding corruption to MPs expenses, has left it in the gutter.

In the Petri dish of sewer politics, populism is flourishing like ecoli. The more that politicians are associated with broken promises and dishonest motives, and the more dislocated communities become from over-centralised power, the more the bacteria grow.

Its spread is also airborne, carried on the disinformative winds of algorithms bending at the whim of those such lies benefit. The chains of hatred, despair, disinformation, mistrust are strangling the ideas we want to flourish – while our politics and our communities are under threat from conspiratorial thinking.

The solution for algorithmic alienation and tech-based depression we are told is for sufferers to reconnect to the communities around them. To spend real, offline time with other beings and in nature. To literally re-root themselves in human connection.

Ros Wynne-Jones

Our broken, depressed politics, and our atomised population, need the same prescription – community power.

Practically, this means a re-rooting of politics. The physical act of meeting together, the sharing of resources and ideas. Working together to see actual meaningful change happen, and getting dirt in our fingernails.

This has been instinctively understood in places from Stretford Public Hall in Manchester to the Lawrence Weston housing estate in Bristol to my local co-operatively-owned pub, the Ivyhouse in SE London. And it was understood by the founders of the Becontree council estate in Barking and Dagenham, whose 100th anniversary the Daily Mirror, helped celebrate with a community film last year.

It was evident all along the backbone of Britain when the Mirror undertook an 80th anniversary journey of George Orwell's Road to Wigan Pier – in places like Stoke, Stafford and Barnsley; communities surviving on nothing more than thin air, resilience and camaraderie. And it's understood most of all by communities that have been violently oppressed, from the Grenfell bereaved to the Hillsborough families.

Yet too often, communities have had to stand together because no other help is coming. Community power is the secret weapon the Co-operative Party has to share with a Labour government at the wider movement – so the people get the backup they deserve.

Levelling Up, in practice, has been the opposite force in our communities. Lisa Nandy – the former Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up – memorably called it a “partial refund” – where millions were robbed from local services, and a few vote-pleasing handouts given in return.

“I'll tell you what Levelling Up means to Wigan,” Nandy once told me. “You get 60 press releases on the Northern Powerhouse but actually they've electrified a tiny bit of track that doesn't go anywhere and taken most of the trains off.”

We'd been to visit Sunshine House, a flourishing grassroots project that also happened to be the nearest building to the infamously noxious tripe shop, above which Eric Blair, AKA George Orwell, lodged on his road to Wigan Pier. Then run by the late Barbara Nettleton, an indomitable Wiganer, Sunshine House had started as

a community centre, and become a string of pay-what-you-can shops, a kitchen that fed people no questions asked, a respite for carers and a meeting place for lonely widowers. A place so cheerful that even the notoriously idle Mrs Brooker of the tripe shop would have flung off her grimy blanket to get to seated yoga.

Sunshine House was flourishing in its own right, but was also interconnected with The Wigan Deal, which pioneered a “new social relationship” between the council and local community. “All across Wigan, in places like Sunshine House and elsewhere, people are weaving gold out of thread,” Nandy said. “They are more ambitious for their communities than their government. Imagine what they could do with a government that backed them.”

Fast forward four years, and it's Nandy's government that is in power. But her government are showing, thus far, too few signs of ruling as communitarians.

Labour can still be a weaver of gold thread, a party that chooses a Red Bridge over a Red Wall. But it needs first to choose between being a party of paving stones, or of power.





About Community Britain

Community Britain is a campaign that highlights the role communities are already playing in solving our nation's most pressing challenges and reclaims the role of communities as a serious political and economic force – not just a feel-good afterthought.

As *Stories from Community Britain* highlights, many communities are already pioneering solutions to important issues like climate change, economic stagnation and social cohesion. Taken together, they provide a blueprint of what our country could look like if every community had the power, ownership, and resources to shape the places they live – providing a direct alternative to division, disillusionment, and decline.

Community Britain asks government at every level not to step back, but to step forward. We're calling for policies that shift power and resources back to communities, ensuring they have the tools to take action, the ownership to drive change, and the backing of government to make their ambitions a reality.

