Power to Change

Backing community business

From the ground up

Community business and Britain's next decade

November 2025

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Introduction

Where we've been, and where we're going

For ten years, Power to Change has worked to build the power and profile of community business.

We began by helping individual community businesses to establish and grow through funding and support. Along the way, we've learned from them – about the challenges they face, the barriers they are working to overcome and the aspirations that drive them. In that time, we've built a compelling evidence base showing how community business creates stronger and fairer local economies and more resilient, connected communities.

Today, the case for community business is more urgent than ever. Our economy is failing to improve living standards for everyone and too many communities feel powerless to make the changes they need. Community business offers a better way of doing business, that puts power and wealth in community hands.

As we look ahead to our role in the next ten years, we will continue to draw on what we have learnt. As a think-do organisation, working alongside community businesses, our ambition is to unlock the policy, systems and cultural change, as well as the resources and cross-sector collaboration, that can enable many more communities to change what matters to them through community business.

Advancing our vision for the future

In practice, this means focusing on the issues and systems where we feel community business can make the most impact. We will work shoulder to shoulder with community business to grow community-led local economies, create community-powered places and spaces and build community-centred public services. Our goal is to see community business recognised and supported as a mainstream, trusted approach to building prosperity and opportunity in communities across the country.

This collection of essays marks our 10th anniversary and looks ahead to the future of Power to Change and the community business movement. We've invited a group of creative thinkers, practitioners and local and national leaders from across the country to share their reflections on the past decade – the challenges, the achievements, and the lessons learned – and to explore how communities can meet the economic, social and environmental challenges of the decade ahead with resilience and unity.

Their essays show how communities are driving renewal on their high streets and in their neighbourhoods, tackling division and isolation, and creating good work and opportunities where they live. They feature stories of the impact of community business, from Hartlepool to Hastings, and from Stretford to Birkenhead.

Contributors also grapple with the barriers that still stand in the way of this vision. They ask vital questions about how we're governed and who benefits from the economy, while

Image: Gosforth Civic Theatre

offering ideas to shape policy and structural reform. Above all, they advance a vision of our country's future that depends on the transfer of power and support to local people, and they call on the people who can to make this happen.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who contributed their time, reflections and ideas, and to the many people and communities that have influenced and inspired the thinking behind these essays. We hope you enjoy reading them and feel inspired to join us in backing community business.

Power to Change, November 2025

Image: Granby 4 Streets, Liverpool

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Community-powered places and spaces

Social infrastructure, the places and spaces which enable communities to meet and connect with each other, is under-developed or in decline in many parts of the country. Its absence is felt acutely in communities facing economic disadvantage, which are disproportionately affected.

Even when efforts are taken to develop local assets, renew neighbourhoods or regenerate high streets, communities often feel locked out of the process, unable to influence how it is shaped or to benefit from its outcomes.

Community businesses, as locally rooted organisations working with communities, are a vital part of social infrastructure and must be nurtured. They bring communities together, they build the social fabric where it has been weakened, and they build resilience that will safeguard the future as well as the present. These benefits are greatest when, through community business, communities have a stake in the ownership and stewardship of local places and spaces.

Image: Edberts House, Gateshead

Looking back to move forwards: A historical perspective on community and public policy

Nick Garland

The Labour government is putting considerable faith in policies targeted at mobilising community initiative, aimed at resolving twin problems of spatial inequality and disillusionment with mainstream politics. This is not the first time that a British government has embraced such thinking in response to a vicious cocktail of economic constraints, state dysfunction, geographic inequality, and acute awareness of political disengagement and a rising radical right. Since the 1960s, similar initiatives have been launched with great ideological fanfare: that they might reverse local decline, strengthen community spirit and working-class self-reliance, and deepen democracy. Their record in meeting those lofty expectations has been mixed.

The history of post-war place-based policymaking can offer lessons for the government's current approach. In particular, the government should learn from the past the importance of durable design, clarity of objectives, and the relationship between community policy and economic strategy.

Putting community policy in historical perspective

In recent months, the English Devolution Bill has been rebranded as the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, foregrounding a Community Right to Buy, accompanied by a new 'Pride in Place' fund, providing deprived communities with the resources to improve their local area. These measures, alongside Labour's much-heralded capital investments in regional industry and transport, are the government's response to what the responsible Secretary of State, Steve Reed, diagnoses as a crisis of social cohesion and political trust stemming from 'austerity, deindustrialisation, an uncritical embrace of globalisation… [and] a style of government which deprived people of control'.

Whereas today the Labour government is concerned with social infrastructure and community cohesion outside England's major cities – in the ex-industrial places which, in MHCLG officials' terms, 'fell through the cracks of previous regeneration schemes' – it was previously an 'inner cities crisis' which motivated British governments' original embrace of the 'area-based initiative'.

By the late sixties, Britain's inner cities had become synonymous with an apparent 'crisis' of community, marked by the persistence of deep-seated, geographically-concentrated deprivation, urban deindustrialisation, the fractious politics of race, and the apparent decline of historic, working-class kinship networks. Aware of the political threat of Powellism and the National Front, politicians scrambled for solutions. Interest in hyper-local, devolved and participatory approaches to policymaking was fuelled by other factors: particularly the desire to offload responsibilities from an 'overloaded' state in the context of low growth, high inflation, and dysfunctional industrial relations, and politicians' perceived need to cater to less deferential citizens, frustrated with the remoteness and restrictiveness of the bureaucratic, post-war welfare state. With electoral participation declining and the party system fragmenting, parties were embracing the language and methods of community politics at a time when they appeared increasingly detached from real communities.

In this context, poverty was conceptualised as something to be addressed not only through standardised services or financial transfers, but by tackling interlocking, spatially-concentrated problems of 'multiple deprivation', spanning housing, education, welfare, and apparent cultural deficits of agency and aspiration. Such thinking would shape centre-left approaches to welfare and poverty into the next century.

From community development to property-led regeneration

In 1968, Harold Wilson's drifting Labour government – alarmed at working-class support for Enoch Powell, directionless after the abandonment of the central pillar of its economic policy, the National Plan, and shedding votes to Conservatives, Liberals, and Scottish and Welsh Nationalists – launched twelve Community Development Projects to conduct 'action-research' in deprived urban areas. The idea was at once for community workers to build local capacity, and to deepen the government's understanding of the complex factors

underlying 'multiple deprivation'. The projects, it was hoped, might revive decaying traditions of working-class self-help and illuminate methods of tackling deprivation untouched by the Beveridgean welfare state.

The programme swiftly became a debacle. Spearheaded by radical community workers closely entwined with the far left, the CDP became synonymous, locally, with bitter clashes with Labour-led councils and, nationally, with a radical critique of the principles underlying the programme. CDP researchers argued that the forces restructuring inner city communities lay well outside them, in the decisions of multinational companies. Policies designed to effect hyper-local change amounted to little more than – in the evocative title of one CDP pamphlet – 'gilding the ghetto', substituting a focus on working-class residents' moral failings in lieu of a thorough political-economic understanding of urban change. This analysis was not baseless but, as the historian Peter Shapely notes, the attempt to bend the original CDP vision to more radical ends 'achieved nothing of value for the urban poor', beyond embarrassing government and ensuring future initiatives would be more tightly managed.

From the late 1970s, urban policy took a turn towards private sector, property-led regeneration. The most determined opposition to Thatcherite regeneration initiatives came from municipal government, where the Labour left had gained a sizeable foothold. Despite the political controversy they generated, left-led councils proved crucial laboratories for more participatory and decentralised forms of service provision. The Greater London Council (GLC) lavished public funds on a sprawl of community groups, childcare providers and co-operatives, while Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council would decentralise its housing service into a network of neighbourhood offices. These were flawed experiments, but, by the 1990s, decentralist approaches had entered the mainstream of local government practice. However, one consequence of the ideological heat around local government was a progressive dismantling of its powers – as the Thatcher governments restricted councils' financial autonomy, imposed compulsory competitive tendering, and abolished the metropolitan county councils including the GLC – from which it has never truly recovered.

Into the 1990s: community in the ascendant

Come the 1990s – shaped by a common sense that Thatcherite individualism had extended too far – politicians across the spectrum sought to compete on the terrain of community and citizenship. John Major's premiership yielded a new, more conciliatory Conservative localism, albeit within a competitive framework. However, the principal beneficiaries would be New Labour.

In the nineties, much was made of Blair's 'communitarian' political philosophy, though this was in some senses rather superficial, especially given New Labour's ambivalence towards local authorities. Nevertheless, those governments marked the apotheosis of changes hinted at since the sixties. From state multiculturalism to the government's enthusiasm for partnership with community businesses and social enterprises, community was increasingly treated not just as an ideal to be pursued, but as something represented by organisations, committees and leaders – stakeholders to be

managed and incorporated within a framework of governance. Albeit, in all these cases, there was ambiguity over how representative these mechanisms for community voice were.

Participation and disillusionment

New Labour went further than any previous government in its pursuit of area-based initiatives to increase political participation and tackle spatial inequalities. The headline initiative here was the New Deal for Communities (NDC), designed as a ten-year programme to tackle 'multiple disadvantage' in deprived, largely inner-city areas, involving residents and a range of public bodies and other local organisations in regeneration initiatives, driven by neighbourhood boards elected by residents. 39 communities of no more than 4,000 households were selected, with a total of £2 billion funding allocated over the decade.

Given its lofty ambitions for community involvement, the NDC was judged a disappointment, with ambiguity around what participation should entail, rising tensions between residents, councillors and consultants, and the programme became yet another flashpoint in frustration with Treasury 'control freakery'. The project's national evaluation found that just 17 percent of residents in the NDC areas had attended or taken part in NDC activities, and just 14 percent of those had voted in board elections.[1]

This was unsurprising: by design the programme was targeted at areas often characterised by high rates of residential turnover, poor relations with the local authority, a lack of pre-existing community organisations, high rates of unemployment, and significant numbers of young people and single parent families. This exposed the great difficulty of 'develop[ing] cohesive communities in areas that in many cases could not properly be described as communities at all.'

When it came to outcomes more broadly, the picture was more positive: by 2008, NDC partnerships had spent £1.71 billion on 6,900 projects or interventions.[2] New neighbourhood centres were opened; homes, parks and play areas were built; innovative projects provided expanded early years provision, leisure activities, and employment support. These yielded statistically significant improvements across a striking range of indicators, including mental and physical health, participation in education and training, and residents' satisfaction with their area. Placed alongside other initiatives in urban social policy, most obviously Sure Start, we can see New Labour's efforts at strengthening social bonds, facilitating new social infrastructure and combatting 'multiple disadvantage' in a more positive light.

Frustration with the NDC derived in large part from the scale of declared ambition: the inevitable disappointment stemming from the hope that programmes commanding only a small portion of social spending in a locality could somehow reverse decline rooted in deindustrialisation and the decline of social housing. Likewise, the promise that communities would have control over how money was spent – providing they met demanding Treasury criteria – exposed the tension between target-laden programmes designed to improve material outcomes, and the aspiration to active citizenship.

After New Labour

The Conservative-led coalition government marked, as political scientist Stuart Wilks-Heeg notes, a striking departure in urban policy: for the first time since the CDP, government abandoned area-based initiatives aimed at the most deprived places altogether.[3] Instead, the 2011 Localism Act, shaped heavily by the Liberal Democrats' enthusiasm for 'community politics', equipped local government with new 'rights' – but at the same time, increasingly cash-starved local authorities bore the greatest brunt of austerity, cutting a swathe through Sure Start centres, libraries, youth hubs and women's refuges.

Brexit marked a striking change of its own, drawing political attention from the inner city towards ex-industrial towns, the 'red wall' electoral battlegrounds, to be provided with 'levelling up' funding through competitive pots of funding. In this geographical focus, if not in the specifics of place-based policymaking, there is clear continuity between the Johnson and Starmer governments. The political geography might have shifted, but the problems with which Labour is concerned – spatial inequality and the decline of local spaces stoking political disengagement, distrust, and a backlash against immigration and social liberalism – are strikingly reminiscent of those which animated the CDP's founding almost six decades ago.

Learning the right lessons

As the Starmer government pursues its own *Pride in Place* agenda, it is worth dwelling on three lessons.

The first is around sustainability. As Power to Change's Jess Craig has noted, plaques on walls are frequently 'the last visible remnants of regeneration initiatives' like the NDC.[4] Where the cycle of community feast and famine, in step with government funding, has been broken, it has often been where commercially viable community businesses have been established, able to rely on income from properties bought through regeneration funding. The challenge of sustainability also suggests the importance of confronting the precarious financial position of local authorities, which – when not stretched to breaking point by pressure on statutory services – are best placed both to provide democratically legitimate local voice and to support community initiatives.

