

People power



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Today the Sunday Mirror brings you the stories of ordinary people seizing the opportunity to change the country. Years of decline have left some of our most precious community assets in ruins. But now – all over the nation – ordinary people are joining together to fight back. The power to change our country lies in the palm of our hands...

PEOPLE POWER



Cuts to services are KO for local people

GOVERNMENT cuts are seeing vital services disappear from local communities and are having a grim effect on people's well-being.

New research carried out by Power to Change and YouGov shows the impact of closures on communities.

Three-quarters of people who were aware of cuts made to their local services since 2010 said the outcomes have been negative.

Of all age groups, people of 55 or older were the most likely to think their own community's well-being had worsened over the past seven years.

And overall a third of Brits said they felt local well-being has gone down in that period of time.

Richard Harries, who leads the research team at Power to Change, said: "This polling is a reminder that tough times are far from over for a lot of people.

"And it shows the impact on happiness and health if we don't think about communities in different ways.

"There are great ideas all over the country but there are real problems ahead if people aren't given the chance to lead work in their own backyards."

Figures show that when it comes to community assets, green spaces are the ones given the highest priority by the most people (64 per cent).

Libraries (53 per cent) and leisure centres (44 per cent) are also near the top of the list.

APPETITE

The figures also show the depth of feeling people have for all forms of services in their local areas.

Museums, community centres and allotments are all part of the fabric of communities, with 30, 25 and 18 per cent of people respectively saying they value these council-run services.

Mr Harries added: "It's clear there's a real appetite for keeping these assets alive.

"Local people see the difference it makes every day to have a library they can visit with their kids, or a leisure centre where the whole family can have fun. Our communities will be so much poorer if these services are lost."

A regional breakdown of the survey shows that more people in the North (64 per cent) are aware of cuts to their council-run services since 2010, compared to in London (53 per cent).

Of those aware of cuts in the North, 77 per cent say they have been negatively affected by them. The equivalent figure for London is 70 per cent.

Mr Harries added: "It's not surprising that people are feeling the impact most in areas already hardest hit in the last decade."

All over the country, community groups are getting together to try to protect their local assets.

Projects can include taking over buildings which councils are selling, running businesses or starting up ideas from scratch.

Power to Change has helped 150 businesses to launch in the past two years.

And it is confident that its programme can be rolled out to even more areas.

Mr Harries added: "As the polling shows, there is real concern about what's happening to communities.

"You can't underestimate the effect that closures have on people.

"That's why we want to hear from people about project ideas they have.

"Local people know better than anyone what their own area needs, and the skills they have to keep their neighbourhood vibrant and alive.

"It is all about helping them take control of their own futures."

YouGov surveyed 4,265 adults for the poll in February.



GUS O'DONNELL:
Former Cabinet
Secretary

In an age of austerity, local heroes are showing the way forward

COMMUNITIES PROFIT FROM BUSINESSES THEY RUN

BY GUS O'DONNELL
Former Cabinet Secretary

AFTER a decade of disappointing growth, the economy is slowly beginning to recover.

But growth is not expected to go over two per cent a year, business investment is falling and inflation is starting to rear its ugly head.

The Chancellor is penned in by manifesto commitments not to raise various taxes. And he is still not on track to meet his goal of getting rid of the deficit at the earliest possible date in the next Parliament.

So the Government's austerity plan will continue, putting enormous pressure on welfare budgets and local communities.

Across the country councils are grappling with horrible choices, either putting up the cost of social care or cutting much-needed and loved social services.

As Cabinet Secretary to three Prime Ministers I saw the difference these services make, from play centres and community advice clinics to adult learning classes and libraries.

To give just one example, the charity I chair, Pro Bono Economics, estimates that low levels of adult numeracy already cost the country £20 billion a

year. Cutting services further might save money in the short-term, but it risks driving a bigger wedge between communities and causing real long-term damage.

