

Generating CHANGE

COMMUNITY LINKS

- To generate change.
- To tackle causes not symptoms, to find solutions not palliatives.
- To recognise that we all need to give as well as to receive.
- To appreciate that those who experience a problem understand it best and to help the smaller voices to be heard.
- To act local but think global, to teach but never stop learning.
- To celebrate the diversity that enriches our society and challenge the inequalities that diminish us all.
- To collaborate, because it isn't some of our activities that change complex lives, but the sum of them all.
- To be ambitious for the work that we believe in – but to build a network, not an empire.
- To be driven by dreams and judged on delivery.
- Never to do things for people but to guide and support, to train and enable.
- To simply inspire.

At the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, we have a long history of supporting community development work, helping to establish the emerging sector in the 1960s and 1970s by providing some of the necessary funding and advocacy. Our work supporting Community Links was one of our first ventures in this realm. We are pleased to have supported it at several key stages in its development and of the force that it has become within the sector.

Reflecting on the past to prepare for the future is a valuable tool. This 40th anniversary allows us a timely occasion to reflect on the journey of Community Links, and an opportunity to learn from the methods and core principles outlined in this book.

At the heart of the organisation remains an unshakeable commitment to local insight. Community Links is a remarkable example of an organisation that has a significant national presence, whilst remaining local to Newham, East London. In part, this has been achieved by consistently placing people at the forefront of its work, recognising early on that trust is essential to working within a community. This is an ethos that we can all learn from. By taking this approach, Community Links has been able to identify and tackle root causes of social issues, rather than symptoms, merely putting bandages on wounds.

The local work in Newham informs the “national work” of Community Links; the broader, more political branch of lobbying and advocacy work. This dual-action technique is a consistent reminder that we should not work locally without understanding the wider national context, nor should we try to tackle problems nationally without understanding how they play out at the local level.

In concluding, David Robinson highlights the value of working in partnership; within an organisation, within a community, with funders, between sectors, even with people that might have an opposing viewpoint or approach to one’s own. By doing so, we can connect different perspectives, different skills and assets. Partnership is the fundamental tenet of our work at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. I would further emphasise that there is value to communication and collaboration within our sector. As evident from this book, there are lessons that we can learn from each other, from our histories and different experiences.

This book details a number of Community Links’ national projects. One notable example is its work in the early 1980s on unsafe tower blocks. The campaign resulted in 144,000 homes being demolished or made safe. This emphasises that the horrifying events of June 14th 2017 were predicted decades ago and underlines the crucial importance of organisations like Community Links in supporting local communities to campaign on vitally important issues.

We are grateful for this unique review of the strength and journey of an organisation that we have supported, on and off, over 40 years. There are certainly lessons that we will take away regarding how best to nurture and support initiatives. In particular, its story speaks to the value of taking calculated risks and pushing boundaries. In the first chapter, David Robinson asks,

“Who would close us down first if we tried to do the same today?”

This book demonstrates that each decade has brought its own trials and unique challenges to Community Links. The current backdrop is continuing austerity and increasing pressure on social organisations with ever-limited resources. More than ever, we need to remember and speak for the value of a community-centred approach to development and problem-solving. In these difficult times, Community Links is a voice for community. We hope that despite or perhaps because of this difficult context, this book inspires you to do and support great work.

Andrew Barnett

Director
Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (UK Branch)

For four decades now Community Links has demonstrated something which ought to be obvious, but often is not. That big national change is not the exclusive province of Whitehall or Westminster. That some of the best ideas can be found outside of think-tanks and universities. And that people who experience problems in our society are usually best placed to produce the solutions.

Indeed, it was the everyday insights of people living in tower blocks in the East End, of people attempting to move on from the informal economy, of people on the sharp end of benefits sanctions, which in each case was the foundation on which Community Links was able to build both local and national change, and the stories of how that happened are set out in this book.

Connecting our neighbourhood action to the national policy framework was never simply desirable, but always an imperative. From the beginning, the declared intention of Community Links was to tackle causes not symptoms, find solutions not palliatives. Community Links asked the big question, what can be done not just to tackle the problems we see around us, but also prevent the problems arising in the first place? Our answers, including the concepts of Deep Value Relationships, and Early Action, are today influencing public service design, legislative change, and funding practice right across the country.

And so, over these four decades, Community Links has shown what can be achieved by a small East London community organisation willing to act local but think global. We hope you will enjoy reading this book, and that it will encourage and inform your own action.

It will certainly encourage and inform Community Links ourselves as we move forward into the next phase of our work, in partnership with Catch22. We will do our very best to remain true to the spirit of the last 40 years: telling stories which resonate because they are authentic, never criticising without a solution, never giving praise without a challenge, and always building unlikely coalitions of the willing and the brave.

Steve Wylter OBE
Chair, Community Links

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David Robinson

Community Links, Without Borders

Taking stock

I have no idea how many people, adults and children, we with have worked with over the last 40 years, but it would be many tens of thousands over many hundreds of thousands of hours.

We have welcomed Prime Ministers, Chancellors and three members of the royal family, publicly and privately, and some more than once.

We have met the bailiffs on various occasions and endured several arson attacks, two major fires, a devastating road accident, numerous burglaries and an armed robbery.

Mostly what we do is one to one or in small groups helping people in east London to overcome the obstacles in their lives, to thrive independently and to contribute collectively.

Sometimes we encounter wider issues, common concerns, and we bring people together. We develop practical responses unlimited by geography or a rigid operating model and we share the solutions further afield.

This book is a collection of accounts about those wider projects. It is not a history of our organisation. If it were, the principal characters would be people like Stan Harris and Kevin Jenkins, both part of the founding group and hugely important leaders ever since, Stan as chair of our trustees for 25 years and Kevin as director of our children's and youth work programme.

Even within these narrow confines it isn't complete; there wasn't space for everything and everyone but big birthdays are a time for reviewing the big picture and for taking stock. Here, at 40, we look back, we reflect and we look ahead.

Our journey began on a bus

Newham in the late 1970s still had docks but very little trade. Huge cargo ships were once tethered three deep on either side of the Royals – the biggest enclosed docks in the world. Now the heavy cranes hanging high across the vacant water seldom moved.

Related industries had thrived for generations in the vicinity but they were relocating quickly or dying a slow death. Only Tate & Lyle found new ways to flourish in an increasingly barren landscape.

The people remained but regeneration had yet to begin and unsurprisingly Newham was at the bottom, or very close to the bottom, of all the league tables – high unemployment, low educational attainment, poor housing, and dismal prospects.

A group of us, mostly 16- and 17-year-olds, formed around the loose idea that we might do something that was constructive, useful and fun. Kevin was then a local sixth former. He would go on to lead our children's work with enormous skill, dedication and energy for more than four decades.

Others were also to remain involved for many years. Sandy Davies, for example, the Principal of Education Links, our now independent alternative provision free school, was another early member of the group.

We'd heard interesting things about a Play Bus in Islington and tried to copy the idea running some events, raising £360 and spending it all on an ageing Routemaster. We unscrewed the seats, sold them and bought some art materials, knocked in some benches, a couple of moveable tables and even a used caravan toilet, although thankfully no one ever used it again. Second-hand games, a stair gate, a sand-pit and dressing up clothes were all donated.

We were too young to drive, so an exceptionally dedicated social worker called Mike Lucas, an enthusiastic driving instructor called Pat Woods and volunteers from Plaistow Bus Garage were recruited to take the Bus to regular sites in holiday times, evenings and weekends. From here we ran play sessions and youth activities typically involving 120 to 140 young people every time.

Lighting and even an erratic and feeble heating system would suck the batteries dry on cold, dark winter afternoons. Thirty 9- and 10-year-olds, maybe more, would be needed to push start us back to our borrowed home in the Council depot. As the engine juddered into life and the bus wobbled down the road, all 30 cheering children, maybe more, would fall on top of one another on the icy tarmac.

Who would close us down first if we tried to do the same today?

Somehow the project survived, indeed thrived. Why? Because in essence it worked. Kids came. Parents got involved. Communities cooperated. Relationships materialised.

Certainly there was a simplicity about what we might now call the “business model” but I don’t think our priorities were wrong. A recent study by the World Bank and others split small businesses in West Africa into three groups. The first was a control, the second was given conventional “business training”, the third received “personal initiative” training. The psychologically stronger group performed significantly better than the others.

Likewise we got stronger. Bigger things happened. Community Links had begun.

By the end of the 1970s we had a permanent base as well as the Bus, a tiny lock-up shop in East Ham, and a sharper sense of purpose: “We all need help at some time in our lives, we all have something to contribute. Community Links will work on developing practical new ways of tackling our local problems and involve the whole community in the process.”

At first there was no expectation that any of this activity would be of interest or value beyond east London but word began to spread, people visited from elsewhere and it gradually dawned that some of the learning might be useful to others. Might we aspire to be a national organisation?

The question was more philosophical than practical. Most of the organisations that we admired at the time and to some extent sought to emulate – the Young Volunteer Force Foundation (subsequently renamed the Community Development Foundation, recently wound up), Make Children Happy (also wound up) or CSV (recently renamed Volunteering Matters) – began with a national purpose and reached down. Our origins were different, but it wasn’t impossible to imagine that we might grow sideways and similarly deposit activities in other localities. Policy-makers would now call this “scaling up”, and the issue that they wrestle with today is the one that we first encountered more than 30 years ago – essentially, how do you maintain fidelity to a successful model under different conditions when results depend on something as personal and as individual as human relationships?

We decided that plonking down in Glasgow or Birmingham a project that was conceived, honed and, in every sense, owned in Canning Town or Custom House probably wouldn’t work and definitely wouldn’t exploit the unique local assets, the distinctive experiences and the special talents which had made the Bus, despite its multiple flaws and inadequacies, a successful exercise in community development.

That didn’t mean, however, that there was nothing useful to be done beyond the limits of the borough. We talked about how the London Hospital just down the road met local needs day in, day out, but also built out from that experience to learn more, to research and invent and to teach. Here it wasn’t a question of whether the hospital was local or national. It was clearly local and national. The relationship was symbiotic – one fed off the other.

We came to see in our own field that the brave pioneering, bottom-up approaches of some of the old settlements like Cambridge House, Toynbee Hall or Blackfriars offered more useful inspiration than the top-down national charities. Taking risks, developing new ideas and spreading them was deep in their DNA. “Fear not to sow because of the birds” ran the embroidered maxim above the hearth in the home of Samuel Barnett, Toynbee’s founder, more than 100 years ago.

Statement of purpose

“To generate change. To tackle causes not symptoms, find solutions not palliatives. To recognise that we all need to give as well as to receive and to appreciate that those who experience a problem understand it best. To act local but think global, teach but never stop learning. To distinguish between the diversity that enriches our society and the inequalities that diminish it. To grow – but all to build a network not an empire. To be driven by dreams, judged on delivery. To never do things for people but to guide and support, to train and enable, to simply inspire.”

Local and national became the basis of our operating model – developing and delivering first-class services in and with our local community whilst also using that experience to help practitioners and influence policy-makers further afield. Local delivery would always occupy more than 90% of our staff team and the overwhelming majority of our budget, but the mix, and the synergy between the two, was to be at the heart of an approach that was captured in our “Statement of Purpose” and that has underpinned our work ever since.

Alongside the docks, and of course the excellent football team, Newham is probably best known for Stratford's Theatre Royal. Its finely renovated Victorian façade is now inscribed with the words of its moving spirit, the rebellious and profoundly influential Joan Littlewood: "My life is built on the rock of change".

At first glance the idea of change as a permanent underpinning for the life's work of an individual or an organisation seems almost contradictory, but just as it once drove Joan, it still drives Community Links. "To generate change" reads the top line of our Statement. Change in the lives of those with whom we work and change in the systems, structures and cultures that disadvantage some and not others.

What is "national work"?

The projects which are remembered in this little book are very varied but all are about changing something that could work much better to the benefit of us all. Local MP and former government minister Stephen Timms has called this outlook a "restless pursuit". Sometimes that pursuit has been contentious and combative, often willing and collaborative but always rooted in the lived experience of Community Links and the people who come through our doors seeking help.

We are not a think tank. We don't have the expertise of a university or the resources of a big consultancy. We do have, if not uniquely then certainly unusually, the wisdom of experience topped up every day. It is this precious asset that informs the choices we make about the issues we pursue and about the ways that we pursue them.

At first we didn't have a word for it. The National Tower Blocks Network and Action Match were just two more projects, alongside children's play schemes, the Pensioners Group and the Women's Advice Service.

As Community Links got bigger, separate staff teams and management forums were needed and it was logical to distinguish between the Local and the National.

A range of titles have been tried over the years: At first "National" seemed a bit grand for a handful of projects, so we tried various permutations of Publications, Policy, Development, Consultancy and Research. In the twenty noughties when the work programme was bigger than it had ever been we settled on Links UK. As the team contracted alongside the wider contraction of Community Links in more recent years we have reverted to the Policy moniker, although the brief remains wider than this title implies. In this book we will describe the work as National because every project covered here is rooted in east London but has ambitions which extend beyond the purely local; it is Community Links, work without borders.

Importantly, "national work" at Community Links is not another way of saying "public affairs". It is not about our producer interests and not focused on promoting or protecting our organisation. These are necessary but different functions. Like our colleagues working on our local projects, our work without borders is focused on delivery and on generating change.