Second, clarity of objectives is critical. Area-based initiatives have often fallen victim to ambiguity about their fundamental purpose; a jumbling-together of aspirations aimed at poverty reduction, local economic renewal, strengthened 'social capital', a more decentralised and participatory democracy, or just a sense of ownership over small, but worthwhile, local infrastructure. They have been more successful in some respects than others. The most participatory-democratic process may not always align with the best, measurable outcomes. Either way, imprecision or overclaiming about objectives inevitably breeds disillusionment.

The third lesson is perhaps the most fundamental: that policies directed at reversing place-based decline cannot succeed in isolation, separate from an overarching view of political economy, nor from a strategic view on how the great share of social spending attached to other programmes and services (whether on education, health and social care, or early years provision) is deployed. The CDP radicals understood correctly that communities are inevitably subject to forces larger and more remote than those that can be tackled in their immediate area.

This government appears to have learned at least some of these lessons, pairing an emphasis on community *ownership* with an economic strategy focused explicitly on the geographic distribution of good work and opportunity. Success in cultivating stronger communities will depend upon its depth of commitment, its focus on equipping community initiatives and local government with the capacity to outlast a change in central government policy, and a holistic view of the forces shaping communities' power and autonomy.

Nick Garland is a historian of contemporary Britain and an Associate Fellow at IPPR.

Image: October Books, Southampton

A decade together: Stretford Public Hall and Power to Change

Simon Borkin

"For ten glorious years Stretford Public Hall has belonged to us, the people. Not just in name, but in practice and in love and in joy.

A place reclaimed, reimagined, reinvigorated, reinvented and returned to us for ten great years and for endless time to come."

Written and performed by Andy Simpkins, volunteer for Friends Stretford Public Hall, at Stretford Public Hall's 10th anniversary on 1 March 2025

Earlier this year, Friends of Stretford Public Hall celebrated its 10th birthday in the same spirit as we began: together. Except this time, we were in the magical ballroom of a building transformed, a place we now own as a community. The day was a frenzy of colour and sound – children throwing themselves into circus skills, live music filling every corner, and

speeches that moved people to tears. A magnificent cake was cut and shared, while old friends and new neighbours danced late into the night. The Hall swelled with more people than we could ever have imagined - over 4,000 through the doors in a single day. There were familiar faces who had been there from the start, standing alongside families visiting for the very first time.

A decade earlier, my own connection to the Hall started almost by chance. At an event in Manchester, I found myself in conversation with Annoushka Deighton, the founding chair of a new community co-operative. She and two other parents from the local primary school had set up Friends of Stretford Public Hall when whispers spread that the building might be sold off. They had already overseen a remarkable grassroots campaign to secure its future in community ownership and were beginning to face the next challenge: how to turn that bold idea into a sustainable reality.

And those ten years - from a grassroots campaign to a thriving community business - curiously mirror the lifespan of Power to Change. Both journeys began with a leap of faith: in our case, with local people daring to believe that they could reinvent a much-loved building, and in Power to Change's, a national funder recognising that communities themselves could lead a new wave of local economic renewal. For both organisations, what followed was not a straight path, but a decade of hard work, creativity and resilience — all the while discovering that extraordinary things can happen, when communities have a real stake in their neighbourhoods.

From crisis to possibility (2014–2016)

The starting point for Friends of Stretford Public Hall was not celebration, but crisis. In 2014, Trafford Council started to explore the prospect that the Grade-II listed venue, once gifted to the people of Stretford by industrialist John Rylands, could be sold off. For many local residents, the hall was more than a building: it was a cherished place that had hosted dances, concerts and community gatherings. Despite years of neglect and its recent use as council offices, to lose the Hall completely to private ownership would have been an almost fatal blow to a neighbourhood that had already been marked by years of under-investment, with a growing sense that nothing positive ever happened in Stretford.

But actually this was a story being repeated across the country. The 2011 Localism Act had, in theory, given communities new rights to protect and bid for assets and services. At the same time though, austerity was driving councils to close services or sell buildings at an alarming rate. It often felt like papering over the cracks just as the ground was giving way beneath communities.

Even so, glimmers of light began to appear. The transfer of Stretford Public Hall into community ownership took place at the very moment Power to Change was established as a newly endowed trust in 2015. Power to Change's work was pointing to another way forward. It showed that communities weren't limited to a simple choice between state or private ownership, but could try something different: collective, community-led

enterprise. For Stretford, it was a step towards proving that things could change in a place that had seen little investment for so long. Our vision was for Stretford Public Hall to become a *unique and thriving multi-purpose venue at the heart of Stretford, owned and run by the local community*.

And at a national level, it marked a new wave of recognition and support for community business.

The power of community investment (2017-2019)

Once the Hall was in community hands, the central challenge was how to turn an iconic but neglected building into a sustainable business. At the heart of the business plan was the need to transform the magnificent ballroom into a multi-purpose space - somewhere that could host weddings and conferences to provide financial security, while also realising its potential as a welcoming venue for community events and cultural activity.

As a new organisation, we had no funding in place for the works, so in 2017 we launched a community share offer to raise the bulk of what was required. In less than two months, more than 800 people invested over £250,000 - an overwhelming response that encapsulated the strong sense of community in the neighbourhood. For most, the investment wasn't just about money; it was about making a meaningful connection to the Hall and having a real say in its future.

Crucially the offer became one of the pilots for Power to Change's new Community Shares Booster Programme, which match funded what was raised from the local community through an equivalent investment on identical terms. The Booster programme marked a major breakthrough for institutional investment in the community business sector and has collectively gone on to back over 100 other communities with millions of pounds, stimulating £3.65 of community investment for every £1 invested by Booster and growing the community shares market considerably over the last few years.

Rising to the challenge (2020-2022)

When the pandemic hit, Stretford Public Hall had to change direction almost overnight. With the ballroom closed and most of our income gone, we focused on what the community needed most. With the help of our dedicated volunteers, we distributed foodbank parcels, ran a phone line for people who needed advice or support, and delivered shopping and prescriptions to residents who were shielding. Our ability to mobilise rapidly, and get support where it was needed most, underscored how embedded the Hall was in the community. It also proved to the council we were a reliable partner organisation, that they could trust us to respond quickly and innovatively.

That experience shaped what came next. Trafford Council has since continued to fund the Hall as part of its network of community hubs, and we've taken on roles from supporting Ukrainian refugees, to working with others on the Trafford Poverty Truth Commission.

Power to Change's support was also vital during this period, actively recognising their role in helping the whole

Image: Stretford Public Hall, Greater Manchester

community business sector navigate the pandemic by distributing millions in emergency funding, creating spaces for peer support, and making sure national decision-makers understood the role community businesses were playing. Fundamentally at a time when so much was shutting down, the community business sector didn't retreat but rather stepped forward, showing that community-led organisations could be relied on when it mattered most.

Building resilience (2023-2025)

Just as we began to recover from the pandemic, another challenge arrived. Rising energy bills and the wider cost-of-living crisis hit hard, and demand for support at Stretford Public Hall kept growing. People came to us for warm spaces, weekly meals, advice and referrals, and practical help when money was tight. The Hall became a trusted hub for residents who might not have known where else to turn.

This picture was repeated across the country. Community businesses were juggling soaring costs with growing demand, often in older, energy-hungry buildings like ours. Power to Change's Resilient Communities Fund — a rapid, flexible programme — gave us breathing space to cover bills and the confidence to plan for longer-term energy resilience. For us, and for many others, it showed the value of funding that trusts communities to decide what they need most.

At the Hall, this crisis also pushed us to think harder about the building itself. We identified a critical first phase of works to underpin a wider capital programme that would secure the Hall's long-term sustainability. This included major roofing upgrades, improved drainage to cope with heavier rainfall, new insulation across the roof voids, and replacing outdated strip lighting with low-energy LEDs. To make this possible, we returned once again to the community with a new share offer — inviting local people to invest not just in repairs, but in the future resilience of the building.

Taking Back the High Street (2020–2025)

In 2020, Trafford Council secured £17 million from the Future High Streets Fund to redevelop Stretford Town Centre, naming Stretford Public Hall as a core community asset in its bid. The investment, alongside a joint venture with developer Bruntwood to buy Stretford Mall - the struggling shopping centre that dominated the 'high street' - suddenly enabled the wholesale renewal that Stretford so acutely deserved.

At the same time, we joined Power to Change's Community Improvement District pilot, which led to the creation of the Stretford Town Centre Forum in 2023. The Forum brought together the council and Bruntwood alongside community organisations and independent businesses to attempt to give them a more meaningful say in the redevelopment plans.

The potential for the Forum to influence the regeneration scheme has been a challenge, but in the short term an opportunity arose to work together on a plan to celebrate their town centre. Friends of Stretford Public Hall worked with the Town Centre Forum to deliver the first "Stretfest", a neighbourhood-wide festival involving local businesses, community spaces and groups from across Stretford. By its second year in 2025, Stretfest had attracted more than 10,000 visitors across the town centre and mall, showing the power of community-led activity to breathe life into a town centre that

was suffering from considerable overhaul. Our experience, and those of communities across the country, show that lasting renewal depends not just on investment in buildings, but on communities shaping and animating the places they call home. It's no surprise that high streets remain a key focus for Power to Change going forward, given the value of community business in underpinning thriving local economies. And for us at Stretford Public Hall, the town centre will remain just as central to our future - making sure that community voices and community activity sit at the heart of Stretford's regeneration.

Looking to the next ten years

The past decade has shown what's possible when communities are trusted with the places that matter to them, and when national support helps to back that ambition. For Stretford Public Hall, the journey from uncertainty to ownership, from survival to celebration, has been mirrored by Power to Change's own path in growing the community business movement.

Both stories underline the same lesson: community ownership is not just about saving buildings, but about creating anchors for local economies, spaces for civic life, and confidence that things can change for the better.

Looking ahead, the challenges won't be small — from climate action to inequality, to the uncertain future of town centres. But the experience of the last ten years shows that communities have the imagination and determination to rise to them, provided they have the right support. For Stretford Public Hall, that means hopefully deepening our role in the regeneration of the town centre, alongside realising the future potential of our wonderful building through continued capital investment. Alongside Power to Change, ultimately, we hope we can continue to show that community business can be a foundation for thriving local economies.

Simon Borkin is chair of Friends of Stretford Public Hall, and a freelance practitioner supporting other community businesses and social sector organisations to start, grow and contribute to a sustainable and inclusive economy.

We were meant to be together: Creating social connection in a time of division and discontent

Maff Potts

Before it became the organisation we know today, myself and Caroline Macfarland were hired as consultants to write the business plan for Power to Change. Caroline was the brains; I made the tea.

We travelled the country meeting brilliant community businesses so that their inspiration could guide the organisation's future strategy. We sat in cafes with our laptops – there was no office yet – and wrote ideas for grant programmes. We then had these ideas put through the grinder by Power to Change's new, incredibly smart board members.

We regularly met in Chieveley Services on the M4 with the then-Chair of Power to Change, the late Richard Handover, former boss of WH Smith and hero of the Ladbroke Grove train crash, who lived nearby. We were mentored, supported and challenged by his fine and honourable mind. We

interviewed investors who might handle the endowment and pretended to understand a word they were saying. We were given short shrift by Warren from The Bevy community pub in Brighton for not being good enough…so we put him on our advisory panel, along with other trailblazers in community business like Brian from SAFE Regeneration in Bootle and Jess from Hastings Commons.

And finally, we arrived, terrified, in a very big room full of very many board members of the National Lottery Community Fund where the decision was given: our plan was approved, the fund would go ahead, and Power to Change was born.

The funny thing is that all the time we were doing this, we were also setting up our own stuff on the side. Caroline went on to establish the think tank, Common Vision. I was setting up something called Camerados in my bedroom. A growing movement of people from Blackpool to Baltimore who get through tough times by looking out for each other.

The thread of isolation

The goal of Camerados was to fill the gap left by my 20 years of failure working mostly in the homelessness sector. I'd spent 20 years processing people through a system that wanted them to have housing and money. Useful things, but not the reason they were homeless or the way out of it. For me, people need two things – friends and purpose – and without them, their life won't work. I'd been banging on about it for years so finally it was time to do something about it.