However, there is another way. In villages, towns and cities across the country a new breed of community enterprises is sprouting up, bringing local people together to address local needs in a more business-like approach.

Places like Homebaked, a bakery saved by the people of Anfield in Liverpool, which uses its profits to invest in desperately needed homes.

These community businesses don't depend on Government grants, which are fast disappearing anyway.

They make money, which means they can keep providing goods and services while re-investing the profit to make their neighbourhoods better.

They bring jobs, skills and training – and help to build stronger communities. Already in England there are more than 7,000 of these businesses, employing 36,000 staff, engaging

nearly 200,000 local volunteers and generating £1 billion of income.

What we need now is action by the Government to turn this into a nationwide programme of business building.

The Government recently uncovered a £2 billion windfall, cash lying unclaimed in dormant assets such as stocks and shares, which ministers say they want to use to improve communities.

Meanwhile many councils are sitting on valuable buildings, such as former libraries and halls, they can no longer afford to run.

Official figures reveal more than £2.5 billion of surplus property across England, although Power to Change reckons the total value of such assets could be as high as £7 billion.

Now is the time to bring these two opportunities together. This will help councils to manage

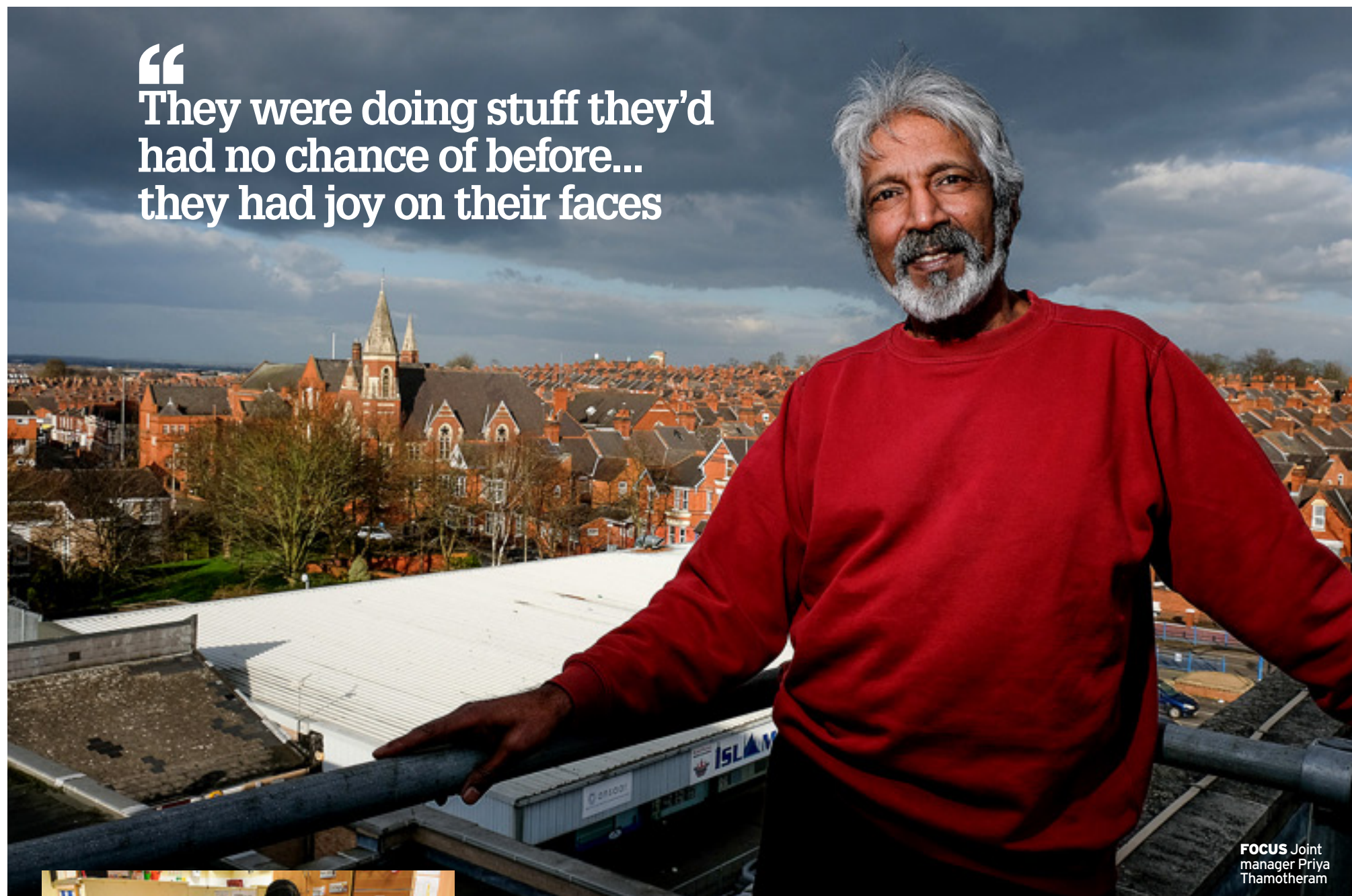
shrinking budgets and still protect vital local services.