Big or small, we have always used the assets around us to respond to the needs on our doorstep. Being serious about listening and learning, about real change, and about involving everybody in the process involves surrendering fidelity to a fixed typology. Sometimes a practical service is the most effective response, sometimes it's a campaign, an event, a product. Sometimes it's a hybrid and sometimes (like We Are What We Do) it's something that defies all the existing categories. Whatever it is, if it reaches beyond east London we think of it as within the purview of this team.

In the early 1980s, for example, there were two issues repeatedly presented at our open advice sessions and for which there were no simple answers. The first concerned the tower blocks – Newham had more than any other housing authority, many of them were overcrowded, damp or unsafe, and most were unsuitable places for growing families.

Guided by the insights of tenants, we developed practical services in and around tower blocks but this wasn't an adequate response when the blocks themselves were fundamentally unsound. The Newham Tower Blocks Campaign emerged. As it became evident that demolition was the only long-term answer, it also became increasingly obvious that the government would need to be involved and that tower blocks in other places were equally problematic. The Newham issue couldn't be fully addressed without a national approach, so the National Tower Blocks Network was set up. That blocks were then demolished in Birmingham, Glasgow and Manchester was the very welcome consequence but not the objective when Community Links set out on this work. Tragically, that work is now hideously relevant again as the inquiry into the Grenfell Tower disaster begins to unfold.

The second issue concerned Asian women who were experiencing domestic violence. It wasn't that there was necessarily more abuse in these families than any other, but the Asian community here was growing very fast and the existing advice services, including our own, were not ready to deal with different languages and especially different cultural expectations. Legal advice about separation or court orders was not, initially at least, a relevant or helpful response.

Community Links Advice worker Su Bhuhi began to draw together some of the women who were trapped in abusive relationships but felt entirely dependent on the man, and especially on the extended family, who largely supported him. These conversations led to

a support group, then a network of support groups, some training and, ultimately, an advice service run for and by the women. By now the initial group had become a separately constituted charity – Apna Ghar – based at Community Links and substantially supported by the bigger organisation, but run for and by the women themselves.

When the service expanded to include a 24-hour telephone line it was no longer just used by women who could walk to the Centre. Should it then become a national project? One of the major sponsors of the work, Barclays Capital, were eager to support such a development. They helped to test out the feasibility and devise a plan and they even offered a tempting funding package, but Apna Ghar decided to stay local. Its services were nothing if not personal. There were no advantages for the women of east London in going national, lots of risks and anyway a service in a distant city would be better delivered by women who lived there. Thirty-five years on, Apna Ghar, now called Aanchal, has been independent of Community Links for many years. It still thrives with Su (now Su Bhuhi MBE) at the helm, and although no woman is turned away its focus remains on London and on Newham in particular.

The Tower Blocks Campaign became part of our national work and features in this book (chapter 2) because the issues it addressed could not be resolved without looking further afield. Aanchal, though equally pioneering, is not included in this collection because the power to make the change wasn't somewhere else; it was in the family and very close to home.

There are no instructions on the bottom of the box for this kind of work. The projects in our national portfolio have been pieced together from the available assets. They look different and the theories of change have all been individual, but a set of common core principles has remained consistent over time:

The common core

Essentially all our national work ...

- 1) Starts with local insight.
- 2) Is shaped in response to local needs and assets – form follows function.
- 3) Seeks to generate a change that will benefit our community.
- 4) Goes wherever it may take us, invariably outside of our own organisation and outside of east London.
- 5) Supports progress everywhere but always expects to feel the impact where the job began.

These principles have played out in many forms:

- 1) As we learnt with the tower blocks work, government action, local or national, is sometimes essential. Recent and current work on benefit sanctions is another clear example. Community Links advisers cannot prevent the distress and destitution caused by the random and unjust application of benefit sanctions without changing the policy, but relevant policies don't all reside in government so sometimes our policy fire must be directed elsewhere.

In 2013 we noted that we could only manage the queue for our advice services by reducing need, but we could not divert resources into prevention without abandoning the most desperate. We concluded that we couldn't resolve this dilemma without persuading major independent funders to provide additional funding for earlier action. This became a major focus for our work. When the Big Lottery Fund agreed and made early

action one of its three key priorities at the start of 2017, it opened up important opportunities for Community Links and for our service users. Big Society Capital and the City Bridge Trust are the latest major funders to adopt a similar focus. A further 60-plus funders are now in membership of the Early Action Funders Alliance which we started in 2015.

This huge expansion in independent funding for early action, like many other policy changes that have started here, works well for our community and it improves lives across the UK. The benefit is everywhere and not least for funders who recognise two bangs for their buck:

“Community Links always seek to maximise the return for beneficiaries and funders, and the insights from their work have an impact both in their community and across the UK ... we are constantly impressed”

said Dawn Austwick, Chief Executive, Big Lottery Fund in March 2017.

- 2) Sometimes the necessary outcome isn't about policy, but a new service or even a new product. We Are What We Do, for example, began from considering how volunteering had changed at Community Links over our first 25 years. Those insights led us into behavioural change and the product-focused approach of what ultimately became Shift.
- 3) Occasionally, the local insights from our day-to-day activity haven't been about individual problems. Action Match, for instance, began from the experience of raising funding for our front-line services, and the Early Action Task Force (EATF) from thinking about an operating environment that so often obstructs rather than supports the preventative approach that is so important to Community Links.

- 4) Community groups notoriously reinvent. Henry Ford didn't use a faithful facsimile of the first wheel on the Model T but nor did he need to reinvent the concept. Principles travel, lessons can be adapted, protocols can be taught and ideas can be shared. As we sought to learn from others we realised that we also had learning to share and that there was benefit for everyone, including ourselves, in aggregating knowledge. Publications and events became another important part of our national work, with leading projects like the Ideas Annuals or Chain Reaction or, most recently, the Gallery of Case Studies which is being compiled by the Early Action Task Force. In all this work we don't claim that every featured idea is brand new, ours or anybody else's. Nor do we say that these are the only examples or even the best ones. We just say, “here is a useful story; we've learnt from it; we think you might too. Now tell us yours.”

This book

Attribution is difficult. We have tried to neither over claim nor under claim for achievements in this book. Every chapter is built around the comments of others, so hopefully there is at least a measure of objectivity but in the end these are personal judgements. I don't think it is ever possible in our kind of work to say that we, and we alone, achieved a certain outcome. I do think it should be possible to say that without our contribution, maybe alongside others more or less important, but without our contribution it would not have happened, or at least would not have happened when it did or how it did. We don't need to know that our work is unique, and it shouldn't be exclusive, but we do need to know that it matters.

Guardian editor Alan Rusbridger once said, “the legendary Community Links wrote the book on how to regenerate deprived

neighbourhoods and engage with young people” (*Guardian*, 25/11/11). That very clearly was an exaggeration (!) but we have tried to test and learn and “write as we go”, sharing experience good and bad in the belief that reflection and dissemination at the very least informs internal review and at best inspires and drives wider change.

As Community Links approaches its 40th birthday this publication is the next contribution to that canon but it emphatically is not a complete history of Community Links. It is a telling of stories about some of our projects with national reach – a small proportion of what we do and have done – in vaguely chronological order and as recalled by some who were there at the time. The recollections have been compiled by Aurora Percannella. Her work was funded by a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In the final chapter I offer some headline observations on the lessons we have learnt.

Way back in 1978 the Trust for London, then called the City Parochial Foundation, boldly pledged to pay the rent on our first little shop. So committed were they, but so uncertain of our future, that we agreed an unusual arrangement: The grant would be released quarterly on receipt of a dated, signed three-word note printed on headed paper:

“We're still here”

Forty years on we're still “still here”. Much has changed around us, but many of the issues that we were founded to address continue to impoverish lives across the UK. As long as the cause endures, this book is less a reminiscence, more a call to arms. We hope it's useful.

The Tower Blocks Campaign

[Following the collapse of Ronan Point, residents of the Beckton clearance area launched a] petition [which] stated “under present conditions we will flatly refuse to leave our present [Victorian] slums to enter modern slums” (i.e. newly built tower blocks), to which a letter from the Town Clerk replied, “whether the blocks become slums or not will depend on the people who live in them”.

(Patrick Dunleavy, “Ronan Point: Crisis of legitimation”, in *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945–1975*, p.244)

I wish to highlight the fact that [tower blocks are] not only a London problem. [They are] a national problem and, indeed, an international one. Outside Paris there is a district called Sarcelles which has had the tower block problem for some years. There is a new disease in France now called malade Sarcelles, which is mental disturbance caused through living in tower blocks.

(Mr Tony Durant, MP for Reading North, 24 May 1974)

Our promise [is] to make the demolition of Ronan Point open to public scrutiny at all times; so any lessons to be learned could be revealed to the world for the benefit of future house building and the quality of life for future generations, which has been denied [to] those that lived and died in this monument to human frailty.

(Fred Jones, Leader of the Council of Newham, speaking at the technical presentation of the dismantling of Ronan Point, 2 October 1986)

We could start this book in lots of different places. Projects ran concurrently. Some led to others. Some took off in a direction of their own. We’ve chosen two pieces of work – the Tower Blocks Campaign and Action Match – because they were the first projects to have a real significance outside of east London and because although they were underpinned by the same values and the same sense of purpose, they could not have been more different in style and content.

The Tower Blocks Campaign was the earliest example of Community Links’ willingness and desire to engage with the broader policy implications arising from its local action.

Although initially involving only the tenants of the high-rise estates on which the organisation was offering individual advice services in the 1980s, the initiative grew quickly; soon, it came to include the wider, crowded network of Newham tower block residents who could no longer bear their living conditions and wished to fight for fairer social housing solutions. Cockroach infestations, lack of safe spaces for children to play, derelict community rooms and the resulting feeling of being forgotten by formal institutions had all contributed to exacerbating the social isolation felt by tower block tenants, motivating many to ask Community Links for support in developing a comprehensive campaign.

Once started, the action didn’t exhaust itself at the borough level. Fuelled by Community Links’ ability to bring together a powerful network of local knowledge, journalists, architects, councillors, government officials and high-rise tenants experiencing similar problems, it gradually extended to other parts of London and cities across the UK.

And with this expansion, Community Links’ vision broadened. If, at first, the main purpose of the initiative was to provide services for tower block residents, new priorities emerged. The campaign had to mean more than the immediate satisfaction of a multitude of individual interests. Of course, cockroach infestations had to be eliminated, derelict community rooms had to be renovated and put to use again, safe play areas for children had to be introduced, but wider policy changes were needed too, be it at the local or national level. Relevant institutions had to provide remedies for the failures caused by the post-war wave of cheap housing construction: they had to invest in strengthening existing blocks and commit to building humane, structurally sound estates. Growing out of the need to find practical responses to local concerns in a collaborative manner, the campaign adapted flexibly as it was exposed to new challenges, gaps and perspectives, ultimately engaging with systemic issues to try and shift mainstream political thinking.

In order to fully convey the organic evolution of the movement, why it was significant and the role of catalyst played by Community Links, this chapter narrates in some detail the story of the tower blocks through the eyes and voices of some of the people involved in the campaign. The story begins in 1968, approximately nine years before the birth of Community Links, with the collapse of Ronan Point.

“Think how you pump a bicycle...”

It was 5.45am on a late spring day in 1968 when Ivy Hodge struck a match to light the stove for her morning cup of tea. She had just moved into a flat on the 18th floor of Ronan Point, a 22-storey tower block on Butchers Road in Newham that had been completed and handed over to the Council a couple of months prior, on 11 March 1968. Three weeks after the first tenants had moved in almost all flats were occupied. As the woman lit up the match, a sudden explosion occurred. This caused an entire corner of the brand new high-rise building to collapse progressively, like a house of cards. Ivy Hodge miraculously survived, but five people were killed and 17 injured that day, as some of the load-bearing walls of her apartment were blown out and could no longer support the structure (<http://www.newhamstory.com/node/1061>).

The inquiry that followed established that – far from being unpredictable or particularly violent – the blast could have caused one of the load-bearing walls to fail at an internal pressure of 1.4 lb per square inch. To put this figure into perspective, Sam Webb, the architect who dedicated his career to fighting for the demolition of Ronan Point, says: “Think how you pump a bicycle tyre – you would need anything in between 50 and 500 lb per square inch.”

After the inquiry reported, the government ordered councils to turn the gas off in all the similar tower blocks throughout the country.

“These buildings were built like castles of cards”

notes the architect. Once flats in Ronan Point were fitted with electric cookers and gas was disconnected, tenants were told that their homes were now safe and they could move back (<http://www.community-links.org/linksuk/wp-content/PDF/RonanPoint.pdf>).

“Ronan Point was like a symbol for everything that was wrong”, concludes Sam. But it would be a further 13 years before the start of the campaign which would eventually lead to its demolition.

April Merrin and Sue McDowell

In the early 1980s, Frances Clarke was running a variety of projects across different Newham estates from the Community Links’ double-decker bus. “We were providing different services, including advice on benefits, debt, and immigration. Because Newham had built so many tower blocks – 114 – they seemed like the ideal places to work. We’d just park up on the estate and offer advice – this was a way of finding out what the issues were”, explains Frances. Through these encounters and conversations, unexpected challenges that were specific to this form of housing started to emerge.