Like Power to Change, things have changed since working in my bedroom or in cafes on laptops. After ten years of mistakes and learning, Camerados now spans six countries, with more than 300 public living rooms bringing people together worldwide. These are the main vehicle of the movement; a place that communities set up where there is no agenda, where people can mix, disagree well, have each other's backs, and not have to achieve anything for the time they are there. Except, of course, they do. Connection does that to people. Our learning partners have shown that 85% of people feel happier, 1 in 2 feel more able to cope with life, and 73% feel less lonely from getting involved. We've produced a big shiny ten-year learning report but to be honest, the real success is that every day more boxes go out around the world to more communities who tell us this is what's missing in their neighbourhood – from Kansas to Kilmarnock.[5]

We watched the world, but not each other

We don't all walk around every day thinking about the arc of history and its impact on us, but let's take a look at the last decade. Social media became the focus of our attention, rating us, curating what we see, including news and opinion. Donald Trump and other populist figures have fuelled 'culture wars', driven by algorithms that lead us into increasingly polarised ideological spaces. A global pandemic made isolation compulsory, and the ensuing cost of living crisis meant we couldn't afford to break that isolation and go out.

And actual wars broke out. We've watched it all play out on screens, increasingly drawn to our phones and not the person opposite us. It's a perfect storm for isolation and polarisation.

Camerados is the least innovative idea anyone could have, but it's chronically missing and massively needed. When I ran homeless hostels, there was a death every 16 days, and they were all linked to isolation. It's a killer – and it's a thread running underneath almost every social problem. It links to addiction, mental health, and the growing conversation about young men being radicalised through toxic masculinity and incel subculture, as highlighted by the drama Adolescence.

Like Power to Change, our ten years have shown there is space for something that isn't charity, that isn't a service, that feels more mutual – maybe because it is owned and run by the people who use it. The business world has known for decades how to imagine how people will feel when they buy or experience a product, yet the world of delivering social good, whether in the public sector or charity, has never done this. We just assume the hierarchical model is the only one available to us: some people are clever and generous and are here to tell you what you need and fix you, while others are feckless and need to be fixed and should be grateful. Funnily enough, this doesn't feel too great to those on the receiving end. With a community business or a Camerados public living room, we run things for ourselves and each other, so we know how it feels, and we make sure it feels great.

We call it 'radical mutuality' in Camerados, because it seems the world needs a jolt to remember things are better when they are equal and mutual. We call this jolt the 'sugar question' after a fella wandered into a public living room in Camden Town and told us "You've run out of sugar!". "Well, you'd better go get some then" said someone from the sofa. It stopped the fella in his tracks. He walked out, but he returned 10 minutes later with a bag of sugar and announced to everyone "We have sugar now!" and everyone cheered. That's all it took to jolt him into realising this place was run by all of us. That is standard fare for every community business, where everyone has the power to change things.

We don't need to agree, we need to connect

When I think of the decade to come, it's hard not to imagine a worrying picture. A struggling economy, accelerating inequality, and fragmented politics can lead us to bad places. Rather than leaning into increasing polarised political narratives and our siloed spaces, there's an urgent need for voices that bridge divides and help us understand each other.

We ran a campaign last year called "Dunk Off", where people sat down with someone with whom they actively disagreed and dunked their biscuits in their brew; the first to fall in lost the argument. They laughed and saw each other as human. Reaching an agreement wasn't the aim, they just disagreed well. I think we'll be doing more and more of this in the next ten years, to counter the division and hostility which seems to be occurring. And it starts in our own neighbourhoods. Flags are going up where I live, so I gave a talk on polarisation and invited councillors and supporters from across the political spectrum. We're now going to hold a regular 'disagreement

cafe' (we're calling it "Grub & a Gripe") so that the vitriol on our local Facebook pages can be diffused by a bit of face-to-face disagreement over a bowl of chilli in a local cafe.

Of course, the work I'm doing is driven by citizens, people trying to make their own places better. But there's a role for government too – even if sometimes that's just to turbo-charge the work of brilliant people and communities and get out of their way.

Making the difference

Ten years of Camerados and Power to Change has given us ample insight into who is doing brilliant stuff and where. The further we get from knowing the names of people whose lives our decisions affect, the less wise, informed and effective those decisions are. So, we need to back the people who know people's names. Power to Change and Camerados know so many of these people. I wish decision makers would simply ask us who they are – from Wigan to Dover, Belfast to Port Talbot – and really see the difference they're making. Trust them, and back them. That's how you build a better Britain.

If you're running a successful community business, the chances are you actually care about the right things and are tremendously gifted – it's NOT easy! Camerados' public living rooms are much easier to start and run, but in reality, it still takes guts and real insight into your community - and that's exactly why policymakers and government should pay attention. The people using public living rooms are also the people who don't show up anywhere else. Our recent data shows that a third of people who use them don't have any other social groups in their life. So, these are the people and places to listen to, to empower and – most of all – to trust.

And for the rest of us, we can be part of this movement too. The 'power' in Power to Change has never come from that £150 million endowment Caroline and I helped convince the Lottery to commit. The power came from all those people we met and the energy they put into communities because they give a damn and they give their time. You have that power too.

As Hollie McNish said in a brilliant recent poem, if you want to "get your country back", then do something. It's not hard to find out what your town needs. Surely, if we've proved something in the ten years of existence – Power to Change or Camerados – it's that we have the power. Will you use yours?

Maff Potts is the Director of the Association of Camerados. Maff left the traditional forms of social change in 2015 when he set up the worldwide social movement, Camerados, which holds over 240 'Public Living Rooms' in libraries, parks, hospitals, or community spaces.

You're invited to dinner: The unlikely allies reimagining our high streets

Bex Trevalyan

It started with a question, over Zoom, in the thick of lockdown: *Who are we not talking to?*

That was Vidhya Alakeson, OBE — then-CEO of Power to Change. I'd been speaking with her about the systemic problem impacting our neighbourhoods: incredible community leaders unable to access empty high street spaces, despite having amazing visions for socially-just, climate-safe neighbourhoods. Councils with a mandate to transform town centres, but limited powers to find and convene building owners. And property owners with empty units previously occupied by Topshop or Debenhams, quietly saying, "This isn't working for us either."

At the same time, in areas with commercial demand for space, communities were finding themselves outbid and powerless in the face of displacement. Brixton's thriving Latin American community hub – full of food, music, salsa, services and life – was evicted overnight and replaced by a Sports Direct. Much of the area had been bought up by a Texan billionaire. Spaces for people to meet, like long-standing grassroots music venues and affordable workspaces, were losing their homes. Wider social and civic infrastructure like libraries, youth spaces and community centres were under threat too – as council firesales increased to plug budget gaps left by austerity measures.

This was part of an urgent and escalating UK-wide problem: communities losing places and spaces to come together, dream, organise, build, and support each other in the face of crises like polarisation and ecological breakdown whilst in other areas, land and buildings stood derelict. Often it was the marginalised and racialised communities that were most impacted.

Dining over the divide

It was obvious: we needed to do property differently. No single actor or sector could solve this alone. We needed a space to build trust between people who don't usually meet, let alone collaborate. *A platform for places*.

So, together with co-founding partners Power to Change, British Property Federation, High Streets Task Force, New Local, Radix and Shoosmiths, we convened 25 town centre property leaders – council officers, community entrepreneurs, asset owners, investors, and artists from across the UK. In the depths of lockdown, we met on Zoom for two hours each month.

We got to know each other as people. Community leaders and landlords shared their experiences, motivations, hopes and frustrations for the first time. A senior leader in Legal & General heard the struggles of a leader trying to secure space for her community climbing gym in Southend.

A strange and beautiful thing happened – this group of unlikely allies began to become friends. We collectively reimagined the urban property system.

Later, we met in-person, visiting inspiring leaders in Bristol and Liverpool City Region. That's how the real transformations happen. I'll never forget witnessing Mark, a respected commercial property leader, sitting in the People's Republic of Stokes Croft DIY arts venue, listening to their director Keith. Keith's journey of fundraising, legals and negotiations towards community assets hit home for Mark: communities have the credibility, passion and talent to be developers of their own places. Mark now advocates for more community ownership across his commercial property and government networks.

We heard similar stories from initially sceptical council officers, who went on to secure game-changing funds for their community partners.

Seeing the potential, I went for a pint with the formidable Frances Northrop, who'd been part of the dialogue. "Let's make this happen," she said.

Platform Places was born. From a series of conversations to a national cross-sector collaboration and non-profit, with a mission to 'unlock town centre buildings for amazing ideas that help us live affordably, sustainably and together'.

Shifting power to communities is a win for places

The solution, we realised, already existed. We were inspired by community innovators like Nudge Community Builders, Stour Trust, SAFE Regeneration, People's Property

Portfolio, CIVIC SQUARE and Architectural Heritage Fund's Heritage Development Trusts. They were working with their communities to secure and reimagine multiple buildings, to transform their neighbourhoods.

We saw how this difficult journey became easier by building trust with power holders from the outset – as with the partnership Meanwhile in Oxfordshire led by Makespace Oxford, which unlocked a staggering 30 buildings in 18 months for community organisations.

This inspired our guiding philosophy and work: convening convivial dinner tables made up of local community leaders and power holders. This was about joy, shared vision, and welcoming in diverse perspectives – rather than 'us versus them'.

Today, the National Lottery Community Fund is supporting Platform Places and partners with £2.5 million to shift power to community entrepreneurs in five places, so they can convene these dinner tables and grow what we call 'Local Property Partnerships' – a process that transforms neighbourhoods by bringing multiple buildings into community use and ownership.

The five partnerships are showing early signs of success.[6] In the first six months, more than a hundred cross-sector partnerships are developing, more than twenty assets shortlisted, and over fifty local stakeholders convened around dinner tables. A 10-year rent-free social value lease has been secured in Wandsworth Town – which will become a community cafe and youth training hub. Other partnerships are securing affordable spaces for community food hubs, wellbeing spaces, centres for social justice and cultural venues. Kisha Bradley, our local community partner in Darnall Ward, told me this work and funding has been transformational: "we're now able to think and act long-term in our neighbourhood."

An ambitious vision for the future

Through the work of Platform Places, the Mycelial Network of community asset developers, as well as the many examples of community-led innovation already underway, we want to transform the system of land and property ownership to enable social justice and climate-safe neighbourhoods. So, we hold three provocations close to heart:

First: What if, by 2035, one in three high street buildings were in community hands – owned or stewarded by local people?

Second: What if every neighbourhood had its own local property partnership — a cross-sector group transforming neighbourhoods, with community leaders in the driving seat, not just at the table?

Third: What if philanthropy and government came together to unlock billions of pounds – and powers – for community-led neighbourhood transformation?

If we can achieve this, we'll see cultures and spaces of care and mutual aid. Ecosystems of community businesses will flourish, meeting local needs, creating meaningful work and inspiring civic pride and generosity – like Future Yard, Trinity Centre, Wolves Lane and many more today. Our neighbourhoods will be climate resilient, with rewilded green

and blue spaces, retrofitted neighbourhoods and centres of response to our changing world as envisioned in CIVIC SQUARE's and Dark Matter Labs' 3°C Neighbourhood work.

What it takes to get there

However, we are still grappling with a land and property system that is deeply at odds with the one communities need to achieve this vision. Across three high streets we've mapped with local partners, over 90% of buildings were privately owned and controlled. Less than 0.1% were in community ownership. Many councils can't identify who owns key sites – and when they can, owners are rarely incentivised to engage.

But there are actions that power-holders can start taking today, to unblock community-led development and create the future we want to see.

Philanthropic funders

We know £84 billion is locked up in the endowments of the 300 largest charitable foundations in the UK.[7] This urgently needs to shift and flow out into communities – to build local wealth and power to organise in the face of crises.

Right now, we're hearing countless stories of personal sacrifice from community asset leaders – maxing out personal credit cards to start community bakeries, remortgaging their homes to secure the first freehold on a civic building, overworking and burning out due to lack of core funds.

We hear stories of energy wasted to constant fundraising – applying for one small grant after another to assemble the financing necessary to do this work. Dr Jess Steele OBE, CEO and Commoner-at-Large at Hastings Commons, famously raised over 100 separate grants and loans to bring 9,000 square metres of a deprived Hastings neighbourhood into community ownership and stewardship.

What if, instead, funders collaborated with each other to create pooled, dedicated, long-term revenue funding for neighbourhood transformation? What if the ambition started to line up with the level of need and opportunity – rapidly shifting *hundreds of millions of pounds*? What if this unlocked billions in capital grants and long-term patient finance for asset acquisition and retrofit?

What if the flow of funds was co-governed and led *with* community leaders, rather than traditional gatekeeping?

Government – local authorities and Westminster

Some local authorities don't have the capacity or mindset to treat community organisations as strategic partners and allies. But where they have, results have been transformational. Take the example of Wirral Borough Council where long-term trust and partnership-building paid off in a successful Town Deal bid, which resourced community businesses to purchase and transform their buildings with and for creative communities around Birkenhead.

