

Local Trust

Big Local

The courage to succeed

Taking action to make a change



Louise Tickle

About the author

Louise Tickle is an award-winning freelance journalist specialising in education and social affairs. Her work has been featured in a range of national publications including The Guardian, The Times and Sunday Times, Newsweek, Tortoise, consumer magazines and specialist professional journals. From September 2018 she spent a year as Local Trust's first journalist-at-large, travelling the country to tell the stories of Big Local.

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly..."

Theodore Roosevelt

Local Trust

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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: 978-1-9162638-0-2

Published: March 2020

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FOREWORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Put a kaleidoscope up to your eye, twist the barrel—and the world changes. You’ve instigated an action, a thousand tiny beads have reconfigured themselves, and what you see now will never be the same as it was before.

These are stories of transformation, where people have taken their own action and made a change. But they are also stories that acknowledge that it’s hard to build something new, and easy never to try, because the pain and shame of anticipated failure can be too great to bear.

So, what, then, if you do screw up the courage to give something a go—and succeed?

Criss-crossing the country over the course of a year as Local Trust’s first journalist-at-large, I’ve been struck—not only by the determination required to initiate action in communities suffering the attritional disaster of unemployment, poverty, and lack of interest and investment from government—but also by the fortitude required to grapple with success, when accomplishment may be unexpected, feel unfamiliar and bring challenges never encountered before.

All these communities are part of Big Local—the funding experiment in which 150 different communities are provided with £1m to improve their local area, with no bureaucracy, targets or strings attached.

It’s a radical programme, but its success isn’t always dramatic or obvious. In this essay, I’ve looked at how people have been supported at critical points in their lives, enabling

them to make what might seem like, from the outside, some modest steps forward. To these individuals, however, the tightly targeted, individually tailored, consistent and compassionate mentoring, offered at exactly the right time, has meant they could take risks which are just beginning to pay off.

Success can be thrilling but can also result in pressures and demands that have the potential to become overwhelming. It can also change the direction of someone's life in a way that neither they nor their friends and family ever expected. The extraordinarily motivated, knowledgeable and creative group of teenagers on the west coast of Cumbria who campaign for greater understanding of mental health issues, and who lobby at regional, and now national, level for better mental healthcare for children and young people, are responding to a burgeoning crisis they've identified in their region. Their increasingly high profile has brought with it an immense sense of responsibility. For some of the young people involved, there has been a marked change in their expectations of themselves and in their aspirations for the future. This is not always straightforward to deal with. It takes resilience. It is emotional work.

Being ambitious requires courage too, especially when it involves taking on millions of pounds of mortgage debt. I met one group of residents who are thinking very big indeed to ensure a legacy for children and young people in their area. Success is not certain: the next few years will be risky, and the partnership is made up of people in their 60s, 70s and 80s, some of whom know they may never see the project realised. Nevertheless, they are pursuing their vision with an unrelenting, unstoppable determination that perhaps only comes when you have the life experience to know that

persistence—plus a hefty dose of nerve—is very often what wins out in the end.

There is courage, too, in working slowly, carefully, without lots of razzmatazz. In Wargrave, local resident Louise Forshaw has championed the establishment of a peer-led support group for people who self-harm. Quietly and effectively, this is addressing an urgent but silent local need—one that many thousands of people are struggling to cope with across the country. But sometimes you can't prove impact in a way that metrics will measure. Sometimes, there won't be praise or recognition. Sometimes, you'll have to make a case for something you believe in, or against something you don't, and you might not always do it as diplomatically as you'd like. People might get annoyed or angry. People might not follow your lead. You might feel unskilled, or out of your depth. But you push on because you know there's a need. And, as an individual, and as a partnership, you change, mature—and achieve more than you ever imagined.

I hope you enjoy these stories of courage and success, what that means, and what comes after. I loved writing them.

Louise Tickle

From September 2018 Louise Tickle was Local Trust's first journalist-at-large; a position offering the opportunity for an established journalist to travel the country for a year to tell the stories of Big Local. She met with people in Big Local areas to better understand how Big Local is changing communities, hearing their voices and perspectives and understanding their work in the context of a changing social and political landscape.



Becky in Porkies Cafe

The mermaid of Plymouth Hoe

Whitleigh Big Local, Plymouth

THE SEA OFF PLYMOUTH HOE IS STILL only 14 degrees at the end of June. Becky Allen picks her way across the stony foreshore, trying to find a good spot to slide in.

A seaweed-free entry point is important, because Becky is a mermaid. Once both her legs are tightly encased in the iridescent, pink and turquoise fabric tail which is currently slung over her shoulder in a duffel bag, getting entangled in slimy fronds of vegetation would be dangerous. Nor is it a look any self-respecting sea nymph is after.

We find some steps leading down to the water. It's clear except for a floating crisp packet. Becky checks for rocks. There's one just beneath the surface, but she can avoid it, she says.

Preparing the tail is a palaver. The plastic monofin into which both her feet will soon be strapped must first be wrestled down into the furthest corners of the fabric; once it's finally in, the fluke stiffens into shape.

Then there's a fast strip down to her bathers, and Becky pulls the tight column of fabric up and over her legs and lower

body. Without any hesitation at the prospect of immersion, she wriggles down the final two steps and into the dark, chill water. A small gasp, and she strikes out.

“How is it?” I call as she glides away. She’s swimming slowly, breathing deliberately, careful to avoid cold-water shock.

“Not too bad!” the mermaid calls back, grinning. She raises an eyebrow. “You coming in?”

I grimace.

The colours in the mermaid’s tail blur under the water as, sinuously, she swims further out. The words, “You get numb after a bit,” reach me, then she curls into a dive. With a glittering splash, her glorious, flouncy tail rises from the surface of the sea, then swishes back beneath.



Becky has just dropped her three kids at school when she meets me at 9am at Porkies Cafe. The cafe looks out over Whitleigh Green, a large grassy area surrounded on two sides by a local Co-op supermarket and a parade of shops.

Yesterday, the Green was packed with families for The Very Big Lunch, put on by Whitleigh Big Local in partnership with neighbourhood organisations and businesses. Scores of children ran manically between activities including a bouncy slide, a swinging boat ride, archery, face-painting, a live band and a kids’ dance display. In among the chaos stood a stall whose hand-painted banner proclaimed ‘Whitleigh Circus’. Becky was at the Big Lunch to fundraise for her new community circus project and her upcoming entry in Miss Mermaid UK. She brought along ribbon wands and sock poi—striped stockings, weighted at the toe end—to teach children some of the circus skills that she and friends have recently started to perform at events around the county.

It was a long, hot, humid afternoon, during which Becky demonstrated how to spin the ribbons and manipulate the poi, and helped any kids who sidled up showing an interest in how to do it. She was also selling hand-sewn toys and bags and, all told, managed to raise £50—“Not bad,” she says—but, as a result, this morning she looks tired. She’s also in pain: serious physical and mental health issues have been part of her life since she was in her early teens.

The creation of a community circus is this 29-year-old’s dream—one that might change her future. Even to have a dream, for a woman whose childhood was systematically destroyed, first by her mother, and then by the state, feels like a triumph.

“I come from a very disruptive background. I was always told I was never going to get anywhere. Always going to be a failure. Never going to have anything. Never going to get married. Never have a family.”

Who told her this?

“My mother, mainly. And then, I was bullied by teachers. And kids. In school and out of school. I was nine when we moved down here. I didn’t fit in.”

What follows is the bleakest of stories. Becky’s mother was first a victim of domestic abuse, and then, increasingly, a perpetrator. “She had countless partners who were violent,” Becky remembers. “She herself got more violent as time went on.” The two of them ended up in a refuge. “Things just fell apart even further from that point, just ended up in a dark spiral.”

Strong evidence has been published in recent years showing that children who observe domestic abuse are harmed by it, let alone those who are directly targeted. Witnessing sustained abuse in their homes is so damaging to children’s

sense of safety and their emotional development that it is a factor in many local authority applications to remove children into foster care, or, if they are very young, place them for adoption.

“It was really strange, because up until I was about eleven, I thought it was normal,” she says with a tight smile that twists down at the ends. “That was the household. That was how life was. Then, when I started socialising a little bit and actually meeting other families outside of what I grew up with in Kingsbridge—because, you know, up there it was pretty much wild children, parents would open the door at nine o’clock, we’d all go to school, come back, have a sandwich and then go out, and that’d be all you’d see of us until night-time, pretty much...” She draws breath, thinks back. “Yeah, I met a few people and I saw how their family worked. I was like, why isn’t my mum like that? Why doesn’t my mum treat me like that? I questioned her on it, and it would lead to a massive fight, an argument, and she’d kick me out.”

