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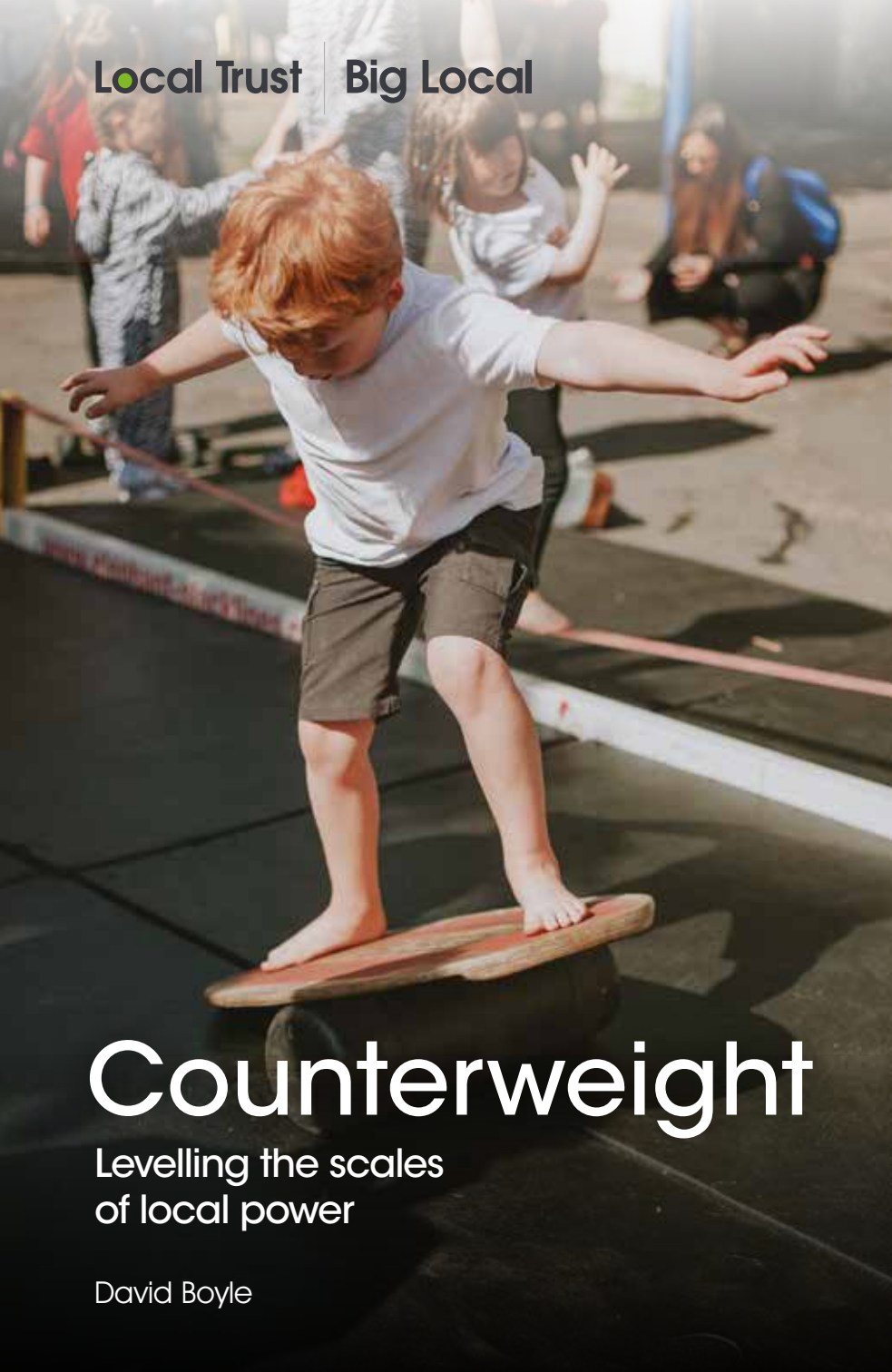

Counterweight

Levelling the scales of local power

David Boyle

About the author

David Boyle is the author of a range of books about history, social change, politics and the future. He is a fellow of the New Economics Foundation and has been editor of a number of publications including Town & Country Planning, Community Network, New Economics, Liberal Democrat News and Radical Economics. In addition to this essay, David wrote The Grammar of Change, an earlier essay in this series.

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Registered in England and Wales
Big Local Trust charity number 1145916
Local Trust company number 07833396
and charity number 1147511

Big Local is managed by Local Trust and funded by
The National Lottery Community Fund.

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ISBN: 978-1-9998292-9-2

Published: December 2019

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FOREWORD

BIG LOCAL IS ONE OF THE MOST radical and exciting grant programmes ever launched by a major lottery funder. Between 2010 and 2012, the National Lottery Community Fund identified 150 areas that had historically missed out on lottery and other funding. Each of those areas was allocated £1m of Big Local funding. This could be spent in any way they chose, provided residents organised themselves locally to plan and manage that funding, involving the wider community in the decision-making process.

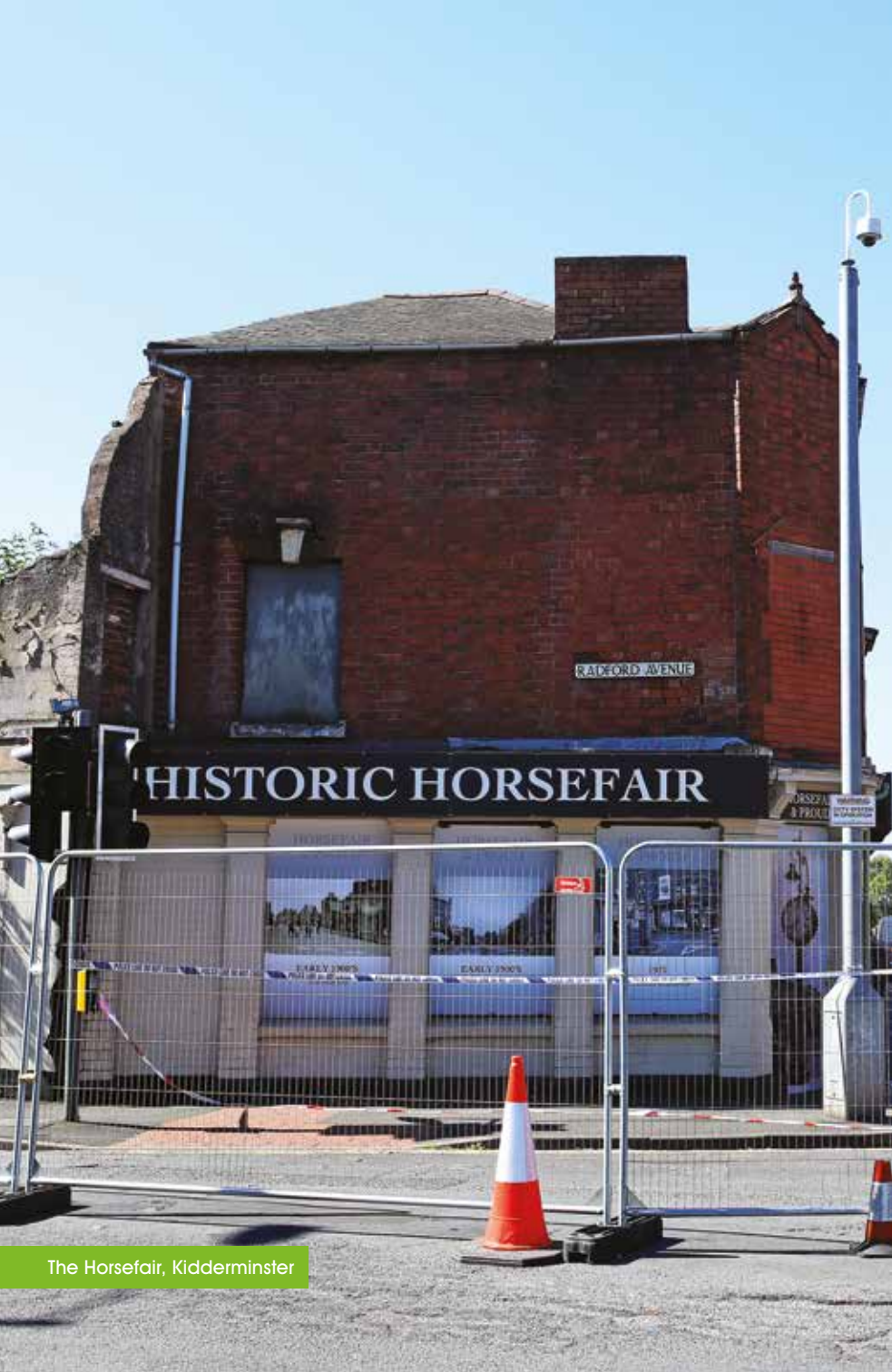
The programme was designed not just to provide funding for projects, but to do so in a way that would build community capacity, confidence and skills in the longer term. To accomplish this, Big Local is bottom-up and community-led; there are no top-down targets or centrally imposed delivery models. The rules, constraints and priorities that define Big Local have been for local people to decide. The timeframe extends over fifteen years, allowing communities to take their time, build confidence and skills, make decisions and deliver change, without the usual pressures to meet end-of-year spend targets or other arbitrary, bureaucratic deadlines.

In his second essay for Local Trust, continuing the theme of his first essay - *Grammar of Change* - David Boyle visits three more Big Local neighbourhoods, introducing us to places, groups and individuals operating at the intersection of local authority and community. In telling the stories from neighbourhoods in Kidderminster, Broxbourne and Sheffield, he highlights the critical role that a strong

community institutions play in supporting the success of local neighbourhoods, and explains how a diversity of centres of power and influence is vital to enabling our democratic institutions to function effectively. Finally, he makes a strong case for the state having the courage to step back at times to enable the potential of local people to come to the fore.

This is the latest essay in a series in which Local Trust has invited a range of writers, thinkers and researchers to help understand the context and relevance of Big Local. The essays, which are also available online at localtrust.org.uk, seek to draw out lessons that can inform wider debates on future policies affecting community and place. *Counterweight* is a timely and compelling contribution to an increasingly important conversation.

Matt Leach
Chief executive
Local Trust



The Horsefair, Kidderminster

Part one

DY10 Big Local, Kidderminster

"Neighbourhoods are the cells which keep society whole. We are threatened with infections, from outside and from within; our powers of resistance and eventual recovery depend largely on whether these neighbourhood cells are healthy or beginning to decay."

Tony Gibson, Counterweight:
the Neighbourhood Option (1984)

TWO GREAT DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS form the foundations of discussion when it comes to improving pretty much anything—and certainly when it comes to local regeneration. Both representative democracy and participative democracy have their own narratives, traditions and claims.

Sometimes they are a continuum, working happily and productively side by side. Sometimes they can be a source of conflict, of competing claims to legitimacy, struggling over shifting boundaries—just as they can also provide the basis of peace.

Local government is the bastion of representative democracy; Big Local, and similar community initiatives, can often provide the best examples of participative democracy. But when the boundaries are disputed between the two of them—or when one side invades the bastions of the other—there can be spectacular fallings out.

This is one explanation why one Big Local, DY10 HBG in Kidderminster, began life by banning elected councillors from its partnership board.

How this happened, and some of the unexpected—not to say paradoxical—events it led to, require us first to understand some of the background, not just to the DY10 Big Local there, but also a little about Kidderminster.

Once a medieval woollen town, it was immensely wealthy, with its weir on the River Stour. By the last century or so, the town came to specialise in carpet manufacturing. But, nearly two decades into the 21st century, that second tide of prosperity has also receded and the little terraced homes built on the hillsides, too many of them boarded up, or the more modern, yet crumbling flats in the other neighbourhoods, house serious poverty.