Alongside resources, communities should be able to exercise rights to share power in their neighbourhoods and pursue community ownership. As well as welcoming the progress towards a Community Right to Buy, the We're Right Here campaign is calling on local authorities and Westminster to

Image: Nudge Community Builders

formalise the rights and powers of community organisations and businesses through community covenants. These covenants would formalise how councils and communities work together, enabling local groups to play an active and formal role in making the decisions that impact their lives.

Asset owners and developers

From Legal & General in Poole to Rockpoint Leisure in New Brighton, there's a growing group of progressive private asset owners showing that with values-led multi-stakeholder partnerships, everyone stands to benefit.

One of the most powerful things that asset owners can do is offer long leaseholds or freeholds at below-market rates to community organisations – as ARC LRE Ltd are doing in Wandsworth Town. This moves beyond 'meanwhile' space – and creates vibrancy, footfall, local wealth, and social and environmental value for the long-term.

In summary, the most powerful thing these different stakeholders can do is to come to the literal and metaphorical dinner table when invited by community organisations – to build trust, to shape a shared vision, to co-design, to co-finance, to co-build and to steward places for the long-term. Ultimately, the only legitimate placemaking is driven by the people that live there.

The future of our high streets is no longer a technical question — it's a relational one and a question of will.

Bex Trevalyan co-founded Platform Places (www.platformplaces.com) after eight years spent working with communities to develop socially-just and climate-safe urban neighbourhoods – including growing her own community-led enterprise Library of Things to 21 London high street hubs.

The politics of neighbourhood

Anoosh Chakelian

From the civic might of Middlesborough to the coastal cheer of Hastings to the quiet resilience of the Medway towns, I have seen first-hand how community-powered initiatives with place at their heart can directly change people's lives. These stories are rarely told. It is simply the nature of news that we, as journalists, are far more likely to report on a place making headlines for reasons of tragedy or tension than recovery and strength.

But Britain's recent spasms against social cohesion highlight the urgency of this untold story. It is the places where *disconnection* – not immigration or other demographic trends – is at its greatest that were most likely to suffer from riots in the summer of 2024, after all. 'This Place Matters', a report by Citizens UK, UCL Policy Lab, and More in Common, found no consistent correlation between high immigration to an area and low social cohesion.[8] Rather, the constituencies that experienced unrest all have populations where more people report feeling "disconnected" than "connected".

Image: Sparks, Bristol

Maintaining civic pride against the odds

When our smartphones serve as our social network, shopping precinct, entertainment venue and library, place-based connection matters more than ever. What improves connection? Free and accessible venues where anyone can gather. High streets that offer more than shuttered shopfronts, bookies and dizzying volumes of vapes. Community businesses that invest in their local clientele and locale. And, yes, funding from local and central government to rebuild public services and the public realm after the age of austerity.

As Britain editor of the *New Statesman*, I have the privilege of travelling regularly around the country to see for myself how residents, businesses, charities, councils and all the doers in between are responding to the way politics buffets their neighbourhoods. I often come away from such trips with conflicting feelings. Respect for, and no little relief at, locals maintaining civic pride against the odds. But also despair at how little help they receive, and how ragged so many places in this rich country of ours have been left to become.

Reclaiming disused and unloved spaces – whether sold off by straitened councils or neglected by distant landlords – is crucial to a neighbourhood no longer feeling 'left behind'. One of the most striking pieces of polling that has ever crossed my desk as a political journalist was a survey by the polling company Survation: when asked what their neighbourhood most lacks, the top thing people in 225 'left behind' neighbourhoods identified by Local Trust was: 'places to meet'.[9] This was put above the need for more jobs, housing, transport and healthcare.

Community businesses tackling local challenges

I was fascinated during a trip to Hastings on the east Sussex coast to see how vibrantly a community business was responding to the problems of a town battling high deprivation and high housing costs. Hastings Commons, a grassroots group that could be described as part-social enterprise part-community land trust, has since 2014 been buying up and renovating 'derelict and difficult' buildings in the town centre, plus a network of caves carved out of the cliffside, for community use and public good.

On my tour, I saw 12 flats rented out at affordable rates retrofitted into a reclaimed Sixties ex-office block, a shared working space with similarly low fees installed in the former printing presses of the *Hastings and St Leonard's Observer*, and an old Victorian cottage of hireable classrooms, artists' studios and a common room. The spaces bought up and done up by Hastings Commons provided social events like community barbecues as well as tech workshops and a youth club. It was a lesson in corralling grants and loans from hundreds of organisations (including Historic England and the National Lottery), as well as in the potential fruits of the government's new Community Right to Buy and powers of compulsory purchase – pushed for by Power to Change.

I have also witnessed how community businesses can play other, less direct roles in reviving an area. During a visit to Luton Road – often characterised as notorious for antisocial behaviour – in the Kent town of Chatham, I joined Arches Local community workers who had commissioned street

art, run a pop-up farm and planted trees around the place. They also used the generous backyard of a much-loved local motorcycle shop for events and parties for locals. We spoke to the owner of the local business who had a clear stake in community cohesion as well as serving his customers.

In Middlesborough town centre, I spoke to a representative of the central shopping centre – perhaps not a company that would usually be viewed as a community business – who explained why they were so keen to give over empty units for no rent to the Camerados network of public living rooms: free, all-inclusive spaces of fairy lights, children's toys, cups of tea and biscuits where anyone can drop in for a chat and a sit-down and even a strum-along on a guitar.

Pride in Place

These are different manifestations of businesses working for community good, but they are all united by a stake in improving lives for locals. It is key for the state to create such conditions with programmes targeting funds to particular neighbourhoods, such as the Pride in Place strategy.

We know now the impact of such schemes, from a landmark study by the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, which tracked the results of Big Local – a 10-15-year scheme that granted £1 million each to 150 areas across England in 2012 for residents to spend as they pleased. The study found that labour markets in Big Local areas remained more resilient than their non-Big Local equivalents, and that they experienced a steeper fall in overall crime and antisocial behaviour: total crime fell by nearly half in Big Local areas. For the £102 million spent on the programme, there were £323 million in direct savings, plus a £1.1 billion wider benefit over five years.[10]

Similar findings were revealed in a 2024 report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies on the first causal links between the closure of youth clubs and levels of education and crime.[11] Comparing neighbourhoods where there were youth club closures in the austerity years with those where there weren't, the economist behind the report, Carmen Villa, found teenagers in the affected areas performed nearly 4 per cent worse in exams, and were 14 per cent more likely to commit crime. For every £1 saved from closures, she found associated losses of nearly £3 due to "forgone returns" to education and crime costs.

With the social cohesion and economic cases clear, Labour is wise to follow the place-based investment of the New Labour years (most visible in Sure Start centres and the New Deal for Communities) with Pride in Place funding and legislating to give communities greater power over local assets in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill. While often accused of lacking vision, the government is clearly serious about neighbourhood renewal. It has invested £2 billion more in its first year on what the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods defined as 'Levelling Up' initiatives than Boris Johnson did in his first year, and is on track to invest three times the levels under Johnson – the last politician to speak seriously about place renewal.[12]

Learning from what didn't work to build what will

However, Labour must avoid the pitfalls of the Levelling Up and Towns Funds that we saw under the Conservatives. For example, funds should not be tied up at council level, which can disempower grassroots groups, funnel money to budgets where cash-strapped local authorities need it most, or result in superficial smartening up of the most tourist-focused and least residential areas (such as the seafront of a coastal town). Councils instead must be funded adequately, requiring the long-promised overhaul of social care.

Labour must also avoid a north versus south narrative: the new Index of Multiple Deprivation – the first since 2019 – shows the biggest deprivation increases not in the north but the south, with poor old Jaywick in Clacton yet again England's most deprived place.

But perhaps most pressingly, Labour must weave its own narrative of saving our neighbourhoods. It is outspending Boris Johnson on so-called 'Levelling Up', but that is a calculation covering 46 disparate schemes and funds, with no label like Johnson had to hang it all together. While storytelling and slogans may sound like a shallow concern, the government by its own admission needs to be known for making a tangible difference to voters' lives by the time of the next election.

Community power

As Power to Change polling shows, the public is supportive of the government's community empowerment policies when described to them in a survey, but recognition of them is low. Around half of Britons think the Community Right to Buy and the Plan for Neighbourhoods regeneration scheme (the predecessor to the Pride in Place funds) reflect positively on the government. However, the proportion of the public aware of each of these policies is below 43 per cent – far below other policy announcements made in Labour's first year in office.[13]

Following Brexit, there was much handwringing among the political class about the failure to properly label and signal infrastructure that was a result of EU funding. Perhaps the government should learn from that, and find a language and visual vernacular for its very sincere focus on community empowerment – and put its mouth where its money is.

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Image: The Arcade, Dewsbury

02

Community-led local economies

The economy is still not delivering for all communities. Income inequality, wealth disparities and poverty are widespread and growing. Many communities do not feel that the economy is working for them, or that growth is being pursued in ways that put people, the places they live or the planet first. Communities too often feel powerless to contribute to a brighter economic future. The result is corrosive, deepening feelings of economic and social marginalisation.

Community business offers a different way of doing things. These businesses trade locally for the benefit of the communities in which they are rooted. In doing so, they put greater economic power into communities' hands and help to retain wealth locally. Community businesses are drivers of growth that people can see and feel in their everyday lives.

Image: Sparks, Bristol

The future of business is community business

Tim Davies-Pugh

I write this piece with immense pride in the incredible role that community businesses play and all they contribute to our economy and society. At the same time, I also feel a sense of urgency. There is an impatience that community businesses aren't a more significant part of our national conversation.

They are not often taken as seriously as they should be by policymakers, investors, and the media. Too frequently, they are viewed as a 'nice to have'.

Looking ahead to 2035, I propose a straightforward assertion: the future of business is community business.

A future rooted in community

Today, we are experiencing economic stagnation, distrust in institutions and democracy, and increasing social isolation. The impacts of climate change are being felt close to home. Community businesses offer solutions to these challenges. Of course, they cannot tackle these issues alone, but a world where these organisations are commonplace could lead us to confront these challenges directly, with communities themselves leading the way.

Imagine a future where we measure economic growth not just by financial indicators but by how we enhance people's health and wellbeing, protect the environment, and foster strong community cohesion. Where more wealth is retained and circulated locally to support quality employment, particularly for those farthest from the labour market, creating places where people want to live, work, and thrive. Community-driven businesses would build in sustainability and the health and wellbeing of the people in the communities they serve. By 2035, imagine a variety of local organisations where we can engage with our neighbours, rebuilding bonds of trust that we can rely on in difficult times.

Importantly, we envision these local organisations (community businesses) having real decision-making power in the future. Many will connect with their local community covenant. By 2035, this concept will be a well-established form of neighbourhood governance, allowing communities to draw powers from central government and make decisions about how money is spent in their areas. With these new powers and a focus on impact investment, government subsidies and other financial support will enable communities to implement wind, solar, and heat pump initiatives in their neighbourhoods, reducing energy costs and supporting the transition to net zero. Empowering communities to make decisions fosters trust in politics and democracy.

Making this vision a reality

This is a future that Power to Change is determined to help build alongside community businesses, and I hope many of you will join us on this journey. We need to embrace the notion that the future of business is community business. Over the past ten years, Power to Change has supported community businesses, with over 11,000 of them in various forms across England—strong and resilient establishments. However, I believe there remains a vast well of untapped potential.

Our understanding of community business is evolving. If we envision a future where community business thrives, we must include your local corner shop—where individuals from diverse backgrounds can chat, supported by a shopkeeper who is a vibrant force in the community. We must consider your local BMX park, which serves as a joyful sanctuary for kids, steering them away from mischief and low-level crime. We should highlight your local microbrewery, which provides a sympathetic ear to patrons when they need it most.

All of these businesses fulfil vital social roles in addition to their economic functions. In many ways, they are community businesses but may not yet recognise it. They can become more attuned to community needs and adapt their offerings based on feedback. They may want to develop a membership structure that includes local residents but might

Image: Baltic Creative, Liverpool

need guidance on how to do so. This is where the existing community businesses can offer assistance. They can help the businesses of the future navigate challenges they have already faced. Their advocacy and collaboration with us in testing ideas can help eliminate some obstacles altogether.

This applies to businesses working at a bigger scale too. Community-owned design and manufacturing space or community asset developers turning round whole town centres – like WeCanMake and Hastings Commons. At the moment, these are shining lights, exceptions to the norm. By 2035 I want these large-scale, ambitious community businesses to be commonplace. These two shifts combined would mean a community business sector that is both broader and deeper, and crucially more central to our national life.

I am excited to embark on this journey in the coming years. Throughout our tenth anniversary year, I look forward to sharing more insights and hearing from various contributors as they look ahead to 2035 and the challenges and opportunities on the horizon—from technology to climate change, poverty to how we think about economics. With the right conditions, community businesses can help create an economy that works for people and the planet, giving communities a greater say in the decisions that affect their lives.