This toxic dynamic carried on for a couple of years. “Every weekend, I’d be kicked out. One day I got sick of it, so I just didn’t bother going back.”

How old was she?

“Twelve,” she says.



Becky was put on the council’s emergency homeless list when she was 13, after a year spent drifting around the area by day, sofa surfing with mates, or sleeping rough when she’d run out of favours.

Was it dangerous?

“Very,” she says. “One particular night I remember my mum kicking me out. I was in hot pants and bikini top in the middle of winter. I walked into town. No shoes or anything. I

PORKIES CAFÉ



was outside Bretonside bus station, just singing, trying to keep myself entertained. This homeless guy came over and said, ‘You won’t last a night like that.’ I ended up having to walk around Plymouth with this other homeless guy called Chris. He took me to find some clothes.”

She pauses. “I’ve had a few situations where I’ve just gone back to random people’s places for somewhere to sleep. Drugs, alcohol, the whole lot. I just did what I did to survive. I’d been so downtrodden. I didn’t actually think I was worth anything.”

She’d pretty much stopped going to school, she explains. Nobody bothered. “The council said I was intentionally homeless. Council workers just wouldn’t believe my mother was abusing me. I was like, ‘You’re taking the piss. Take me home, I’ll sit there for half an hour and I guarantee I’ll be back outside that door.’”

When she was 13, the council put her into bed-and-breakfast accommodation. Social workers, she says, refused to take her into care because, at just 13, “I was apparently too close to 16,” which is when councils’ leaving-care process kicks in.

It seems incredible that a child just into her teens could have been left, alone, in a bed and breakfast. Becky says she was put on benefits, “and then they demanded rent!” She sounds weary and cynical. She shoplifted food to survive. Her mental and physical health were on the slide. “Nobody gave a toss except the Youth Enquiry Service. A charity. It’s only charities that have ever helped me.” Her contempt for the council is stinging.



At the end of 2017, Pippa St John Cooper had only just started her job as community development worker with

Whitleigh Big Local when she first met Becky at the Whitleigh Christmas Fayre.

“It was raining. It was really, really cold. Three degrees or something. There was this poor little lass sat in a hot tub, outside Porkies, dressed up as a mermaid,” she says. “Most of the time she was on the outside of it, trying to talk to the kids. I just remember her shivering with cold. I was thinking, ‘This is just lunacy’. In the nicest way. It’s just, like, ‘What are you doing?’ She was going, ‘It’s fine! If I get too cold, I’m just going to get back into the hot tub.’” They had a chat at an International Women’s Day event, and Becky turned up at a Whitleigh Big Local partnership meeting early last year. When Becky stood up to speak, St John Cooper remembers, she was trembling. “She was really vocal, though. Nervous, but really vocal about environmental issues. She was passionate, but also, it’s about having that courage to talk.”

A central plank of St John Cooper’s role as development worker is to offer lots of intensive individual support for local residents as they start to explore how to realise an idea they’ve come up with. “In order to make sure people feel welcome and that they’re able to play a part and feel valued, it takes that one-to-one work, because people go up and down,” she says. “My biggest concern is actually can we make this really local and make sure that the power stays within the community. That takes time, because it’s about empowering people to feel confident even though their lives may be chaotic, and also understanding that we operate with a no-blame culture.”

Despite health problems that have flared badly this year, and some upsetting family issues she’s had to deal with, Becky has felt an urgent desire to do something, start something. “It was either an environmental project on plastics, or the community circus,” says St John Cooper. “She chose the

community circus which, again, I think was brave, because there's not really a model for it in the way she wants to do it."

Ask Becky about her idea for collecting together a group of people with a mix of performance skills to travel around the county, demonstrating and teaching at events, and her face instantly brightens. "It just helps to get people connected. It's a talking point. The kids love it and yeah, I like sharing that little bit of joy. It's the only way I can think to pay back my community."

Her starting point for the community circus is that "everyone has a skill" they can share. "Doesn't matter what it is. Doesn't matter where it comes from. Everybody has a skill and it can be utilised." She's talking about friends she made through her teens and twenties, people who have maybe lived on the fringes at times and had to hustle to make a few pennies to survive. I ask how she learned performance skills. She laughs. "When you're hungry, you do what it takes. I've sung on the street to make money to eat." As well as mermaiding—Becky has a freediving qualification—she is a juggler and sometimes performs with fire torches. She has friends who can stilt-walk, others who are poi experts, others who do tumbling.

Becky and St John Cooper have met up frequently over the last 18 months to work through what form a community circus might take and how it would be run. Aware of her own mental and physical health needs, and the strengths and vulnerabilities of her performers, Becky is adamant that it should be a flexible entity, ramping up or down depending on people's circumstances. "Some of our members have mental health issues, so if they can't deal with coming out, they stay with the kids or they stay at home or they just don't bother turning up for the day and there's no pressure to it. We will make it work even if there's only one of us there," she says.

It's not just about people being performed 'to'—she wants it to be inclusive. "I would like, eventually, for our community to embrace it and get more performers—all the people who do the odd little things," she says. "Get them out performing. Bring their confidence up. Just get a bit of good news into the area as well, you know."

The circus is still in its very early stages. Becky and her troupe of volunteers have performed at a few events, but with St John Cooper's support, she has spent the last year laying the groundwork so it can grow, going on training courses and constituting the circus as a not-for-profit, community interest company. "Working with a solicitor to get that sorted out was so hard! And overcoming my anxieties, because I'm a bit social-phobic," she says. Just the anxiety. The paranoia. The fear of going on my own to meet random strangers. It's like arrrggggh!" St John Cooper has encouraged, cajoled, guided and advised as the community circus project has taken shape. "She's doing courses left, right and centre, and she's brilliant, so talented," she says. But there has been a lot to learn, and Becky's truncated schooling means she still struggles with the literacy and numeracy skills needed to complete essential paperwork.

Though it's sometimes two steps forward, one step back, Becky knows her confidence is increasing. Over the last 12 months, she's repeatedly put herself out there: talked to people she'd never met, gained new knowledge, developed some of the skills she needs to run an organisation that works with children and, importantly, been repeatedly challenged by St John Cooper and had to think hard about how to respond.

The balance in Becky's marriage has had to shift as she has taken more on. Her husband who, she says, supports her completely, now does far more childcare as her health has

improved and she is out and about doing courses, setting up the circus, organising events and travelling to mermaid bookings. “It used to be I was home all the time and he did the running around, but now it’s more he’s at home and I do the running around,” she grins.

Her husband also suffers periodically from poor mental health—what happens, I ask, if the circus takes off and makes increasing demands on her time? “Life happens the way it happens. We can’t have control over it,” she says. “I will always try and lift him along with me. I don’t want to leave him behind. I don’t want to leave anybody behind.”

Becky is certain she would never have dared to stretch so far had it not been for getting involved with Big Local. “It’s definitely changed how people look at me. A lot of people were like, ‘Oh, you’ll never get anywhere. You’ll never do anything. You’ll be a druggie and an alcoholic all your life...’ and I’m like, well, that’s your label. I’m doing this because I want to. I don’t want to be bored. I just want to be better than I was yesterday. I love learning. And I need to get better. I need to do something with my life.”



Becky and Pippa in Winnie, Whittleigh's community van



Chloe and Rebecca, members of We Will

We Will

Ewanrigg Big Local, West Cumbria

THE SKY IS A GLARING GREY WHITE when I park up at Maryport. The town perches on Cumbria's far western edge; on a previous visit here, I was told that on a clear day you can see across the Solway Firth to Scotland. I peer out. Not today.

Lean against the railings on the old wall and your view to the west takes in Maryport's long-defunct lighthouse and, closer in, the shining silver globe of the Alauna Aura, a steel art installation depicting the history of the town. Swing south a little and your gaze takes in the Aquarium visitor attraction and I, and a couple of nautically named pubs. Take a wander over the bridge that spans the mouth of the River Ellen, and just up the hill to the east is the town, built in a grid system in the 18th century.