“We went to a high-rise estate in Plaistow, the Brooks estate. We expected that the people would come to us and talk about benefits or debt, on the basis of our general Community Links experience, but actually what came was a whole range of housing problems, like cockroach infestations or water coming up out of the drain or out of the toilet. At times water was not running at all, or there was damp and mould. Security was a big issue too, as the front door was just like an internal door and somebody could easily kick it open”, remembers Frances. “So we decided to do a survey. We door-knocked every flat and asked people about their issues.”

In April 1981, 13 years after the collapse of Ronan Point, April Merrin, a young woman who lived in one of the blocks on the Carpenters estate in Stratford, committed suicide after trying desperately to obtain a housing transfer. She had, Frances says, told “social services, housing and the local papers, over and over again, that she could not bear life on the 21st floor. She used to go to the housing department every day.”

Community Links was soon approached by one of April Merrin’s friends, Sue McDowell, who wanted Newham tower block tenants to organise. She asked for help in setting up a campaign. Pulling together the feedback from the survey and the desire for change and working with a group of April’s neighbours who wished to fight against the misery of high-rise living, Community Links was able to assist tenants with planning coordinated meetings on both estates. “About 50 people came to each meeting. At that time, it was certainly far more than we’d expected”, reflects Frances. The Newham Tower Block Tenants Campaign (NTBTC) was born.

“Once we realised that this was really going somewhere, we applied for funding from the GLC [Greater London Council]. They agreed and we employed a tower blocks campaign worker”

says Frances, noting also “how different it was back then”, when it was possible to get mainstream funding for grassroots work which, due to its very nature, would probably fail to pass the now rigid thresholds that define measurable impact. “Mandy Wilson, our newly appointed campaign worker, was a brilliant asset and hugely increased our capacity in ways that we would not have imagined when we first applied for the money.”

“The Campaign was a mix of community activities, bringing people together and supporting them”, continues Frances. “When the architects had envisaged these new communities, they had developed community flats for spontaneously organised community activities. But they weren’t working, as people were isolated, conditions were awful and these spaces were derelict. So we campaigned for permission to lease several of these rooms and we got a couple of them to reopen. We ran a bulk-buying food club, bingo and summer

playschemes, we supported people in a whole range of ways, as well as campaigning.” In particular, the charity established a community room within Gannon Point, one of the blocks on the Freemasons estate – to which Ronan Point also belonged. “This led to a breakthrough in our work there”, explains Frances. “We had identified the high-rise estate as one of the worst in Newham as virtually everyone wanted to move out.”

By the beginning of 1982 the campaign involved four estates; each had its own board, and representatives from these met regularly in a borough-wide committee. Borough-wide campaigns were organised to draw attention to particular problems: for instance, heating days, cockroach days and a children’s week of action (after a toddler fell from a balcony). Participation was high because the issues touched upon were experienced across the borough and beyond. Ultimately, it was that sense of isolation that seemed to accompany every instance of low-quality, high-rise living that Community Links and the Campaign were attempting to tackle head on.

In order to amplify the voices of tower block residents, the Campaign worked closely with the media. “We kept them fully involved in all our activities – Hugh Muir [now of the *Guardian*] in particular. He was a reporter for the *Newham Recorder* at the time. He managed to sell that local story to a national newspaper”, says Frances. “By constantly approaching journalists, the people involved in the Campaign came to be regarded as the sources to speak to when opinions were sought.” As part of this strategy, on 7 November 1983 Frances published an article in the *Guardian* in which she voiced the concerns and demands of the NTBTC for the newspaper’s national audience. The story caught, once again, the attention of architect Sam Webb.

“I came across the article in Autumn 83”, remembers Sam. “Frances was announcing a National Tower Blocks Conference. I phoned her up and said, ‘I’ve done all this research on Ronan Point, They invited me to speak at the conference.’”

Turning points

The conference was held on Sunday, 23 October 1982. It was a turning point for the Campaign, which was now starting to gather national momentum. “A lot of people came, from all over the country”, remembers Sam. “Far more than we’d expected”, agrees Frances. “So many that we had to bus people out to other venues for the break-out sessions. We had Members of Parliament, councillors, engineers, architects, housing people”, continues Sam, “and lots of radio and TV coverage.”

It was at that point that Sam Webb introduced to the public the idea that, besides being undesirable, grim and isolating, many of the tower blocks that were frantically built to respond to the post-war housing crisis were also structurally unstable. Analysing the Ronan Point tragedy from an entirely new perspective, Sam wrote in his conference notes:

“After the Ivy Hodge’s incident, gas became the major culprit and the scapegoat. In fact this was a red herring. It didn’t matter what caused the explosion. The structural principle on which Ronan Point was built was unsound.”

But how could that be and what did that mean for the other blocks built to a similar design?

“In the 1950s and 60s ... this country achieved its building output at 75% of the cost of its EEC

partners. The legacy of that is why we are here today”, said Sam at the conference. The UK had invested heavily in systems constructed out of prefabricated panels that could be assembled quickly, without employing skilled labour and which could save space if piled up into high-rise buildings. “Ronan Point was just one example of the Larsen-Nielsen system of construction which was used very widely in the 60s and 70s by Taylor Woodrow-Anglian.” This system was developed in Denmark in the 1940s. It is “composed of precast concrete components designed to minimize on-site construction work. Walls, floors and stairways are all precast and all units are load bearing.” This means that some of the walls on each floor support those directly above and if the wall panels of one of the units fail – as it was the case with Ronan Point after the explosion – the entire structure will progressively collapse.

In the UK this structural frailty was exacerbated by reckless interpretations of space maximisation and cost-effectiveness. According to the designers of the Larsen-Nielsen system, only buildings of up to four storeys were robust enough to prevent disproportionate collapse without additional reinforcement. But unlike their Danish counterparts, the joints of the far higher Ronan Point and the other 22-storey tower blocks of similar design “were only nominally reinforced and could not resist collapse”, writes Sam in his notes. “Bags, polystyrene, cardboard, wood, cigarette ends and tin cans” were found tucked in the joints instead of cement. When the final tests on Ronan Point were carried out before its demolition three years later, Sam was astonished at “the sheer scale of bad workmanship”; “not a single joint was correct”.

During the conference, a couple of Ronan Point tenants mentioned that they could smell the food being cooked many floors below and hear televisions and people talking. In conversation with them, the architect mentioned that he believed that this indicated that “there were gaps between walls and floors through which smoke would pass”.

Working with these residents, Community Links and a team of students, Sam surveyed 50 flats and the main staircase. Here, he found cracks in the panels. “The lower I got, the worse the cracks were. In my opinion, this was because the block was swaying in the wind.” In one flat, he tried to put a 10p coin up against the wall and let it slide down. “It disappeared. We went downstairs and we could see it coming out of the ceiling in the flat below.”

Cllr Fred Jones, the then Chair of Newham’s Housing Committee, agreed to take the findings to a special meeting of the Housing Committee on 27 April 1984. “One hundred and thirty tenants packed into the meeting”, recalls Frances. “Far too many for the public gallery to accommodate. The overspill forced their way into the Council Chamber and sat with the councillors. Many more gathered outside. The pressure was enormous.”

The meeting unanimously agreed that Ronan Point should be evacuated immediately. This was a great leap forward, but the Campaign didn’t end there.

With Ronan Point now empty, NTBC continued to put pressure on the local council to perform tests which would further corroborate the evidence found by the architect. Ronan Point was handed over to the Building Research Establishment who pledged to “test it to destruction”. The decisive step was a fire test carried out in the summer of 1984. “If that 10p coin had been fire”, Sam had told the tenants, “it would have spread down the building, through the gaps, and would have gone from tenancy to tenancy.” The Housing Committee, in its report announcing the evacuation of Ronan Point, had similarly written:

“Dust, noise, etc. can travel from one flat to those above and below through these gaps. In the event of a fire in one flat, smoke and fumes might be communicated in the same way....”

The existence of these gaps means that the blocks no longer comply with Fire Regulations.”

The regulations assume that “you are safe inside your house for an hour”, explains Frances. “So the fire brigade expect they have one hour to get people out. But as those flats were not properly sealed units we guessed that they would not contain the flames for anything like that length of time.”

Sam remembers standing outside Ronan Point during the fire test and watching the flat burn, supposedly in a controlled manner. Within 10 minutes it was evident that the third floor unit used for the test could not contain the blaze. The fire brigade had to intervene immediately. If they hadn’t, the whole block would have burnt down or collapsed.

“We were embedded in the community”

This was irrefutable proof. Ronan Point was never occupied again and was eventually demolished in 1986, together with its eight sister blocks on the Freemasons estate. Liz Lowe, Social Work Team Leader, recalls, “over a thousand families, representing four to five thousand people were rehoused within the Borough within a short period, some permanently and some placed temporarily but all with the option of returning. Newham Council set up the South Canning Town and Custom House Project to support local tenants in the process of emptying the blocks and then redesigning the area once the blocks were demolished. The Council seconded a senior officer to this Project from every council department and opened a dedicated local drop-in office in an empty school caretaker’s house in Freemasons Road.”

The nine grim, tall high-rise buildings were replaced with terraced housing. “Shaped by the tenants a local plan was developed and consulted on. This community consultation process resulted in a low-rise estate into which displaced tenants could be rehoused, with a range of services including: leisure, family and under-fives and community health”, says Liz Lowe.

The tenants’ Campaign and Community Links had achieved their goal – safe, socially adequate housing for every resident. Experts played a part but it was the scale of the tenant involvement and the mobilisation of the people who had experienced the problem first-hand that eventually delivered a just outcome 18 years after Ronan Point first made the news.

Tower block tenants had often been dismissed as apathetic, but Community Links showed that this disempowering rhetoric was inaccurate as the vast majority of Freemasons estate residents recognised that this was their opportunity to improve their lives. “We leafleted and door knocked to explain the situation”, said Frances. “The loud hailer became our most prized possession. Door knocking and loud hailing for several hours prior to every meeting became the set pattern.” And this simple, grassroots approach worked. “We had meetings where hundreds of people came”, remembers Sam. Many were outdoors because the community rooms were too small to contain them. Block and borough-wide meetings, tenants’ petitions, lobbying of the Housing Committee and high attendance in Council meetings became increasingly ordinary phenomena.

“This showed the power of local people”

Frances reflects now, 32 years later. “It was a campaign led by the local community. It showed that people are absolutely not apathetic; you just need to offer them an opportunity that works for them.” For

organisations, this means being rooted in the communities that you are attempting to engage with. “If you’re not”, continues Frances, “you come up with all sorts of strange conclusions. Policy-makers could have an idea and implement a project at a rather elevated level, but if it isn’t rooted in the community, it doesn’t have much relevance.”

“We were embedded in the community, we weren’t political agitators who’d come in from outside and were trying to get people to follow a line”, explains Frances. Talking specifically about the Campaign, Sam notes how they “could involve people very quickly because they trusted us, because we ran a whole range of projects; we weren’t just a campaigning group.” In this sense, Community Links was able to act as catalyst, listening to the issues of tower block residents, encouraging them to take action, enabling the formation of a powerful web of key people and successfully channelling the voices of a previously disempowered community.

“I think we changed people’s lives. We contributed to giving tenants immense self-confidence”

reflects Sam. “I’m thinking of tenants’ leader Sue McDowell, for example. Just after Ronan Point was evacuated, we were invited to a big housing conference at Kensington Town Hall. I was asked to be the keynote speaker. I said Sue should do it. She protested and said she had never spoken in public before and wouldn’t know what to say. So I said she should tell them about how she became involved with the campaign, what it was like living in a tower block – not just for her, but for her friends and especially the children. As she spoke, you could have heard a pin drop. People were visibly moved by what she said. She realised, as she was speaking, that what she was saying was important. You could see her grow in stature. She changed after that and it rubbed off on everyone. It was a

major triumph, not just for the tenants from Canning Town but those from all over London who were there that day.”

“It was the first time I saw involvement on that scale”, observes Frances, as she notes, too, how many of those who took part in the campaign gained confidence and went on to be more active in the community. “Later on, I saw the names of people who had been involved in the tower blocks listed as members of parent-teacher associations, health panels and governing bodies ... Because of how the Campaign was organised in those little committees, people became familiar with how governing bodies work. Many people played a part – friendly experts, politicians, journalists – but it was the drive, the determination, the deep understanding of Sue, the other leaders and their neighbours, that carried the day. Nearly 1,000 families actively participated.”

Stephen Timms, the current Labour MP for East Ham who at the time was a young member of Newham’s Housing Committee and an ally of the Campaign, doesn’t believe that tower blocks would have been questioned, tested and then demolished if Community Links hadn’t worked so hard to apply community-wide pressure on officials. “The issue would have just been dismissed, I think, as it had been before. Community Links was able to bring people together, provide a forum for people.” And the organisation’s ability to develop a diverse network of experts and tenants made waves locally, nationally and even globally.

“They can design them, they can build them, they can pay for them, but nobody will ever know what a tower block is like until they’ve actually lived in one”

According to Frances, “Strong evidence is really important in getting people to understand your case and to form a good relationship with you ... That’s why the Campaign ensured that press, radio and television were constantly involved. We hand delivered frequent press releases, running down Fleet Street (there was no email in those days!) making personal contact and tipping off journalists just enough to keep them engaged, but not too much either, so that the tenants group wouldn’t accidentally lose ownership over their demands and, consequently, weaken their negotiating voice.”