In the end, this is not about money or buildings. It is about people supporting each other and taking control of their own futures. It is about recognising the common good and focusing on the well-being of a place rather than what's wrong with it.

“They offer services to local people and profit is invested in community”

GUS O'DONNELL ON RISE OF SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

“They were doing stuff they’d had no chance of before... they had joy on their faces



FOCUS Joint manager Priya Thamotheram

All together in tune to put community at the centre



EARLY START Kids share play session



NO OLDS BARRED Elders enjoy meet-up



COMMUNITY RUN Girls-only group at gym



NET GAIN Lads' basketball practice

IN the middle of a sprawling inner-city council estate, community elders hunch over pool tables and PlayStations - the joy of this first encounter lighting up their faces.

This is the Highfields Centre - a community-run resource which easily incorporates facilities including a music studio, gym and pre-school area alongside a licensed bar and a prayer room.

"It's a place where people integrate and come together," says joint manager Priya Thamotheram. "We're a secular organisation so we work with everyone. That's understood by everyone."

Built in 1974, Highfields has been at the heart of this Leicester community ever since. Priya joined in 1981.

Taking us on a tour of the local estate, he underlined the importance of this vital building: the Highfields area is faced with high unemployment, overcrowding, and poor life expectancy.

More than a quarter of residents are on benefits - way above the national average.

Priya tells us: "Highfields is like many inner-city areas of the UK - it's largely disadvantaged. It's been the initial arriving ground for people moving into the city.

"So the Irish in the 19th century, the Huguenots, post-war the Afro-Caribbean people and people from the Indian subcontinent.

"In the 90s, the Somali communities, then in the 2000s new arrivals from Africa, the Middle East and Afghanistan.

"Most recently it has been the Eastern European people."

Since the community took over the centre fully in 2010, records show 600,000 people have passed through the doors. Priya estimates with the previous 36 years, it could easily be in the millions.

Showing us round the centre, he enthuses: "There are some fantastic stories

here. My favourite is one that just shows how it's the community that drives need.

"We have an elders group and for some reason they couldn't use their normal room, so we had to hold it in the area where our young people usually go.

"And it was a fantastic result - one of the best things I've seen happen here.

"They were playing on the pool tables, the table tennis and the PlayStation. You had all these older people who had never been exposed to anything like it.

"They were doing things that you or I would take for granted but they had never had the chance to do them before.

"It was the sheer joy on their faces. It shows that people should have the chance to do as much of these things as possible.

"And that's where a community building like this comes in. We have a licensed bar - that's been a problem in some community buildings, but not here.