Once-handsome Georgian houses line the streets: these were the homes of well-to-do merchants, shipbuilders and industrialists who made their money through commerce and coal. The elegant architecture is only obvious now if you look upwards, however; at ground level, many of the frontages have been destroyed, thanks to poor planning decisions. Fast-food

joints, charity shops, newsagents, off-licences and convenience stores line the town's two main thoroughfares. A wedding dress boutique is the only shop that's remotely enticing. Bluntly, the place is run down. A once thriving, dynamic and economically important seaside town, whose streets for over two centuries bustled with people full of purpose and ambition, now feels scruffy and exhausted.

Despite the railway line which still operates, Maryport is isolated. The train takes three hours to Liverpool, Manchester or Lancaster, and two to Preston. In a car, the 38 miles to the M6 at Penrith take an hour. Rural bus services have been cut and those that remain are pricey. Maryport—indeed most of this coastal edge of Cumbria—does not sit within the Lake District National Park; despite its fascinating history, the potential of its harbourside and the loveliness of its architecture, this is not a tourist honeypot with all the money and employment that brings.

The remoteness of the setting is a critical factor in the lack of mental health services available to people who live here and, particularly, local MP Sue Hayman tells me, in the poor provision of mental health support for children who find themselves in distress. I meet Hayman a hop, skip and a jump down the coast in Flimby, at the village's annual carnival. As children whoop and shriek around us, she explains how over the past few years, "In my surgeries, I'd seen more and more families coming to see me about mental health care for young people.... The big problem we've got here is that we don't have the resources at all to meet the need." It's tough to recruit qualified professionals in any public-service sector to work in this depressed part of the county, she explains, which exacerbates the local effect of a well-documented national crisis in mental health care for under-18s.

Nationally, children's suicide rates are up by over two thirds since 2010,¹ and a quarter of those referred for help are denied treatment.² According to the Care Quality Commission,³ 23 per cent of child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are rated as 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'. Here in West Cumbria, the official target for seeing a young person accepted onto a CAMHS waiting list is 18 weeks, or four and a half months—a time-lag some already regard as dangerous. Although figures from Cumbria Partnership NHS Foundation Trust indicate that waiting times are improving, as of July 2019, the average waiting time of 132 days was outside the target of 18 weeks. Interviewed on ITV's Border News programme, Stephen Eames, chief executive of Cumbria Partnership Foundation Trust, admitted he knew of one child who had waited 15 months to be seen.

According to Hayman, children only get support once they reach crisis point. "It just seems crazy to me that you have to have somebody virtually suicidal before you're prepared to help," she says.



A sprawling area of white semi-detached social housing forms the Ewanrigg estate on the south side of Maryport. Ewanrigg sits in the 10 per cent most deprived areas in England.⁴ Some properties on the estate are privately owned, but primarily, the people who live here are social- housing tenants.

¹ Office of National Statistics (ONS): 187 under-19s took their own lives in 2018, compared with 162 the year before—a rise of 15 per cent. In 2010, the figure stood at 112.

² Education Policy Institute report: Access to children and young people's mental health services - 2018

³ Care Quality Commission: The state of health care and adult social care in England 2017/18

⁴ Cumbria Intelligence Observatory: <https://www.cumbria.gov.uk/eLibrary/Content/Internet/536/675/1766/1775/4207415584.pdf>

Over the past two years, cheered on by Ewanrigg Local Trust, a group of teenagers aged 14 to 18, living in and around the estate, have joined forces to demand better mental health services for themselves and their peers. Called the *We Will* group, they've lobbied their school's senior leadership teams to better support student wellbeing, and have got themselves trained up in mental-health first aid so they feel confident listening to peers who are stressed, anxious or upset. They've also campaigned to challenge the stigma around mental ill health which, they say, is poorly understood in this rural, predominantly farming community, where men are hard and boys don't cry.

The teenagers have made short films promoting their message ("The courage to talk, the courage to listen, no one is alone"), undertaken interviews with print and broadcast media, and spoken at events throughout their county. Increasingly, they are lobbying health commissioners and policymakers at not only regional but also national level. And they are learning that passion and fury, underpinned by research, persistence and, above all, the courage to face up to people in power and argue for change, can get you places you never dreamed of.

One of those places was the Palace of Westminster on 22 May 2019.

"I was so lucky to chair the meeting," grins Rebecca Woods, 17. One of the founder members of *We Will*, she meets me at the end of the school day at the Aquarium. Rebecca, who has always lived on the Ewanrigg estate, explains that she'd only been to London once before. This time round, she would be running a session by Sue Hayman, so that the *We Will* campaigners could meet not only senior civil servants with responsibility for mental health but also the minister responsible, Jackie Price-Doyle MP, and her Labour counterpart, Barbara Keeley MP.

"It was kind of scary at first," recalls Rebecca with a laugh. "I couldn't quite believe what we were doing."

Two years ago, she remembers, she would never have stood up in front of a group of people to speak about mental health. “Now I get really excited. When you get that clapping at the end you know you’re getting your message out. We went to a conference a couple of weeks ago to say there should be counsellors in every school—it was in front of teachers and headteachers, people from public services, companies. A good hundred, I’d say.”

Four members of the group travelled down to Westminster, by indignation that mental health services for young people in West Cumbria lagged far behind the need they knew existed within their peer group.

Another founder member of the *We Will* group, 16-year-old Molly Robinson, explains how this affected her. “I was lucky, I ‘only’ had to wait four months,” she says quietly, “but in that time things drastically changed, and I had to get to crisis point before I got help.”

Molly had been struggling with unexplained pain from an undiagnosed health condition. That, plus the worry about what was wrong, caused her to feel increasingly anxious and distressed. At her lowest, she couldn’t cope with going to school. “It took that for anyone to take things seriously,” she adds.

It was in part Molly’s experience that sparked the idea for the *We Will* teens to come together in the first place. Frustrated by the length of waiting times for treatment, she talked to friends she’d made while campaigning to save the local cottage hospital, and gradually their aims started to take shape.

Ewanrigg Local Trust’s development officer, Kate Whitmarsh, says statistics suggest there is a growing crisis. “The number of young people referred to West Cumbria Mental Health Services who meet the criteria for getting treatment quadrupled last year,” she says. “In towns and cities you tend

to have more third-sector organisations who can offer some support to bridge the wait, but there's very little here." And many parents are suspicious of officialdom, she adds, which prevents some from letting professionals know there's a child in urgent need of skilled intervention. "There's a fear of children being taken away by social services if you admit that your family needs help."

Two years on, Molly's mental health is much better, but she recognises there is a gap between her message about teenagers needing to talk about their problems and doing that herself. She's also very aware that people want to specifically hear about her experience of struggling with mental health and the CAMHS system. The time, she knows, is now. "We never thought we'd be able to change the waiting times for young people waiting for help," Molly says, "and it still might not be possible, but... we can see a door is opening."

That door was given a shove at the meeting in Westminster, where the *We Will* group explained to the government minister responsible for mental health how the existing funding structure means there is little chance of an improved service in West Cumbria

"They'd told us about how funding pots for mental health pilot schemes are tied to six universities across the country," MP Sue Hayman recalls. "Your proximity to one of them is part of how well you score on whether that money gets spent in your area. But... our nearest university is Manchester! We said, well, we're three hours away. One of the reasons we have particularly poor support is because of our isolation, and now you're making that worse because of how you set up these schemes. And that was one thing they hadn't thought of at all. When the kids mentioned it, you could see the penny drop."

While young people often feel that they have no voice,



Hannah, Billy and Jasmine, members of We Will

Hayman makes the point that this group has, over the past two years, learned how to wield the power that comes from becoming experts in their field. “If you know your stuff,” she says, “you can get to people who can make a difference and get them to listen to you.”



The knowledge that she is making a difference has flame-haired Chloe Wilson, 17, beaming with pride. We meet for a cup of tea at Maryport’s once-grand Golden Lion Hotel, which once hosted Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens and George Stephenson of the Rocket and railways fame.

Alongside Rebecca and one other *We Will* member, 17-year-old Reece Pocklington, Chloe is now a partnership member of Ewanrigg Local Trust. A resident of the estate, she contributes to decisions about how to spend the million pounds of Big Lottery money Ewanrigg was given—some of which has paid for the mental health first-aid training the *We Will* teens have undertaken, and which they have also ensured has been delivered to teachers and students at their schools. “It’s nice to be sat at a table with adults and for your voice to be just as valued as theirs,” Chloe says.