Importantly, the campaigners included various contacts on press releases: there were tenants, community workers, architects and Housing Chair, Fred Jones. “This enabled us to appear reasonable and confident of our argument”, reports Frances. “We succeeded in convincing the media of the credibility of our claims and developed many productive relationships. Over the months, members of the press and TV interviewers came to know the issues as well as we did. Many came to identify with us and, I think secretly, to support our case.”

Hugh Muir is now Associate Editor at the *Guardian*, but at the time he worked for the *Newham Recorder*. He remembers that “back in the 1980s, it was simply impossible to predict the rise of social media or the sophisticated public relations that drives social campaigns today. But it was important then as now to engage the public, to humanise advocacy in a way that can engage and move the public. The Newham Tower Block Tenants Campaign clearly understood that.

“There was a notable trajectory. Stories might begin with me or my colleague Pat Coughtrey in the *Newham Recorder*. I passed many of the stronger ones up the line to Thames News, then the ITV news programme for London. Some were fed to national papers. Some were human interest stories. Others, informed by long conversations with the ever knowledgeable, always accommodating architect Sam Webb, dealt with wider structural concerns. One in particular gained media traction. On examination, a load-bearing joint from the refurbished Ronan Point was found to have been stuffed with an old copy of the *Daily Mirror*.

“The story of Ronan Point and the Freemasons estate highlighted many things about the relationship between the media and government, about local journalism and the link it should have to communities, about political accountability. It changed lives. It may have saved some.

“But most of all it showed how ordinary people – focused, informed; determined and strategic – really can seek and achieve momentous change.”

On 22 November 1984, BBC Two produced a 30-minute TV programme called *The Blockbusters* in collaboration with the tenants, who wrote large parts of it and suggested the title. The accompanying tagline was: “They can design them, they can build them, they can pay for them, but nobody will ever know what a tower block is like until they’ve actually lived in one.” On the day, the programme’s synopsis included in the TV listings announced: “Housing authorities can no longer paper over the cracks of the 60s social disaster, system-built tower blocks that are literally splitting at the seams. Setting an alarming precedent, east London’s Newham Council has ordered the total evacuation of tenants from a nine-block estate [the Freemasons estate]. It’s a victory for reason – but only after concerted pressure from

‘The Blockbusters’ – the Newham Tower Block Tenants’ Campaign. This is the story of their constant fight against the misery and terror of tower block life – and the lessons they learnt in the process.”

Looking back, “I think the biggest achievement is that we probably changed people’s attitudes”, sums up Sam, particularly by engaging with the media and “putting the issue on national television. I think what we did do was piece it all together in an explainable way, so we always had the advantage because people would understand what we were saying. We became reliable, trusted sources of information. People would call from all over the country to ask questions.”

“These problems will only be solved by increased spending on humane housing”

By sharing information about this local work Community Links had found a deep gap in housing policy that no newspaper was talking about, no organisation was engaging with and no policy-maker was promising to remedy. The issues experienced by Newham tower block residents weren’t unique to this portion of east London; thousands of other tenants across the country lived in similar conditions.

“Pursuing this to its logical conclusion”, writes Frances, “we then sought to draw attention to the inadequacy of resources which had created many of the problems in the first place. ... These could only be solved by greatly increased spending on sound, humane housing.” The Campaign had ultimately grasped and embraced the national dimension of the issues it was trying to tackle. Until then, Community Links and the tenants had mainly engaged with the national level as a necessary step to bring about change for the local patch. By continuing to involve the people of Newham while also reaching out to tenants everywhere, Community Links was no longer merely offering

support and creating change locally; it was also tackling a national and indeed global issue.

Community Links’ decision to organise a National Tower Blocks Conference in the midst of the local campaign was motivated by some of this growing awareness. The intention behind the event was to “draw attention to the social and structural problems of Britain’s tower block homes, to share information about local activities and to consider ways of building on these experiences”, Frances explains. Community Links had understood that the group’s action could potentially bring about broader change, and although it could then hardly hope to influence governmental policy on its own, it could instead attempt to “build links”, or establish a network of key knowledge and people that would help them do so.

Of course, at the time, the organisation’s vision wasn’t as linear as the narrative we can compose with the benefit of hindsight. Much of the organisation’s action during the Campaign was moved by this sense of possibility, together with a stubborn determination to keep up the momentum gained around these issues. For this reason, while some of these initiatives were developed consciously and strategically, others happened on a more spontaneous level, and it would be difficult to accurately disentangle the two. What’s interesting, however, looking back, is noticing how these elements interacted and shaped the story of the Campaign. Since the network evolved out of people’s lived experience, it was primarily pushed by pragmatic concerns, not necessarily by a conscious desire to develop these into something more. Community Links’ unique contribution lay in the audacity and flexibility it lent to the project, broadening what was originally a narrow perspective then actively gathering awareness, learning and deliberately pushing initiatives one step further, always lacking the certainty that something would be achieved but always determined to try.

The National Tower Blocks Network, launched at the conference in October 1983, would go on

to gather and share tower block information nationally. A series of National Tower Blocks Directories were produced, sponsored by the Gulbenkian Foundation and produced by Community Links. They were divided into two sections: the first part included an alphabetical list of the main organisations involved in tower block issues, both landlords and tenant organisations. The second part featured DIY, community-based examples of good practice that could inspire new ways of tackling common problems, from forming and training tenants’ co-ops to eliminating cockroach infestations to building community gardens and play areas in council estates, as well as wider reflections on tower block living.

“We hope that this publication will enable local groups, professionals and decision makers to learn from the experiences of one another and to work together in improving the quality of life for high-rise tenants everywhere”, declared Frances in the introduction. To ensure that the National Tower Blocks Network would continue to grow and consolidate after the conference, the Campaign also launched a national quarterly newsletter, *The View*.

“This local victory is to be used to full effect”

“When we started compiling the Directories, I visited cities all over the place and found similarities”, remembers Frances. “In Waltham Forest,” declared the Campaign in a press release dated 26 September 1986, “there are 22-storey blocks of flats with a gas supply. They do not meet the minimum requirements for structure laid down for gas. Other high system blocks with gas have been found in Camden, Glasgow and Sheffield. Not one of them could stand a gas explosion.”

Many local authorities didn't have the drawings of their tower blocks, mostly because the licence agreement between Danish company Larsen & Nielsen and Taylor Woodrow-Anglian, which had built many of the large-panel systems in the UK, provided for all "methods and practices, documents, drawings and information concerning construction and prefabrication to be kept secret". When councils did have access to drawings, following Ronan Point, it was impossible to predict whether the highest standards of construction had been respected in assembling the buildings on site. "The repercussions of our action were huge nationally", notes Frances. "We shared information, organised training events about structural defects and other people started to get funding to do tower blocks work. When the government became aware of the issue, they started surveying large-panel system blocks, and those blocks would either be strengthened or demolished."

This eventually persuaded the government to instruct the Building Research Establishment to survey 144,000 flats across England and Wales.

With the failure of Ronan Point and other blocks across the country, large-panel systems gradually became obsolete. "If we hadn't exposed their frailty, we would have many, many still", Sam believes. "The Campaign discredited them. We changed housing policy at the national level." The levels of poor workmanship found in the joints of Ronan Point and the awareness that the system was susceptible to progressive collapse, apart from leading to the demolition of blocks in the UK and abroad, also shaped practice and building regulations throughout the world – from Canada and the US to the then socialist People's Republic of Hungary. When the blocks were first assembled, they were thought to be innovative, cost-effective and safe. "We do not consider that in its present form Ronan Point is an acceptable building," states the report of the post-1968 collapse inquiry, "yet it was designed to comply with statutory standards". Evidently,

something was missing from such standards, and the term "disproportionate collapse" finally found its way into global building regulations; the notion, that is, that even if a structure suffers local damage, the system as a whole should be able to sustain it and remain stable, to avoid a repeat of the phenomenon that caused Ronan Point to crumble on an early spring morning almost 50 years ago.

“Newham used to be a hotbed of Masonry”

The Campaign also left its mark on local institutions. "We formed an alliance with the people who wanted a change", reflects Sam. Frances explains: "Newham council was dominated by Freemasons whose decisions at the time lacked both transparency and accountability." Indeed the *Independent* noted that it was "a hotbed of masonry".

The name of the Freemasons estate to which Ronan Point belonged (itself named after local councillor Harry Ronan) and the Freemasons Road that still runs through the area bear witness to the confident power of the Masonic influence. It was widely believed that "the chair and vice-chair of the Housing Committee were Masons, as were the Director and Assistant Director of the Housing Department", writes Frances in *Talking Point* (the Tower Blocks Campaign newsletter). "Fred Jones, who later became chair of housing, was not a Freemason", explains Sam. "He wanted a change. So we were supporting new, young councillors who wanted a change to come forward and they were supporting us." This reintroduced transparency into a council that had struggled to remain accountable to the local population, particularly in relation to housing matters. Some decisions were very difficult to understand.

Sam remembers the extraordinary public meeting in which Housing Chair Fred Jones proclaimed that "this isn't just the end of Ronan Point, it is the end of this kind of politics in Newham".

“Everybody's contribution counted”

Sam emphasises that Community Links' approach was, above all, collaborative. Wherever possible it sought to build a willing coalition, but there were too many vested interests to imagine that this would always be possible. The Campaign was merciless in its pursuit of public officials; some would say it went too far. Sometimes meetings were very angry. "Poverty brutalises", said Frances. "If you ignore people for many years and treat them badly it is unsurprising that working together, patiently and tolerantly, can sometimes be a struggle."

Others, not involved in the Campaign, began to feel that their needs were ignored. Families who had been on council waiting lists for a long time, many "temporarily" housed in very low-grade bed and breakfast hotels, started to complain to Community Links that they would cheerfully trade in their place in grim lodgings for a tower block home no matter how risky it might be. As this lobby became increasingly angry and active, Community Links decided that it wasn't its role to rank needs and nor could it stand by whilst one desperate group pitted its case against the needs of another. Everybody had a right to a decent, safe home. This led Community Links to run advice sessions for people in B&Bs, then a Family Day Centre and ultimately the No Home Campaign. The development of this local work wasn't consciously modelled on the tower blocks work, but we can see that it made the same progression from essential support services through to coalition building and the facilitation of a campaign led by people with living experience. It's a story for another day, but the lessons are similar.

All the Freemasons tenants obtained their housing transfers, but Community Links and the network it had put together hadn't just been able to give practical answers and solutions to the needs of a group of Newham residents.

They had understood lived experience, observed the system in its entirety and identified what needed to change. The Campaign "illustrated the link between local and the national: that there's no point in working at one level and not the other", reflects Frances.

“That's certainly something that Community Links has always tried to do and that's what we did then. We helped people to realise they can have some impact, that they can influence things.”

Community Links had just started to grasp the unique space it could occupy. Deeply in touch with the local reality and directly exposed to the issues experienced by the local population through its community services, the organisation had now found a way to make the ripples of change it created travel beyond Newham. Engaging with the tenants pushed the team to adjust goals and vision and to build a diverse network of people and knowledge, Community Links had come to understand that its primary strength lay in facilitating, mediating and, ultimately, liberating connections. Its role of enabler informed the network's action, and the latter shaped its identity in turn. Far from presenting itself as the sole driving force behind the Campaign, Community Links became a conscious promoter of a collaborative approach to change-making, in which everybody involved felt that they had some level of individual ownership over the initiative and its achievements. Everybody's contribution counted.

Post script

“Tell that to the tenants”

Frances Clarke writes in July 2017: The Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017 is a brutal reminder that although our Campaign won many victories in the 80s and 90s, we didn't win enough. The Campaign ensured that the defects inherent in the Ronan Point style large-panel system blocks were widely known. The nine blocks were demolished and government instructions were issued to local authorities across the country to check all similar blocks and deal with the structural issues. The Ronan Point campaign had a national impact; 144,000 flats around the country were reinforced or demolished.

We wanted to seek to fill the gap in knowledge about tower blocks and to share information that tenants and tower block owners would find useful. Through the National Tower Blocks Network we sought to gather and share information about the social and structural problems of tower blocks and to promote solutions to these problems. We had found early on that owners of blocks and even the Department of the Environment knew little about the stock. Original drawings were often not available, perhaps never kept, perhaps lost or destroyed, perhaps kept secret. Log books and records of alterations and refurbishment works were not maintained.

We, the least "expert" people, became the source of much knowledge. In a meeting between tenants' representatives and the Department of the Environment, we were told by officials that no Reema large-panel blocks existed that were more than 19 storeys high. "Tell that to the tenants of the 25th floor of Royston Hill", shouted Eileen McCloy, Glasgow tenants' leader.

The National Tower Blocks Network was able to support tenants' groups nationally and we saw that the council responses to problems varied; some councils responded quickly while others required pressure from their tenants to face up to tackling the risks. In Glasgow, tenants of Royston B identified fire safety as a risk when they realised that their flats would not be able to contain a fire for one hour. A tenant had

drawn attention to this when she accidentally spilt paint which reappeared in a flat two floors below. Once again we saw that tenants' experience could highlight vital issues. Tenants insisted that these Reema blocks be structurally surveyed, and their fears were proved right when all were found to be outside of building regulations and had to be demolished.