Tim Davies-Pugh is Chief Executive of Power to Change. Having helped establish the organisation in 2015, he has in recent years led the transition of Power to Change to its new position as a think-do tank, as well the development of its vision for the next 10 years. He previously held senior roles within the National Lottery Community Fund, the Cabinet Office's Office for Civil Society, Numbers for Good and GLT Partners.

The economy has left the building

Erika Rushton

What happens when you invite people excluded from something to redesign it? We design it to include ourselves.

Kindred, in Liverpool City Region, is a powerful demonstration that our lived experience of exclusion from money makes us experts in the changes needed for a fairer, more prosperous economy.

When Power to Change become Kindred's first funder five years ago, they backed more than an organisation or fund. They invested in an invitation, to Liverpool City Region's social traders, to demonstrate what happens when people who've been shut out of an economy are trusted to build one for themselves.

We knew what didn't work: application forms no one could understand, business plans consultants wrote, processes that treated risk as a flaw – rather than a fact of life. And our faith in the latest inward investor, or grant from Government, to deliver promised jobs and prosperity was long lost. We didn't want our poverty mapped or our needs met; to be consulted or researched – again. We wanted our ambitions invested in so we could contribute, have value, create our own future.

We invited ideas. Answers on a postcard – no business plans required. Feasibility studies took the form of pop-ups. Collaboration replaced competition. Eligibility criteria were: turn up, find a way, care enough, make a difference.

A group of young street runners were some of the first to turn up with their passion. Once they had access to a warehouse, 1,000 young customers were turning up weekly within a year. If we had talked 'NEETs' they would have run – artistically – away.

I was invited to hold a conversation about the future of Liverpool's economy. I was expecting 20 people for a modest civic debate on 'Homegrown Business'. Over 100 social entrepreneurs from across the region turned up – standing room only. That night, Power to Change's then-CEO Vidhya Alakeson stayed until the end and nearly missed her train. I gave her a lift to the station and she said, "we want to help build this", offering an initial £1m if we could make a business case and raise local match funds.

We hit the road across the city region, commissioning local activists and animateurs to ask 'What if...? If this was *our* money (although we had none at the time!), what would it look like? What terms would we take it on? Who would judge us?'

Together, 150 social entrepreneurs – people who couldn't access the 'social' investment available nationally because they didn't have a track record, an asset, or a £300K turnover – redesigned the money to work better for all of us and the economy we share.

Contrary to popular belief, it's those with very little, not those with a lot, who are the real experts on money. We make a little go a long way.

Kindred was launched in 2021 with £1m from Power to Change and £5.5m from Metro Mayor Steve Rotheram and the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. Their investment in Kindred – in us – represents a rejection of trickle-down economics. Power and policy were passed to people with lived experience and trust was placed in the ingenuity of people in Liverpool City Region to build and rebuild our own economy.

Collectively owning and investing our wealth

Kindred is a fund, yes. But, more importantly, it's a community-designed economic system. A demonstration of what happens when money flows differently and wealth – created in and by communities – is collectively owned, shared and reinvested.

Kindred provides 0% interest investment to socially-trading organisations (STOs) – ventures trading commercially for social good. Investments are non-competitive, decisions are made by peers and repayments are made in both cash and social returns.

In just five years, Kindred has made 61 investments, of which 51% have gone to women, 31% to Black and ethnic minority social traders and 100% to those without access to other money.

Kindred investees are growing by 20% year-on-year across the portfolio, with longstanding investees hitting 55% annual growth – well above OECD's 20% high-growth threshold. With the right money, in the right place, at the right time, we are not unproductive or market failures – we are living, breathing growth opportunities.

We have, between us, created 200 jobs in places crying out for employment. Places of low productivity, where we're hiring people from 'outside the labour market'. This is where we live and do business, and these are our friends and neighbours. We see the impact directly in our community.

With growth, our demand for space has grown, so we have brought £16m worth of underused property and land back into use to date. Creating value where there was none. As 70% of us need more space, we are setting up a community property holding company so the value we create isn't extracted, but retained and reinvested by us and in us.

This way, derelict buildings can become testbeds for youth music scenes. Community bakeries become training grounds for the unemployed and ex-offenders. Old garages transform into food-growing start-ups. And garden sheds become therapy rooms for peer-to-peer mental health services.

BlaST – the Black Social Traders' network – set up by Joanne Anderson, began as a group of 25 Black and ethnic minority people with an idea. We said 'we trust you, have a go' with a development award of £500 to £2,000. Five years later, Cycle of Life became the first STO to fully repay its loan, and BlaST has 250 members. At the last BlaST meet up, The Florrie's Anne Lundon described the 92 homes and 11 commercial units she is about to sign off on, and encouraged others to think big! 'Credit' originally meant to have faith, believe, and trust in another. Without it, Kindred money might still be sitting in the bank. With trust in each other, Kindred money is repaid so the next, and the next, STO can grow.

We co-locate and cluster together. And just like in industry clusters, the pace of innovation is accelerated. But our clusters aren't driven by the traditional UK Standard Industrial Classification code sectors. We grow from a common cause – in food, culture, creativity, care, energy, sport and health – in living here. STOs are finding new ways to solve intractable problems of food security, mental health and hospital bed blocking.

A former child carer imagined a dementia centre that cared for the whole family – as she dreamed of. This year, she opened her second dementia day centre, the Me2u Centre, full of gardeners, dancers, storytellers and hairdressers. If we wait for a government to reform adult social care, we could be waiting forever.

Social clusters give places a new purpose and unique identity, and some are attracting up to 2000% other economic activity, to places formerly labelled 'deprived' or 'left behind'.

We're not 150 STOs anymore. Our membership has escalated to 1,500 STOs across Liverpool City Region who are no longer satisfied with 'just' alleviating the impacts of poverty. We aim to trade our way out of it.

There's an abundance of latent entrepreneurship in every place, just awaiting an invitation.

As word of Kindred spread, more and more people wanted investment, and we worried out loud that we didn't have enough. But the latest roomful of emerging STOs didn't get competitive or opt for winners and losers. They proposed to share what we had and support each other to make more. Now that's the kind of economy I want to live in.

Kindred's 1,500 STO members – people with lived experience of financial and economic exclusion – know the blockers and barriers and the system changes required for an inclusive economy, because they navigate them. They are experts – building systems based on mutuality, not scarcity; where we don't measure outputs, we grow impact – £39 million, £13 for every £1 of it to date. A fair return on investment.

Kindred economies are built on trust, and our accountability is to each other.

A people-centred economy

Kindred isn't radical. It costs far more to exclude people than to include them; far more to drip-feed poverty than to fund potential. Kindred is a rational industrial policy that takes account of the evidence built over the past 30 years.

Research by the Heseltine Institute shows that the social economy makes up 10% of the Liverpool City Region's economy, and STOs, capable of radical growth, provide 5% of the region's jobs, invariably in the places most in need of jobs.[14] Knowing that Liverpool City Region is home to 10% of England's most disadvantaged communities, scaling Kindred and the social economy will deliver wealth and employment where they are needed most, replacing an increasingly anti-social economy with a more Kindred one.

Kindred, along with eight other regional partners, is now working to secure £50m in devolved social investment for a Social Investment Pathfinder. That's less than 10% of the social investment already released by the Government, intended to transform the fortune of disadvantaged communities, but we can do a lot with a little!

We are calling it a 'Pathfinder' because we are just one in a patchwork of places across the country, stitching ourselves together, testing out economic alternatives, sharing our ambitions for an industrial strategy that delivers a wholly social economy in the UK.

The funding exists. The real question is not where it's used, but how it's used. Will decisions rest with those within the system, whose expertise comes from managing and protecting wealth? Or those outside it, whose lived experience of poverty and exclusion makes them the real experts.

To Power to Change, we say thank you for your trust five years ago. For backing Kindred before we had a perfect model, or a glossy prospectus, while the answer is still unfolding. Power to Change understands that communities are not recipients of social policy. We are the designers and practitioners of our future economy, in which everyone has a share.

The economy doesn't happen in Westminster or Whitehall. Economic experts don't just sit in Deloitte or McKinsey. And bankers are no good at money or we would all have some by now.

The economy as we knew it has left the building. We are the economists now.

Erika Rushton MBE is the Director of Creative Economist Ltd and Strategy Director at Kindred LCR.

Doubling the size of the community and co-operative economy: Learning from a decade of transformation in Liverpool City Region

Patrick Hurley MP

Over the last ten years the story of community business in my part of the world, the Liverpool City Region (LCR), has shifted from a handful of isolated initiatives towards a more visible, dynamic and ambitious ecosystem. When one looks back over that decade, the pattern is clear and promising. We've seen community business models that combine real trading with rooted social purpose grow in both number and sophistication, while institutional support from regional and local government, investors and anchor organisations has started to catch up.

The experience of the LCR offers a compelling illustration of how community business can deliver at scale and what is possible with a regional government committed to growing the sector even further. Now with its ambitious commitment to double the size of the co-operative and mutual sector, the moment is ripe for our national government to help advance the community-led and co-operative economy, so it can continue to transform our society and economy for the better in the decades to come.

From decline to renewal

The economic terrain of the region is important to set out. Covering Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens, Wirral, Halton and Knowsley, we have for years wrestled with the legacy of deindustrialisation, public sector retrenchment and economic fragility.

My own background is instructive here. I grew up in Prescot, a town in Knowsley dominated for decades by the factory site of an industrial cable manufacturer. When the factory shut in the early nineties, taking with it hundreds of local jobs, the site lay unused until a retail park was built there a decade later. The retail park - a big Tesco along with other big box retailers – took footfall away from the high street, which was left stuffed with charity shops and bookmakers. It was a place that had seen better days.

Over the last decade, though, the town centre has transformed. This was kickstarted by the building of a live performance theatre at one end of the high street and further bolstered by the success of a local authority-backed heritage initiative refurbishing shop fronts and other building facades throughout the town. All this has been done in the context of a stagnating national economy and a move towards supporting community businesses at a regional level that had been absent in previous years.

A better form of business

In that context, the emergence of community businesses that are mission-driven, locally rooted and commercially active has a particularly potent resonance. With support from the government's Pride In Place agenda, they can begin to address the deep-seated and long-term economic stagnation that has afflicted the country since the 2008 global financial crash and most keenly felt in the post-industrial towns furthest from London.

Indeed, research from my region shows that community businesses enjoy stronger survival rates than typical small businesses (83% over five years in one sample vs around 43% for small companies).[15] With that level of comparative success, the community business sector has a strong role to play in bringing prosperity back to those areas that need it most.

Ten years ago, the baseline was modest: a 2019 report from the Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place estimated around 84 community businesses in the region with combined turnover circa £22 million and net assets around £38 million.[16] But that scarcely tells the full story of latent potential, or of the shift that has followed in the years since.

Take, for example, one of the most visible community business projects in the region – Future Yard, in Birkenhead. Set up as a Community Interest Company, it opened a live music venue in 2021 in the centre of the town, with rehearsal studios, a bar, artist development programmes, and a clear social mission. From the outset, the proposition was more than live music: it saw itself as a hub for creative opportunity, training, community engagement, inclusion, and environmental ambition.

Future Yard is emblematic of a particular strand of community business in the region: experience-based trading activity (ticket sales, studio hire, food and drink) with reinvestment of surplus into community benefit (training young people, widening access) and strong commitment to placemaking (Birkenhead, a town with significant regeneration potential). Through such models, the notion of the community business has moved from something niche and place bound to something entrepreneurial and pioneering.

Indeed, Future Yard is increasingly being seen not as an alternative to mainstream business models, but as a signpost to a more modern, next generation version of how business can work. Their National Portfolio Organisation status within Arts Council England is just one example of national recognition, and across the industry, their purpose-driven approach is being replicated more and more.

Equally important is the growth of infrastructure, support and sector development institutions, not just individual enterprises. A pivotal actor in the last few years has been Kindred, a specialist vehicle established by Steve Rotheram, our regional Mayor in 2020, with support from the Combined Authority and Power to Change, to provide interest-free loans and tailored peer to peer support for socially-trading organisations (STOs) across the region.

Another longstanding partner in that evolution has been SAFE Regeneration (commonly known as SAFE). Founded in 2000 as a community arts collective, SAFE's model has matured into a community business campus. It manages a creative enterprise hub (St Mary's Complex) and a canal-side community pub (Lock & Quay) and supports dozens of small ventures, artists, social enterprises and creative microbusinesses. SAFE is consistently cited in academic research as an exemplar of asset-based community business: owning or stewarding place, supporting entrepreneurship, leveraging trading income and reinvesting into local empowerment.