In the group’s early days, she recalls, “Some people underestimated us because of our age. People thinking ‘they’re just kids.’” She smiles. That doesn’t happen so much any more. Key to their success to date, she says, has been sustained guidance from a trusted trio of workers employed by Ewanrigg Local Trust: Kate Whitmarsh, Anne-Marie Steel and Sam Wilkinson, who have helped the teenagers structure and direct their campaign, bolstered their confidence and helped them believe in themselves. “They all show you the qualities that you want to grow into,” Chloe says. “They give a little speech before you do something that makes you feel you can.”

Perhaps inevitably, the demands on the *We Will* group have multiplied as a result of their high profile. Several recently met the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge to talk about youth mental health—the founder members have just been given Diana Awards. This attention, in turn, has brought unexpected stresses that the young people must find ways to navigate. Because they care so much, the pressures are keenly felt, especially now these teens have grasped that their voices have a unique authority. Glimpsing success has brought the knowledge that by working harder, doing more, grasping every chance that comes their way to reshape policy and practice, each can be part of driving a change in the way mental health services are provided in their area.

“Lots of them have part-time jobs, some are involved in other stuff, all are under huge academic pressure, some have difficulties at home,” reflects Whitmarsh. “Also, as the campaign has become more successful, we’ve had lots of requests, and it’s tricky because supporting *We Will* could be a full-time job for a paid professional. For the young people, these things create a lot of calls on their time—and their mental health needs protecting! Because, ultimately, what they want to see is a change to youth mental health services, they don’t want to risk not getting to that point by turning things down.”

Success, she acknowledges, has brought with it a danger of burn-out.



The community hub on the Ewanrigg estate faces a children’s centre. The latter is completely encircled by high wire fencing; it looks as if it’s been shut up and mothballed, but Sharon Barnes assures me it’s open for business. Barnes is the chair of Ewanrigg Local Trust and has lived on the estate for 25 years. We meet in the Ewanrigg Local Trust office in



Fishing boats in the harbour in Maryport

the community hub after the weekly computer lesson for residents. The fact the children's centre is still open when so many have closed is a good thing, Barnes says, because poor parenting is a big problem on the estate.

"They don't know how to. They're pregnant and have babies at 16 when they're kids themselves, and they can only do what their parents have fetched them up understanding is the right way," she says. It can drain their ambition, and it's consequently rare for people to leave the estate.

For young people without access to cars, or, as rural bus routes are reduced, to public transport, the isolation of the area is stifling—it's hard to be aspirational when you're not exposed to any other types of thinking or ways of living. It's also a factor in attitudes to mental wellbeing: here, there hasn't traditionally been much sympathy for the suffering poor mental health can bring, Barnes explains. "It's just the way Cumbrians are," she says with an eye-roll. "Big farm-yakking, muscly people—it's not done to cry in public, it's the way they're brought up. There's a definite stigma with it still." She pauses for a moment, deciding how much to say. "Last Friday, there was a lady in her 60s, she'd had a kind of breakdown so she hadn't been here for two weeks, and another lady said, 'It's been two weeks now, is she not all right yet?'" She rolls her eyes again. "It's like it's the flu or something. There's no concept of what it involves."

As chair of the partnership which agreed to fund the staffing required to support *We Will's* campaign activities, Barnes has observed the blossoming of the group's young members with pride. Again and again, they've had to draw on reserves of courage they might not have dreamt they had to force themselves out of their comfort zones. "Just their confidence, it's unbelievable," she says. "They walk taller.

They're smiling. It continues to be daunting for them, but they get really good coaching from Kate and the team."

Rebecca Woods, she says with glee, is now talking about going to university, when previously her plans had been college in Workington. "That completely opens things up for her. And I'm like, do it, do it!"

What happens to the community here in Ewanrigg, if being successful means the best and brightest of its young people leave?

There's a pause, which gets longer. It's a quandary. Barnes doesn't have an answer.



There's no question that the success of their campaigning has prompted some of *We Will's* members to rethink their futures.

As well as studying for A-levels, to support herself and take pressure off her family's finances Chloe works four hours a week as a kitchen assistant at a residential care home, and between 12 and 16 hours a week at discount retailers B&M. Add in the time she spends on the Ewanrigg Local Trust partnership and *We Will*. "I really want to do it all but it's hard to fit it all in," she says.

Over the past two years, Chloe's aspirations have been transformed. "Coming from a small town, it's very closed off," she muses. The new worlds that have opened up through *We Will* mean she now wants to study counselling and psychology. "You need quite high grades, B/C/C. I'm really working now to get those, and I really want to do it at university, not college."

That would mean moving out of the area, away from her roots. It's a very big deal. She's still unsure how it might feel. "I'm a big family person and they all live in Maryport. But when I go on a school trip and to London, I love the different

cultures, and the energy's so different. Here's an empty town."

"Two years ago, I'd have thought I'd just get a I job or just stayed at B&M's. Or the fish factory," she continues. "Not that there's anything wrong with working there, but in a small town, you think that's your limit. You're never told, go and be something big. Go and be an MP."

Being taken seriously by her own MP has been a transformative experience. "Sue Hayman... the support she's given us! She makes you feel so welcome. She's on it. She sees the passion in people," Chloe says.

Rebecca Woods' vision for her future has changed too. "For the longest time I wanted to be a prison officer—I was just going to go to Carlisle college," she says. "Now I want to work in mental health on a psychiatric ward." Her hope is to go to university in Liverpool. It will mean leaving the area. Her family will have to adapt. "My mum... she likes us being there," says Rebecca. "Me moving away will be a big, big thing for her. Because I want to do a year abroad as well." Her face lights up. "I might even go to Michigan, because the degree there is really good for what I want to do."

Why the change of mind?

"It's knowing I can go outside my comfort zone and it'll probably be all right," she says. Laughing almost incredulously, she adds, "I've seen people grow so much. So much! I've seen me grow so much. It even took bravery going to the first meeting, and we're like a little family now."



On a Saturday afternoon in July, ten of the *We Will* teens gather at the Ewanrigg community hub. With Kate Whitmarsh's support, they're working out a new set of campaign objectives. Will they aim high, or go for something softer, maybe more obviously achievable? Strategy matters

because, in a few days, they have a private meeting scheduled with senior health commissioners after a public meeting of the West Cumbria Community Health Forum, and they need to know what they're asking for.

"We're not afraid to speak our minds anymore" says 18-year-old Jasmine Dean.

"Or do the big stuff," Reece Pocklington adds.

"We don't think 'This is our level and we can't go any further,'" Jasmine agrees.

Whitmarsh sounds a warning note. "You need to look at how ambitious you want to go," she says. "At the moment, you're overstretched because you're so in demand. So, we need to get really specific about your campaign targets." During a pre-meeting with a sub-group, she reports back that members said their gut feeling was to be ambitious, and insist that four demanding targets should be met.

These are: a four-week waiting-time limit for anyone referred to specialist youth mental health services; that every young person who presents in crisis should be seen within four hours; a counsellor available in every school; and youth mental health services to be available up to the age of 25, rather than a cliff-edge switch to adult services once they hit 18, as it is now.

At a time of austerity in public services, seasoned campaigners might opt to ask for something that is practically realistic and financially feasible. But sometimes, perhaps, the inexperience that means you dare to dream big will take you further. Particularly when, as the *We Will* members know, young people's lives are stake.



A couple of weeks later, I contact the *We Will* WhatsApp group to find out how their presentation to the Community Health Forum was received. Josh, Jasmine's 15-year-old

brother messages back. “We feel the meeting went really well due to the fact we brought pretty much all 40 of the people attending to tears!”

Crucially, in a separate meeting afterwards, senior health and local government officials told the group that they had listened and would take action, and that the teenagers must hold them to account.

Jon Rush is the chair of NHS North Cumbria Clinical Commissioning Group, and attended the meeting. “It was probably the most impressive thing I’ve ever seen done by young people of that age—quite unique,” he tells me on the phone. “At first, you’re sat there thinking, right, there’s some 16- and 17-year-olds going to come and explain mental health to you. But it took me about 30 seconds to realise that this was a group who’d taken a lot of time to do their research, and not only that, but who had done something about the situation.

“Did they push some of the things they wanted? Damn right they did. To have the confidence to do that and to know that you have the data to support their argument is very different to just standing there saying, ‘This is really bad’. They did not waste their opportunity. They presented a case in a very informative and open way, they asked pertinent questions, they’d made films and they’d done the peer support stuff in schools, and I thought, ‘You’re not just shouting here—you’re part of a solution, you need to be listened to, you need to be embraced. So I was almost in awe, really.’”

Can a group of teenagers really influence what happens with mental health planning for their region?