Perhaps it is partly due to the town's falling on hard times, but its politics have been described as toxic. The Liberals and Lib Dems divided a generation ago, and, into their midst, Dr Richard Taylor flung his new Health Concern party, originally an attempt to save Kidderminster Hospital.

These bitter divisions got in the way of a previous attempt to support a more participative approach, following the Blair government's flagship New Deal for Communities. DY10 HBG chair Brenda Lines was an education rep (she was a local assistant headteacher) on its local board and chaired it herself in its final months in 2010. She remembers how the

local councillors would dominate conversation, often making abstruse arguments about upcoming council budgets—so much so that many of the locals began to drift away.

As the old board wound up, the idea around the Big Local began to emerge; so of course, some of the members of the old board—called after the three neighbourhoods, Horsefair, Broadwaters and Greenhill—had strong views about how the £1 million should be spent.

Brenda withdrew. "Because I was a local headteacher by then, I felt I had a conflict of interest. I also didn't like the way the old HBG members were somehow thinking they could just coalesce into the new Big Local group," she says now.

It seemed to her that three of the councillors on the old HBG board, in particular, saw it as an opportunity to plug cuts in services then being made by Wyre Forest Council.

The issue came to a head when Helen Fairweather, the Big Local rep supporting local participants, was asked to help bring a steering group together to make the Big Local resident-led.

And so it was that, at a local school, on a cold foggy February evening early in 2012, people began to put themselves forward for places on the resident-led steering group to set up the Big Local. Among them was a number of elected local councillors.

"The councillors were beginning to spar with each other over their political agendas and you could see people saying to themselves 'what am I doing here?'" says Helen now. "But the local residents did have opinions about what was going to benefit the area, and they needed to think about the first large-scale actions to take, rather than being pushed by councillors who felt they knew what those needs were."

So, Helen and Chris Allen, another Local Trust community rep who lived nearby, met with the residents by themselves,

and together they decided to exclude the elected councillors.

"We were quite strong community people," said Sarah Rook, another of the steering group members. "So we decided we couldn't be on the same steering group as councillors telling us what they've always told us—that they knew what we needed."

The decision had been argued out. Voices had occasionally been raised. But in the end, it had been unanimous. Now, somebody had to go and tell the councillors.

Helen and Chris took on the task and saw seven of them at the district council offices. They explained that it was a temporary decision, "for the time being", to give the residents the space to work it out and produce a plan so that they could draw down the first tranche of money.

"Because I'm a bit gobby, I'd have just told them it's supposed to be resident-led, so pee off," said another steering group member Vander Browning, now on the partnership board. "But others are more polite. I was happy we were taking back the power for residents."

Some of the councillors understood, but some of them were not at all pleased. There were angry texts and emails. One of them was particularly cross and threatened to take the infant Big Local to the European Court of Human Rights. But, as Helen says, "The storm was weathered." DY10 HBG went ahead with its outline plan without the direct involvement of elected councillors. It was eventually finished in 2015.

When the Big Local was formally set up, it chose the postcode as a name rather than the old nomenclature, because the old board had been too dominated by local politicians (though they have since added the initials to their name). They also made permanent the ban on councillors by writing it into their terms of reference.

Brenda is judicious about this. “We’re not anti-council,” she says. “Even the ones who were angriest have also done good things in the town. But HBG residents would have stopped coming to meetings if the internal wrangling had carried on. I could see it going the same way as the old board.”

Yet the story does not end there. There was a twist, and an important one.

Two years later, Sarah Rook took Brenda aside after a meeting and asked her what would happen if she stood for election to the council.

“I was terrified she was about to tell me she was leaving,” says Brenda. “But it occurred to me that it would be good if we could grow our own councillors.”

Would it not be a powerful putting of their purpose into action if they could take residents from places like Greenhill and build their skills and confidence enough to seek elected office? On the other hand, there was the councillors’ ban to consider; but at the same time, it would be crazy to boot someone off the board once they achieved any kind of local success. What to do? Brenda decided to take it to the partnership board.

They agreed to change their articles. So, when Sarah won her seat on the new town council, she stayed a member of the board, and so did one of her colleagues who was elected to the district council at the same time. Now, Sarah is also on the district council as part of the ruling progressive alliance of councillors who run Wyre Forest. They also have on their board one of the original councillors, who has since stood down from the council; Brenda describes him as “stalwart”.

Some of the original councillors have never quite forgiven their exclusion. There are many stories from other Big Local

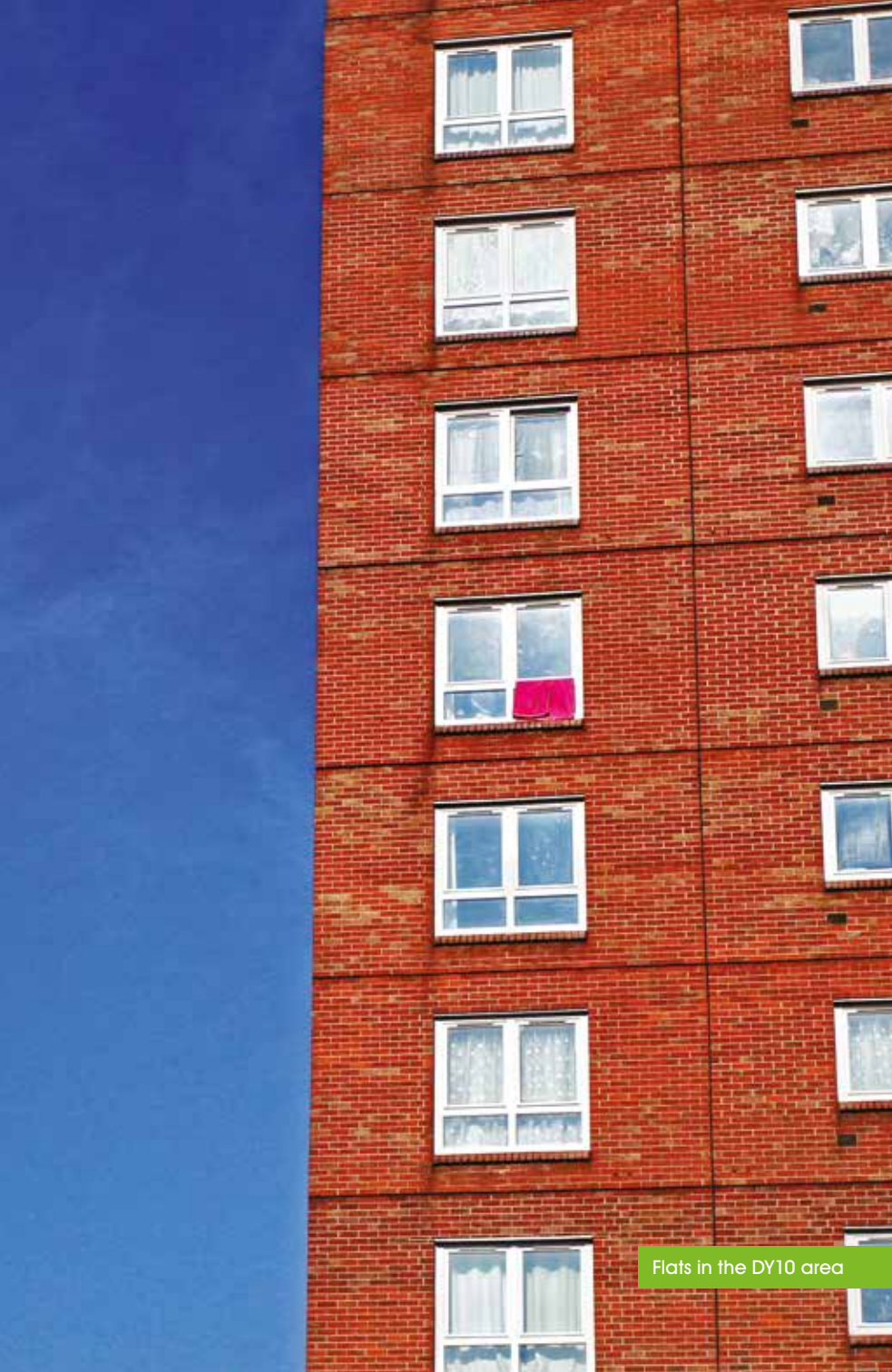
areas about councillors or council officials assuming that the £1 million was theirs to decide about—and many stories also about their rage or incomprehension when they discovered it was not.

You can't deny a frisson of pleasure that kind of discovery gives the rest of us. This is probably unfair, given the difficult decisions councillors have to make these days. But too much representative democracy without participation does, as we know, all too often lead to a kind of pomposity and a disconnect between rulers and ruled.

But let's be completely fair about this: the opposite also fails to work very well. Participative democracy without enough representation has its own drawbacks. It can lead to aloof introspection, or a kind of process getting in the way of action. You do need both, and an awareness of the importance of both.

DY10 HBG and its board have made their peace with local politics and have moved on, and they are stronger for it. We should recognise that, especially where there is poverty and a sense of disenfranchisement, there is likely to be a gulf between elected officials and local people. You can see it everywhere; rightly or wrongly, people can feel ignored and neglected and— let's face it— they often are. Without any kind of participative institution, such as Big Local with its own resources, it can be extremely hard to break out of these vicious circles. Sometimes campaigns against some element of local policy can invigorate people, only to disperse again when the energy leaves, especially when their lives are under pressure.

What seems to have helped DY10 HBG to navigate a path through the quagmire is the clarity with which they saw that that the partnership board—the steering group before them–



Flats in the DY10 area

was not made up of representatives and was not claiming to represent anybody except themselves. They were not trying to ape the local authority.

This is what has allowed them to have an open agenda, a blank sheet of paper, to start with. It has allowed them to develop in a new and unusual direction.

It has also meant that they have had to police the relationship. They know that their board members and the elected councillors are, to some extent, fishing in the same pool when they are electioneering—from the pro-community rhetoric that both use and, perhaps also, from their common understanding that democracy flows from local people or not at all.

So, the board has decided to introduce a six-week purdah period before local elections—as for the Civil Service—during which candidates who are also members of the board can't boast about their involvement with the Big Local. This is what their terms of reference now say:

"To this end, it will exclude elected members who have not previously served on the Big Local DY10 HBG Partnership. An elected member, who has developed from the partnership, or a person running to become an elected member, will desist from representing Big Local DY10 HBG in the six weeks prior to an election. This is to prevent that person finding themselves in the sensitive position of trying to fairly wear two different hats."

It is a fascinating but extreme example of the potential conflict between councillors and community. As a solution, it may not suit everywhere, but it is at least clear about roles and responsibilities.

Otherwise, the DY10 HBG board is pressing ahead with its search for legacy, which can keep enough money coming in to

continue to make an impact after the end of the ten-year Big Local funding plan. (It is now half way through that period.) Other Big Locals which are working in more geographically coherent communities often want to invest in some kind of centre—bricks and mortar to host activities and bring in a bit of income, as Wormley and Turnford are doing, demonstrated in the next section of this essay. But, for DY10, there is no obvious place to put a building which would not privilege one neighbourhood over all the rest.

Instead, they are taking on a worker to investigate, develop and fundraise to support a legacy. There is, after all, the dilemma of how to act for such a widespread and varied community of over 7,600 people across so many different neighbourhoods. This has led to what looks like one of the most distinctive ways forward—distinct, at least, from how a local authority would set about it.