"But equally we have a prayer room as

well." Priya has other many stories that he believes show the importance of the building and its place in the community.

He recalls: "We had a young Bengali woman who couldn't really speak English.

"She took part in one of our programmes, like an access course. Then she did a degree at De Montfort. Then a Masters. Just seeing her go through the process was incredible. There are so many examples like that."

The centre's place at the heart of the community has never been in doubt. But Priya says they were struggling to respond to what local people were asking for.

He said: "People kept asking, why can't we use the sports hall for major social functions? We had to say that the funding didn't cover it.

"With Power to Change we can now revisit that. They're helping us to set up for major events on the weekends, things like weddings, dances, conferences.

"It's something the community have been crying out for - desperate for it. Now people are really looking forward to being able to put on events, staying in the area.

"It's the people who know what they want. The demand and the needs are there and established over several years."

Work on the project funded by Power to Change is expected to start as soon as possible. And Priya believes it will help protect the future of this vital resource.

He adds: "The major physical change will be improvements to sports hall access. That's going to make it much more accessible as a venue for large-scale events.

"We're also moving the café from the first floor to the main community entrance. That will generate a lot more interest and boost the centre's income.

"It's going to be a busy time - but it's going to help our future and make sure we're around for a long time."



FUNDS Priya with charity's Russell Hargrave

PEOPLE POWER



COMMUNITY MINDED Phil Knibb

Local people are creative driving force

PHIL Knibb is the man behind the Ait Valley group in Liverpool. He's a long-time community activist and believes it's well within the power of local people to change their areas for good. From a slow start, Ait Valley now runs shops, a pub, sports centres, libraries, training schemes and more. Even a farm.

Phil believes the key to their success is the involvement of local people. He lives just round the corner from their HQ in Croxteth. Phil said: "It goes back a long time. I was involved in stopping a local school from closing in 1983. "In the end we took the school over and ran it as an independent for three years.

"Then the council took it back in. We went from there. "We're old-fashioned community activists. I was a pipe-fitter welder by trade. And I live here. I care about the area - we all do. I live round the corner so when the school was closing I got involved.

PATH

"We kept the school going and that changed the path of what I was doing." Ait Valley took over a sports centre in Croxteth that was run down and plagued by anti-social behaviour. Now it has three-floors of state-of-the-art equipment, 3G football pitches and kids' areas. And Phil says the driving force behind it was that it was created by, developed by, and now run by local people.

He said: "We took over the sports centre on the Sunday. And it was in a bad way. It was the biggest area of anti-social behaviour. The kids used to hang round, there were police cameras, security, it was a flashpoint. "We got the keys on a Sunday night. Monday morning, local people went in, and the kids turned up. They were saying, 'What are you doing here?' "And the people who had come were saying 'Get out of here or I'll tell your mam...' And off they went. "We didn't need any security guards or anything. "Then eventually we got the kids back in. Charging 50p, putting classes on. Anti-social behaviour disappeared overnight."



A CLASS ABOVE Swimming lessons under a big screen



HISTORIC Entrance to the baths, which date from 1904

LANDMARK Tall chimney is remnant of industrial past



Pooling resources to save our baths

DOMINATING the skyline, the towering old foundry chimney is a well-known city landmark.

But this former factory is a big part, not just of the horizon, but of all life in Leeds. Since 1904 it has been home to Bramley Baths, teaching generations how to swim. For part of its career, with its pool boarded over during winter months, it also served as a dance hall where romance blossomed between future wives and husbands. And when it was threatened with closure, locals realised just how vital it was to the whole community. Tracy Basu, the chief executive of the group now running the baths, said: "A few years ago hours were very much reduced and it was threatened with closure. "It was losing in excess of £100,000 a year and so a decision had to be made. The local community was very passionate about it remaining open. "There's a lot of local nostalgia and love for the place and there was an outpouring of