His answer is an immediate “yes”, but he goes on to explain what he’d said to the teens at the time.

“We all want things to change immediately, but in large organisations, particularly now we have staffing issues here

in Cumbria, it doesn't happen overnight, and people can get disillusioned.

“And I said you may not see change straightaway, but don't get disillusioned. We know in our area, like in lots of the country, we have a longstanding issue with child and adolescent mental health services, and you've made an impact and don't underestimate it. We're in the process of changing our approach to mental health, and I think they'll be able to look back in 10 years' time and say, 'We were part of that—we spoke to some key people, and they listened.'”



Jasmine, a member of We Will



The Brookside estate

Megan

Brookside Big Local, Telford

“I STRUGGLED TO LIVE ON A DAILY BASIS. To get up, even. It was like I wanted to but couldn’t.”

We’re sitting in the cafe in the community centre on the Brookside estate on the outskirts of Telford. It takes nearly an hour telling me the story of how she escaped the financial, physical and emotional abuse inflicted by the man she met aged 17, before Megan Allen, now 24, mentions the destructive effect of his actions on her mental health.

Explaining the crisis into which she plunged twelve months after leaving her abusive ex, she says, “No disrespect, but it wasn’t your average depression or anxiety. Panic attacks triggered by specific things would take me back. To me, it was post-traumatic stress. It took a long time for me to acknowledge it to myself, and I had to push really hard to get it acknowledged by professionals.” Her voice drops and she looks embarrassed. “In the end, my mum and dad said we should go private. And then it was recognised, and I was pointed in the right direction.”

Post-traumatic stress affected every part of her life, including her ability to look after her very young daughter, who she gave birth to at the age of 19. Both of them now live with her mum and dad near the Brookside estate. Her parents were able to offer a sanctuary many domestic- abuse survivors aren't lucky enough to have, and Megan is well aware that this has been critical to her ability to regain her health and to continue parenting her now five-year-old.

Bubbly and smiley as she chats away this afternoon, Megan says that, had anyone met her a few years ago when she was with her ex, she would barely have spoken. "People kept saying to me there was something wrong with the relationship. But I withdrew. I defended the situation, said there was nothing the matter." It caused so many arguments with her boyfriend when she wanted to go and see her parents or her friends that, in the end, it wasn't worth the hassle, she explains.

Was she ever scared for her safety?

"In small moments, yes," she says.

"I was kind of blind. I believed lies that were fed to me. And I was so young and hadn't been in a relationship before. I was never taught... I had no idea..." she still looks horrified at her ignorance, "no idea that this sort of thing went on." Her existence throughout that period, she recalls, "was on autopilot. I didn't know how I felt. I was a bit numb." Other people who she'd grown up with locally didn't really understand what was happening either, "So my friends, they just gave up."

Her mum didn't give up. She kept asking Megan—now pregnant – to go to an appointment with the independent domestic violence adviser service (IDVA): "It took a long time for her to get me to go. I was very defensive. I only agreed reluctantly, really."

She had given birth to her daughter before she agreed to see the IDVA. The violence, as she's learned is common, had



The Brookside community hub

worsened when her ex discovered she was expecting. “I don’t think I realised I was seriously at risk until I’d seen the IDVA,” she says. “I didn’t put everything together. I was treating everything as small isolated incidents.” Carefully taking her through the various different factors identified on the nationally recognized, domestic abuse, stalking and honour-based violence risk-assessment tool (DASH), the IDVA was able to demonstrate the danger Megan and her daughter were now living in.

The Freedom Programme is a course that helps women and men understand the dynamics of domestic abuse, examining the attitudes of abusers and victims’ responses. After she left her boyfriend, and following months of harassment—“sometimes it was up to 100 voicemails and texts a day, I couldn’t do anything on my phone and I was scared to even leave my mum and dad’s,” she remembers—Megan enrolled on the course and began, gradually, to grasp what had happened to her.

Her mental health collapse came out of the blue, some months after she’d completed the course and well after she’d thought she was past the worst. In the time it took her to recover—around two years, she estimates—she started to think about how she could help other young people, just as inexperienced as she was when she embarked on her first big relationship, to avoid partners who denigrated them, isolated them and ultimately, attempted to destroy their confidence and sense of self.

It was entirely by chance, she recalls, that she started chatting to Sam Pitch, the Big Local’s paid community co-ordinator, at a community event. “I just happened to say I was looking into some training I wanted to do, and she said, ‘Go and find out more and come back us with a proposal.’”

Prevention of abuse—and educating young people to recognise and reject it—is Megan’s goal. She wanted to train

as a Freedom Programme facilitator as a step on the way to developing her own training course. which she could then offer to secondary school pupils while they were still in full-time education. “It’s at that age you start to enter your own relationships and not know what to expect and accept whatever you’re given. I get this all the time from young girls: ‘He buys me all these things, drives me round in his car...’” She looks sad. “I really don’t know why young women expect so little. They should expect everything.”

She wrote her proposal, and Brookside Big Local’s partnership board funded her Freedom Programme facilitator training. It took place over three intense days that set her on the course she’s now travelled some way along. Once she’d completed the training, Pitch encouraged her to apply to the Prince’s Trust entrepreneurship programme so she could access more resources and mentoring. She’s since explored possible structures for her planned training organisation, and worked out that she wants to establish a community interest company: she’s adamant she won’t charge schools for sessions, and has worked out that a CIC will enable her to apply for funding so she can offer her training for free. It’s evident from the intensity she speaks with that Megan feels a special responsibility. “With anyone, but especially with young people, they tend to engage more when they know it comes from your heart,” she says. “When you can say ‘I know about this because I’ve been there.’”

Over the last year, she has met with other people who deliver programmes to young people, done courses that will help her understand how to organise company finances, and started to design the material she wants to deliver.

Some Big Local projects are ambitious in scope, and partnerships cough up big chunks of their million pounds to realise them. Brookside Big Local does this too—the

partnership recently bought a five-bedroom house to enable a local drug-and-alcohol rehabilitation charity to provide more supported places. That cost around £100,000, and it stands to help scores of people leaving prison or trying to get off the streets, or who otherwise find themselves on the skids. The cost of Megan's training has been far, far less; but her need for support was spotted by Pitch at a pivotal moment, when encouragement and proof that she was worth investing in helped her feel that she had something valuable to offer that could, without any overstatement, save lives.

It's no small thing for someone who has survived a violent and controlling relationship, months of sustained harassment and a mental health breakdown to decide they will speak publicly about events that have nearly destroyed their wellbeing, and put at risk their chance of being able to parent their child. "This is completely new territory for me," Megan smiles. "I've never done anything like this before. So, tiny little baby steps."

Does she wish none of it had happened, I ask—that the nightmare of abuse and the anguish of her breakdown could just be made to disappear?

"I don't regret my life at all because it's made me who I am, and I have my daughter," she says without hesitation. "So no, I don't regret what's happened. And I'm at the best point so far."

BROOKSIDE



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Partnership member Yvonne on Jasmin Green

Jasmin Green and the six million-pound mortgage

Birchwood Big Local, Lincolnshire

WENDY PARRY NEVER PLANNED to be a property developer. She just wanted to give Birchwood residents the play areas they told Big Local were their top priority for their million pounds to be spent on.

Everyone knew that local kids hadn't been able to enjoy a playground near home since the early 1990s. That was when the council gave up repairing the damage repeatedly done by vandals to existing facilities. Apart from a small, minimally equipped play area behind the shopping centre, for the last two decades there have been no swings, no slides, no climbing frames, no balance beams, no roundabouts, no seesaws, no witches' hats, no zipwires, no nodding chickens, no pirate ships, no wooden forts, no sandpits—nothing. Nor is there anything free and fun for teenagers to do.

With the £1m of funding from the programme, there was no problem in Birchwood Big Local buying whatever play equipment local families wanted. The problem was the upkeep. “We asked the council if they would maintain play areas and

play equipment if we paid for them. They said no,” Parry recalls. So Birchwood Big Local had to find a solution.

Today, as one of the founder members of the Big Local partnership, which may soon be asking to borrow £6m to build social housing on one of the biggest areas of green space in the Birchwood area, Parry has found herself involved in seeking a £300,000 Homes England grant to enable a planning application to be researched, designed and submitted. The intention is that money from the housing will be enough to cover the cost of maintaining play and leisure facilities for local children and young people—a Big Local legacy that will far outlast the term of the initial grant.