Their policy has been, on the one hand to build the capacity of individuals and, on the other, to plant mini-Big Locals in their neighbourhoods and provide them with the very small amounts of money they need to make things happen.

But make what happen? There's the rub. A local authority might balk at the loss of control that implies. But there is a purpose behind that—that they have to let go of the possible outcomes and *trust* local people. The money they provide for each neighbourhood gets allocated by local residents, in a form of participatory budgeting. Local residents put ideas forward and their neighbours then decide which ideas are best. This makes for some uncertainty, of course.

"The councillors ask us things, like what we're going to do, and we don't know," jokes Brenda. "It is different to the way they do things—like 'this is what you're having...'"

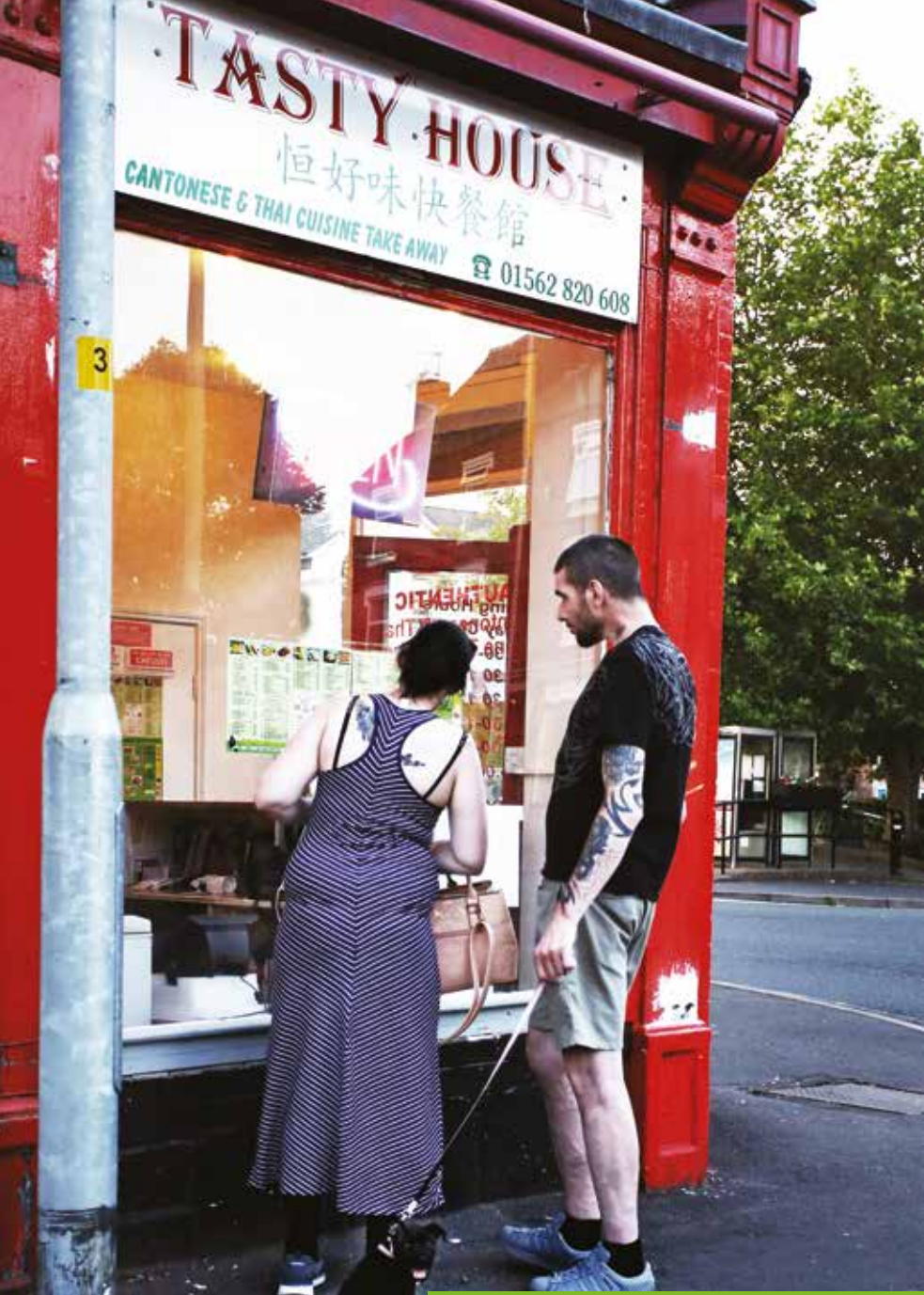
One of their great successes has been the regeneration of the old Horsefair site, giving the Old Post Office a lick of paint, putting up new signs—a slow but steady process, which goes with the grain and the energy of local volunteers. It is also completely different from the way any statutory service would approach it, wielding key performance indicators, when— for the cost of a few tins of paint and without the cost of master plans or demolition teams—they have succeeded in injecting new life into the heart of the neighbourhood.

Nobody would suggest that one way works and the other doesn't —there are clearly strengths and weaknesses on both sides. But there are elements to any regeneration that works which just have to be provided by the locals, on their own terms.

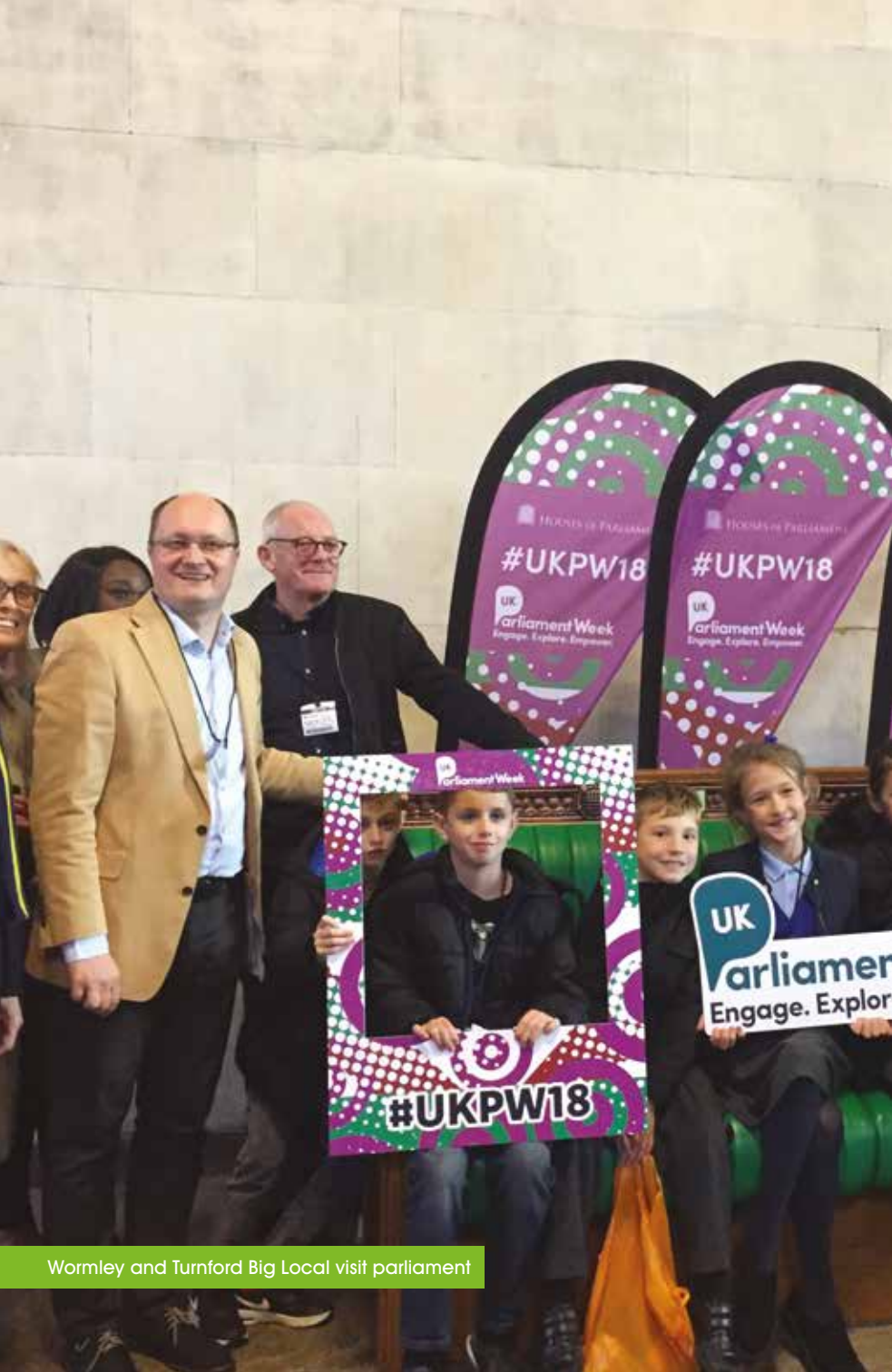
The closer that Big Local gets back to the council, the more it has to police those boundaries between them. They are, for example, careful not to discuss politics when they are on DY10 HBG business.

All this is the antidote to the idea that politics is about life. The personal may be political in Kidderminster; but, if it is, it is rigorously small-p political.

What there isn't any more is any animosity between DY10 HBG and the council, at least not from the Big Local side; yet the two different styles of democracy remain distinct. In fact, as Sarah says about her fellow councillors, "We're grateful to them really, for making us as strong as we are."



Residents outside a restaurant in Kidderminster



Wormley and Turnford Big Local visit parliament

Part two

Wormley and Turnford Big Local, Hertfordshire

"By long years of military experience he knew, and with the wisdom of age understood, that it is impossible for one man to direct hundreds of thousands of others struggling with death, and he knew that the result of a battle is decided not by the orders of a commander-in-chief, nor the place where the troops are stationed, nor by the number of cannon or of slaughtered men, but by that intangible force called the spirit of the army, and he watched this force and guided it in as far as that was in his power."

Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace (1869)

IT IS NOVEMBER, AND THE PEOPLE MOST INVOLVED in the Wormley and Turnford Big Local have hired a large red coach to head for Parliament. The adults sit at the front, and thirteen children who have come along with their teachers

from two local primary schools have crowded onto the back seats. It is exciting. It may not be that far down the M11 to get to Westminster, and yet, in some other ways, it could not be further away.

Wormley and Turnford are sub-divisions of the Hertfordshire town of Broxbourne, the point where London's sprawl finally thins out. The M11 corridor is one of the most prosperous suburban areas of the UK, which just makes the poverty in these corners of town all the tougher to cope with.

It is an area of extraordinary diversity—from terraced estates with no apparent variation in styles, built cheaply in the last three decades, through to small country mansions on the other side of the New River, which snakes along parallel to the old Cambridge road, the spine of this community. There is also extraordinary diversity among those who live here. There are Poles, Romanians, West Indians and people from a number of African countries, some having moved from eastern Europe, some just from London. There is also a kind of poverty of isolation—from each other and from the local life.

This is also relatively new. "I was the only black child in my junior school," says former Big Local board member Aisha Munro-Collins. "In my secondary school, we were five per cent from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds."

There is also a big Greek community and a Turkish community nearby in Cheshunt. In the 1940s, they were joined by former Italian prisoners of war, many of them staying to work in the big market- garden businesses that used to dominate the local economy. In the 1970s, it was refugees from communist Poland. Wormley and Turnford has seen the whole world. In fact, the energetic Big Local co-ordinator, Michal Siewniak, is Polish. His wife is Croatian.

"It isn't just the minorities that are struggling, either," says

Big Local chair Noelle Blackman, a former drama therapist. "There are people who haven't worked, for whom everything has failed, among the English people who have lived here for a long time."