About the Co-operative Party

The Co-operative Party is the political voice of the co-operative movement. We believe businesses and organisations should be owned and democratically controlled by their members – workers, customers, and communities – rather than distant shareholders.

Whether that's workers owning their workplace, customers owning their local shop, or fans owning their football club, we want to create an economy and society where power and wealth are shared, and communities have a real stake in their future.

Since 1927, we've worked in partnership with the Labour Party to stand joint Labour & Co-operative candidates. There are over 40 Labour & Co-operative MPs and 1500 Labour & Co-operative elected representatives at every level of government, from MSs and MSPs to Mayors, Assembly Members and Councillors.

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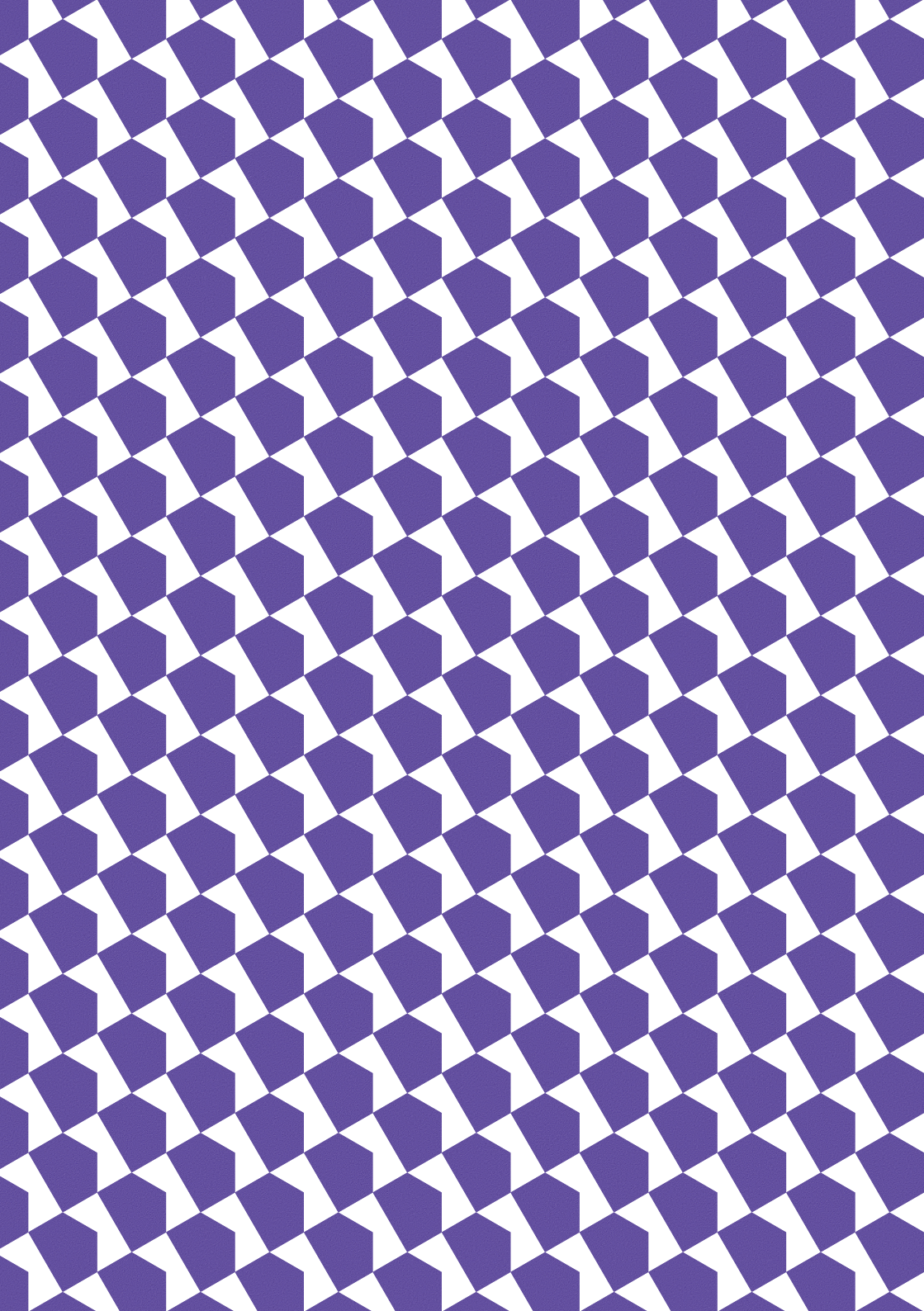
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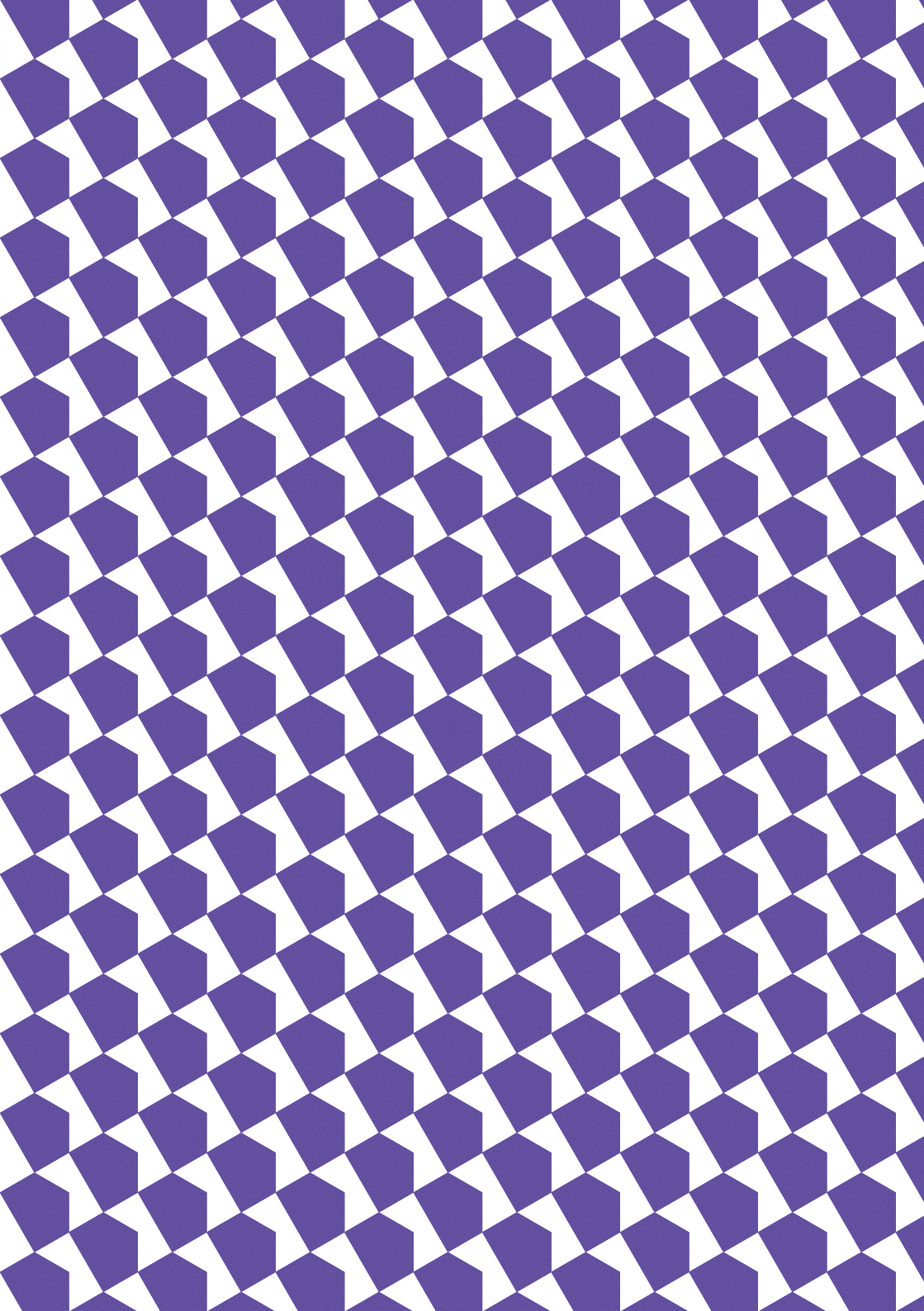
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