feeling when it was going to close. Then we had a 'use-it-or-lose-it' campaign, which was knocking on doors and letting people know the situation. "People just came in droves to keep it open to say they loved it and wanted it here. "That action in itself meant that the local authority saw there was a demand." Control of the baths was transferred to the community in December 2012. And they reopened as a community organisation on January 1, 2013. Tracy said: "That's one of the things that has been really key to the running of the place. "In everybody from the community stepping up and showing their loyalty and wanting to save it, we were able to obtain some short-term working capital to keep it open. "That's one of the differences between

the baths here and a lot of other places where they have closed, the plant was left to deteriorate and customers drifted away. "In working with the local authority and making sure that there was a smooth transfer with no break in trade, it meant the momentum continued." Since the transfer, weekly opening hours have more than doubled from 47 to 100-plus, and the number of children on the swimming programme has soared from 400 to 1,000. Tracy added: "We've looked at programming in a different way, one of the best things about being standalone. "It lets us be more creative than the local authority. As some examples of that we've got AquaBallet, synchronised swimming groups and a triathlon club. "We're always looking to the local com-

munity to influence the programming. It's not about us telling them what they want, they tell us what they enjoy. AquaBallet came about through one of the mums who is a dance teacher down the road. "She thought it would be a great way for older people to be able to exercise." A key to the baths' success has been this ability to let the community say what hap-

pens at the pool. They also control pricing. Tracy went on: "Bramley is not a rich area so it's always about keeping things affordable. We have the autonomy to be able to work out how we subsidise certain things. "That's the nature of any business but it has meant we've been able to turn it around. "From it losing more than £100,000 under local authority control we've just recorded a

£37,000 surplus. It's a win-win for us and the local authority because just in the time we've been open we've saved £500,000." The council has been delighted with the progress the project has made and has lent its full backing to Tracy and the team. She added: "We know on an operational basis we can run this well and make money. "We've now extended the lease. The council was sceptical at first so it put us on a 25-year lease. That has now been extended to 75 years so the future of the building is secure for future generations." As well as providing sports and leisure facilities, the baths have developed a relationship with schools and are helping to create jobs. Tracy said: "Local employment has been an important part of it all. "Two years ago we put on the first programme and trained eight students from Leeds West Academy. "Four went on to become lifeguards and three became swim teachers. It's an

opportunity that wouldn't have been there. It's a springboard for their lives. That's a contrast with a lot of chains, or other organisations where they just want people with degrees." Tracy believes that being a community-run organisation, and the affection felt for them locally, is the driving force behind the baths' solid prospects for the future. Describing an example of community spirit overcoming a challenge, she said: "Last July a bird dropped a stone on the glass roof above the pool and shattered one of the panes. "It was an external pane so it didn't come into the pool but we couldn't risk opening. "Because we couldn't open up and we were losing money, we tried to involve the insurance companies in coming up with a solution. They sent along a lot of people to

try and find a way but they couldn't come up with anything. "At that point they agreed we could go to the community to find a solution. "So we sent out messages on Twitter and Facebook to say we couldn't open. "By then we were losing £10,000 a week and that can destroy a community enterprise really quickly. "Within two days we had a solution. A local firm got involved. "And with the support of our neighbours, who let them put scaffolding up and get on the roof, we were able to fix a problem the insurance companies said would take six weeks. "It shows the power of the support we've got and the ability to find solutions locally. "We're here for the community and the community are here for us."