Wormley is one of the most deprived estates in the county. Turnford is another one, and they have been knitted together—two impoverished areas in a sea of prosperity stuck on the edges of Broxbourne. This makes the ward one of the biggest Big Local areas at more than 8,000 people.

Compared to some of the smaller areas in more impoverished regions, Wormley and Turnford suffer—as we have seen—from a particular kind of isolation. There are few institutions and societies to support people here, no shared tradition of solidarity among the disenfranchised, and no pubs to meet in. "Even the big pub has been pulled down," says Noelle. The prices are high as well, especially for housing.

As such, it is a neighbourhood that has suffered disproportionately from the austerity spending cuts for public services. Broxbourne does not get extra funding because it is, apparently, universally prosperous. Consequently, there are families on the estate who suffer from extremes of deprivation, with no heating or electricity, sitting in the dark, their tax-credit payments delayed, their children going to school without shoes, and their lives on hold. Nowhere else so accurately demonstrates what it would be like if money was lifeblood, circulating around, keeping people alive. Without it, as John Maynard Keynes put it, life can be a "peregrination in the catacombs with a guttering candle."

To really make an impact on a neighbourhood that size, the Big Local members know they need bricks and mortar. But the high street is outside their patch and their brief foray there was not successful enough; so, they have set up shop in the

community centre in the heart of the Wormley estate.

It is possible to tackle some of this isolation head-on with events or volunteering or similar, and they do; but they find themselves not just filling in gaps in public services, but also in the local economy. The only cinema nearby was in Waltham Cross until it was taken over by Gala bingo. Now, that has gone too, and it is all shut up. The disco has gone. The centre for under-18s has shut its doors. The children hang around outside because the youth service has gone, and, by all accounts, wasn't that helpful when it was there. There is no mental- health provision and no debt advice (when Michal's team asked local people what services they wanted, help with budgeting was top of the list).

"People say they're not interested in politics," says Aisha about the Westminster trip. "They say they're not political, but while they soon complain about the majority of things, they are equally active in finding solutions."

The ritual of a visit to parliament by constituents is well-rehearsed at the Palace of Westminster. Most afternoons you can see the burghers of distant places being shown respectfully but proudly around by their elected members, but unsure how to deal with the huge mosaics above Central Lobby or the great mural evocations of moments in English history. There are ways in which any divisions between parliament and the people can be widened by these brief tours.

What saved this tour was partly the passionate anger which flared up when people started talking about Brexit—many of those on the coach had voted Leave—and partly the way it was one of the children who broke the mood of confrontation. "Why did you want to be an MP?" she asked Charles Walker, and it seemed to change the mood completely.

Perhaps because it was an apparently naïve question which seemed to go to the heart of the matter—why be an MP in this distant, historic, though beautiful, palace, apparently so cut off from the world? Why be this lonely princess in your gothic tower?

It is a good question; but the visit also marked an important moment in the story of Wormley and Turnford and their Big Local. It may have also been the moment when the local political establishment fully understood what the Big Local team was managing to achieve on their slender resources. As Michal says, "A million pounds doesn't get you far these days."

When I visited for the first time a few weeks later, there was already a meeting scheduled with the deputy leader of the local Broxbourne Borough Council and with local councillors. Michal knew how much they needed the patronage and support of the local authority. Quite apart from anything else, they were negotiating to buy the rest of the building they are currently using as a hub, in the heart of the Wormley estate—a former council community centre attached to an NHS clinic, and next to the only local store for some miles around.

The building is amazing, with a huge ballroom-size space, and other rooms big enough to house their regular cinema evenings, which use one of the local churches. The store stocks almost everything you can imagine and is known by all the locals as Brace's, after Tony and Jenine Brace who have run it for the past three decades. When I first visited, they had hung a supportive banner outside the hard-fought-for building proclaiming 'Hands off our community centre'. The Braces have since been the stars of a local documentary, called *The Brace Position*.

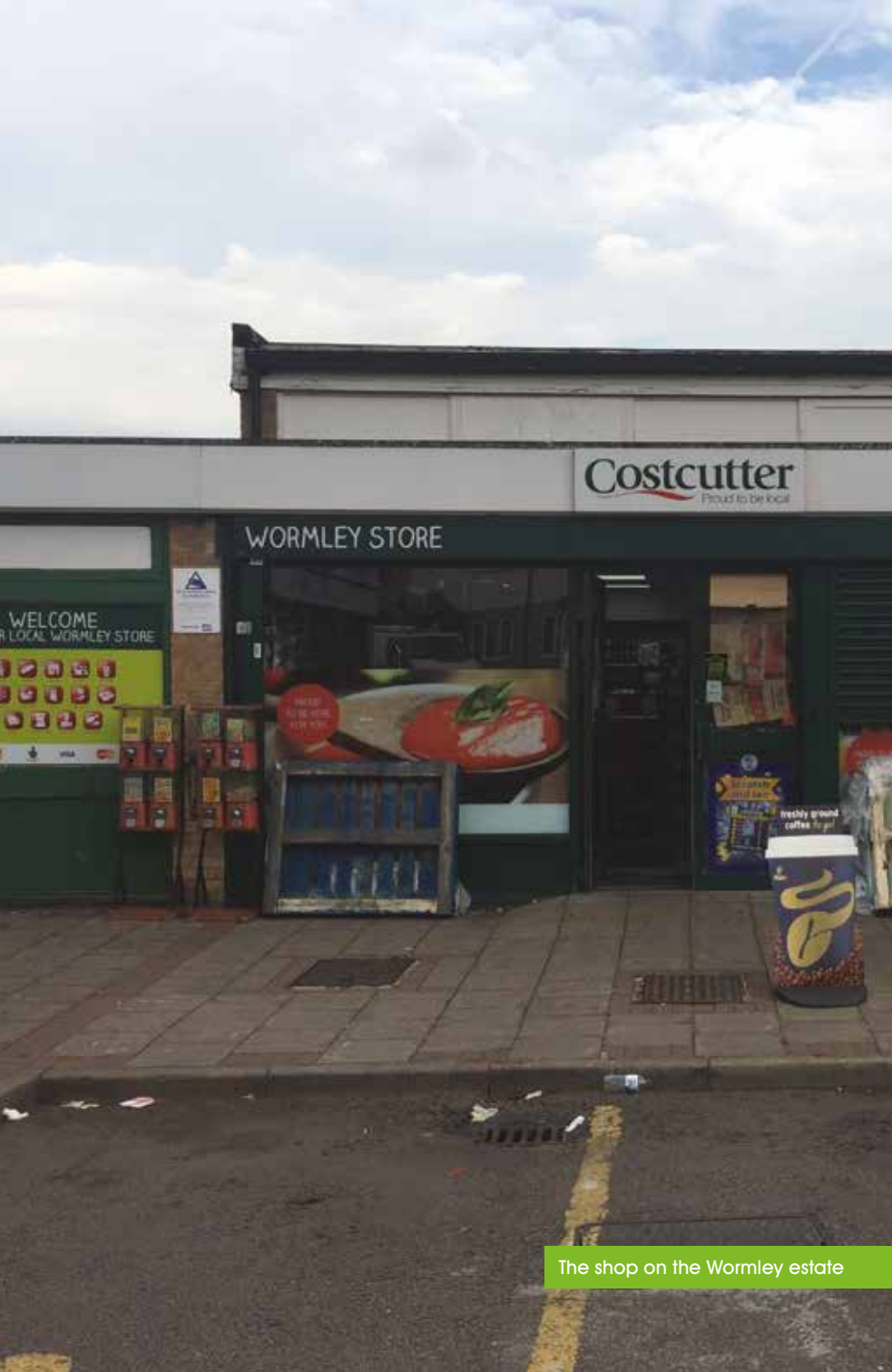
Back then, the council was planning simply to dispose

of the building to a local housing association. Most similar buildings around the UK have long since been sold for development and pulled down. If it hadn't been for the Wormley and Turnford £1million, perhaps this would have been too.

And local councillors have been supportive. It is no criticism of them that the system fails to work quite as it should—partly because money is so scarce, partly because, well, it never really has worked that well. The whole business of visiting Westminster may have actually worked for Wormley and Turnford precisely as the system was supposed to: the constituents court their local MP, she or he is impressed and urges her or his political colleagues back home to give them some backing. MP Charles Walker himself visited in May. "It's about building a relationship and demonstrating that you are serious about bringing local change—that you're not going away," says Noelle.

But you only have to spell it out like that to have gnawing doubts about how the political system is supposed to work. It relies on patronage and, with the best will in the world, those who will get most of it are already those best connected or wealthiest. Yes, some of their largesse might trickle down to the people of Wormley and Turnford and any of the other 150 Big Locals. But the very existence of the Local Trust and the Big Local programme is designed to redress the balance a little.

The whole idea of Big Local exists because some other form of democratic system is required which is able to meet people half-way, one that demands that people gather together to lead. This is important, because it became clear in the months that followed the trip to Westminster (emphasizing Noelle's fears over the previous two years), that the then leadership of the council was not making a priority of selling



The shop on the Wormley estate

the community centre to them. Meetings seemed superficially friendly, but it seemed clear that little progress was being made.

"Our sense was that it would have been disposed of quietly to the housing association, who thought that would be a done deal," says Noelle now. "We butted our noses in and said we had money. But two and a half years later the process had become tedious and stuck."

Then all of a sudden, the leadership changed. The new leader, Lewis Cocking, is only 26, but he is keen, and the negotiations have powered ahead. Now, they are either buying the building outright or on a 999-year lease, which comes to much the same thing. All that remains is the question of who should bring the fabric up to scratch, after the council left it in what Noelle calls a "terrible state".

And here, as it turns out, is another use of a Big Local. Having a million pounds, or thereabouts, has allowed people to hang on patiently and effectively, waiting for the right change in leadership and the right political opportunity to emerge.

It may be that the 35 local people who went to Parliament will be more likely to vote as a result of their visit. It certainly impressed the children. But that isn't quite enough to make for a functioning democracy—at least, if it is, then areas like Wormley and Turnford will tend to stay excluded.

That implies something about how you actually go about making change happen. Parliament and the official channels can help, but they are not quite enough, especially when you realise for how many generations some of these struggling Big Local areas have been poor. As long ago as 1976, when the government published its Inner Urban Studies, the research showed that many of those areas had been impoverished

for two generations back. We also know that they are either gentrified or still impoverished even now, nearly two generations later. New Deal for Communities, under the Blair administration, invested £2bn in 39 areas over 13 years, and the central problem remained unsolved. The main effect of three decades of regeneration has often been to raise property prices, forcing people away from the areas they had been brought up in.

So what does make a difference? My previous experience writing about Big Local areas has made me clear that this is a pretty complex question. Change happens to individuals sometimes when officials have given up—sometimes because of the very smallest things rather than the big processes (see *The Grammar of Change*). Change sometimes happens because of individuals whose personality seems to challenge in the right way, often because of what they do rather than what they say. But even those complexities have to be hedged around with provisos.

In Wormley and Turnford, Michal is convinced that change is happening because it is resident-led—because they have the £1 million in their back pocket, so to speak, and that gives them both responsibility and that subtle element that demands respect—let's call it *oomph*.

To buy the building, Noelle, Michal and their colleagues know they need to create some kind of legal entity to hold their funds and own it (until now, Broxbourne CVS held funds on their behalf). The main thing on their to-do list for the year ahead was to be a CIO, or charitable incorporated organization—and, in the nick of time, they have been designated one.