During the course of our research we found that fire safety was a widespread and growing concern to tower block tenants.

Fires should not spread in tower blocks. The Building Regulations are based on the assumption that each flat is a sealed unit that will not allow the spread of flames or fumes for at least one hour. The rest of the design is predicated on this presumption. If it is undermined, perhaps by refurbishments or poor maintenance, the Fire Service will not be able to rescue everybody. There is often only one staircase and no sprinklers; fire brigade ladders cannot reach the upper floors; dry risers may not be functioning. All this was known, not least by the tenants, long before the Grenfell tragedy.

A tenant died as the result of a fire spreading over six floors in Merry Hill Court, Smethwick 27 years ago. The gaps between flats were found to be filled with newspaper, and the fire spread along the floors and between the flats through ducting that held the gas pipes. The pipes had been boxed in plywood and there was no fire-proofing of the pipes or ducting. The dry risers had failed to work. In Knowsley Heights in Merseyside, in the following year, a fire spread rapidly up the rainscreen cladding. Horizontal fire breaks had been omitted in order to give ventilation and address problems of dampness, condensation and energy efficiency.

In 1990 the National Tower Blocks Network carried out a "Spot Fire Safety Survey". Architect Sam Webb inspected estates in London, Sheffield and Manchester, and 30 tenants'

groups in other parts of the country submitted fire safety information about their blocks. A picture emerged of structural defects, shoddy maintenance and cuts in fire-testing.

Examples of conflicting priorities also arose, conflicts that jeopardise fire safety, for example, when fire stopping behind cladding is considered less important than aiding air circulation in order to prevent dampness and condensation. Similar conflicts arise when gas is present in tower blocks – gas pipes must be vented to avoid explosions and vertical fire-stopping may not be used as it could interfere with this venting.

In some cases the tenants were able to use our spot safety check information to effectively highlight their issues. Tenants in Kedge House in Tower Hamlets, for instance, successfully campaigned to be rehoused due to lack of fire safety.

We were able to support tenants' groups in particular areas to deal with the problems they identified, and tenants from across the country came together to share their knowledge.

However, overall our concerns relating to fire safety were not addressed. The problems that had been identified in the early 1990s went on to be added to by the policies of austerity, local authority funding cuts and a Conservative government's commitment to deregulation. The fire risks grew.

As the risks grew, the voices of the tenants and their allies were diminished. Public sector cuts meant that organisations like the National Tower Blocks Network were no longer funded, and legal aid was slashed. Ownership and management of housing became more complex and less transparent, less accountable and open to tenant pressure.

In 2009 a fire in Lakanal House, in Southwark, spread rapidly up the cladding killing two

families of six people. These families were not safe in their flats for one hour. Sam Webb once again represented tenants and once again pleaded for a change in the Fire Regulations. The inquest advised installing sprinklers in all blocks but nothing changed.

As the truth about Grenfell gradually emerges, we hear many echoes of the Ronan Point experience: It was a small gas explosion in 1968 that triggered the collapse but it was the design and workmanship that caused the disaster. In 2017 it was a small fridge that sparked the blaze but it was the cladding that drove the devastation. Newham tenants were told to stay put in the event of fire. The same advice was still being conveyed in 2017. And, at the heart of it all, tenants knew all along that they were living with danger but their voices were routinely ignored.

Tenants of Ronan Point were puzzled as to why they could smell the food cooking many floors away; tenants of Royston Hill wondered why spilt paint would reappear in a flat two floors below. These everyday puzzles led to the identification of serious structural issues which required blocks to be demolished because they could have collapsed or burnt down.

If Grenfell residents had been listened to, if tenants had had a mechanism by which they could be heard, investigations could have taken place and the terrible death toll could have been avoided. A tenants' voice needs to be built into the democratic system, and those making the decisions about other people's lives need to be more accountable and more humble, for they have not got it right. The image of babies thrown desperately out of windows and of phones blinking their silent mayday is seared into our memories. Those responsible may eventually be held to account but is that enough to stop it happening again?

Action Match

Sport (sponsorship) has grown massively but nowhere nearly as much as social and in some small way that was down to the vision and bravery that Community Links has shown throughout its life.

(Giles Gibbons CEO, Good Business, 2016)

Inside the Marks & Spencer room there were desks heaving with paper, books, it all looked very un-Marks & Spencerish.

(The Rt Hon Stephen Timms MP, 2016)

Community Links is clearly moving towards a position where no self-respecting local enterprise can afford not to be seen sponsoring some aspect of its work. ... As you visit Community Links commercial sponsorship is obvious. Each interior door has a plaque which says "This room is sponsored by..." anyone from a small local business to London Weekend TV, Laura Ashley and Shell UK.

(Duncan Scott and Paul Wilding, Manchester University, *Sponsoring Voluntary Action: Rhetoric or Reality*, 1986)

To put the hyperbole in context, Scott and Wilding wrote those breathless lines in 1986 when Community Links' entire turnover was less than £200k. It is, however, true that corporate sponsorship was the largest single source of income then and had been since Tate & Lyle first supported the Bus project in the earliest days of Community Links. Like many big businesses, Tate & Lyle have undergone huge changes in 40 years, but to this day the company's support has never wavered.

At the time Tate & Lyle were the borough's biggest employer, operating from two very large refineries in the borough. When asked to house the Community Links bus they not only agreed, but also undertook regular maintenance, provided first aid training for the young volunteers and helped with fundraising. Community Links found that business leaders were more open to an innovative and entrepreneurial approach and more comfortable with the risk than almost all the charitable trusts and statutory bodies that they approached. From those beginnings they were emboldened to seek help from other businesses and also to begin to explore the potential for mutual benefit.

This radical approach to fundraising was surprising, even, at the time, countercultural. Stephen Timms was the Newham council leader at the time, soon to be an MP and ultimately a government minister. He is and has always been a strong supporter of Community Links but recently remembered a vague feeling of discomfort when he visited 105 Barking Road:

"I vividly remember visiting the Community Links building, which would have been in High Street South at the time. It was a sort of biggish Newham terrace house, end-of-terrace, and it was just full of activities, heaps of paper, people coming and going and I went up to the first floor and it had like every other terrace house in Newham three bedrooms and I remember in the middle of these three bedrooms it said on the door 'the Marks & Spencer room' or something like that. And that was in a way quite a subversive thing because Newham was a Labour council, struggling with all these things, and here was a bit of a critique coming from an organisation that was getting funding from businesses. And that was quite new ... corporate social responsibility, that was a very new aspect, it probably hadn't been invented at that stage.

"So the way in which Community Links was able to harvest links with businesses and funding from businesses to try and address some of these very pressing social issues was brand new. And, you know, from the point of view of a Labour council, at the time, that was slightly troubling, subversive. Something ... You know, if this had been a general workers' union room or something, that would have been very comfortable, but the fact it was a Marks & Spencer room, that was quite confusing. This would have been the mid-1980s. Inside the Marks & Spencer room, there were desks heaving with paper, books, it all looked very un-Marks & Spencerish".

Ford UK, just down the A13 in Dagenham, were also very large local employers. They too became supporters and, like Tate & Lyle, actively contributed to the development of the early thinking. At the time around £250m was spent on corporate sponsorship in the UK, most of it on sport with about £25m on the arts. Almost all this money went into high end, professional businesses, leading institutions and elite teams. The market was growing at 15% per annum and Ford were market leaders, heavily involved in sponsoring motor sport across the world.

One day Stuart Turner, their then Director of Marketing and Sponsorship, lunched at Community Links and asked a simple question – if Ford were to sponsor football, which teams would we pick?

David remembers the Community Links team suggesting Manchester United or Arsenal – the biggest names in the game.

“No”, said Stuart, “you’re not understanding why I might want to do it. You are not thinking about the problem I am trying to solve: Global recognition isn’t a problem for Ford. Everybody knows our business. We don’t need Match of the Day. Our problem is that customers think we are too big, we don’t care anymore and customers don’t matter. That’s why our new corporate slogan will say **FORD CARES FOR PEOPLE AND THEIR CARS**. If we want to get into football sponsorship we will go for lower league teams, several of them, maybe youth teams or an entire league. Then people will say isn’t it nice of Ford to care about our team. Offer me that goodwill here in east London, multiply it up with similar deals across the country and the aggregated benefit will exceed anything I could gain from tying up with a single big name.”

Community Links gobbled up the insights. They realised that an association with their work offered a level of goodwill that couldn’t

easily be bought in any other way. They began to argue in fundraising materials and on wider platforms that “businesses that are concerned to be seen must be seen to be concerned” – a line that would later be borrowed by Business in the Community. The group set to work on crafting offers that would meet the needs of Ford and of other companies. Most were tiny; this was after all uncharted territory. Whilst it was reasonable to pitch for a modest punt, it wasn’t reasonable at that stage to seek major long-term commitments. Nonetheless, as Scott and Wilding observed, some big names picked up the invitation.

“Social sponsorship will exceed sports and arts sponsorship as the fastest growing marketing technique of the 1990s”

Community Links hadn’t intended to break new ground, just to meet their own needs, but this approach to fundraising made the young agency, according to the Manchester University team, “a rare bird”. In fact, Scott and Wilding couldn’t find any other examples.

The £25m spent on the arts had grown out of almost nothing over the preceding decade – just £0.5m in 1977. With the whole sponsorship market apparently expanding fast, and with arts sponsorship as the precedent, perhaps “social sponsorship” could be the next big thing? Community Links coined the phrase and suggested to the Home Office, who then led on the government’s relationship with the voluntary sector, that with a small grant, the group might popularise the concept. It was the first time that Community Links, hitherto exclusively focused on east London, asked a national funder to support a national project.

A two-year grant was ultimately awarded for a team of three people, and Action Match was launched.

Action Match was first introduced at a press event addressed by Stuart Turner and Home office minister John Patten and attended by journalists, business leaders and charity directors. It was improbably but effectively chaired by Valerie Singleton, who was then primarily known as the Blue Peter presenter. As David says, “I can’t remember much about how Val came to be chosen to sprinkle the stardust, but I don’t think it involved very careful deliberation. Someone knew someone who knew her and no one else knew anyone who was more famous. Anyway, she did it well and the Minister was very pleased!”

In Mr Patten’s speech that morning he predicted that “social sponsorship will exceed sports and arts sponsorship as the fastest growing marketing technique of the 1990s”. It sounded like a bold aspiration, but given the Manchester University conclusion that the total spend on social sponsorship in the UK at the time amounted to less than £200k, a growth rate target was largely meaningless. Instead, the Action Match team set themselves the goal of placing social sponsorship alongside arts and sports sponsorship as recognisable marketing techniques that were widely understood. They hoped that it would be regularly deployed by marketing directors, and alongside fundraising events and individual giving as fundraising methods that were similarly accepted and adopted by the charity sector.

Josephine Seccombe had just stepped down from Saatchi & Saatchi, then the UK’s leading ad agency. She joined Stuart Turner as an external adviser and as Chair of an advisory board that included leaders from all sides of the table. In keeping with the sponsorship philosophy of mutual benefit, the team suggested to board members that they, as well as Community Links, could benefit from an involvement with this work. Josephine recalls that she did benefit personally as well as contribute:

“Action Match gave me the opportunity to learn how to train a group. This was the chance to learn on the job so to speak, hoping the group would gain overall. Facilitating, mediating, mentoring and leading idea generating are all best ‘taught’ by actually doing. I am indebted to Action Match for this experience.”

In its promotional materials at the time Action Match began to argue that “social sponsorship offers good value for money. It enhances the corporate image, gives access to the media, and a range of practical benefits to customers and workers, provides links with celebrities, politicians and opinion formers, offers opportunities for creative product promotions and is good for the tax bill It raises the charity profile, and can have a range of knock on benefits for fundraising, campaigning or other agency activities.”

Of course there were limitations, and the project team were very clear about these too: “some voluntary sector activities are better suited to social sponsorship than others and some companies are not acceptable partners. ... it isn’t easy money. It demands time, care, imagination and persistence to construct a deal that is profitable for both partners and true to the ideals of the agency but the experience of sport and the arts and international comparisons demonstrate that the local voluntary sector isn’t getting nearly as much as it could from British businesses largely because it appears to offer so little in return.”

Little of this would be contested in 2017, but it is interesting to recall how controversial it was 30 years ago. David remembers with a shudder the applause for the Chief Executive of a leading children's charity who responded to his presentation at a charity conference with a withering "it might work for snooker tournaments, but never for my organisation". With some very notable exceptions, businesses were generally more open to the thinking and faster to the table than the charities.

Action Match developed a three-part strategy:

- A promotional programme included an Awards Scheme, a business breakfast programme and a media campaign. Action Match authored a monthly page for the industry magazine *Sponsorship News*, compiled a training pack published by the Directory of Social Change and contributed to numerous other publications. The team spoke at seminars and conferences hosted by *Marketing* magazine and charity events convened by partners as disparate as the Institute of International Research, Mencap, the National Alliance of Women's Organisations and the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations.
- A support programme helped both businesses and charities make social sponsorship work for them. This included a training programme for small and medium sized charities in 26 cities throughout the UK. One hundred and twenty organisations attended the two-day programme in the first year. A consultancy service for companies was sponsored by Royal Insurance enabling Action Match to assess existing corporate marketing strategies and suggest ways of including social sponsorship and, as the data base built up, ambitious plans were developed for a Matching Service.