Over the past five years, Parry has helped oversee the appointment of architects and a project manager, and participated in multiple discussions with directors of planning and housing at Lincoln City Council about what sort of homes and access roads are needed—all the while trying to work out exactly how the development might best provide a secure—and sufficient—income.

It’s around lunchtime when I knock on her front door. The 86-year-old retired midwife peers at me beadily through her orange tinted glasses. “I’m technically blind and my hearing is poor,” she says matter-of-factly, showing me through to the lounge before handing me buttered toast and a mug of tea. “Without these”—she points at her lenses—“I wouldn’t be able to see you at all.” Under her neat grey crop, her expression glints with energy and amusement.

Parry was fifty-six when she moved to this neat-as-a-pin end bungalow. Her home abuts the panhandle of grassy land which forms one of the entrances to the area earmarked for the build. It’s called Jasmin Green.

“My passion is Jasmin Green because I live on it,” she explains. “Thirty years I’ve been here and when I moved in the

place was awful. Knives, glass everywhere. I've been burgled twenty times." She nods. "Once my granddaughter was in the small bedroom, and they tried to come in that way." However, the area has "come up a lot" in the last decade, she continues. It certainly isn't evident, driving around, that over one fifth of children in Birchwood are officially designated as living in poverty.

We head out for a wander across the Green. This isn't a dinky patch of velvety sward in the middle of a village. It's an extensive area of parkland dotted with mature native trees, intersected by paths that allow residents to walk to the shopping centre, health centre and pharmacy; a social- housing estate and private housing also border the land. Lincoln City Council had wanted to build on the Green. But, whether because of the expense or some other reason, no houses ever materialised.

Now, if all goes to plan—and there's many a slip—by 2024 a third of this area could be the site for, it's currently mooted, 70 or so custom-designed, socially rented homes for older residents. Every one of them will have been built thanks to a small community group made up entirely of volunteers. The task will be immense: it has taken over half a decade to reach the point where councillors are taking Birchwood Big Local's proposals seriously. And the barriers have been considerable. Most people on the partnership are in their 60s, 70s and 80s. Nobody had ever built one house before, let alone dozens. Nobody had ever tried to convince a council planning department that they could design, finance and manage a multi-million-pound build.

And to be fair, nobody—yet—quite knows if they can.



The partnership has been wise enough to employ well-qualified expertise to design and manage the upcoming build. Bob Ledger is the affable and recently retired director of housing and regeneration at Lincoln City Council; he has just taken on the role of project manager. As I discover, this is something of a turnaround.

Dapper in a stylish, pale-green tweed jacket, Ledger arrives at the Birchwood Big Local office after ploughing through snarled-up traffic in Lincoln. “I hate being late,” he says. He’s not late. But his willingness to drive right across the city to talk about how he first came across the Birchwood volunteers and their designs on Jasmin Green is, I assess, a mark of his respect for the partnership and how hard they have worked.

“Have they told you what our first meeting was like, in, I think it was, 2015?” he asks with a slight smile.

I’ve heard various versions of that meeting; taking the general temperature, it sounds like he may have—politely—put the group through the wringer.

“While admiring their ambition and aspiration, it seemed to me they didn’t have a process to get where they wanted,” says Ledger, diplomatically. “They were quite ambitious in what they wanted to achieve but hadn’t taken what seemed like the most rudimentary of steps, such as, maybe get a grant to pay for some of the initial work that needed doing.”

With a background in tenant participation, Ledger says his approach while employed by the council was to support the group, “But clearly it wasn’t my job to do it for them. I knew if I’d helped, it wouldn’t have been their scheme, it would have our scheme, and different.”

The years it has taken to get this far and the various challenges they’ve experienced along the way might have thrown a less persistent group off track. “Because they are



Eddie in Diamond Park

quite democratic in the way they approach things, it all does take a while, but that's their success isn't it? Because there's not this single person driving it," he reflects.

There are known risks to a slow pace on a big project, he points out. "Inevitably, impetus wanes. And people drop by the wayside. But one of the most significant things about this group is that the core players have been the same throughout."

Now, despite having been informed of progress at each stage, and agreeing to let Big Local take ownership of the land for the nominal sum of one pound, there are indications that the council is starting to feel wobbly.



Ledger thinks this is a bit of a cheek, given that the group has just secured £300K of grant funding, and the design of the development is going full-steam ahead. But clearly, there are still dangers to be navigated. The Homes England grant has been inexplicably delayed, which is "a concern," Ledger acknowledges. "Through me they've appointed architects, and that's over £20K of commitment. For a community group to risk that money... And let's put it in context. This will be a six-million-pound construction project led entirely by a community group. Not by paid workers—by a hundred per cent volunteers. A number of them are later in life... and there's considerable stress and anxiety in a project of this size."



"The council needs us as much as we need them," says Eddie Strengiel robustly, as he sips tea in the Active Nation leisure centre opposite the Big Local offices. Rain is belting down outside. Strengiel has been chair of the partnership from the off, and has weathered every storm that's hit the

development idea since it was first suggested to the group by the Community Land Trust.

Strengiel is the very picture of a retired military officer. Wearing a cornflower blue jumper, he has bright blue eyes that gleam out over a fine grey moustache. After time spent in the army, he became an independent financial advisor. He's been a Conservative councillor on Lincoln City Council and Lincolnshire County Council for the best part of thirty years; as well as chairing the partnership, he has fingers in a wide variety of civic pies. He is a man who likes to get things done.

As well as the council being keenly aware there are no free-to-use leisure facilities for the youth living in Birchwood, Strengiel points out, it also knows full well that the Big Local partnership won't be splashing out hundreds of thousands of pounds to buy and install any new equipment without having ongoing funds for maintenance.

"That's why we first planned all this housing," he says. "And," he continues, pleased with the niftiness of the scheme, "the housing will meet a local need too." He doesn't say it, but as a councillor he will be acutely aware that local authorities need to demonstrate that they are facilitating housing development in their area.

Right now, however, Strengiel is feeling, if not worried, then possibly slightly on edge. As mentioned by Ledger, the city council is currently cavilling about whether to extend the outline planning permission it granted Birchwood Big Local on the Jasmin Green site. The consent lasted two years and expires in October. It's a nail-biting moment, because there's a chance the partnership could find itself in receipt of a whacking Homes England grant—with no land to develop. "This is the third housing director we've had to deal with since we started," Strengiel says, a little wearily.

The council's uncertainty has arisen, I surmise, because it has taken such a long time for the volunteers to marshal their collective resources to make a high-quality grant application that will allow them to put in a fully surveyed, designed and costed planning bid for the funding. And as time has pitter-pattered on, the council has presumably been wondering whether the first brick will ever be laid.

The reality is, however, that the type of time-frame and deadline which local authorities can reasonably demand of commercial developers will never accommodate the manner in which community groups operate: volunteers will always take longer—sometimes much longer—than a professional outfit, particularly when embarking on a major project. They must absorb complex new information from scratch, develop understanding of issues they had never before encountered, find time to discuss and analyse the emerging options and, in a properly democratic set-up, consult and then vote on the preferred way forward. Everything slows right down. It requires a shift in expectations of pace. It requires patience.

Looking back on the years it has taken to get this far, does Strengiel ever get downhearted?

I'm pinioned by a brief, fierce stare, before he laughs. "No. I'm the eternal optimist!"



What will make this development, as Ledger put it, "their scheme", rather than an off-the-shelf commercial build plonked in the middle of a large expanse of grass, are the firmly expressed opinions and input of this group of resident volunteers who have learned how to make their views known. Their accumulated ages mean they have a lot of life experience to draw on.

When she was presented with the first outline plan for



the housing, Parry was not impressed—and said so. “They had them all looking outwards. I said ‘that’s not what you do to older people! You have them with front doors facing in, so they have someone to communicate with.’” Behind the orange lenses, there’s definitely an eye-roll going on. “And they changed that.” She sounds chuffed.

At the most recent meeting about the plans, she also insisted that accessibility should be designed-in from the start. “I’ve been in a wheelchair after a car accident for four months, and I explained in front of the whole meeting, I told them what I went through, and they wanted normal narrow doorways... honestly!” she huffs with exasperation. “I said ‘Please, are you going to make them accessible with wider doors?’ I said it really had to happen.” She glints mischievously. “I’m afraid I put my foot down.”

Another volunteer on the board, Yvonne Griggs, is concerned that the small sub-group that’s just formed to push ahead with planning how to maximise income from the development doesn’t get carried away with its own ideas—she wants them to keep the partnership involved. “I’m backing it, but I’m wanting answers. I’m not trusting everything,” she says. “It feels very daunting and a very big responsibility.”