“ They came in droves to say they wanted the place to stay open ”
TRACY ON CAMPAIGN WHEN CLOSURE LOOMED



AIMS Tracy talks to Sunday Mirror



FUTURE IS SAFE Baths had been faced with closure

“ We solved a problem in two days the insurers said would take weeks ”
TRACY ON COMMUNITY RALLYING ROUND TO HELP



SO POPULAR Exercise class in full swing at pool

Picture: JOHN GLADWIN

There was nothing left for ordinary folk, but we revived the hall... now it's buzzing

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Pictures: JOHN GLADWIN

“We’ve held concerts, exhibitions, yoga.. there is a real demand”
ANNOUSHKA DEIGHTON
FRIENDS OF PUBLIC HALL

DECADES OF MEMORIES
Hall is serving the public once again



GUEST STARS
Sid and Beryl Guest volunteer to look after the hall which has played such a big part in their lives

“Somewhere that we loved so much was just going to waste”
SID GUEST WHO WED AT STRETFORD PUBLIC HALL

MORE than 50 years ago Sid and Beryl Guest held their wedding reception, a small family do, in a public hall built in 1878.

Over the years, Stretford Public Hall in Manchester became a big part of their lives – especially for local girl Beryl.

Now – two decades after seeing its concert and theatre space turned into offices – they are helping to return it to its former glory with the assistance of Power to Change

Beryl said: “It was a big part of life growing up. “You would hear about what it was used for over the years. People’s memories of it. There were dances, concerts and celebrations like ours.

“People used to gather here after both wars, and used it to take shelter from the bombings. It was such an important part of people’s lives.”

Over the years, the local council began using the building for office space.

In 1994 it took it over completely – leaving the local community with nowhere to go. Sid said: “When it was offices you would walk past and

think what a shame it was. That somewhere we loved so much was just going to waste.

“We got married just down the road and had our reception here.

“It was a family do. It was lovely. Beryl’s a Stretford girl so all her relatives were round here. I’m only from just up the road so it made sense.

“When our daughter was young she started dancing as part of a group. She appeared on the stage here in the main hall. We used to come and watch her. We’ve always had connections with



ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT Computer space

the place. They had music concerts and all sorts. It used to be a theatre. There were all sorts of things going on here. But over the years the council decided to change it to office use.

“They did all sorts of conversions, did away with the stage, everything that people loved. All the stuff there for the community went.

“There was nothing left in Stretford, in the town centre. Stretford was destroyed. The shopping centre was built but that’s in poor condition.

“There’s nothing left of the original Stretford apart from buildings like this.”

When the council came to sell the building in 2014, the local community stepped in to try to take it over. Sid said: “This is how we got involved first of all. We saw about the meeting they were having to buy the hall, and put in a bid to the council.

“That year was our 50th anniversary. This is an ideal venue. Hopefully it can get back on its feet.

“We’ve been volunteering for the last couple of years. Electrical and joinery works, taking stuff out of the garden, setting up the Christmas display. I like

the people I meet. There are a lot of younger people involved in it. It’s nice to see something that meant so much to us getting back to shape.

“You see kids and families coming in. The place has been really buzzing. There’s just been a choir formed and they got 100 people along.

“The demand is there. It makes you wonder where they would go before this place was open.”

The Friends of Stretford Public Hall are completing a share option with matched funding from Power to Change. They aim to get the hall up and running again and provide somewhere for local people to go.

Group chairman Annoushka Deighton said: “We’ve already got loads of demand for people who want to get married here. It shows that it’s the community who know what the community needs.

“We’ve held art exhibitions, concerts, all sorts of things. There are well-being classes, yoga, things for people of all ages. The whole thing is oversubscribed.

“There’s a real demand to give people what they want. The untapped potential in the community is incredible and we know we can make this work.”

HOW RESTORING A FORGOTTEN FARM

GREENSLATE Community Farm is thriving – but it wasn’t always that way.

Just a few years ago, it was a wasteland. Sitting between a new housing estate and the edge of Billinge village just outside Wigan, the farm had fallen into disrepair.

Locals had been dealt another blow with the closure of a hospital, costing jobs and valued care. But in 2012 local activists came to the rescue.

Rhiannon Jones, project manager at Greenslate, said: “We noticed this farm had been abandoned for about 16 years. The two things that were going on in this area were the hospital – now a housing estate – and the farm. The

community had been left with next to nothing. So we wanted to use the site for the needs of the community – whatever they might be.”