"The important thing is that it is a resident-led initiative,"

says Michal. “It is the residents leading. And when it is resident led, there may be other challenges. You’ve got to cross bridges to make it work with the people who live here and work here, and engage with businesses and charities.”

There’s the Wormley baby group—a godsend for isolated mothers with little English, the health walk every Tuesday, and the monthly pensioners’ forum for retired people, with a speaker, in a local pub called the Old Star.

And then there’s the pop-up cinema, and an allotment project. They are all about getting people together and maybe, maybe fostering local mutual support. There really is no poverty like isolation.

But then, part of what those different services might look like was spelled out by Aisha. “We don’t want special services just for older people or just for younger people,” she says. “We want to bridge the gap, making them a bit more flexible for everyone.”

She is quite right. One of the weaknesses of the ‘proper channels’ is that both central and local government tend to cling to old, worn- out patterns of service, even though it can be obvious to the users on the frontline that there might be better ways to do it. Why, for example, should local authorities struggle to produce services for older people and younger people, always separately and out of different budgets?

For young people—if not always—can have a lot to offer old people, and vice versa, giving both sides responsibilities and relationships to nurture. Bringing generations together is creative and makes sense. It might also save a great deal of money.

But to do it, to start experimenting effectively, the community needs to be free to take its own decisions.

Taking decisions isn’t about consultation, either. Local

innovators will not always want to, or be able to, convince the professionals and councillors to risk something different. They need some resources to get on and try it out for themselves—to own it, both its failures and its successes.

In fact, it is hard to see how the public sector can innovate without some practical experimentation at a very local level. It has worked like that for decades, but largely unrecognised and usually by accident.

There are deep conflicts around some of these Big Locals in seriously intractable neighbourhoods, and Wormley and Turnford are no exception. That is one of the results of poorer communities taking their own decisions. Another is that they must have the freedom to learn and to make mistakes, and lose money, if necessary.

This is, of course, the overwhelming fear of the conventionally minded, and you can see why. It combines a kind of snobbish nervousness about the ability of any untried team to manage effectively, a suspicion that they may behave in a feckless way, and an ignorance of what they actually feel, which—in my experience of Big Locals—is absolutely the reverse: a potentially paralysing sense of responsibility to make sure the money is spent for the very long term.

As a newcomer to the Big Local idea, Michal is staggered by the freedom they are allowed. "I asked them what I should do if the residents decide to go for a legal structure that is wrong. I was told that, as long as it is legal, then they must be allowed to fail—as a learning opportunity. That is quite extraordinary."

None of that implies that there is no learning necessary. Quite the reverse. But it is learning that has to take place in the old-fashioned way, mistake by mistake, with the advice and

criticism of your neighbours echoing in your ears. And it is not necessarily comfortable.

For Aisha, it is more like building a family, and no hierarchy and personalities, nor systems, will decide whether the idea will go well or not.

"We have a lot of people who were off sick," she says. "We're not a closed group of people deciding how to spend the money, anyone—*anyone*—can be involved. Different people can contribute in different ways. A million pounds isn't much, and we will need to find additional funds. But it does mean we can stand up to the officials."

I met Stuart Allen, who had come on the trip to Parliament, squeezed into a corner of the room serving as the group's temporary hub. He had taken an overdose only four weeks before. "If it hadn't been for the trip, I just would have sat in my flat and done nothing," he says.

Also talking to me is Cora from the local housing association. Stuart goes in to see her most weeks and she calls his nan for him in Bridlington. These kind of informal relationships of care are absolutely vital in places like Wormley, as everywhere else. But it is an informal system that, really without planning to, the Big Local supports.

There was a nine-month waiting list for Mind after Stuart was referred there, and when he called the mental health helpline number there was no answer. "But I know I can come here and cry on Cora's shoulder," he says. "And there's nothing like these people in the whole area."

Michal has only been in post for a year and he knows as much as anyone that the current board lacks some of the skills it is going to need. As an energetic, not to say hyper-active, believer in community development, he needs no convincing that the neighbourhood can make a difference using its own

skills over time. But he also knows it needs some expertise—on tap but not on top, as Tony Gibson used to say in the 1980s (more of him a little later).

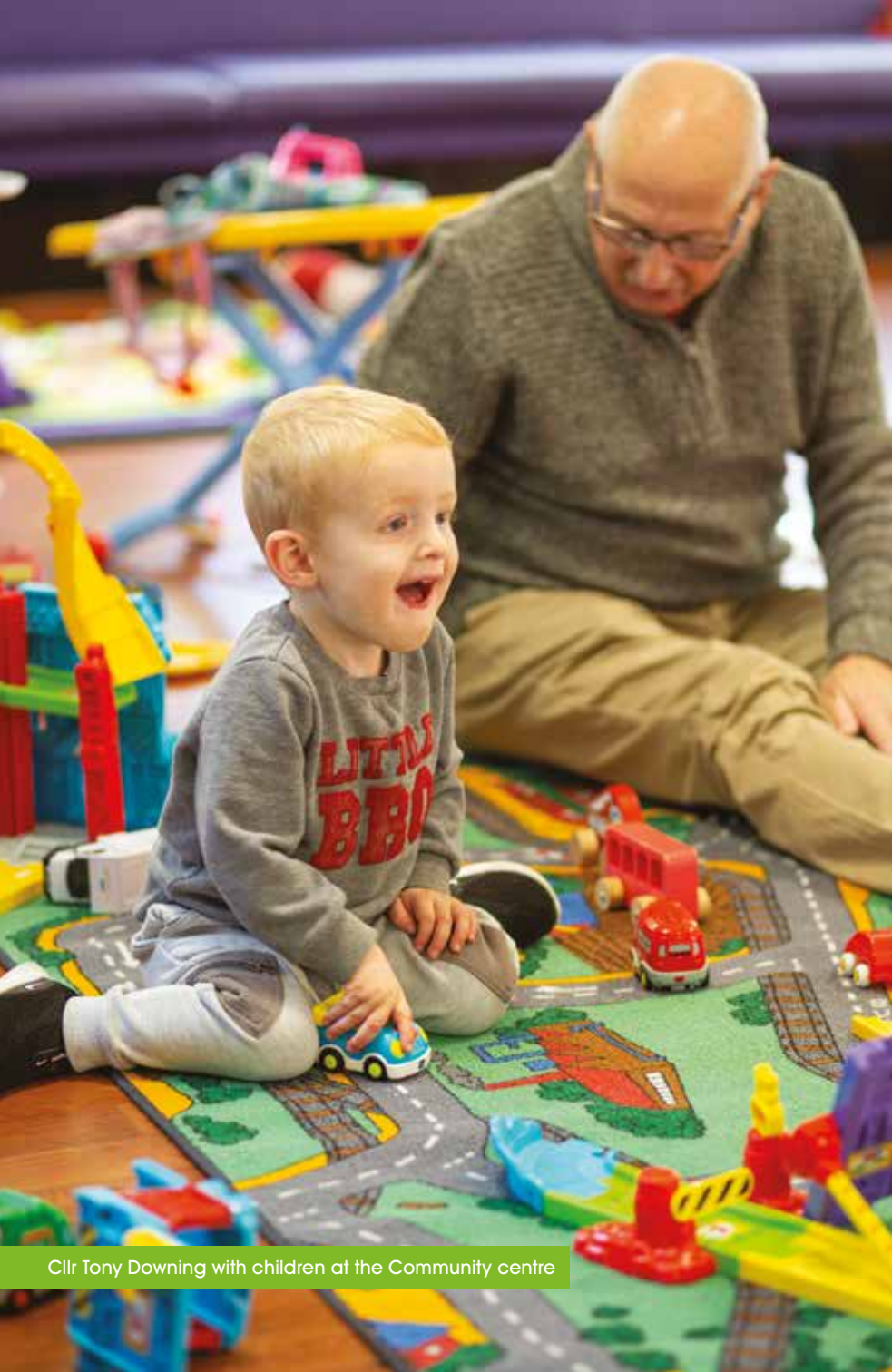
"If it's just us doing and doing and doing, then everyone will get a good ride," he says. "But we also need to make sure that we have partnership board members with a range of skills, and so on. It isn't just about financial help, but development skills as well."

Diversity works, in other words. "This would be a boring place if everyone was the same," says Stuart later in the conversation and he is right.

In the meantime, the board is as good a local assembly as anyone might wish for. "It's our own mini-houses of parliament in good old Wormley and Turnford," says Aisha.

"I think, before, we were a bit of an anomaly to local politicians," says Noelle. "But now they are beginning to believe in us. For me, it is about building relationships over a period of time. But it has been difficult—sometimes it has been like pushing a boulder uphill."

But then, as she told those who travelled to Westminster with them: "Democracy begins with ourselves realising we have some power over our own lives." In Wormley and Turnford, that principle is beginning to work itself out in practice.



Cllr Tony Downing with children at the Community centre

Part three

Westfield Big Local, Sheffield

"Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die."

E. M. Forster, Howard's End

I WONDER WHETHER IT MIGHT BE IMPORTANT that there *should* be tension between a Big Local area and its local authority. I had been thinking about this in the circumstances where a neighbourhood was impoverished and neglected by habit by the local authority—we can all think of examples.

I put this question to the deputy lord mayor for Sheffield, Councillor Tony Downing, who happened also to be a member of his own Big Local partnership board in Westfield, at the far end of the Sheffield tramline, in the south east of the city.

He didn't agree. And, in fact, it is pretty clear that

Westfield has its litter picked and has a good relationship with its local council (as they don't everywhere, by any means). It even gets a share of the community infrastructure levy from across the city. It is hard to discern—at least with a member of the council's ruling group sitting there—the same sort of tensions.

"When I saw the opportunity as a resident for getting things for this place, I thought at least I could try and get involved," he says. "But we don't have council involvement in this—it is a private movement and it's got nothing to do with the council. Unless people specifically ask me, I never bring the politics of the council into the meetings."

We are sitting around the table, he and I, with other key members of the Big Local board, in the former pub turned community centre which they now manage.

They tell me about what makes this area poor. It isn't the worst architecture you have ever seen, this yellow-bricked, low-rise, South African-designed township, separate from the rest of the city. But it is isolated, or at least it feels so. If you hold an event in the next-door village of Beighton, nobody will be there from Westfield, they tell me. But there is a good bus service I can see criss-crossing in front of the window. And if the Big Locals want to buy a youth centre—or take over an old factory—well, then they can and have done. They can do so in a way that Big Locals down south simple can't afford to because of the insanity of the way property values have accelerated.

It also becomes pretty clear when we talk that, even on the outskirts of the People's Republic of South Yorkshire (as they used to call the city), it can be useful to have a real live councillor on your team. Yet it still took eighteen months to negotiate the deal to take over the old pub, which once used

to be called the Golden Keys, because of fears the community would be left responsible for the mildly dodgy flat roof.

It can be irritating dealing with local officials at the best of times—especially when the community found itself responsible for the sprinklers or other fire systems. These had not been working before, when the council ran the building, but were suddenly going to be inspected by the same council.

According to Julie Edmonds, "It is strange that when we took the building on from the council, they required a lot of equipment to be working, despite the fact that they hadn't made it work when they had the building— because they didn't inspect it themselves." Strange, yes, and unfair too.

Julie represents the 'locally trusted organisation' (in Local Trust terminology) that holds the money for Westfield. That is the Beighton Community Development Trust, now self-supporting thanks to Coalfields Communities money, which allowed them to buy rentable units on a nearby industrial estate and to build a nursery. She knows the ropes.

It also helps to have a councillor on your side when the council's legal department takes six weeks off in the summer and negotiations go to sleep. Or, when the whole council goes into purdah during the local elections, which means even more delays.