Griggs, who is 70, has passionately championed the refurbishment of a small community play-area at the far edge of the Birchwood Big Local area. Diamond Park, as it’s known, is her baby, and she is determined that the focus on the development’s *raison d’être*—to bring home the bacon so Big Local can afford to maintain the play equipment in Diamond Park and, eventually, Jasmin Green—is not lost in the anticipated thrill of seeing the diggers arrive.

Decision-making at this level is a new experience for Griggs, who has learning difficulties, epilepsy and a stammer, and has “always been told I can’t do things.”

Her family background, she tells me, was tough. “Mum was a cleaner and a cafe worker, dad a plasterer. They split up when I was six.” In the 1950s, this made her an outsider. It’s a feeling I sense she may have struggled with for years, and which her participation in Big Local has gone some way to ease. But it’s taken time. “At first I thought Big Local was for snobby people and not for Birchwood people,” she says. “When I joined, they were not using me to my full potential.”

Griggs’ drive to transform Diamond Park for local children has, however, propelled her past others’ resistance and helped her break through her own natural reticence. And it has given her a new reason to get out on her mobility scooter and interact with people. Without volunteering for Big Local, she says, “I would probably be in a nursing home by now. My brain has had a sort of switch on. My doctors have said if I stop volunteering, I might become wheelchair-bound and not come out. So Big Local has given me a purpose. A life, if you like.”

Embarking on a project as ambitious as this—employing teams of professionals, running community consultations, taking on a massive mortgage and, finally, becoming responsible for delivering a major build—has plunged some partnership members into brand-new experiences. Parry remembers interviewing firms of architects. “I’d never interviewed people in my life,” she laughs. Her face lights up as she leans forward. “I found it such fun! And I found my knowledge was the same as other people’s... I could tell when they had a real interest and understood what we were wanting.

“And we had to present a plan to the council. That was a first for me as well.”

Was it daunting?

“Well,”—she smiles through her orange glasses—“I called it exciting!”



Just before he heads off, Bob Ledger observes that, “It is so safe *not* to do things like this. A scheme this size is a brave thing to do.

“Just by comparison,” he says wryly, “we have a desperate housing crisis as a nation, and there are councils who are not building at all, because they take the view that there is risk. And there is risk—I can’t protect the group from that. The fact that they are still going for it is the thing I admire about them, because they want to make a difference.”

Gill Hutchinson, the Big Local rep for the Birchwood area—an experienced community development professional employed to give light-touch advice and support to residents in the Big Local programme—is clearly proud of what these Birchwood residents have achieved. “I’ve probably been more scared than them at times,” she says. “The day they started talking about how much money they needed to borrow, I thought, my god, what have we done!

There have been many frustrations over the years, she says. “But I’ve never heard them want to give up. And they’ve never fallen out over it.”

Maybe it takes people in their later years to take a project of this size in their stride. They’ve seen so much in their lives. And they know that persistence wins out in the end if you just keep bugging on.

“I’m stubborn,” says Parry, again with that glint in her eye. “It’s going to take years for this to be done. It’s not going to be five minutes. But I’m not the sort of person to give up.”

There might be houses on Jasmin Green by 2024. Or not. It might take till 2025. Or 2026. Or longer. But I’d take a bet it’ll happen, one way or another.



Volunteer, Justine in Diamond Park



Aerial view of the Sankey Viaduct

Louise, Jeanne, Viki, Leah

Wargrave Big Local, Merseyside

UNLIKELY THOUGH IT MIGHT SEEM, the district of Wargrave, perched on the Merseyside boundary, is a place of world firsts. Twenty metres above the footpath that runs by Sankey Brook, intercity trains, rushing between two of England's great northern cities, traverse the nine high arches of the world's first major railway viaduct on what was once the world's first passenger rail line. This runs above the world's first canal, opened here in 1757 to service the sugar trade.

The Manchester to Liverpool line splits Wargrave from the only slightly larger town of Newton-le-Willows just to the north. Industry once favoured this area, offering skilled jobs and security for over 150 years. Until the late 1970s, the Sankey Sugar refinery stood on the banks of the Sankey Canal; here, as a little boy, the husband of Wargrave Big Local vice-chair, Jeanne Dentith, remembers sugar workers hurling processed sugar-cane waste—lumps of crunchy cinder toffee—over the fence for local children to cram their mouths with; sweet summer memories that resulted in lots of local tooth decay.

Here, too, was situated the evocatively named Vulcan Foundry, established in 1832 to make ironwork for the ever-expanding railways. On an extensive site to the south of Wargrave, Vulcan engineers soon began constructing the thundering locomotives that steamed across the globe; in World War II they switched to making tanks; in the company's final decades, its employees designed new models of diesel and electric engines.

"Everyone was employed, everyone had a job," says Louise Forshaw, chair of Wargrave Big Local, who grew up here in the 1970s and '80s. "My dad worked at the Vulcan. He made the trains. A lot of people's mums worked as well— my mum was a hairdresser, but lots of women worked in admin, in the offices. It was a community that was very secure."

It was when Forshaw was about 12 or 13 that she noticed the change. "That was when they closed the pit. Everyone had the placards. There was a lot of upset among my fellow pupils at school with the loss of industry." Down the road, a "big, proper working men's club" closed. "People just started to struggle, socially and financially," Forshaw recalls. "And people became a bit bitter."

Forshaw doesn't sound bitter herself, but, though she speaks softly, the intensity with which she describes her hometown's decline indicates her anger.

Her dad started up as a self-employed carpenter, and she makes it clear that their family was therefore better off than many. But Forshaw has a clear memory of Wargrave altered. "It became a place of deprivation," she says quietly. "Everyone was struggling. There was a lot of jealousy from people who couldn't get back into work. Some people emigrated to Australia and South Africa. It broke up families."

Today, not a single brick of the Vulcan Foundry still

stands. The last locomotive was made in 1970 and the works finally closed in 2002. Five years later every building was demolished. Now, hundreds of smart new houses stretch across the vast site, and developers are still building more.

There are pitifully few well-paid jobs in the area, so who is buying them, I wonder, as I gaze at the show home and marketing suite which, a placard declares, is open for business.

Commuters, Jeanne Dentith tells me, as she takes me on a tour of Wargrave. A former senior council worker who retired early after being offered redundancy, Dentith is a keen walker, but rain is threatening to dump on us, so we duck into her car. Parts of Wargrave, she explains, have become a dormitory town: the village is close to the M6 and M62, and two train stations plus a good service means it's 22 minutes into Manchester and only a shade longer to Liverpool. In years gone by, hundreds of men on bicycles would swoop through Wargrave's mail roads to clock in at the Vulcan site, but now the flow of labour and expertise is directed out of the area. There's nothing here for educated people with skills. Why would they stick around?

This is how communities built up over decades gradually disperse and break down. Over one fifth of children in Wargrave are officially designated as living in poverty. Almost the same proportion of the population has a limiting long-term illness. The working-class community that Forshaw grew up in has been, she says, "very poorly treated" since the wealth brought by heavy industry disappeared.

Finding ways to support and enrich this community where she was raised, where she worked for ten years as a teaching assistant, where her family still lives and where her three-year-old granddaughter is growing up, has always been Forshaw's driving motivation for being involved in Big Local.

But she had a bumpy start. “The people involved in the early stages, I don’t think they had Wargrave in their hearts,” she says. “I don’t think they understood the needs of the place really—they were thinking on a bigger level. They wanted to do more showy things.”

After a year of going to meetings and ending up distinctly unimpressed, Forshaw left. “Afterwards, I did think about it a lot. I dwelt on it. Then I got made redundant, so I tentatively went back.”

Local rep Sian Jay remembers her reluctance. “When she came back, she just dipped her toe in. She wasn’t sure. She bided her time. Gradually her confidence grew. Whenever the partnership might have been becoming complacent, it was her voice that you’d hear. And over time, she’d speak up. She became more comfortable with hearing her own voice.”

When the chair stepped down, Forshaw was almost unanimously voted in. She had by then demonstrated “her charm, and her thoughtful approach,” says Jay.

Right now, Forshaw and Dentith are excited—as well as, I sense, more than a touch relieved—that a major project they’ve been working on is definitely set to launch in the autumn. Decorators are about to start work at a disused building on The Trees social housing estate; this pair have grafted hard for 12 months to be allowed to develop the building as a community centre for all Wargrave residents to use.