Rhiannon and her team set about restoring the farm, which 20 years ago had been used by the council as an educational facility. Now it is fulfilling the same role, hosting school groups, local residents and adult learners.

Rhiannon said: “Local people who came here on a school visit are now bringing their own children here.

“It’s a great feeling when you hear that we have brought

something back that was so loved – and is again.”

As well as the working farm, Rhiannon and her team have set up Carefarm, which gives adults with additional needs the chance to develop new skills. Rhiannon said: “They learn

GROW FOR IT Allotment and farm learner, right



BROUGHT UNITY TO THIS COMMUNITY

life skills and independent living. We use the animals to do this. For example, if they learn to look after a goat, they are learning food, diet, happiness and well-being. That feeds back into their own lives.”

But Rhiannon feels the most

important aspect of the farm is uniting a community that had lost its centre.

She added: “There’s a big two-way divide between the community. We have an older, retired, working-class section. Then we have this new housing estate that’s full of very young families and commuters. We wanted a way of combining the two. We’re already seeing them come together. One example is our skill-sharing days.

“This allows people to come down and host workshops – things like gardening, which have been a massive success.”

Greenslate also hosts farmer’s markets, half-term activities,

music gatherings, food sharing, pop-up cafés and baking. The latest project is the Strawbale building – helped with cash from Power to Change.

Rhiannon said: “Power to Change have been massively helpful. Strawbale is going to be a community café, farm shop, classrooms and kitchen.

“Carefarm will be hosting it. And we’ll be able to hire it out to the community.”

With donations and an army of volunteers the future looks secure. And what was once a community without a heart is back on its feet again.

Rhiannon added: “The farm brings the community together. It’s a hub, the heartbeat of the place.”



EWE STAR
Rhiannon feeds farm’s sheep



CLUCKY BREAK
Farm has united the community

PEOPLE POWER

'People invest with hearts not pounds'

Vidhya Alakeson has been chief executive of Power to Change since 2015.

Q Can you tell us what Power to Change is about?

We're about supporting local people to take control of communities, local assets and their future. It can be things local authorities might once have run like libraries and leisure centres. Or it can be things that the private sector might have run like shops and pubs. If it's not saving something it could be an idea generated by the community itself.

Q How important are these local assets?

There's a village on the edge of Wigan where the centre had fallen away. It had become a dormitory for Liverpool or Manchester commuters. Villagers started a community farm and that brought a heart and a centre back. It's a place people meet, connect with their friends and neighbours. In their own words it has "put the soul back in the community".

Q Do the projects have anything in common?

The main thing they all have is drawing on local expertise. Who else knows better than locals how to make a place better and vibrant again? It's about ordinary people. They're not whizz-kid entrepreneurs in fancy suits. These are normal people who are doing things for the community.

Q How many people have you helped so far?

We've helped about 150 businesses in three years and we connect businesses to each other too. The best thing for them is someone who has walked in their shoes. And we have leadership programmes to help people grow and help the sector has a whole.

Q Do the people involved need lots of help?

They often need technical support like a planner or an architect. But they have the vision. One of the things I love most about it is what people are able to achieve when they come together.

Q What are your long-term plans for Power to Change?

Long-term we want to scale this up. We want community business to be an idea people across the country get and want to be a part of. We want to help them realise their vision. We want to convince government and business this is something they should be involved in. There's huge potential. All across the country there are assets that local authorities are struggling to maintain. They could be run by communities given half the chance.

Q What do you look for in a successful project?

First, a viable business model - something that can survive beyond a grant. Sometimes these ideas



come out of a conversation in a pub or a sketch on the back of a napkin. We need that turned into a business plan. If you're going to run a café, how many people will turn up? Are there enough to make it work? Where will you get your stock from?

Second, that the community is engaged in an ongoing way. Our research shows that makes small businesses more resilient - it's how they get their customers, their employees and volunteers.