In practice, this was the most erratic aspect of the project. The scheme never achieved sufficient scale to guarantee success; sometimes brilliant matches could be made and sometimes they had nothing to offer.

- A good practice programme shared through a quarterly, full colour magazine – the only national magazine focusing exclusively on social sponsorship – and also a series of practical booklets highlighting successful practice and explaining the mechanics.

By the end of year one the influential Mintel Report was reporting on the advent and "notable rise" of "Social sponsorship [which] in addition to the benefits it offers as a marketing tool has added PR potential. That is the projection of a caring image through contribution to charitable causes and therefore to the quality of life in the community."

Did it work?

Looking back, there were several learning points which will reoccur in different contexts throughout this book.

The imprecise expectations at the outset – all aspirations, no numbers – and the absence of formal monitoring throughout make it difficult to judge the impact of the work so many years later. Did it work? Giles Gibbons, then a Saatchi & Saatchi employee, now CEO of Good Business and one of the world's leading practitioners and thinkers on the relationship between business and the wider community, thinks it did. In a recollection for this book he wrote:

"How many meetings do we have in our careers? Rough calculations gets me to 50,000. How many do you really remember? Meetings that changed the course of your career, probably no more than 50. One of those for me was meeting David Robinson many years ago.

"Steve Hilton and I had a theory that in order to be a successful business in the 21st century, it would be as critical how you actually behave as an organisation as what you actually sell. Success would come from being a 'Good Business' – where values are as important as value.

"Was the idea good enough to leave our safe jobs at Saatchi & Saatchi?"

"We went to talk to business leaders. Many of them said the same thing, we are jolly nice people, we support many charities (normally under the auspices of the chairman's wife's fund). These were mostly charities of little relevance to the business in question. We went away slightly depressed but also motivated, thinking if only we could persuade them to be more strategic in how they supported society through their business, not only could they do more good, but they could help themselves too – the food company that helps the farmers and their communities in their supply chain, or a health insurance company inspires people to be more active ...

"This made sense to us but did it make sense to the people already helping those in society? Again we thought we should talk to some charity CEOs. The charities, said they didn't really care. As long as they got the money, they didn't mind whether it was strategic or irrelevant to the business. Having to be strategic might even limit where they might be able to get their money from. More depression ensued ...

"Then we ended up in Canning Town to meet a guy called David Robinson, the boss of Community Links. It didn't look like it was going to be worth all the effort of cycling to East London! How wrong we were. He showed us a chart that compared the growth of social, cultural and sporting sponsorship in the previous 50 years, the visual was astonishing. Sport had grown off the chart, culture too, a massive growth; social, minimal growth.

"Why, we asked? Because we haven't been strategic, he said, we are still only getting the chairman's wife's fund. To succeed we must show businesses why we are relevant to their success and how we could partner to make things better.

"Standing in the shadow of the shiny new Canary Wharf, looking across the second poorest neighbourhood in Europe, it was clear for the Wharf to succeed, so the communities around it need to as well. They had a strategic rationale to make it work. David showed us Action Match. A way to take great solutions that were working here and trying to do them elsewhere with partner businesses included.

"We left that seminal meeting knowing we weren't crack pots and with the confidence to start Good Business.

"And look what has happened since. Charities and business work hand in hand to make society better delivering on mutual objectives. WWF works with Coca Cola on water replenishment schemes around the world; The Shard works with community partners to train local people to deliver new jobs. The Sports Shoe Manufacturer works with community sports organisations getting kids off the streets and into sport. The list is endless. The combinations are multiplying.

"We have come so far that new UN Sustainable Development Goals, 17 ambitious goals to improve the world, will only be met by Government, NGOs & Businesses working together to that end.

"Thirty years later, if we relook at David's chart and review social, cultural & sport sponsorship again – two things would stand out.

Josephine Seccombe agrees:

“First, how difficult it would be to measure social impact: so much of the delivery is not in cash but through the business actions itself it would be impossible to measure – but assuming you could, yes sport has grown massively but nowhere nearly as much as social and in some small way that was down to the vision and bravery that Community Links has shown throughout its life.”

“There is no question that the arrival of Action Match forced voluntary sector workers to look at this new approach of raising funds from a new source in a new way. The match was between the customer of the product or service and the end aim of the charity, e.g. the local parents’ charity seeking a sponsor for their guide for new parents. They sold the idea as part of a package that would be distributed by the midwifery service – a package that included the Guide and also the baby products produced by the sponsor.

“The newness was the approach to the marketing budget not the charitable trust source, which was different again from the Saatchi style help-in-kind offer for creative products like new headed paper or leaflets. Action Match truly broke new ground.”

David Robinson remembers it the other way round:

“Marketing managers were accustomed to spotting the opportunities in sport or the arts and were apparently comfortable with the unpredictability of advertising – but most at first struggled with social sponsorship. It wasn’t the lack of evidence that bothered them but just the sheer novelty. As we’ve seen subsequently with other, quite different projects you can argue the case until you are blue in the face but it is case studies – real-life examples of success – that ultimately swing the argument.”

What was learnt?

- 1) Social sponsorship certainly took off, but it is difficult to properly evaluate the scale of the Action Match contribution from the surviving evidence. It is unimaginable that any serious funder would enter into an arrangement now that involved so little measurement and so much trust. At the time, of course, this was not unusual, but attitudes and protocols have subsequently changed on both sides. It would no more occur to Community Links to pitch a project on this basis today than it would occur to most government agencies or other public bodies to fund it. Instinctively this feels like progress but it is worth pausing on this first project to reflect on what might have been lost from the subsequent professionalisation of the grant-making process:

Would a tiny community group stumbling on a bright idea ever have had the chance to make it grow and to share it if precise outcomes had to be predicted at the outset and delivered by the quarter date?

Would an entrepreneurial movement ever have emerged, adapting and shaping itself to the opportunities and pitfalls it encountered if the milestones were carved before a penny spent?

Would a reputable funder now take little more than the instincts of a handful of outlying practitioners and the slender “evidence” of one project and support an idea (it was no more than that) like Action Match today? Giles’ account of his first impressions reveals the improbability of the endeavour – “It didn’t look like it was going to be worth all the effort of cycling to East London!”

Flair, instinct, trust, freedom, discretion, flexibility have been replaced by certainty, systems, measurement, accountability, control. Neither perfect state is ideal. In the right context, there is a place for both.

- 2) It is an obvious point, but as in so many other areas of our lives it is hard to overstate the impact of the internet. Sharing good practice in the 1980s and building a network meant a costly magazine, expensively posted to relatively few people. The total unit cost for each magazine, excluding labour, was around £2. Today the labour costs would be similar but costs would be far lower. Magazines get passed on laboriously to maybe half a dozen others, one by one, and then they fall apart. Emails and pdfs are instantly and continuously relayed and stored indefinitely.

At around the same time as Community Links was building Action Match, it was also developing the National Tower Blocks Network and about to start work on the first Ideas Annual. Again, these were all painstaking processes and quite different from the subsequent, more successful and much easier experience of the Early Action Task Force which has similarly attempted to spread an idea, build a practitioner network and share learning. The Action Match brokerage service never fulfilled its potential, and didn’t survive because it was just too big a job to reach the necessary critical mass. In 2017 such an undertaking could be vastly faster and cheaper.

The success of Action Match demonstrates that even very small organisations can have big ideas and can light a slow fuse. It is exponentially easier in 2017 but it is hard to identify the practitioner-led movements that have caught fire faster. If it isn’t that the sector doesn’t have the technical capacity, could it be that it no longer has the appetite for risk, the funding for experimentation or even the belief that an idea shared is an idea doubled? These are all questions to which we will return.

The Social Enterprise Zone

Action at the centre does not always translate into action locally.

(Government secondee to SEZ)

Without approaches ... that ensure policy is driven by practical experience of the problems, evidence-based policy offers no inherent guarantee that it will produce policies that work.

(*Enduring Change* report, Community Links, 2004, p.27)

The next big opportunity to engage with ambitious policy ideas presented itself when the organisation developed a new model for neighbourhood development: the Social Enterprise Zone. This is the story of how Community Links sought to regenerate Newham with the sort of local exceptionalism that Margaret Thatcher had granted the big businesses in Canary Wharf a decade earlier, failed to obtain the necessary permissions to do so and somehow, along the way, ended up playing a key role in the implementation of tax credits instead.

“How could you create a sort of Business Enterprise Zone to develop human capital?”

In the mid-1990s, Community Links began to ask why it was that, despite all the regeneration funding that Newham was receiving from government, the borough consistently featured among the worst performing and most deprived areas in the UK. “We realised that significant sums were spent on regeneration and that Newham had benefited substantially from these government programmes. We used to say to people that we could go on the roof of our centre in Canning Town and see, within walking distance, examples of every generation of government-sponsored regeneration since the earliest urban programmes of the 1960s”, remembers David Robinson.

“We could see gleaming new Jubilee Line trains on their way from the rejuvenated Stratford town centre to central London; passenger jets shuttling to and from City Airport; London’s largest new conference centre, ExCel”, a 2004 report co-authored by David and Matthew

Smerdon further describes. But despite all these investments, Newham seemed to still do badly on all the league tables. Was it because money wasn’t being spent well? Or because it was being spent on the wrong things? Community Links began to realise that, although large amounts were allocated to these high-profile regeneration programmes, the sums were still relatively small compared to the sums that were spent on benefits or housing in the same area. As large as it seemed to be, the regeneration spend was tinkering at the margins.

In 1998, Community Links estimated that about 60–70% of the gross domestic product in the Borough of Newham came directly from the public sector. Of this amount, some 2% was for urban regeneration; the other 98% went into mainstream programmes, such as housing and benefits. To illustrate this, Community Links analysed the spending for the New Deal for Communities in West Ham and Plaistow, a regeneration programme worth £50 million over 10 years. They calculated that if benefit payments were to remain the same over the same period of time, they would amount to £1.2bn – a sum that was 24 times bigger than the £50 million which was specifically dedicated to regeneration. Staff began to think about how they could help to change the ways in which the benefits budget and other mainstream funds were being spent.

For inspiration, the charity had to look no further than across the River Lea, in the direction of Canary Wharf, where the tall towers and skyscrapers of the city’s financial district powerfully remind east Londoners of what can happen when a neighbourhood is granted some level of exceptionalism. An idea started to take shape: what if a similar concept were to be applied to Newham? What if less bureaucracy meant that the borough could experiment with different arrangements and come up with alternative models that would lift it out of poverty?

“We realised that the Business Enterprise Zone, which the then government had used to develop Canary Wharf by encouraging business to locate there, was all about altering tax and planning regulations for companies”, continues David. “They weren’t just offering relatively modest capital investment; they were transforming mainstream programmes to release a different kind of development. We started thinking, ‘How could you create a sort of Business Enterprise Zone but apply it to the development of human capital rather than the physical capital?’” In short, explains Aaron Barbour, who first joined Community Links as a researcher to support and expand this programme, Community Links took “the principle to try to develop the social equivalent of Canary Wharf”. It was similarly hoping to set in motion a new, more holistic process of regeneration in Newham by attempting to negotiate exceptions to all those rules that had so far stifled change.

The idea and corresponding experiment took the name of Social Enterprise Zone (SEZ). In its *Social Enterprise Zones: Building innovation into regeneration* report in 1998, Community Links defined the SEZ as “an area in which local communities and agencies can come together to change relevant rules or laws wherever more flexibility could have a positive impact on both social and economic regeneration”. The purpose of this experiment was, therefore, to create an environment free from suffocating bureaucracy in places where several competing factors – from unemployment to poor health services – had caused long-term deprivation.

“One of the first things I did was look at a map of multiple disadvantage for Canning Town”, remembers Matthew. “If you were a local resident, there were all sorts of barriers you faced that were interlinked and self-reinforcing. [At the heart of the work on Social Enterprise Zones] was the idea that if you’re really going to try and change an area, you need to harness

all the resources – not just the little bits that are available for regenerations – and use them to address all these different barriers.”

In areas such as Newham, Community Links hoped, the establishment of a Social Enterprise Zone could bring about a different way of doing things. People would collaborate more. Ideas could be tested through pilot programmes. Mainstream public funding could be invested in locally led regeneration initiatives. All this would likely tackle problems at the root, in a systemic manner.

That, at least, is what the organisation had initially envisioned. Government was less keen. John Prescott, the Secretary of State for the Environment, had initially spoken with enthusiasm at the launch and referenced the project, with approval, in a parliamentary debate, but as the detailed work began to be developed, all the ideas for wider discretion were rejected. It became increasingly evident that something truly radical and systemic was not going to happen in the way that Community Links had intended.

From the initial bold, human-centred reinterpretation of Thatcher’s financial vision, the SEZ shifted its focus into influencing the way individual public resources were spent. In order to do this, potential government allies had to be selected for each initiative and approached strategically, with a list of specific, relevant policy proposals. These ideas could only be developed by involving the local community, and should be tested and monitored locally before being recommended to central government. It was a subtle but disappointing pivot and a step back from the ambition of the original vision but, once again, just as in the National Tower Blocks Campaign, Community Links was building networks to channel the local knowledge and using that knowledge to pioneer working solutions on the ground.