The evolution of such 'anchor' organisations shows how community business is not only about startups but about stabilising community wealth, reinvesting it locally and generating multidimensional value.

That regionwide activity is also reflected in the wider numbers. The region was designated a 'Social Enterprise Place' by Social Enterprise UK in 2023, in recognition of its thriving social economy with £3 billion in income and employing 45,000 people. While the social enterprise movement is broader than community business alone, those figures underscore the economic potential of the ecosystem in which community business models are embedded.

The past decade in the region therefore looks like this in broad strokes: a growing number of community businesses emerging from very modest beginnings; a shift from startups to more sophisticated trading models; institutional and infrastructure support emerging through vehicles like Kindred; recognition of the region's potential, and an increasing embedding of purpose-driven trading into placemaking, regeneration and local economic strategy.

Of course, none of this has been without difficulty. Research from the Heseltine Institute points to the challenges: funding constraints, austerity pressures, business model fragility, and

vulnerability to external shocks such as the pandemic. The sector has had to be resilient, lean and adaptive. And in a region where business density lags national averages, creating growth is never straightforward. Nevertheless, the resilience is notable.

Supporting this potential

Looking ahead, the broader political economic context could offer major opportunities. For example, the government is committed to doubling the size of the co-operative and mutual sector by the end of the Parliament. If community businesses and other models of social business that share in co-operative values and trade to benefit their communities are included within this policy agenda, this could be transformational for several reasons. I'll concentrate on my own region by way of example.

Firstly, increased recognition and political will would ease access to finance. Community businesses often struggle with the gap between early grant support and commercial scaling. With stronger infrastructure and more (and more varied) funds available, the pipeline could deepen. The existence of Kindred already shows how locally anchored blended finance works; a doubling of mutuals could provide scale, match funding and risk sharing at national level, enabling more of the university of life examples to become replicable and perhaps networked.

Secondly, an explicit policy push would strengthen procurement, commissioning and contracting options. If government were to make contracting requirements for co-operative and community-led businesses, community businesses could win a greater share of local regeneration, culture and service delivery contracts. For example, community hubs could win contracts in employment support, training, neighbourhood services, local food and catering.

Thirdly, asset ownership and place-based strategies would gain a stronger impetus. Organisations like SAFE showing the power of community-owned assets should benefit from a national policy that sees mutuals and community ownership as part of the growth agenda within a national industrial strategy. That means support for asset transfer, community-led housing, land trusts, and more. The new Community Right to Buy could be transformational in this regard, if state agencies at local and regional level are sufficiently resourced to be active and supportive partners.

Fourthly, the labour, skills and employment implications are significant. By embedding community business expansion into local economic strategy, and aligning with devolution and local skills systems, the growth of community business means growth of good jobs, local supply chains, and inclusive recruitment. A doubling of the mutuals sector could mean tens of thousands more local jobs, especially in parts of my region where unemployment remains above national average.

Fifth, the successes of Kindred is a signpost to a potential way forward nationally. The establishment of series of regional endowments (as opposed to a national endowment run from London), perhaps using some of the Pride in Place funding from central government, to support socially-trading organisations would go a long way to bridging the gap between grant and trading income, and would further incentivise the

adoption of sustainable business practices by a sector that had previously struggled to make its case in this area.

Finally, culture and identity matter. The wider Liverpool regional economic identity as a purpose-led business hotspot is ripe for expansion. Future Yard shows how culture, creativity and regeneration intertwine. A policy that fosters community trading, mutuals and mission-driven enterprise will accelerate not just economic growth, but civic renewal, social inclusion and local empowerment too. It's a rare thing in politics to have such an obvious win-win, but this agenda fits the bill.

Achieving the vision

In practical terms, what might that mean for the sector over the next decade? In an ideal world, there could be a number of developments, just a few of which I'll detail below.

Expansion of the community business support ecosystem. More intermediaries like Kindred, more seed funding programmes, more local revolving funds, more match funded investment and peer networks.

Increased asset transfer and community-led developments. More neighbourhood hubs, community-owned pubs, repurposed buildings for trading community businesses, perhaps linked with housing or energy cooperatives.

More commissioning of community business for local services. For example, employment support, skills for young people, cultural hubs, food production and distribution, and neighbourhood infrastructure

Stronger collaboration between community business and anchor institutions (local authorities, universities, housing associations) to embed them in local supply chains, procurement and place-based regeneration strategies.

Increased emphasis on measurement, social value and trading sustainability. The models of the past decade have often relied on mixed funding; the next phase will focus on trading viability, asset longevity and impact measurement in an environment where policy support is more predictable.

Of course, growth will need to be intelligently managed. Ensuring that community businesses retain their mission and local rooting as they scale is critical. The risk of 'mission drift' or becoming too commercialised is real. A doubling of mutuals must safeguard the values which make community business distinctive.

In the last decade, community business in the Liverpool City Region has moved from promise to implementation. The next chapter of learning and applying that learning nationally could be transformative for people, for economies, for mutual and community ownership, and for democratic enterprise. If the Labour Government (or a future government that inherits its ambition) follows through and doubles the size of the mutuals sector, the country stands to gain in multiple dimensions – economic resilience, social inclusion, regeneration and community agency.

Patrick Hurley is the MP for Southport and Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Social, Co-operative and Community Economy.

Image: Star & Shadow Cinema, Newcastle

03

Community-centred public services

Communities throughout the country face a multitude of challenges: lack of affordable housing, homelessness, loneliness, mental health crises, poor access to healthcare, social care, education or employment support to name a few.

While we have heard strong aspirations from government, prevention – key to people-centred public services – has not yet been designed into our public services. Meanwhile, many services are still being designed and delivered without meaningful involvement of those they are there to support.

Community business can and does play a key role in addressing these challenges. Run by and directly accountable to local communities, community businesses have a deep understanding of communities' assets and needs, and they are responsive to this in the design of both what they do, and how they operate. Community businesses are uniquely placed to meet current challenges and help shape and deliver public services that are truly fit for the future.

Image: Haven Community Hub, Southend-on-Sea

The digital disconnect: taking digital social policy seriously

Rachel Coldicutt

"In principle, redirecting finance towards fairer, greener, more socially beneficial forms of growth could usher in the ICT golden age that has long been possible. But while the technologies are there, the politics are not."

Carlota Perez, What is AI's Place in History? (2024)

The computing power of modern smartphones is extraordinary. For the last decade, millions of people across the UK have been walking around with supercomputers in their bags and pockets, each one more powerful than those used to guide the 1969 Apollo mission to the moon. However technology policy rarely addresses this potential. Rather than unlocking UK community power, successive governments have deferred to the model of innovation championed by US tech companies and investors, picking corporate winners rather than investing in communities, people and places.

In 2017, former digital Secretary of State Matt Hancock declared that the UK would be "the best place in the world to start a business and the safest place to be online". Since then,

technology policy has been caught in a contradiction of its own making – simultaneously appealing to the world's most disruptive businesses while attempting to assert boundaries around those companies' ability to disrupt. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), formed in 2023 – merging responsibilities from the Departments for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – has not only inherited that agenda, but done so in an environment remote to social policy. Under the previous government, DSIT's focus was on pursuing the technological approach to "AI Safety"; shortly after coming to power last year, former Labour Secretary of State Peter Kyle declared DSIT to be an "economic department". People power has not been on the agenda.

DSIT's flagship social policy is currently the enforcement of the Online Safety Act, with a side effort to address digital exclusion through (mostly) recycling corporate computers. Otherwise, the department has no remit to address social and economic inequalities, and no agenda to remedy new societal harms created by technological change. Meanwhile, the current government's pure-play technology policy focuses on top-down measures such as trickle-down economic growth forged chiefly through closer ties with the US, increased government efficiency, and improved national security. In this worldview, technology is a purely exogenous force that happens *to* us – driven by a combination of big tech firms and academic researchers who are pushing at the boundaries of human knowledge. Digital social policy, which understands and supports what it means to be human in an increasingly digital world, is the missing piece in the cross-government commitment to renewal for the UK.

The new normal

The reality of digital technologies is that they have so far changed, and continue to change, many ways life is lived in the 21st Century and have utterly transformed how communities form in places. They have shifted how many people live, love, learn, earn and relate to one another, and turned utterly mundane processes – from paying for car parking to asking your neighbour for a cup of sugar – into technologically mediated tasks. For the 1 in 5 households that experience digital exclusion of some kind, the prevalence of digital technologies has made it more difficult to participate in everyday life, while those of us who are digitally connected often find we are caught in a firehose of news and information, gleaned from all kinds of sources.[17] Digital policy is no longer something that just happens alongside science and innovation; like it or not, these technologies are a building block of the "new normal" and have more than earned their place in cross-government policymaking. A more resilient, people-focussed approach, in which technologies play a part in improving the lives of more people, and more people have the chance to shape the technologies we all use, will make an essential contribution to a more equitable and cohesive society.

Innovation's unequal footprint

While the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) makes innovative operational use of digital technologies – creating tools such as Extract to digitise historic planning documents – the ways digital life has changed and is changing communities and social infrastructure do not appear to be a policy concern. For

instance, the £1.5 billion Plan for Neighbourhoods (this has been expanded and brought under the Pride in Place banner in October 2025) aims to invest in 75 deprived areas to address long-term deprivation through creating thriving places, building stronger communities to tackle social division and restore collective belonging, and giving people back control of their local areas – yet the only mention of technology in the long list of accompanying powers is a nod to sustainable and green tech. The everyday news and communication environments built on Facebook and WhatsApp groups, TikTok and YouTube don't get a look in, and there is no correlation with the AI Growth Zones outlined in the AI Opportunities Action Plan or the clusters approach in the Modern Industrial Strategy.

Industry, innovation, and technology are positioned in cross-government policy as taking place in parallel, almost on another plane to neighbourhoods and communities, even though access to good work and prosperity are foundational properties of good places to live, and communities are more likely to be formed on a smartphone than in a community centre.

It is also the case that even close proximity to innovation does not mean its benefits are shared. In London, the ward of St Pancras and Somers Town is home to DeepMind, Google, Meta and the Francis Crick Institute, but it also has the lowest median household income in the borough of Camden and the highest rate of multiple deprivation.[18] Cambridge is 'the UK's most innovation intensive city' but it has a commensurately widening wealth gap, with rising house prices quickly outstripping local wages, which have remained static, and the largest rate of life-expectancy inequality in the UK.[19]

What can be done about this disconnect?

September has seen a policy reset in Downing Street, moving from Missions to a slimmed-down triumvirate of policy priorities, including a change in emphasis from "kickstarting economic growth" and "breaking down barriers to opportunity" to "deliver[ing] higher living standards, so that people actually feel better off". At the same time, the English Devolution Bill has been renamed the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, with some seeing this shift in focus as one of Labour's secret weapons for strengthening the social fabric, creating better places to live, and defeating Reform.

Community empowerment, as seen in the revamped Bill, equates to better governance and expanded Community Right to Buy powers, but modern social organising is not an analogue experience – technologies have a role not just in connecting people but in making it quicker and easier to get things done. And, if other government policies are to be taken as credible, investment in people's entrepreneurial capabilities and willingness to innovate is the key to unlocking considerable growth and potential.

There is, rightly, much focus on the role of social media and messaging platforms in spreading disinformation and widening social divisions, but they also have a less-storied role in powering activism and community building.

Modern community empowerment and social infrastructure building starts in Facebook groups, Signal and WhatsApp

groups, Discord and Slack communities that fill the gap left by community centres, coffee mornings, and jumble sales. As documented in comedian Jayde Adams' hilarious podcast, Welcome to the Neighbourhood, these groups include all kinds of life and opinions, from the extremely heartwarming to the extraordinarily petty and irritating, and have taken the place of all kinds of physical infrastructure, from noticeboards to street corners. Behind every local football team or running group or community garden there's a WhatsApp conversation where real-world plans are made.

In my South London neighbourhood, local forums are the places that get people along to community markets, fill empty shops, and unite people with nothing in common save their adoration of an adventurous local cat. They power an economy of favours, freecycling and recommendations – while also being home to plenty of moaning and challenging conversations about everything from ULEZ to flags.

These forums are far from perfect – and there is another essay to be written about the economic and social impacts of Meta's de facto monopoly on informal public communication channels – but they are places where people gather that are totally neglected in social policy. Local communities that band together to buy their local pub do so not only through meeting in person but via WhatsApp chats and crowdfunding websites. Empowering more communities does not need to be restricted to brick and mortar assets, it can start with active advocacy in these digital communities, and in creating opportunities that are accessible and realisable to people who want to do more than just chat on their phones but just don't know how.