Then there was the tricky business of getting the Com. unity Centre—so named by young people from the area and now their headquarters—wired for wifi. It costs £250 just to make the request to the legal department.

"To be honest, I thought they would be only too happy to hand over the deeds and get rid of it," says Mike Peat, the Big Local chair and a former magistrate. But no, this is Sheffield, where no public asset is ever knowingly sold at all, let alone undersold.

"This is an asset built with public money," says Tony, wearing his councillor's hat. "We can't afford to give things away."

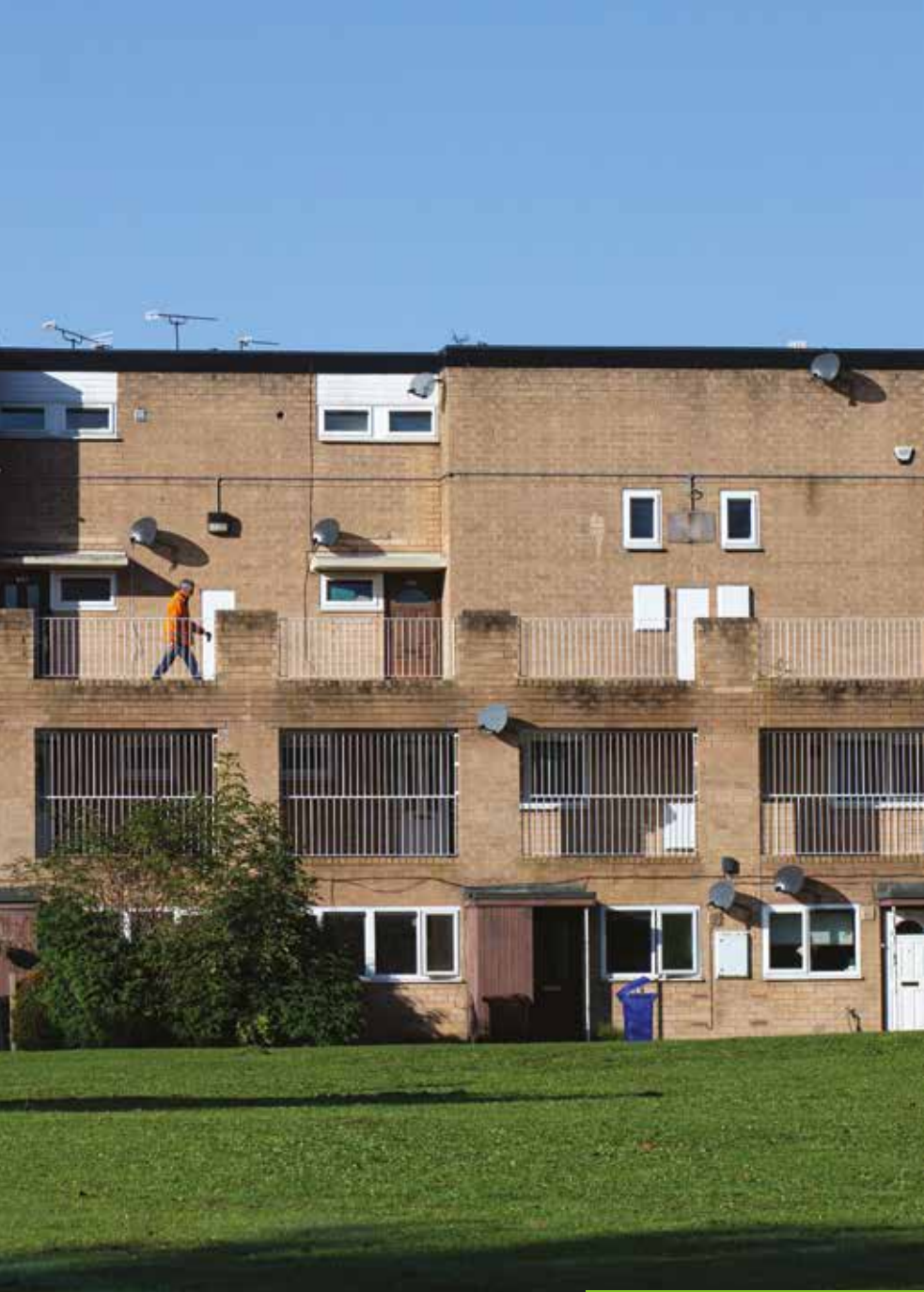
This could all have put Tony in a difficult position, but years of declaring an interest has allowed him to navigate pitfalls like that. And he does smooth paths and set up meetings.

So, when the radical architecture group, the Academy of Urbanism, showed up and recommended more green space—as local people had also recommended in the last Big Local survey—Tony was there to advise. Whatever happened to three of the five pocket parks planned when the area was laid out as a township in 1975? Tony set up a meeting with the parks department to find out; and it was a good deal more friendly than some meetings with local authorities I can think of.

Even so, however well-organised and sensitive the local administration is, there is usually—maybe always— something about the processes that is difficult for local voluntary groups to navigate.

So, when Geoff Micklethwait, one of the volunteers running the centre, and responsible for maintaining the table-tennis and pool tables and much else besides, says he can't make us a sandwich because he hasn't been on the food-hygiene course, we just have to shake our heads. This is not to doubt that this kind of safeguard is important in some places, but we don't fear for Geoff's family back home were they to eat an untrained sandwich.

Here lies another potential role for Big Locals and intermediary organisations like them: to gently introduce the two sides—council and community—to each other; to keep the council up to the mark and remind it that it is dealing with humans; and to keep the community active, despite the way



The Westfield estate, Sheffield

officials are able to corrode their energy.

"Sometimes, local authorities forget that they are actually just us," says Julie. I suspect that will always be the case, no matter how enlightened and democratic both sides get.

There is a funny story going around that amuses those of us at the table. Outside the Com.unity building, people are asking about the mystery councillor who helped the police with the litter pick.

"I don't know who it was, but he had no hair!"

Tony acknowledges that this does indeed refer to him. It is, after all, good that he is recognised at all, as most councillors might not be in most places. Litter picks have become a regular activity for the Big Local, and their success in Westfield is perhaps a counterbalance to the original string of local complaints about rubbish (and noise) from the old Golden Keys pub.

Five years ago, children were still setting fire to the bins there— on one occasion under the primary school and the doctors' surgery— leading to serious smoke damage. This came to the attention of the council's energetic chief executive, Bob Kerslake, later the cabinet secretary.

Using some of the fire-insurance money and determined to do something about Westfield, once the council and police had objected to renewing the pub's licence, he arranged for local schoolchildren to design the inside of the old pub for the careers service, Sheffield Futures.

I mean, even in Sheffield, nobody could possibly expect the council to do everything. But in case someone does, Tony puts us right. The local authority has lost £430 million in revenue-support grant since the crash, and it also has to find another £30 million in savings over the coming year. So, when

the council could no longer afford to manage the building, it said the Big Local could use it as a base in return for a peppercorn rent.

Westfield Big Local was in its early days then. They needed two elements to get going. The first was a trusted local organisation to hold the money. Their first choice was the local school, which worked fine until they wanted to spend that money, when the risk-averse public sector kicked in. Whose permission did the school need if the money was going to be used to employ someone? Would they be liable? Could they really take on the lease at the Com.unity building? It was just too worrying.

It is worth paying attention to this, because it is another example of why the public sector finds it so difficult enthusing, working with, enjoying the company of—in fact, dealing in any way directly with—communities. It all comes down, as I shall explain in section IV, to the so-called parable of the blogs and squares. Public-sector processes tend to corrode a community's will to live. It is another reason these intermediary organisations are so important. Like Big Local.

So, luckily for Westfield, they shifted the money over to the Beighton Village Development Trust, where Julie is the chair. As a development trust, they understand the importance of buying into assets that will give them a permanent income (Beighton built an industrial unit and a nursery).

The other element the Big Local needed before it could get going was a plan, written by its neighbours. There were already police-community liaison meetings in Westfield to try and break down the mutual suspicion which had grown up during the miners' strike of 1984/5, and afterwards. And it was during one of those meetings that Mike Peat met a contact at the local university.

And so it was that the initial plan was based on the consultation organised by local planning students. That plan took them through to the end of last year, and they are now managing to organise its replacement by themselves.

If Sheffield is a post-industrial city which has yet entirely to find itself in its new role, then Westfield—carved by the city unwillingly out of the Derbyshire mining area—is a symptom of that time-lag. Even in egalitarian Sheffield, you can go by tram across the city between places where male life-expectancy is 85 and others, such as Westfield, where it is closer to 70.

Mike has worked as a magistrate and councillor since the 1980s. “Like a lot of people in Sheffield, I used to be an engineer,” he says.

He got involved in community work because of all the people who came before him in court who said they could neither read nor write.

Under his chairmanship, the Big Local has tried big projects. They bought an old factory building on what turned out to be the wrong end of the estate, and re-opened it as a youth club. When it was clearly not attracting local young people in sufficient numbers, they sold it again and used the money to get youth activities going in smaller pockets around the neighbourhood.

Their main activity by far has been to get as much use out of the community centre as possible; and there is a huge amount going on, from adult teaching to tea dances, to universal credit advice, to ‘chair-obics’, to yoga and the craft club. The craft club, on Wednesdays, is currently knitting little teddy bears which are used by the Derbyshire police to give to children involved in any kind of trauma.

There are also trips, which people can book for £2, to Alton Towers or Cleethorpes or Manchester. There is cake-making and Christmas dinners and gala nights and, in a neighbourhood with just two shops and a chemist, where people often "haven't a clue who lives two doors away", this is important.

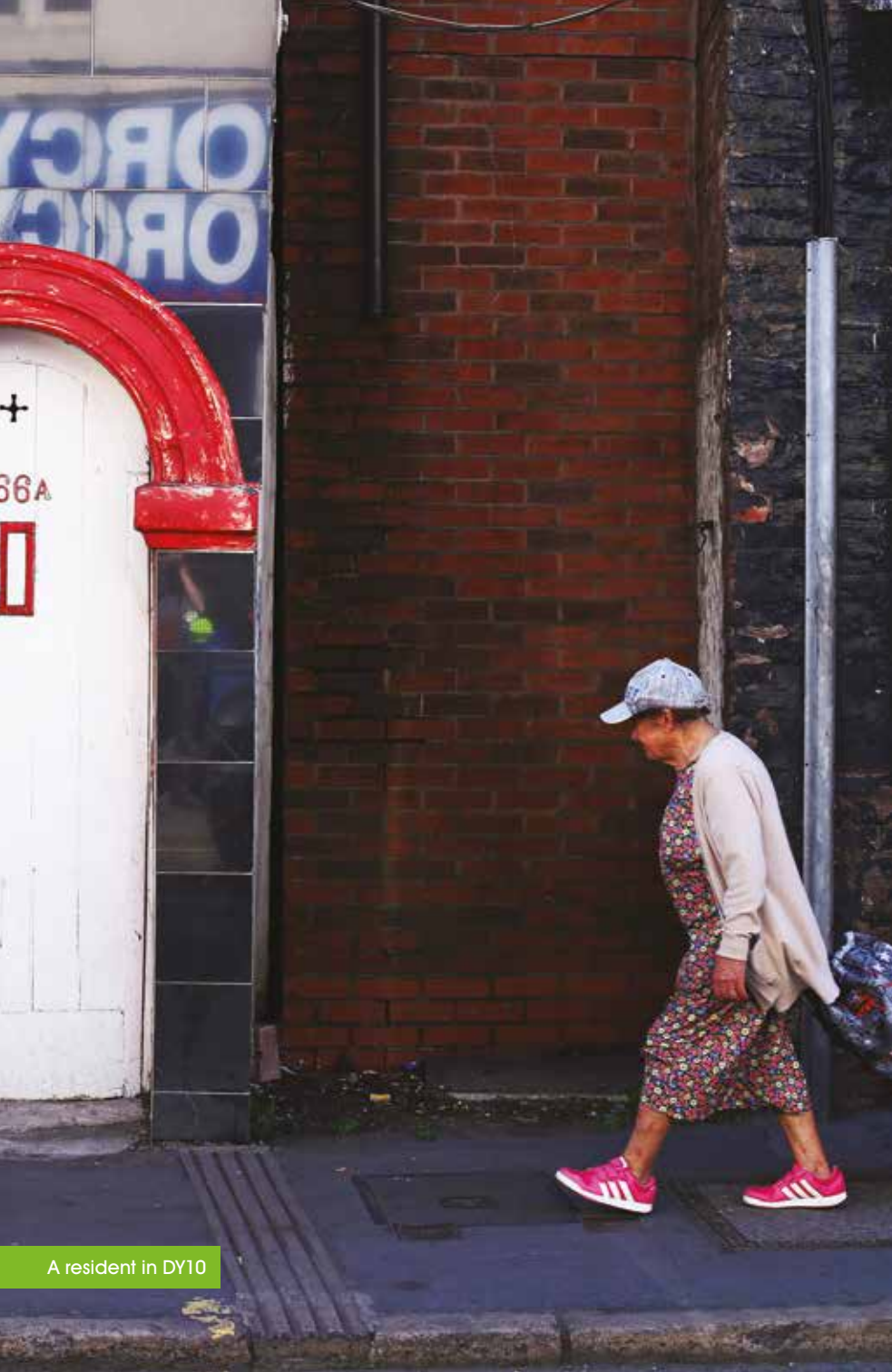
"A lot of young mums come into the cafe here," says Geoff. "We gave them some money for play equipment, and then the next thing we know they are all baby-sitting for each other."