“Don’t tell me what’s wrong with your life, tell me your vision to improve it”

“When the SEZ was launched, it was in the hope that we would secure for this area considerable flexibility in using budgets like Jobseeker’s Allowance”, explains Matthew. “But”, he continues, “we weren’t given that permission, so right from the start we had to rethink what the project was trying to do. It became much more about how to engage people who experience a problem in generating ideas for using mainstream budgets in more effective ways. In that sense, I think it nicely captured the spirit of Community Links around the phrase ‘people who experience a problem know it best’.

“We ran a lot of exercises with [local residents] to generate themes, then we worked together on ideas that had originated through that process and developed them into either [pilots] or [suggestions] for broader policy change. It was a useful distinction; we thought it wasn’t just about big policy change, but also about what we could do locally.”

The SEZ was funded through a local government budget that covered Forest Gate and Plaistow in Newham. For the organisation, this meant that most actions and initiatives, before anything else, had to show that they would deliver local change. “We were held to account by that local regeneration body,” says Matthew, “but we also wanted to amplify that experience and make some wider points.” The regeneration body granted the SEZ unusually flexible outcomes. This enabled the charity to also engage in systemic thinking and generate broader ideas.

Community Links developed a particular mechanism to collect the thoughts and concerns of Newham residents. “It was an idea-generating process which we called What If”, explains Matthew. “The methodology was based around three questions and it started from a positive perspective”, says Aaron.

“Tell me your dreams and aspirations, your vision for the next five years. ... Don’t tell me what’s wrong, tell me what’s right and what’s your vision to improve your life, what are the barriers that prevent you from achieving this and what are your solutions to bring about the change you want.”

Looking back on it, Aaron reflects: “It’s a liberating approach. I’ve taken that on into my work at Katherine Low Settlement” (where he is now the CEO), “because it’s much more positive; you can really engage and have some interesting discussions with people; they go away quite thoughtful and they’ll come back to you with ‘Oh I’ve had another idea!’ It really sparks that kind of thought process and generates a whole bunch of different ideas. We talked about all sorts of things – issues around employment, unemployment, the informal cash-in-hand economy, stuff to do with the benefits system, housing, health. At the time, the idea was to then go, research those issues and set up some practical demonstration projects – some pilots – to see how we could change those things.”

These dialogues were conducted by two employees who lived locally and that Community Links itself had trained. This way, because they were familiar with the particular problems affecting the neighbourhood, they could engage residents more effectively. To eliminate distance and liberate confidence and ideas, “What If” conversations were also structured in a way that would encourage participants to shape content and direction.

“The [What If] message”, concluded Community Links’ *Enduring Change* report at the time, “is that there is a wealth of knowledge and commitment stored in communities all over the UK, but without mechanisms to capture it, it remains largely untapped.”

Once the blurred contours of an idea had emerged through a “What If” conversation, Community Links would apply what it had learnt from past experience: it wasn’t enough to just outline recommendations; to create policy change, ideas had to be linked back to current priorities in central government. This would maximise the chances of any suggestion being picked up. If the ultimate goal was systemic change, some of these ideas had to be tested, so that working alternatives could be found and introduced with confidence to relevant government departments. At this stage, ideas for pilots had to pass a triple threshold in order to be selected: they had to be beneficial to Newham; they had to contain the potential to bring about mainstream change; and they had to include partnerships between local agencies and central government.

One of the first chances to interact with Whitehall and use the SEZ as a lab came when the government started developing tax credits. “We arranged for a secondee from Revenue and Customs to spend some time with us, looking at the practical implications of how we could introduce tax credits.” Before officially implementing the current tax credits system in April 2003, the Treasury and Inland Revenue were looking for ways to raise awareness of this imminent change to welfare legislation among vulnerable communities. Invited and supported by Community Links, the Inland Revenue set up a pilot in Newham in 2002 and collaborated with the organisation to disseminate information and help people on low incomes complete applications. When the project ended, the Inland Revenue reported that Newham had “the highest number of tax credit claimants in all the inner London boroughs” (*Enduring Change*, p.13).

Over £2 million was distributed among families and individuals in need, but the benefits of this initiative extended far beyond the lives of the people who were directly involved in it. After this collaboration, the Inland Revenue established a new department dedicated exclusively to developing partnerships with the voluntary sector, and it grew determined to roll out the scheme across the UK. A few years later, Community Links was also able to exploit its by now well-established relationship with the Inland Revenue to explore potential pathways between the informal and formal economies.

“People have ideas. We need to find ways to build on those”

At the same time, the “What If” process threw up another issue: Newham residents were going into their local Jobcentre and, because many of them couldn’t speak very good English, they couldn’t tackle benefit application forms. “Newham is so diverse; at the time there were more than a hundred different languages being spoken in the borough”, says Aaron. “These people were getting [the applications] wrong and so they were getting massive delays in benefit payments and ultimately eviction notices because the other half of the system hadn’t paid them in time.”

“Together we came up with the idea that we should work with local people, who’ve got all these amazing language skills, train them in form filling and put them in the Jobcentre to translate and help others.”

A pilot was launched in 2002 in Stratford. Soon, the experiment was extended across the borough. One hundred volunteers were recruited to assist Jobcentres with their language skills. They were mainly people who were struggling to get into paid employment.

At the end of this experience, many of them moved on to paid positions within the Jobcentre. “There was something like a six-week delay in processing time [when we first started]”, remembers Aaron. “We managed to reduce that – in a few months – to three days. The error rate went from 76% to less than 9%.”

At first and immediately after the experiment ended, a lot was achieved: Jobcentre Plus agreed to take the funding for the local service into their mainstream budget, and the findings from the pilot were discussed at the Treasury. The then Chancellor agreed to the establishment of “a new fund of £8 million over the next two years to help Jobcentre Plus managers to [introduce] specialist advisers in areas with high ethnic minority populations”.

In the end, however, Jobcentre Plus didn’t use the money to extend the service. “On that one, we failed”, considers Matthew now, but something positive still came out of it all: as with the work with the Inland Revenue the newly built partnership between the charity and Jobcentre Plus would be of enduring value.

“We had really good relationships with local managers and individuals within the agency; that’s why our work regenerated and developed”, remembers Aaron. “We started developing new ideas, such as a Discretionary Payment Fund for people who needed small sums of money to be able to cover, for instance, transport costs in order to attend job interviews.” Again, this small, locally generated idea ended up reaching national policy-makers: in April 2003, the Budget provided for a new discretionary fund that would give Jobcentre Plus managers more flexibility to direct resources towards the specific priorities, challenges and needs of the local community.

All the small initiatives developed under the SEZ umbrella didn’t just have a narrow, local ambition. “We always took all these findings back to government”, explains Aaron.

“We would say: ‘Look, local discretion in Newham is actually bringing about quite a lot of changes; you should give district areas more flexibility.’ Because you know your local area, you know what’s going on, you’ve got a much better angle on this. You should be able to make some decisions at that local level. And the Social Enterprise Zone proved it.”

These ideas incubated by the Social Enterprise Zone highlighted areas into which central government had to intervene, often guiding policy action and reform. The broader reach of this work inaugurated a new phase in the development of the organisation’s self-awareness, as Community Links began to realise that its front-line activities, the networks it was building within government and its ability to unite the two could enable it to make a unique contribution to policy-making.

“We engaged with bigger themes, particularly around the informal economy; it was such a significant factor in our local area that we needed to do some broader thinking about it”, explains Matthew. The most significant piece of work done by the organisation at the time, he says, focused on a report about the hidden morality of informal work. It was written by Dr Andrew Travers, an academic at the University of Exeter, and it pointed out that people working informally often do it for “positive reasons”: to feed their family, to be busy, to feel productive, to build wider networks, to learn new skills. “You’ve got all these very positive reasons which aren’t reflected in the way in which government deals with the informal economy, which is to criminalise it”, continues Matthew.

Before pitching proposals to government, in this case Community Links collaborated with an academic to better understand the reasons behind individual decisions to work informally, to explore public attitudes around this reality and to clearly highlight why government policy in this area needed re-thinking. Only by building on the learning gathered at the local level could the organisation hope to effectively influence central policy-making.

After this initial stage, Community Links made strategic use of the relationship it had already developed with the Inland Revenue and shared its ideas and thoughts directly with them; the Inland Revenue responded with a new secondment to further investigate the issue and interrogate the ideas. This time, the project was directly linked into senior management to striking effect: the secondees had to regularly report her findings to the Inland Revenue board as the placement unfolded. At the end she was promoted and given a budget to develop new policies on the informal economy across the UK.

Effectively, Community Links had begun to come up with its own brand of evidence-based policy-making, which at the time was being heavily promoted at the national level by Tony Blair and others as a way to increase the accountability of public institutions. The organisation was pushing for a type of policy driven by close insights into social issues as experienced by local communities; once again the lived experience was right at the heart of the work. The ultimate goal, articulated in the *Enduring Change* report, was to include these communities and front-line staff not just in the process of gathering evidence, but also in interpreting it, deciding what works and what would work better.

“We were looking for discretionary power at the local level ...”

“Looking back on it, that original ambition wasn’t achieved – a zone where you could flex all these resources and systems”, says Matthew. “We wanted to bring together public sector leaders and local people, break down some of the barriers between them and redirect mainstream budgets at scale. That didn’t work out. Without firm instruction from the centre or a new budget, it was difficult to get people to abandon the way they’d done things for decades.”

In the years that followed the SEZ experiment, Community Links reflected a lot on how to revolutionise the siloed ways in which the public sector tends to operate. “I think it is difficult to do”, says David. “There have been several attempts; some, like Total Place have been government led but progress has been very slow. In more recent times, with the Early Action work we have begun to talk about the ‘magic triangle’ – leadership, systems, culture; trying to pick off one point on the triangle and not the other two is unlikely to work. The SEZ addressed systems. To a limited extent we worked on the cultural influences. Leadership support was patchy. You have to succeed on all three to create sustainable change.”

“We tried to bring to life the idea that ‘people who experience a problem understand it best’”, says Matthew. “And we put some ideas into the public domain that were taken up on a broader scale, such as the focus on area-based policy, on decentralising power, on working together, building around existing local resources, establishing mechanisms to effectively gather people’s voices, opinions, perceptions and solutions, while, at the same time, engaging with top officials, national budgets and regulations. Although the SEZ didn’t become what the organisation had initially hoped, it showed what we were good at, the power of user insight and the importance of the lived experience in developing new ideas. Later on, when we were involved in the Council on Social Action, we were building on this.”

Stephen Timms was a Treasury minister at the time, and speaking in 2016 particularly remembered the work on the informal economy:

“What’s impressive about Community Links is that it’s been able to keep its Newham focus while getting involved in very fruitful policy work with government. When I was at the Treasury, Links was trying to come up with ideas on how to bring people who were making a living – pretty entrepreneurially but illegally – into the legitimate economy. The Treasury took this work very seriously and with great interest. I do think the Council on Social Action emerged from the value that [Community Links] exhibited at the Treasury then.”

Besides opening new avenues for action, some of the mechanisms, ideas and relationships the organisation had developed while experimenting with the Social Enterprise Zone helped to shape Community Links’ belief in a different type of policy-making: one based on collaboration across interests and sectors; one solidly founded upon the insights of change-makers on the ground; one able to put people and their stories at the centre of every new conversation. And that’s how the charity began to engage more systematically with issues whose impact was felt at the local level but that were considerably broader than Newham, such as the informal economy and an overly complex welfare system.

Need NOT Greed

We were thinking, “Well, why not? Let’s tackle the informal economy in the UK. Let’s reform the welfare system.” And actually, a lot of these things did happen. It was about being optimistic; about making something radically different.

(Maeve McGoldrick, interview)

Sharon has been running her own mobile beauty therapy business for three years On average, she declares around 50 percent of her business for tax purposes. However, this varies in accordance with her earnings. Sharon’s approach is to declare the maximum she can afford to, after first ensuring that she can pay her rent and feed her family. That way, she feels she is not taking a penny more of state support than she needs for her basic living costs. She takes quite a strict approach to minimising her state dependency and abiding by her own moral code, distinguishing this radically from “real benefit scroungers”.

(From *Self-employed people in the informal economy – cheats or contributors?* Community Links report, 2004)

The Social Enterprise Zone had repeatedly shown that operating in an area where many residents depended on state funds to survive, meant that Community Links was engaging simultaneously with local needs and issues of national relevance. The gap between taking care of local priorities and attempting to solve them in a holistic way – by involving the right institutions – was a narrow one. If the organisation wished to help someone who had paid a visit to its advice desk because they were at risk of homelessness after losing their housing benefit, for example, any sustainable solution would also entail getting the relevant public agency to change the way it worked. It was never just about offering one vulnerable person immediate assistance; it was also about tackling big injustices at the root. After the SEZ had come to an end, Community Links continued to work on some of the broader issues that had surfaced from local conversations, learning more about them as it went along, keen to inspire wider policy changes. This chapter traces that journey, focusing in particular on the work on the informal economy and the germination of universal credit.

“They were stories from the ground up”

Much of the policy work that came out of the Social Enterprise Zone was collected in a series of publications called Evidence Papers. These contained ideas, highlighted problems and suggested solutions derived from local experience, but their main purpose wasn’t to simply record that knowledge; the organisation wanted to use the series strategically, as a tool to start informed conversations on specific issues with those in power.