It is also the case that the place-based innovation model set out in the Industrial Strategy has no equivalent in social policy. As mentioned earlier, beyond the odd coffee shop or highly manicured piece of CCTV-monitored public-private realm, high-intensity innovation in elite institutions does not magically trickle down to adjacent neighbourhoods and, rather than creating opportunities, can lead to increased local social and economic divides.

The recent Careful Industries report "From Hype to Hope: How Networked Neighbourhoods can make innovation work for everyone" explores how the UK lags on many measures of technology adoption, with few robust strategies for diffusion and an overall weak skills pipeline – a situation compounded by the fact that much place-based innovation policy overlooks the contribution of communities to placemaking.[20]

Embedding innovation in everyday places

Successful centres of innovation and production need to be good places to work and live, and the government's theory of investment in successful clusters does not need to only apply to industry; it also applies to people and communities. The list of powers for the Neighbourhood Plan, which includes pub licensing and limiting anti-social behaviour on public transport, could include the creation of more "Connected Organisations", community incubators that act as local innovation hubs, fostering relationships, teaching skills, and creating pathways to opportunities. Like start-up incubators for communities, these organisations already exist across

Image: FC United of Manchester

the UK and take many forms – some, such as Watershed and Knowle West Media Centre in Bristol, are arts organisations, while others, including Makespace Oxford and DoES in Liverpool, began as co-working centres and maker spaces. And while these grassroots organisations might seem unlikely incubators for technological progress, it is too limiting to see innovation as simply an industrial process: it is a frame of mind, the application of ingenuity, the freedom to get things done that can be shared across the UK to enable greater wellbeing and resilience, higher skills adoption, and more technology diffusion.

While the UK is recognised as a global innovator and leader in research, our technology politics are still very undeveloped – heavily influenced by corporate priorities and 20th century approaches to progress. The digital society has been here for several decades now, but digital social policy remains non-existent, while place-based innovation policies are still developed without considering communities.

Taking digital social policy seriously requires looking beyond the arbitrary boundaries of central government and engaging with the messiness of real life – spotting unexpected uses and reuses of technology, enabling people without computer science degrees to recognise themselves as innovators, meeting more people where they are, in the conversations we are all already having.

Giving more people agency over the technologies they choose and use is vital for developing a modern politics that strengthens democracy and increases national resilience – a failure to recognise this risks creating multiple political, economic, and infrastructural vulnerabilities. Our mission at Careful Industries is to make technology work for 8 billion people not eight billionaires. Taking that seriously begins with empowering communities to make and create the technologies that work for them.

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Imagine if we took community seriously

James Plunkett

Over many years working in and around government, I've come to realise that community agency is seen as nice, but not essential. I've seen many politicians give speeches emphasising the importance of community work, but then they seem to switch modes, turning back to the all-consuming day job: running the machinery of government.

There are many reasons that our civic capacities feel like an optional extra, from the perspective of Whitehall. I believe the root issue is the beguiling power of that metaphor: we see government as a machine that makes policies.

I'm fascinated by the hold this metaphor has over us. So much so that I'm writing a book about its history, describing how it took hold, and what alternative conceptions look like.

It turns out there are many reasons we find machinery attractive, one of which is that it feels tractable. We know bureaucracy has limits, but at least we know how to work it. We pull levers by regulating, we make policies and announce them, we design interventions and 'roll them out'. Community, by contrast, is organic. Even politicians who believe in its substance rarely know how to work with it.

It might be useful, then, to run with a thought experiment. Let's imagine that we treated cultivating community as the serious work of government. How would we go about it?

Getting serious

Step one would be to lift community agency out of the fluffy margins of public policy to sit at the heart of government.

A good comparator might be the way we approach digital technology. The UK government is driving a bold agenda of digital reform from the Department for Science, Technology, Innovation and Skills (DSIT). This work has its critics, but it's certainly serious. So let's imagine we approached the revitalisation of civil society with the same determination. The work would get a top-level strategy, Cabinet-level ministerial sponsorship, institutional backing, and money.

Civil society is so cross-cutting that we would surely want to drive this from the centre of government. We could do that by leading the work from the Cabinet Office, and by framing it as an ambitious initiative: a Marshall Plan to revitalise civic life. Perhaps the work could be driven by a Centre for Civic Life, co-sponsored by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister.

Some will groan at this idea, so it's good to be clear: the job of the centre cannot be to revive civil society with top-down policies. That would be an oxymoron. The work is about fostering the conditions for active communities, using the kind of power that only exists in the state.

So what does this look like? Here are some ideas for the list.

Civic spaces

First, we now understand better the importance of civic infrastructure, and especially civic spaces. Communities thrive when there are places for people to get together, ideally in messy and mixed uses, leading to serendipitous connections.

To recognise this, our strategy could include a major programme of investment to restore and reopen vital spaces, like libraries. Perhaps this could be funded by reductions in the central government estate. To support local agency, we could match-fund communities who raise money to take control of local spaces. There could be partnerships with the biggest estates, like the Church of England, learning from the Good Faith Partnership and Warm Welcome. There could be work to repurpose underused local buildings, in exchange for greater community involvement. We could help local authorities to transfer assets to community ownership.

Alongside this, we could make better civic use of public buildings. Consider how buildings like schools can be designed to foster social connections, so that parents mingle at pick-up and drop-off, and swap numbers, or they can be transactional, so that we rush in and out without talking. Some civic-minded leaders already open up their buildings to be community hubs, fostering community, and they get little thanks for it. If anything, we make their lives difficult. So maybe our strategy would include a national programme to re-architect public spaces, making public buildings, from schools to GP surgeries, more porous, as focal points for civic life.

The software of civic life

Second, we'd want to recognise that civic infrastructure isn't just hardware. It's also the software of institutions and the ways people come together to work through problems and develop solutions.

Here our strategy could draw on great work over the last decade to develop techniques to activate communities and build confidence, and to support dialogue and community entrepreneurship. Our strategy could spread these methods; maybe we'd support a national expansion of the 100 Day Challenge, and a network of 50 Citizen Incubators of the kind being run by Public Life in Liverpool (it pays eight local people to quit their jobs for a year to build a community venture). Perhaps this could focus on communities with low social capital. We could also help more local areas to learn from pioneers in community agency like Wigan, Grimsby, and Camden.

Beyond this, we would want to support software more literally, by backing pro-social and civic technologies.

All too often, we think about technology only through the lens of efficiency, but this is only half the picture. As researcher and adviser Anna Dent points out, technologies can also be pro-social, so that their design actively encourages human connections. There is already a lively sector of people working on pro-social technologies – from interoperable deliberative platforms to platforms for sharing like Olio — yet this work gets almost no support from government, and is often done on a shoestring.

Perhaps we would establish a funding body, a Civic Technology Council, similar to the UKRI Research Councils. This could support new institutions — such as an Institute for Deliberative Technologies — which could become magnets for civic-spirited technologists. This could be funded with an increase in the Digital Platforms levy, on a principle of polluter pays. Big Tech would then help to offset some of the harm their platforms are doing.

From rules to rights

Third, our strategy would want to give communities more power. We could strengthen existing community rights, as Power to Change and others have recommended. We could also adopt the Innovation Unit's idea of a 'right to innovate'. This gives councils a way to request that a rule be suspended so that they can experiment.

Maybe we could go further than this and adopt a more general principle of 'seek forgiveness, not permission.' This would mean reclassifying certain rules as breakable if a council or keystone charity is confident they could later justify having done so. There would be guidance in the form of principles, interpreted through case law. The aim would be to relax the grip of the centre on innovators at the edges.

Cultivating capability

Fourth, we'd want to not overlook the unsexy but important work of improving skills and capabilities. In the last few years, a number of important disciplines have emerged to support active communities, from community stewards, to disciplines

Image: Legacy West Midlands, Birmingham

like participatory governance, to relational practices. Throughout history, improvements to our governing capacities have often spread via professions. Think, for example, how scientific management spread via engineers at the turn of the twentieth century. Or, more recently, think how we spread economics, and later behavioural science and design, as public professions.

Our strategy could do the same, working over ten years to grow disciplines to support vibrant communities. This could be done by supporting professional networks and Centres of Excellence, and by supporting the codification of these disciplines. This could draw energy from a dazzling array of work happening on contemporary governance. Perhaps this work could be bolstered by founding a National School of Contemporary Governance.

Money

Fifth, we would need to recognise the importance of funding. Our strategy would not be able to solve every funding challenge faced by the third sector, but we would want to recognise that communities thrive when they are fertilised by a steading flow of money in the right quantities and rhythms. This can sometimes be small sums, well delivered.

Indeed, too much money, like too much fertiliser, can kill small initiatives, turning them away from serving a community to serving a funder. My local community garden, for example, exists because it received £5,000 from the London Olympics, and 13 years later it is still fostering social connections, paying for itself many times over. The key is for money to come with few strings attached, distributed through funders who understand this.

One approach would be to match-fund the awards given by the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) and to repeat or extend the larger scale initiatives that NLCF had funded, from Power to Change to Big Local.

All of which raises the question: how would our strategy be funded? The key is to be long-term. A pattern I have noticed during research is the number of websites for community work that display a disclaimer: 'This project ended when the money ran out'. Trying to grow communities with short-term funding is like gardening with month-long breaks from watering. Our strategy would therefore want to establish a reliable, long-term mechanism for funding — something commensurate with the notion of a ten-year Marshall Plan to revitalise community life.

So, where would we find the money? Ultimately the goal is to ease pressure on our bureaucratic government machinery, delivering savings. We could commit to a target to drive this; a pledge, over five or ten years, to shrink the size of the central state and switch money into communities, including by reinvesting savings from technology. The intention is that, over time, communities can play a fuller role in societal challenges — from caring to helping people live well with chronic conditions — that are so overburdening the central state. We also know that, compared to technocratic solutions, community approaches are often far more effective and cost-efficient.

Still, we can't wait for that. So perhaps we would consider more creative models. One example is the model used in Brazil, where big businesses pay a small tax surcharge to fund a civic innovation ecosystem. To avoid political interference and ensure long-termism, the money flows past government, directly to agencies that fund civil society. Could we do the same in the UK? And perhaps, as the economic implications of AI become clearer, we could tax a portion of its potentially high and concentrated profits to fund civic life. Our promised high-tech future could then also be a human future of thriving communities.

My point is not that these are the right ideas, but that there are many ideas to choose from. It is just not true that we can't get traction on the work of reactivating communities.

The answer lies not in silver bullet policies, or in interventions we can roll out, but in a broad agenda of work to cultivate the right conditions. Thanks to decades of practice in communities across the country, we know how to do this work. We just have to take off our machine-glasses to see it.

James Plunkett is a writer and consultant with nearly 20 years' experience in UK policy-making, including roles across the private, public, and third sectors, from Downing Street to leading think tanks and charities. He is the convener of Kinship Works (www.kinship.works), an organisation supporting more human alternatives to bureaucracy. He posts on Blue Sky, Medium, and Substack.

The leaders who make things happen: lessons in governing from community business

Vidhya Alakeson

A decade ago, I had the privilege of becoming the first CEO of Power to Change. At that point in January 2015, it was me, a laptop, a new board and a handful of talented consultants helping to build the organisation from scratch. We had four months to launch our first funding programme which we did, and the organisation has since gone on to flourish and deliver real impact for community business.

I bowed out of the Power to Change story three years ago when I left to join Keir Starmer's team. Although I loved Power to Change, I had become a bit frustrated at my inability to connect all the small examples of change we were creating across the country into one big shift in how things get done. Now I had the chance to move somewhere where big change was possible, or so I thought. Three years and one election victory later, I have learnt a lot about creating change and have a new found appreciation for the community business approach.

In the very early days of my time in the Leader of the Opposition's Office, a by-election was called in Wakefield. I was excited that one of the visits Keir Starmer was due to do was to a community hub in the town, one that Power to Change had supported. I called up Bernie, the manager,

expecting to find a similar level of excitement on the other end of the phone. Not so much.

Bernie was nonplussed, bordering on angry. No one from the Labour Party had spoken to her for years or shown any interest in her organisation and its work. Now she was supposed to roll out the red carpet because the Party Leader wanted to visit. Bernie was a Labour member. Her disdain didn't come from different politics but from the transaction Bernie was being presented with. What she wanted from politics was a relationship, an ongoing conversation.

A network of relationships

Community businesses are more than organisations – they are a network of relationships. This is what gives them their power in changing the places where they are based. They trade first and foremost in trust. It's the reason why they can get so far with volunteers in the way most businesses couldn't. It's the reason why board members will dip into their own pocket to keep them afloat, and why they can reach people in their community that other organisations can't.

The Bevy in Brighton rather counterintuitively runs public health initiatives out of a community pub. The relationships it has with local people mean they will accept help and advice there – but not somewhere more 'official'.