“A dynamic hub at the heart of the community to develop a stronger, healthier and greener Wargrave’—that’s our strapline for it. It took blood, sweat and tears, a whole day, for everyone to talk about it and write it,” says Forshaw. She and Dentith smile at each other. Signing on the dotted line— they are leasing the building—has clearly taken them on quite a journey. “I wrote the business plan,” Dentith says. “It took me

WARGRAVE COMMUNITY HUB



Louise and Jeanne outside the community hub

a month. I'd not done one before. It wasn't easy. But I worked my way through it."

Until now, Wargrave Big Local has been based out of a local community centre, but room hire is pricey, and I get the impression that the Big Local partnership's relationship with its managers has on occasion been fraught. Having its own base will substantially change what the Big Local here can offer to Wargrave residents, says Forshaw. "It'll be great because we'll have that connection with people—they can just walk in. There'll be a marketing/admin/office manager person virtually full-time from the start, but making it a place of support will be down to us. One of our visions of the hub is for it to be a place that the community can grow. So if a group of people come to us saying, 'We don't like how they've built on our green space,' or whatever, we can say, 'Here's a room, organise yourselves, and we can empower you to kick off about it.'"

Insisting that Big Local money is spent on helping Wargrave residents, rather than on vanity projects or activities advocated by local politicians, has required, at times, nerves of steel. I ask if either woman has ever felt vulnerable in the roles of chair and vice-chair. At first, both shake their heads. Then Dentith grimaces. "I suppose there was the loco project."

The memory evidently isn't a happy one. Dentith sighs.

"Another community group wanted to buy the last locomotive built by the Vulcan Works. We didn't fund it, but it was a lot of nastiness."



Wargrave Big Local is not a showboating, look-how-great-we-are endeavour. That's not its style. Carefully identifying, thoughtfully commissioning, then consistently supporting services to help the most vulnerable people living in the area has been the partnership's *modus operandi*.

Forshaw has used her deep knowledge of the needs in her community to champion support for people that many in society cannot look at, or even acknowledge. Self-harm is so discomfiting that it is hard to advocate that people who do it are worthy of help. But, after hearing (through her decade of working with vulnerable children in schools) that it was “really quite prevalent” in Wargrave—“and my kids tell me it is, too”—two years ago, Forshaw quietly began working to ensure that Wargrave Big Local set up a peer-led, self-harm support service.

Initially, this wasn’t a popular cause, she tells me. Self-harm frightens people. It repels many. There is incomprehension, blame and a distinct lack of sympathy for people who choose to physically hurt themselves. She has had to advocate carefully to get the partnership to support funding it, and it has been slow work to get the word out locally that the group exists at all. But she has pressed on.

Known as After Silence, the group started tentatively, with just a couple of people and no idea if more would come. Now up to a dozen attend. The age range runs from 16 upwards, Forshaw explains. “There’s a lady in her 50s, and we did have a man in his 60s who had been self-harming for 40-odd years.”

Local resident Viki Guy, 33, meets me at the community centre where she has been leading the group since it began. She looks tired. It’s the summer holidays and she’s been looking after her kids. Sitting next to her is Leah Prescott, 18, who first made contact with After Silence last November, after a suicide attempt. It seems incredible: she’s bursting with youth and energy. Leah lives with her family in Earlstown, on the edge of the Wargrave area, and volunteers as co-leader of a self-harm support group that runs on Thursday evenings in Warrington.

It's a sticky day and Viki is wearing a T-shirt with short sleeves. Her right arm is heavily scarred, her left arm slightly less so. She doesn't hide them. Despite the heat, Leah wears long sleeves and keeps pulling the edges down over her hands. Their experiences of other people's reactions to the fact of their self-harming could make you weep. When Viki explains that, "I know people who've gone for stitches and they've not given them anaesthetic," I'm at a loss for words.

It takes bravery just to turn up to the group for the first time, Viki explains. She tends to speak, sometimes several times, with prospective participants to get to know them first, and always meets a newbie at the front door, so nobody has to enter a room full of strangers on their own.

This is care of the most meticulous kind, offered with a nuanced grasp of individual need that could probably only come from someone who has lived experience of an apparently destructive and undoubtedly scary behaviour which society struggles to accept. The loneliness felt by people who self-harm is one of the most damaging aspects of the behaviour, Leah explains. She began to cut herself when she was 15 "as a coping mechanism."

Viki was 13, and her self-harm started in direct response to early trauma. She gives a very small, apologetic smile, nods slightly, and stops talking.

I choose not to ask more.

Hurting themselves, both women assure me, is primarily a way of staying alive; it is not an indication that someone is going to kill themselves. It is the mental health issues that frequently accompany self-harm, and the isolation felt by people who hurt themselves but cannot say a single word in search of comfort, that can lead to more drastic action, both women explain. Viki and Leah each have a serious mental

health diagnosis, for which they have had much-delayed and shamefully inadequate treatment.

What is the driver or them to run these groups?

“Because I’d want someone to be there for me,” says Leah instantly. “In November, a few weeks after I tried to take my life, I came here, and it helped me build myself back up again. It was not being alone any more.”

“I like seeing how people come back and see how the numbers grow. And see how they grow in confidence—look at Leah!” says Viki.

Education about self-harm, why people do it and how to react, needs to start in schools, both agree.

Viki and Leah are not aiming to stop people from self-harming, though if someone decides they want to try, they will support them through it. These two young women are trying to provide a place of safety for people who are terrified of where self-harm might take them. “I’ve wondered how far I’ll go, wondered how deep the next cut’s going to be, how bad the burn’s going to be—that’s scared me,” says Viki. They offer the understanding and compassionate kindness that many people who self-harm find lacking in their interactions with friends, family and professionals.

People who come to the group, then, mostly continue to self-harm. So how do you assess whether a group like this is a success?

“It’s just so needed,” Forshaw says. “There’s such stigma attached to self-harm, but I sense it’s reducing a bit for the people who attend. They do crafts and talking therapies and meditation, and our local GP surgeries all know about it and have referred people.”

For Viki and Leah, the courage needed simply to survive the pain of how society views their behaviours runs through

every word they utter like writing through a stick of rock. These women are fighting not just for their own futures. Leah has enrolled on a university access course starting in the autumn and is planning to do a psychology degree so she can better support others. Despite lurches in her mental health, Viki is determined to continue to look after her two children, aged six and 12. Soon, she knows, she'll have to tell her daughter why her arms are scarred. That will take courage, too.

Staying alive is already success, and these two women are doing far better than that. Helping other people to emerge from a pit of loneliness, where nobody has been able to reach them for years, is of immense importance in communities where mental health issues are poorly supported and resourced.



In a society which condemns and shuns certain people and doesn't see their needs as worthy of care, it may be that Forshaw has found a very specific purpose. "I try to find the things that no-one's done before, where there's a stigma attached," she says. "When I advertised the self-harm group, I could sense the partnership's embarrassment. It was a hard slog at first and I did it on my own, because no one on the partnership supported it. I realised how it felt to be in a minority."

How did it feel?

She laughs. "Awful. Not a feeling I was used to."

Sometimes, perhaps, courage is about keeping your goals in view, and having the guts to keep at it even when results might be slow, or involve the emotional turmoil of having to face your own shortcomings, or demand that you deal with disagreement or conflict.

"You have to be persistent. I've learnt that," Forshaw says.

“Because if you’re not on it, and if you don’t move, it’s dead, it stops. The things you want to keep going, you keep chipping away at. And it’s hard.” She pauses. “We just keep reiterating our message that we are a group of residents and we make all the decisions. And we are not influenced by anything.”

“Except the good of Wargrave,” says Dentith firmly.

“We just do our projects, quietly, not to get on the front of the paper,” says Forshaw. “I like small change, small impacts. Over time, it builds up.”

“It’s going to take years for this to be done. It’s not going to be five minutes. But I’m not the sort of person to give up.”

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 of local transformation, described as ‘perhaps’ the most important and ambitious experiment in community development ever undertaken in the UK.

In every area, it’s the people who live there that are making change happen, overcoming challenges both personal and public to improve things in their community. Travelling across England as Local Trust’s first journalist-at-large, Louise Tickle met many people who were doing brilliant things and in many cases the odds seemed stacked against them, but that rarely discouraged them. In this essay, Tickle tells their stories, exploring the experiences that have shaped them, their motivations and the incredible results that can be achieved when people build the courage to succeed.

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 978-1-9162638-0-2



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