Here is the strange alchemy of little things at work. You get some like-minded people together, give them a project to co-operate on and suddenly you find they are supporting each other. The police and the housing managers pop in for a cup of tea too, which is as good a way as any of keeping communications open.

But there is one remaining issue— what to call the place. 'Com.unity' was dreamed up originally by the young people designing the inside, but the name feels a little dated and, paradoxically, a bit more dated the older you are. But the board knows that some of the young people still feel affectionately about the centre simply because they named it.

"It is tricky," says Geoff. "Some of those kids now have kids themselves, but they still have a sense of ownership because of the name."

But when and if they do get around to changing the name, the decision is going to be theirs. It is only a small matter, but this is a liberating thought.



A resident in DY10

Part four

Conclusion

"I was brought up to believe that there is no virtue in conforming meekly to the dominant opinion of the moment. I was encouraged to believe that simple conformity results in stagnation for a society, and that ... progress has been largely owing to the opportunity for experimentation, the leeway given initiative, and to a gusto and a freedom for chewing over odd ideas."

Jane Jacobs, 'No virtue in meek conformity', 1952

THERE IS SOMETHING OF AN EXCLUDED PLACE about Crystal Palace, the hilltop suburb in south London where I used to live. After the palace itself burned down so spectacularly in 1936, it became an area of lost souls, with no obvious function except as bedsit land. Lord Haw-Haw lived there before the war: it was the kind of impoverished, anonymous place that suited him.

In the quarter of a century or so that I lived there, it changed in its population. It became more youthful, more middle class, more affluent; and more prepared to defend its neglected park from Bromley councillors, who wanted to develop it so that it would pay for itself.

The result was a series of articulate and impassioned campaigns that occasionally ended up in court. Years later—the park still undeveloped—I was told by a retired Bromley official that the mistake they made was that they believed Crystal Palace was still a 'poor people's park'.

You can see what he meant. Rich people's parks are tended by gardeners. Poor people's parks are often neglected, full of litter and untended, and they are expected to pay their way or they get assigned for housing. Nor is there any point in criticising my friend from Bromley for the way of the world. It isn't anyone's snobbish choice. Yet the truth is that impoverished areas tend to be neglected because poor people don't tend to put up a fight, either for resources, or to complain about the litter, or anything else.

You could see how this comes across as disdain in some places, even, to some extent, in Westfield, just by looking at the imperial behaviour of the legal department. Or, as I discovered, in Chatham, where the council promised Arches Big Local that it would clear out the dead pigeons from the railway arch that appeared to be making people ill—but only if the Big Local paid to close the dual carriageway underneath.

The same can be true in the voluntary sector too, except that those organisations need impoverished areas so they can earn their grants. They therefore manage a process, dubbed somewhat cynically 'farming the poor', during which the latest innovative buzzwords are rearranged to earn project money, most of which will be spent keeping the charity staff in work—

before the grant runs out three years later, the beneficiaries are abandoned and the process begins again.

We have known this for decades. It isn't anyone's fault, let alone anyone's design. It is just part of the struggle for survival in the charity and local government sectors. Which is why the other councillor I interviewed about his involvement in Big Local, in this case, Radstock and Westfield in Somerset where he is chair, felt it helped that he is an *opposition* councillor.

In fact, Robin Moss took on the role a year before he was elected to the council. Because he is in opposition, there should then be no confusion, he says, between his roles—in Big Local and in the local authority—and no hint that the money is somehow to top up for lost services, as indeed it isn't. Again, that is not how they see things everywhere—in Kidderminster, for example—but here it works.

Great steps forward in community development often happen as a result of crises or disasters, like the earthquakes in Kyoto or Christchurch. We don't normally have earthquakes in the UK, but we have had similar, and it was one of these that led to the start of community development in the UK: when poverty-stricken Stepney in east London was abandoned to its fate during the blitz in 1940.

One of those who were there, who broke into the locked and shuttered council offices in Stepney borough, and who witnessed the way that the neighbourhood regrouped and organised makeshift police and social services for itself out of the chaos, was a young Quaker ambulance driver called Tony Gibson. It was his memory of this, and his sense of the right people have (when they feel abandoned by those who administer them) to take matters into their own hands, that led to the launch of the ground-breaking unit at Nottingham

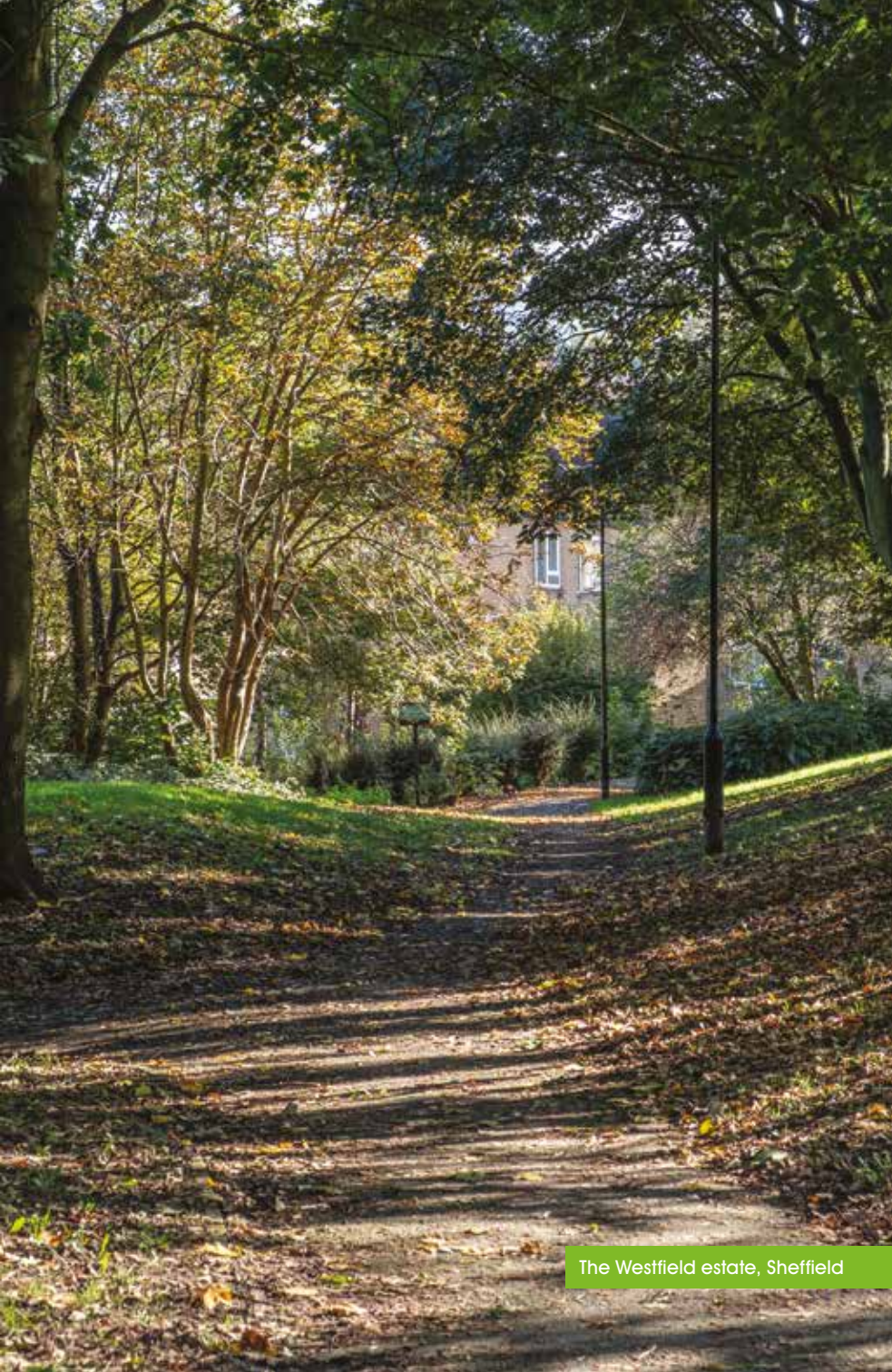
University, Education for Neighbourhood Change; his influential 1978 Pelican book *People Power*; and other projects which led to community development, community technical aid, and so forth.

I would hardly suggest that there is much of a parallel between the blitz and the lack of green space in Kidderminster or a meeting space in Wormley. Of course, if local authorities are managing with enough resources on behalf of all their people, Gibson's fail-safe devices may not be necessary. But it is amazing—ask anyone—how much better neighbourhoods are usually treated by officials if they can find a few articulate, capable activists with time to kill.

I am not suggesting that this is so in every neighbourhood. But I am suggesting that neighbourhoods need the ability to make things happen, which should mean that their needs, and their desires, are taken more seriously. This remains a paradox. If communities are capable of making things happen in theory, they may not need to take over the decision-making in practice.

In fact, the more that communities are geared up to provide for their own needs where necessary, the less likely they are to be treated like hopeless, dependent supplicants to local-government largesse. And the less they will probably be treated like imperial vassals.

It may be that what is most important about the achievements of Big Locals is not actually how they fit into the medieval-style hierarchies of community development techniques. The real breakthroughs in community leadership since the Second World War have been in developing new techniques, such as Tony Gibson's Planning for Real, or the technical-aid toolbox developed with such energy and verve in the 1980s; or by setting up new institutions that can amplify



The Westfield estate, Sheffield

and strengthen people's voice and influence.

And here lies part of the problem. We have lived through nearly eight decades since Gibson's revelation during the blitz in Stepney, yet we have no memory, no narrative and no history of what we discovered between the high points and low points. There has, anyway, only been official interest since the 1976 publication of Peter Hall's Inner Urban Studies. Since then, the inner cities have largely been gentrified, but their original populations are still there.