Politics and government undervalue relationships. They engage sporadically with people, often on their terms and without reciprocity. This breeds mistrust and misunderstanding. Of course, not every problem government tries to fix is relationship-based. Some, like reducing waiting lists, are relatively mechanical. Find the interventions that work and make sure all hospitals implement them. However, many of our toughest challenges, from ex-offender rehabilitation to reducing obesity depend on behaviour change and that is where trusting, long term relationships matter most. This is not a new insight. Far from it.

The brilliant David Boyle, who sadly died recently, wrote about relationships being at the heart of public services many years ago and David Robinson has championed relationships for years. And yet, too little has changed about how the state interacts with its citizens.

Built on what is, not what's missing

In 2023, my worlds of community business and politics clashed again. This time Keir Starmer and Yvette Cooper were going to visit Sacha Bedding in Hartlepool. I had got to know Sacha well as the organisation he runs, Wharton Trust, got a £1m grant from Power to Change over five years to change the Dyke House area of Hartlepool. However, when the Labour Party arrived in Dyke House, it wasn't the positive work that was going on that was the focus. It was the anti-social behaviour and crime, the broken windows and graffiti. We had missed the point.

Dyke House was full of incredible people working together to change their community, supported by community leaders like Sacha. We had missed all this and only seen the problems.

Community business starts from what there is, not what is missing. It's a fundamental difference from how government sees communities. And Labour governments have a bigger

problem here than most. Labour's deep-seated concern for social justice and fairness can leave it overly focused on disadvantage and discrimination. These matter profoundly but communities want to deal in aspiration and ambition. Too often we level down when communities want to be lifted up.

I will never forget my first visit to Safe Regeneration in Bootle, Merseyside. Brian Dawe, its brilliantly charismatic leader, took me to a piece of waste ground by the canal and said, 'Vidhya, in a few years this is going to be a piazza'. It would have been easy to laugh. There was fly tipping and drug paraphernalia and not much else. But his conviction was infectious, and I left believing him. A decade on, the area has been transformed. Not only is there a piazza; there's a community pub, a music festival and so much more.

I could tell the same story about Jess Steele and the Observer building in Hastings or Wendy and Hannah at Nudge Community Builders in Plymouth. Time and again, I saw the same thing: ambition that seemed almost outlandish delivered by incredible people working with their communities, building on what was there, not focusing on what was missing. Government must take a leaf out of this book and become a partner to this sort of ambition and aspiration, not just the provider of a safety net for people.

Backing network leaders who make things happen

What's most inspiring about community business is the people – the leaders who make things happen. Not hierarchical, but network leaders who connect and empower others to deliver real change on the ground. Over time, it became clear that the most impactful thing Power to Change could do was back these leaders – not fund one project, but back them again and again to accelerate the change they deliver. I left Power to Change before fully realising this vision of how funding and support could work best.

Whether in community business or Silicon Valley, it's all about people. Venture capital backs people, much as I had come to realise that I didn't need endless new funding programmes. It might be grassroots and purpose driven, rather than the next tech innovation, but ultimately it's about spotting talent and backing it. You need to be mindful of your biases and blind spots with this sort of approach but if you value outcomes over process, there isn't a better way.

This approach is almost entirely missing in government. Government backs programmes, not people, and despite years of learning continues to make applicants jump through endless hoops to get support. Track record – and what you delivered with the last round of government funding – counts for little. With each new programme, you start from scratch.

Community-led solutions

Three years on, I realise where my frustration had come from. It wasn't that I couldn't stitch together the individual community businesses I knew across the country into bigger scale change. It was that those I was trying to convince, namely government, had missed the point. Too often, government is looking for one answer to a problem that it can scale; the perfect pilot that can make a difference everywhere. It still sees change as an industrial process.

Community business is an organic solution to social change where innovation springs up in communities led by incredible entrepreneurs. It is rightly different everywhere and fits the needs of the people and place where it is born. This type of change still needs government to thrive, but not in the way in which government feels most comfortable. It needs government to embrace difference, remove barriers and enable communities to find their own solutions, spreading rather than scaling what works best.

Long before Power to Change, I was sitting in a roundtable with the then Leader of the Opposition. One of the participants had just told him about a diabetes walking group in Bethnal Green that was very effective. He immediately said, 'How do we roll that out to every community'. This is precisely the wrong instinct. We must shift to a new question: **how do we enable each community to lead and deliver the change it needs?**

Vidhya Alakeson is Deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, and was Chief Executive of Power to Change from 2015 – 2022. She writes here in a personal capacity.

Image: Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth

Give us a chance, and we'll give you community power

Sacha Bedding

On 20 October 2016 I received my first email from Power to Change:

"Through our own research and consultation, your area has been identified as having potential for more community businesses to develop and your organisation as having strong connections with your local community, which is why we are offering you this opportunity to apply for funding and support to give us a better understanding of your neighbourhood."

It came out of the blue and had me puzzled. Why us?

In my neighbourhood

Dyke House is a small neighbourhood in Hartlepool. It's about a square mile in size with roughly 5,000 residents. It has a secondary school, which is part of a multi-academy trust, and a primary school, in a different multi-academy trust. There's St Oswald's Church, one of the oldest and finest churches in the town, and the Nasir Mosque for the region's Ahmadiyya community. And there's the Annexe, the community centre which is run by the charity the Wharton Trust, which I have had the pleasure of managing for the last 13 years.

The people who live here, on the whole, are a great bunch. They say of Hartlepool "it's like a big village" and it is. Until very recently more than 85% of the population of the town were born here. It has an incredibly settled community. Lots of people are either related to one another or part of extended friendship groups. Dyke House is no exception. There are families who have lived here for generations and wouldn't dream of moving.

One of the most satisfying things is that here, you're more likely to have a proper conversation with someone who isn't your neighbour than in most other areas. This speaks to the friendliness and openness of the majority of folk who live here. Although bureaucrats have done their best to dilute a sense of identity by dividing it across three different electoral wards, there remains a real sense of place.

There is also a shared sense of purpose. By 2016, we'd been following a community organising framework for a number of years and it was beginning to bear fruit. Dozens of local people were committed to social action, helped by being a Big Local area – one of 150 places receiving £1 million to be spent how residents wished. These investments made a disproportionate difference, but that wouldn't have mattered if the desire and willingness to roll up sleeves wasn't there.

But for all of that, there remained deep issues. The attempts at changing the town largely failed. Recently built call centres came too late, as offshoring by large companies meant that the heavy industry had mostly not recovered. Large and stable employers, particularly in the steel industry, started to close – again, and on it went.

Simultaneously, the first wave of the Universal Credit roll out created so many problems for people. The zeal with which people were sanctioned was horrific. Austerity was still biting. Job density was appalling low with fewer than six jobs for every ten people of working age. Educational attainment was about 20 years behind the UK average, with 1 in 3 adults in Hartlepool remaining functionally illiterate. Life expectancy was beginning to fall and our GPs began to talk of 'shit life syndrome' being one of the primary factors in many people's poor wellbeing.

It was a time when people were looking for change. Labour began to see a significant reduction in its share of the vote for both local and national elections; independent councillors began to appear in most wards, and Ben Houchen had started his pitch to be Tees Valley Mayor. This desire to change reached a crescendo when Hartlepool voted overwhelmingly in favour of leaving the EU.

For all the unhelpful and condescending narratives of racist bigots voting in protest to immigration, the majority of people I spoke to had had enough of being done to without any consideration of the impact of government policy. It was an opportunity for the politically irrelevant class to make a statement – and they did.

Although I was surprised that the Remain vote didn't mobilise as well as the Leave vote; I wasn't surprised by the scale of the response locally. As a polling station, we had local residents asking for help to register to vote, motivated by a real opportunity to make a difference. They turned out in numbers. It spoke volumes of the disconnect between our mainstream parties and the will of a whole swathe of the town (and country).

It was against this backdrop that my team and I had an opportunity to work with Power to Change to do something completely different.

Empowering Places

Following a period of learning and reflection, I gave a presentation to Power to Change. This presentation reflected our belief that, with the right investment, there was an opportunity to address the market failure as identified by local residents when our community organisers asked "*What don't you like about Dyke House?*". There was an alternative solution – community business.

It was a presentation I practised. The opportunity to see a £1 million investment into Dyke House weighed heavy. The potential it brought to add to our approach was massive

Image: The Arcade, Dewsbury

and I didn't want to mess it up. Fortunately, a couple of months after presenting, I received the email "*Welcome to the Community Business Movement!*", and everything changed.

Joining the Empowering Places programme saw us team up with the most inspiring group of people you could meet. We joined five other 'catalysts' from around the country; fantastic organisations, all deeply rooted in their place and ambitious to make things better. We were introduced to national organisations to work alongside; Co-operatives UK, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, and New Economics Foundation. And we got involved with helping Power to Change shape their approach.

Being honest, it took a while to get my head around the whole thing; but when I did, I saw there was so much we could achieve. Some ideas were brilliant, but the barriers to entry were just too high; a personalised care service and a cooperative care home didn't quite get off the ground. Covid and the policy decisions which followed hit us hard. Power to Change were fantastic though. They were flexible in how we used our grant and, most importantly, patient as the consequences unfolded. That patient and kind approach helped me concentrate on how we could best respond to the crisis affecting our community.

We did have success too. LilyAnne's, a café which was so much more than that, has very recently moved into larger premises due to demand. Minds for Men, a mental health charity, continues to offer services to local residents, as does Run Fit Hartlepool, for whom I've even registered for a trademark! BloomIn Art, too, is doing extraordinary things leading the cultural sector in Hartlepool.

We began to understand the role of community wealth building (who would have thought that the anchor institutions in Hartlepool spend £1 billion annually) and the ways to help money stay close to where it's generated. We found out that there are properties in Dyke House owned by people in Australia.

Through Empowering Places we've just about achieved alchemy. We've now got £1 million of income generating assets. We own The Annexe community centre, having used a Tudor Trust grant to buy it from the local authority, and Annexe Housing now has eight houses. The fair rent from the tenants (who commit to social action as part of their tenancy) is just about enough for us always to be here, to be able to open the doors and to say to our local residents "you *can* rebuild". This simply wouldn't have happened without the financial and aspirational impact of being part of Empowering Places.

We've also now got a national profile. We've sustained relationships with partners which has gone beyond the funding and that's really important too.

Building community power

But the problem with having achieved so much, is the impatience and ambition to do more. We want to create a genuine Neighbourhood Health Service by having a community owned GP surgery where the profits are reinvested into neighbourhood wellbeing rather than extracted as profit share.

We want to own the Enterprise Centre opposite the community centre and create an Economic Campus to support individuals

to improve their skills, create space for self-employment, community businesses and private enterprise, with profits reinvested to enable more people to benefit. We want to scale our housing scheme to give more local people a chance to have one of our homes and bring more income into the organisation, so we are here in perpetuity.

We can only do this if there is a fundamental shift in the approach to where decision making power lies in this country. We know we live in the most centralised country in Europe, and we see that devolution is only really talked about at combined authority level. It's better than nothing but it misses the point.

Dyke House is one example of thousands up and down the country which could have a more active role in shaping how resources are spent and how decisions are made locally. Our Big Local Partnership has been doing so for 12 years. Local people are contributing to making the place great every day. We've got a ten year prospectus which is our effort to ask for help in delivering the change we want to see. It is based on resident feedback and what the data says.

It's why I chose to be part of the We're Right Here campaign alongside Power to Change and the other national organisations working together to advocate for deeper devolved decision making at local levels. It's not about seizing power but sharing it. It's not about a takeover, but distributing knowledge and responsibility for making our neighbourhoods the best they can be. And, without sounding hyperbolic, it's really needed, right now.

The world around us feels increasingly insecure. At a global scale, power is increasingly concentrated in the hands of few, powerful individuals, and the consequences are felt by the masses. If people feel disempowered and left behind by politics, the civil disorder that plagued the streets of my town and many others last year is bound to be repeated.

But, imagine if all people had a stake in where they live. If they could have a say, contribute to making their places better. And given a chance, they could get involved, make decisions, work together.

We need the system to enable that to happen in a meaningful way. We're seeing it happen in Hartlepool. With the right support, we could see it happening where you live too.

Sacha Bedding is Chief Executive of the Wharton Trust, an estate-based charity in Hartlepool using a community organising framework that supports local residents to take action. Sacha is a campaign leader for We're Right Here, and has worked alongside Power to Change since 2016 as part of the Empowering Places programme and to advocate for policy change.

About Power to Change

Power to Change is the think-do tank that backs community business.

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them.

We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

To find out more or work with us, please contact info@powertochange.org.uk or visit our website, www.powertochange.org.uk.

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