The final thing is the right mix of skills. Often that's about finding out who in the community can do what and bringing them in.

Q Is there anything that you would turn down?

We support things with the potential to be viable and some things just don't have that potential. We don't expect viability straight away. But there has to be some way of generating revenue - charging rent, selling something or contracting, for example. Some projects are great for the community but simply don't have that entrepreneurial side to them.

Q Do people have to pay the grant back?

The grant is a long-term investment. We don't expect it back. But we do ask - how are you going to survive without the grant? We might fund the first 18 months of the cost of a chef or café manager. But we would expect you to be in a position to cover them after that. We wouldn't expect you to be up and running on day one. But we'd like to see a forecast for how you will keep going down the line.

Q What's the best thing about a community business?

By virtue of being in a community and generating income they create an economic resilience.

Our longer-term vision is that communities will have clusters of these businesses and produce a local economic engine.

It's healthier than a private enterprise where income is taken off somewhere else. This is about money made by the community put back into the community.

There's a brewery in the Lake District that ran into trouble. The people on the board and the volunteers literally took the barrels of beer to various parts of the country to get them through. Things like that show people have bought in with their heart rather than their pound.

Q What do you like best about the project?

The people are incredible. They often start in a campaign or a protest. They stop something closing or being knocked down and go to the next stage - we've stopped them closing the library now we need to take it over. People out there have fantastic ideas and we've got the ability to make them happen.

Q Do you have advice for people thinking about applying?

Get together with people. You're not going to do it on your own. Don't get overwhelmed at the start. If everyone thought about what they were taking on they wouldn't get going. Take it one step at a time.



CHILD'S PLAY Mums & toddlers at Linskill

Centre has it all under one roof

THE Linskill Centre in North Shields was taken over by a community trust in 2006.

It was built in the 1930s and was a school up until 1984, when it became a community centre.

In 2005, public funding was withdrawn until local campaigners stepped in and saved it.

Over the years it has gone from strength to strength after a series of investments.

Now it attracts more than 120,000 visitors a year.

It hosts dozens of groups a week, has a thriving community café and a nursery offering full-day childcare.

Power to Change awarded the project a grant of £81,000 two years ago.

That enabled the centre to invest in their food and events business, generating a profit and freeing up key staff for other roles.

Chief executive Simeon Ripley said: "There's a mix of traditional community centre services and other things.

"For example, we have a big events programme for things like fundraisers.

"And we do large-scale community events. Last year we put on a gin festival and a winter wonderland."

The centre already occupies a special place in the hearts of the community in North Shields and elsewhere in North Tyneside.

Mr Ripley added: "It's attracting people from across the entire county.

"We don't target one particular demographic.

"The whole point is to bring people together under one roof."



COMMUNITY MAGNET Linskill Centre

★ LOTTERY players are helping transform communities across the land. Money raised from lottery ticket sales is supporting those who want to make a real difference to their neighbourhoods.

Power to Change was awarded a £150million endowment by the Big Lottery Fund, which distributes money raised for good causes.

Nat Sloane, Big Lottery Fund chair, has said: "We believe people should be in the lead in improving their lives and communities.

"We want to support the skills, assets and energy of local people and the potential in their ideas.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

Feeling inspired? Do you know buildings or spaces where you live, which could be brought back to life? We would love to hear about them, especially if there are great photos or even videos.

Write to us at Sunday Mirror Great Treasure Trove, One Canada Square, London, E14 5AP. If you

want to find out more about how to take over a building or space in your own area, go to mycommunity.org.uk. It is run by Locality, the national network for community organisations, and funded by the government to help people like you.

Locality also offers advice and support through their consultancy

team to help communities successfully take on a community asset. There is also a My Community advice line run by Locality on 0300 020 1864 that will be operating especially for Sunday Mirror readers, Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, from May 2 to May 12.