The history ought to have been nurtured in the think tanks that have driven progress, but it has not been. My own experience is that there is a horizon of memory of only about ten years before the lessons are forgotten and have to be learned all over again.

So let me ask the question here: where did community leadership in the UK start? Was it with Gibson's experience in bombed-out Stepney, or the landscape architect Marjory Allen's adventure playground in Camberwell in 1948, with its roots in occupied Copenhagen?

Or should we look for the roots in the 1970s – the launch of the first development trust, North Kensington, on SLOAP land (Space Left Over After Planning) under Westway in 1971. Or the first use of Gibson's *Planning for Real* technique in Wigan, in 1979, through to the launch of the first time-bank in Gloucester, in 1999? Or Ed Berman's City Farm One in Kentish Town in 1972, using the old scenery from the West End show *No, No, Nanette*? Or the first self-build homes designed by Walter Segal on a real slope in Lewisham, given planning permission in the face of political opposition in 1974?

Or should we be looking outside London, to the invasion of a private dinner party given by the Housing Corporation chair in 1980, which launched the residents of Weller Street,

Liverpool, as the first housing co-op? Or the events which followed from that—the Association of Community Technical Aid Centres (ACTAC), Tony McGann on his digger in Eldon Street, Liverpool, or community architect Rod Hackney shocking the architectural establishment by getting himself elected as president of the RIBA?

Or everything that has happened since, from Frances Northrop and the transformation of the Totnes dairy site, to Jess Steele's temporary rescue of Hastings Pier, to Pam Warhurst and Incredible Edible Todmorden—all of them pioneers, all of them learning important lessons, many of which have simply been forgotten. These are lessons which have to be re-learned all over again. I would encourage readers to delve into their stories and be inspired.

All these played a part, under governments of every colour and their top-down concepts, which drove what was never quite a movement in new directions, whether towards social inclusion or double devolution, Big Society or the 'Community right to bid'. We don't know of the impact of the buzzwords on the pioneers, or vice versa, because it has never been properly studied.

But they are all evidence, it seems to me, of the anecdotal effectiveness of intermediary local institutions with their own resources, between communities and local authorities, and for the following reasons:

- Without them, poorer communities get sidelined.
- It is the best way of encouraging people to take control of their destinies.
- It is how you inject innovation into public services.
- Local authorities are not enough; we also need a tradition of participative democracy.

- They give the community *oomph* and staying power to get what they need.

The problem is, as I can't help noticing, that the history of community innovation has left few traces, though there are some city farms and adventure playgrounds, the Bristol pound, even the North Kensington Amenity Trust (now the Westway Trust) which are still going strong. So many of the social enterprises, from Wales in the 2000s to the community businesses from Scotland in the 1980s, that we all got so excited about at the time are mainly gone. The technical aid techniques are mainly lying idle. The huge resources of knowhow and skills known as ACTAC disappeared as long ago as 1992. Where are you now— Ralph Erskine, Colin Ward, Brian Anson, Tom Woolley, Christine Bailey, and all your influence?

But I notice that the projects which have survived have tended to be institutions, and especially ones that have been gifted, or funded or able to earn, their own assets. The rest had to fall back on the tough, buzzword-driven, innovation-addicted, three-year cycles of the philanthropic sector.

This is one of the lessons of institutional economics— a controversial sub-discipline of the dismal science—and one that I think must be right. Institutions, dedicated to local people in their broadest sense, tend to work.

Which leaves me with a proposition: a multiplicity of local institutions makes it possible for neighbourhoods to change. This is because local institutions are a counterweight, both to the inhuman processes of local authorities and the personality-driven world of the neighbourhood, as the civil rights lawyer Edgar Cahn set out in his 'Parable of the Blobs and Squares', which he adapted from a speech given by David Mathews, president of the Washington-based Kettering Foundation. First, you have to understand that the squares are the officials

and the blobs are the community. This is how Cahn told it in his book *No More Throwaway People*:

> "The Blobs seemed to have the energy, the vitality, the contacts, the gossip, the networks that were needed to deal with the problems. But the money invariably went to the Squares because the Squares knew how to manage it, account for it, spend it ... The problem was that, no matter how much the Squares promised to reach into the community and get at the root causes of the problems, the Squares never got there. They really weren't able to get to where the problems were to mobilise the energy of the community. A gulf separated the Squares from the Blobs. The logical response of the foundations was to try to create a neutral buffer zone to bridge that gulf. So they started funding partnerships and collaboratives. In order to get the grants, foundations insisted that the Squares partner with the Blobs. But regardless of the formal partnership, the Squares kept the money and dominated the scene—throwing a few crumbs to the Blobs..."

You can guess what comes next, and, indeed, see it, in a charming Vimeo video narrated by Brian Blessed. They train the blobs up in board and strategic management and, lo and behold—they become squares, and it still doesn't work.

The parable sets out the problem but suggests no answers (though Cahn does). It does imply, though, that some of the answers may lie in intermediary organisations that have the power and resources to allow the neighbourhood to be themselves—enough, anyway, for the blobs to be a counterweight to these squares. That is certainly my conclusion here.

Can you justify this constitutionally? It is certainly democratic in the broadest sense—that it works and can give

people a voice when they had little or none before. I suppose there could be an objection that it seems a little haphazard, without systematic or strategic logic. That might be so in a world where there are few assets that are community owned, or where a Big Local or settlement house is a rarity, but not where they are common enough to overlap—not where there are many of these counterweight institutions.

I want to end with a bit of theory. It means casting our minds for a moment back to Edinburgh in the 1740s, when the philosopher David Hume was wrestling with the problem of causality and inductive reasoning. You can't prove that all swans are white, no matter how many white swans you see, he said.

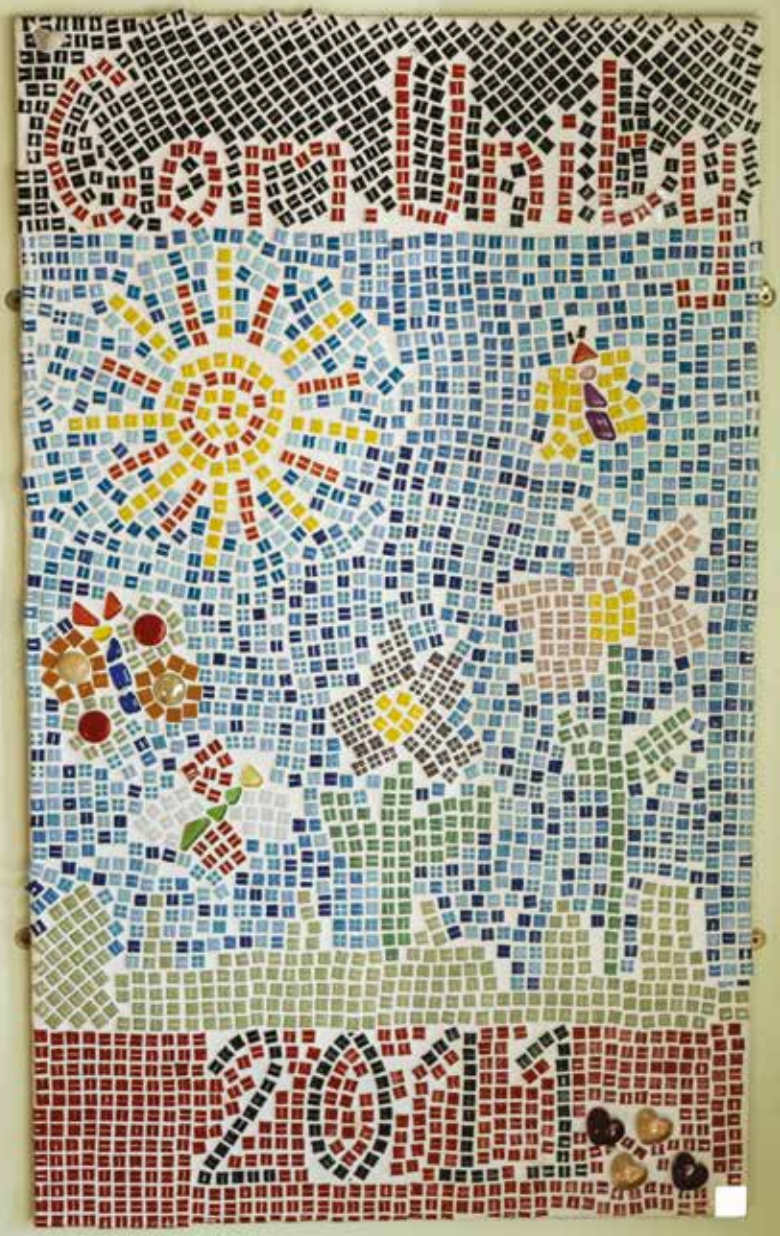
Sweep forward two centuries to the 1940s, when the Austrian philosopher Karl Popper was coming up with an interim answer. You may not be able to prove the white swans' conundrum – but you can *disprove* it—if you see a black swan.

Popper's home city was in the hands of totalitarians, and he quickly found himself applying this insight to policy too. In doing so, he produced one of the classic twentieth century statements against tyranny, *The Open Society and its Enemies*. He said societies, governments, bureaucracies and companies work best when the beliefs and maxims of those at the top can be challenged and disproved by those below. That is how societies learn fastest: closed systems discourage learning; openness encourages it. At the time, Popper was flying in the face of the accepted opinions of the chattering classes. They may not have liked the totalitarian regimes of Hitler or Stalin, but people widely believed the rhetoric that they were somehow more efficient than the corrupt and timid democracies.

Not a bit of it. Real progress required "setting free the

critical powers of man," he said. The possibility of Popper's challenge from below—in what he called open societies—is the one guarantee of good and effective government or management or community empowerment. Those human beings at the front line, those most affected by policy, will always know better about their own lives or their own work than those at the top. The more open you are to them, the flatter the hierarchy, the more critical information will be available to learn and move forward. That is the best explanation why we so badly need to devolve power down as far as possible through society—because that is the way we develop, have ideas. It is the justification for a flatter society, and for an effective, more equal economy too, because we can't waste the talent that otherwise moulders away unused; because open societies can change and develop, and closed societies can't. Hierarchical, centralised systems, by their very nature, prevent that critical challenge from below.

That, in the end, is why we will develop the Big Local model and apply it more widely. Not because it is perfect, but because it works well enough to provide a counterweight to the Squares that is on the side of the Blobs, so that we can begin to learn. We certainly need to.



Mosaic in the Com.Unity centre, Westfield

"Before, we were a bit of an anomaly to local politicians, but now they are beginning to believe in us. It is about building relationships over a period of time… Democracy begins with ourselves realising we have some power over our own lives."

Across England, 150 communities are using £1 million each to make their area a better place to live. They are part of Big Local, a resident-led programme pioneering local transformation, described as 'perhaps the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK'.

If local government embodies representative democracy, Big Local areas are bastions of participative democracy, championing the cause for a 'flatter' society. Both have their strengths and weaknesses and both have a role to play in the running of local life; but in order for communities to thrive, a balance must be struck between the two.

Weaving together remarkable stories from Big Local areas, David Boyle paints a picture of what healthy local democracy can look like. When the scales of local power are levelled to give local institutions the space, respect and support they need to get things done on their own terms, we see the budding signs of communities regenerating.

This essay is one of a series exploring how people and places are changing through Big Local. Each essay considers the lessons of Big Local for institutions and policymakers interested in radical devolution of power and responsibility to a community level.

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ISBN 978-1-9998292-9-2