

LGA Conference Fringe Event: How can community-led approaches build thriving neighbourhoods.

22/10/24 in Harrogate.

Delivered by: Local Trust, New Local and The National Network for Neighbourhood Improvement.

Speakers on the Panel were:

Cllr Jane Ashworth OBE Leader, Stoke-on-Trent Council

Patrick Melia OBE Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council

Anna Francis Co-director, The Portland Inn Project

Matt Leach Chief Executive, Local Trust

Jessica Studdert (Chair) Interim Chief Executive, New Local

Anna Francis was asked to prepare a 5 minute presentation answering the question:

How have The Portland Inn Project taken the lead on neighbourhood renewal and what has this meant for the role of the council in Stoke-on-Trent?

Presentation Notes: I am going to speak about how we at The Portland Inn Project have taken the lead on neighbourhood renewal and to discuss the important partnership working that enables us to do what we need to do to make our neighbourhood in Stoke on Trent a safer, healthier and happier place for residents to live.

The neighbourhood where I live and work, the Portland Street Area of Stoke on Trent was one of the designated Pathfinder housing renewal programme areas, a collapsed government regeneration scheme that ended in 2011.

The collapse of the scheme saw families living next door to boarded up houses. The city council, having purchased 35 properties across 5 streets, needed to be imaginative about what to do to try to fix the residual issues left in the neighbourhood, and announced the £1 home scheme. I don't have time to go into a lot of detail about that -

But as a quick overview on how I come to live and work in the area; as an artist with a social arts practice, interested in the impact of regeneration on communities, my partner and I applied for and were selected for the scheme. In buying a £1 house, you were taking on a £30,000 loan to see the house refurbished.

Three stipulations that it is worth mentioning about the scheme:

- there was a cap on household income – meaning that though you needed to demonstrate that you could afford the loan repayments, this housing was designated for lower income people
- households had to commit to live in the houses for 10 years
- and had to contribute to community development.

That last one, as an artist working across participatory and co-creative practices felt like something I could offer a lot to.

Soon after moving in I began a creative project as a way to speak to neighbours about what worked and what needed work in the area – those of us working within community development contexts will recognise these questions as important when taking an asset based community development approach.

Within weeks of the project beginning (from a tent on the nearby green space, because the pub, shop and community centre were all boarded up) the community let me know loud and clear that what we really needed was a permanent space of our own to programme community activity and come together. So Listening to that:

We began the Portland Inn Project in 2016 – to test if the community would like to take over the abandoned pub building – and as a way to start to be more in charge of the health of the neighbourhood and how our community is talked about, as around that time the only media stories about our neighbourhood were very negative – focusing on Brexit, drug problems and the collapsed regeneration pathfinder. We started a process to aim to take over and renovate the abandoned pub.

I'm skipping through years of work now, but In 2018 once the asset transfer of the pub building had been agreed with Stoke City Council, we tested what a community co-building process might look like. We built a temporary space to work from, and for 4 weeks we ran a programme of activity, but importantly we set up an architecture school to redesign the pub building on the street with the community.

Our architect took the findings from that programme into the Capital Development Plan which was submitted for planning permission and granted in December 2020. Initial estimates at the beginning of fundraising for the building were up to £800,000 but Covid, Brexit and other external factors have pushed the prices of everything, including our capital project up – and at the start of our build in October 2023 the estimated cost was 1.6 million, which we have raised. We are 12 months into the project now, due for completion summer 2025.

In 2018 we became one of 15 areas Nationwide to be a part of the Creative Civic Change programme – delivered by Local Trust with other partners; a programme of funding and support to enable communities to shape, lead and commission creative interventions to make positive change where they live. Importantly this programme enabled us as a community to set our own priorities (one of the things which I wanted to emphasise as being fundamental in how to support communities – is in supporting them to identify and then act on their own priorities).

The 3 year funding was a real game changer for us, enabling us to become an established organisation, and to be able to run regular creative programmes which support our community. It also allowed us to really look at how our community can formally contribute to decision making processes, and led to the setting up of a Community decision making panel in 2018. Usually via a bi monthly meeting with food, we look at setting priorities, discuss urgencies and programme together – voting on anything which needs a decision. This is not like a traditional residents association – any community member can come.

This sits alongside the bi-monthly services meeting which has been running since 2017, which brings together services that we work with in the area, for example, the police and

various departments from the council including for example: empty homes, anti-social behaviour, and environmental teams:

These meetings are always action focused, with different members of the meeting identifying actions that need to be taken as a result of issues raised by the community and then individuals owning the action, which is followed up on later. The meetings ensure that the services can do their jobs more effectively, targeting shrinking resources and allowing us to do our job in the neighbourhood too.

But as we know, with that shrinking resource for those services there are significant Challenges to surmount, and I want to finish by talking through some of those:

Communities need to fundraise greater amounts in order to be able to work on projects like this one – as the cost of everything has risen.

Funders are more risk averse, but to share our experience: when we first met The Big Lottery in 2018 to tell them about what we hoped to do, they told us it would be a long road to get us to a point of being fundable – as we looked so risky at that point, with so much need in the neighbourhood and a true lack of community infrastructure. One of the biggest hurdles was in getting the lease agreement for the Asset transfer of the building sorted out, and for the terms of the lease to be acceptable to funders – Councils can play a greater role in smoothing the way for communities that are ready to do the work by working to unlock hold ups – but also in being a great advocate for the work – which can make such a difference to the funder – yes in 2018 we looked unfundable – but the partnership between our organisation and community, the council and the funder has been imperative in seeing this move forwards.

As budgets for councils shrink communities like ours where there are a multitude of varying challenges, can look so 'hard to reach' that it can be tempting to focus resource in areas where it is easy to see results. What our project demonstrates is that through partnership working, and targeting resource where communities tell you they need it – it is possible to go from a standing start (a community with no social or physical community infrastructure) to an award-winning development project making demonstrable and measurable change for a really challenged neighbourhood.

Finally I want to say something about funding for projects like this: so much funding has a short time frame for delivery – and communities might not always be in a position to access funds – part of the job of the council, and which I know to be underway in Stoke, is to look at how the communities with the greatest need can be supported to access the funding that might be available to them – and that might be in the early stage work of supporting communities to come together.

We are retrofitting the Portland Inn and ensuring it is redesigned to be a sustainable community arts building for now and for the future: making decisions about the building that will make it beautiful but also cheaper and more sustainable to run, and truly representative of our place and our people. This is what the community spoke of needing, and so we have seen amazing buy in from neighbours – if you find out what people want, and support them to do it, they will want to be involved, but what works in my neighbourhood, may not work elsewhere – the key is in supporting communities to define what they want and need.