“The Evidence Papers were rigorous, but they weren’t academic publications”, explains Richard McKeever, who edited the series. “We wanted to write something that felt like a feature, a proper analysis of an issue, and to put that out as a way of generating interest and creating a story. Very importantly, each of those Evidence Papers had to include comments by the people who were affected by that issue, [consider the latter’s] impact and what could be done differently. They were stories from the ground up.”

The grassroots nature of the publications was mirrored in the way they were disseminated: Community Links never sold them, but made them immediately available for download, blogged about them and organised events to launch each one of them. Now the idea of a free download is established practice, but at the time it was unusual.

“The Papers felt like they were uncovering a hidden story, a bit like [developing] an academic working paper; [they were] based on facts, statistical evidence and lived experience, [but they didn’t require] a full-scale research and writing-up process, so they got content moving quickly.” Most importantly, they “served a purpose: they informed action and projects that were happening in the same building. It wasn’t abstract research that you never saw or heard of again.”

The Evidence Papers were an expression, in print, of what Community Links had learnt with the Social Enterprise Zone. They were about uncovering different stories on the ground and sharing them with policy-makers; about challenging traditional, simplistic ideas of what constitutes evidence and what doesn't; and about sharing a deeper level of understanding, inspiring new views and reframing old conversations.

For Aaron Barbour, head of policy and research at the time of the Social Enterprise Zone, the Evidence Papers were representative of the particular type of policy-making that Community Links wished to mainstream: "It was an evidence-based approach to policy-making rather than, 'Oh, I've got a good idea! Let's test it through the various different media outlets and find a winner, then we'll put some flesh on it and develop a policy properly.' A lot of policy is made like that."

The interpretation of evidence at the heart of this process was different from what civil servants might have expected. It was deeply qualitative: it focused on people, their problems and their aspirations. It placed policy ideas in context, portraying how these might fit in the lives of a community stuck for decades at the bottom of all deprivation rankings. "We could say, 'This policy works in practice; now you should roll it out and develop it'", continues Aaron. "And I think civil servants appreciated this. We weren't just saying, 'Here's a problem, it's [bad], fix it'; we were actually saying, 'This could be better and here's how you could do it'. So [the series] was very solutions-focused and it genuinely grew out of the research we were doing on the ground."

The target audience for each paper changed every time, as the organisation tried to strategically identify the most relevant interlocutors in government for each new topic, sharing with them stories and testimony that could shift policy and opinions. More than in their instrumental nature, however, according to Aaron, the value of the Evidence Papers lay in their pragmatism: "They gave you the authority to then go on and say, 'Look, there is evidence for this,

we're not just making it up'. And the solutions are derived from this. That was always the key thing, with all the parts of the work we did: it was based on practical, on-the-ground work. We're not a think tank. It's [all] born of years and years of experience working with local communities – and for me that makes it doubly, triply strong."

“The uncounted population in east London was as large as the population of Norwich”

The first paper, "The Uncounted", was published around the time of the census – in 2001. The phrase was coined by Community Links to describe people who were living in Newham but weren't officially on the census. "This continues to be an issue", says Richard now. "People live in informal accommodation, sheds, above shops – unrecorded. We did a triangulation of data with the number of people who were registered with the GP versus the number of people who were on the electoral roll, all sorts of things which indicated that there were far more people living in the area than were officially registered. [And this] has an impact on services – [such as] the health service, so [for example] the number of beds in hospitals for that population is incorrect."

The subject matter was inspired, once again, through direct interactions with local residents. "[Our] advice workers were seeing increasing numbers of asylum seekers and refugees, homeless people, and travellers", explains David Robinson. "Some of these people were in the UK illegally or wanted to preserve their anonymity for particular reasons, but the overwhelming majority had nothing to hide."

Eventually, Community Links started to realise that the east London population was significantly bigger than the census had suggested and, therefore, that deprivation could be more extreme than anything revealed in the official numbers. The census had recorded that 610,000 people lived in the area, yet GP registrations numbered 710,000. "The truth", notes David, "is that nobody

truly knew how many people lived here." At the time, Community Links estimated that the uncounted population in east London was at least as large as the population of Norwich, and probably approaching the size of Milton Keynes.

Following this discovery, Community Links embarked on a more rigorous investigation, speaking to front-line staff in a wide range of organisations, to service managers and, in particular, to the uncounted. "This led to the realisation that if official counts routinely fail to include those at the bottom, decisions about the allocation of resources consistently underestimate the scale of the need", explains David. This meant two things: first, as the advice workers had initially observed, significant numbers of the most excluded were missing out on important services like GP registration and school places; second, if facilities like the new local hospital were based on population numbers that were considerably lower than they should have been, both the counted and the uncounted were short-changed. This insight was particularly pertinent at the time, as Newham's new A&E provision was proving to be inadequate and a cause of much local concern.

As a result of this piece of work, the Cabinet Office contacted Community Links to learn more about the findings. The organisation automatically assumed that the local authority would be similarly interested in them, as this could attract more funding to the area. However, the LBN Chief Executive publicly dismissed the report and privately demanded a retraction and an apology, saying that Community Links' behaviour undermined "all the good work of the council" and was "disloyal". Council leaders argued that Newham was widely regarded in Whitehall as a successful and effective authority. All the official criteria showed that local need was going down and performance was going up. Government rewarded leading authorities with additional funds, pilot programmes and special privileges. Revealing hidden need spoilt those trends and threatened that reputation, showing that Newham wasn't doing so well after all.

"We decided that we had nothing to apologise for", remembers David. "We were doing exactly what we are here to do: uncovering a major issue through our front-line services, investigating more thoroughly and suggesting solutions. However," he adds, "lessons were learnt from how the findings were used: we should have taken them to the authorities before they were published and said, 'These are the facts, what can we do about this together?' We missed an important stage, and that was naïve and disrespectful."

In the end, "The Uncounted" successfully brought to the surface an issue which was subsequently recognised and addressed, although still not completely resolved. Official figures are now better aligned, efforts are made to identify and count these hidden communities, and to allow for the fact that they exist even when officials cannot be precise about the exact numbers.

"Would the uncounted have come to light without our work?" wonders David now. "Possibly eventually, but it wouldn't have happened when it did. Maybe that's what organisations like ours really contribute. Plenty of good people in authorities, local and national, would arrive at the same conclusions as we do but big systems and structures are often opaque, even to those who work in them. 'To see what's in front of one's nose is a constant struggle', said George Orwell. We see things from a different perspective and we talk about it. We prod and disrupt and challenge and change happens faster."

“For many, choosing to work in the cash-in-hand economy was a survival strategy”

Further exploring the invisibility that often accompanies poverty, some of the Evidence Papers focused on the extensive work that Community Links was doing at the time on the cash-in-hand economy and the people involved in it. Richard remembers, “there was a cycle where we were learning from people with that lived experience, we were writing it up and producing policy recommendations. We were dealing with it in a way that a think tank or university research department wouldn’t: the same people were involved in experiencing the issue, thinking about it, understanding it and then doing something about it.”

In many of the “What If” conversations that Community Links had conducted with local residents, employment issues had been repeatedly raised, and the organisation was determined to make good use of its editorial output to channel, elaborate on and share the reality of everyday living in this deprived area of London. If the “What If” mechanism served to gather the local knowledge and understand the most pressing challenges affecting the neighbourhood, the Evidence Papers were the tools through which the organisation could hope to influence central policy-making, collecting stories on the ground as evidence and shaping recommendations around them.

Through the work on the SEZ, the charity had started looking at why some people in Newham were choosing to work in the cash-in-hand economy. It gradually discovered that this had more to do with survival rather than with greed. “It was a coping mechanism, a survival strategy for feeding their family. It was a reaction to poverty. If people couldn’t get mainstream jobs or develop a career, they had to do what they could to get by – taking bits and pieces of work and getting paid in cash”, explains Aaron. “When we started looking into this area, there was very little research in the UK around the impact that cash-in-hand work has on poverty or prospects. The issue had come out of the ‘What ifs’. We did policy research around it and eventually produced about 20 reports over several years.”

In the foreword to one of these reports, “Self-employed people in the informal economy – cheats or contributors?” (2004), Sir David Walker, then chairman of Morgan Stanley International and regular government adviser, welcomed the organisation’s in-depth exploration of the reasons why people end up working informally. “In poorer countries of the world, ‘micro-entrepreneurs’ trading informally are praised for their initiative, enterprise and sheer hard work”, he wrote. “Their stories are held up as examples of courage in the face of adversity. Our government provides substantial aid to programmes which support them. And yet, in our own country, we seem to [view] their efforts to improve their situation only in a criminal light.”

According to Walker, the informal economy “is a prevalent force in many communities throughout the UK. It often provides an essential mechanism for people to support themselves and their families, become more financially independent and less reliant on state support. It gives them the capacity to work, and with that [come] self-esteem and personal dignity, a sense of contributing to society, and perhaps the only opportunity available to them to acquire the necessary skills and experience to move into mainstream business or employment.”

This means that the cash-in-hand economy remains a grey area, one in which judgements cannot be made without understanding the intentions and motives behind the behaviour. “With ‘The Uncounted’ and this piece of work we were going back to the Tower Blocks Campaign, operating at the margins of what the council and government wanted us to be doing”, says David now. “It was quite controversial, as the popular opinion would be that people in the informal economy should be punished; [instead, we were pushing for] an understanding of the circumstances and of what’s in the interest of wider society.”

Gradually this angle seemed to grow in relevance, and the connection between poverty, benefits and the widespread need to supplement these minimal sums of public money in times of hardship by accepting cash-in-hand jobs became increasingly evident. Scaremongering campaigns by the Department of Work and Pensions targeted at benefit fraudsters began to make appearances across many of the most deprived areas in the country, including Newham. “Made to pay back the benefit I stole”, said one humiliating poster on a phone box outside Community Links, office. “And he thought he’d never be caught”, threatened the official comment printed at the bottom.

The charity felt it had to take urgent action to reframe the conversation and invert people’s attitudes; it had to introduce a different narrative. “Where people take on [low-paid] informal work out of need, the decision ... is different from that of someone who is avoiding taxes out of greed”, explained one Evidence Paper at the time. The perspective was simple but unique; the potential for change huge. A campaign was needed.

The slogan: Need NOT Greed.

“We’ve shown how much of the fraud in the benefits system is perpetrated out of need, not greed”

In 2008, Maeve McGoldrick joined Community Links to work on this campaign. “[The organisation] had a substantial evidence base around the informal economy, but recognised that they needed to change government policy. We needed more proactive campaigning and lobbying”, remembers Maeve. “Initially, I had to refine policy recommendations, build up support for them and do some profile work in parliament and with the media. As the campaign grew, we got it down to three big policy areas to make it more effective: one was around ending the need for informal work through welfare reform;

the second one was looking at formalisation services, particularly around self-employment; the third was [encouraging government to adopt] a more nuanced approach to enforcement. At the time those posters were all over the country and there were adverts on TV – really threatening ones – ‘we are watching you and we’ll find you’. We wanted to say, ‘Yes, benefit fraud is happening, but we should have a more positive approach.’ We realised we needed to do a lot more about the stigma of people on benefits.”

But when Community Links tried to do this, it encountered its first challenge: “We quickly realised that our reports, with all their results, stats and figures didn’t contain sufficient personal narratives or human stories”, says Maeve. These were particularly important, as the campaign was perceived as controversial by several key actors. “It was very difficult to get across in the media, the government and even the third sector. Charities [didn’t feel comfortable] talking about this publicly because they spent a lot of time trying to help people off benefits, whilst this campaign indicated that these people had to stay on, but out of survival – out of poverty.”

The best way to break through this layer of suspicion was to have people as the face of the campaign. “But it was so difficult to find people who were willing to talk to us about their situation; understandably, they were scared”, continues Maeve. “I remember I got a call from the BBC saying, ‘We really want to cover the story and talk to some of these people.’ I was desperately trying to find case studies for them, but I couldn’t and we lost that opportunity. After work that day I walked up and down Barking Road just asking people if they knew someone... I was terrified of how to put it. They all walked away. I hadn’t quite appreciated the challenges of the campaign and the fear people had.”

Although Maeve didn't find anyone who was prepared to talk on the record that day, eventually, by working closely with their own service users and with other organisations, Community Links identified people who were willing to talk. "Trust was essential", says Maeve. "I remember discovering this little community – it's called Gamesley – a really deprived area, with very few opportunities, just cash-in-hand work. We discovered over 30 people who were freely talking about doing bits and pieces of informal work. We ended up with eight people who [agreed to share their experiences publicly and attend] the launch of Need NOT Greed."

“We are living with a complex system”

It was early 2009 when Community Links brought these people and others with experience of cash-in-hand work to Westminster and officially launched the campaign. At the event, there were MPs, Lords and the then Secretary of State James Purnell. "[They were all very interested in] personal experiences and people's personal motives", says Maeve now. "[I remember] this story of a mum who ended up in prison [and] was prosecuted for [fraud]. She said she never regretted it; she mentioned her daughter, she said that she was able to make enough money to educate her and the daughter now had a really good job, so her sacrifice was worth it. James Purnell [in particular] was very moved. He invited us to meet later with him, the head of the Department for Work and Pensions fraud team and the head of benefit policy. It was the morning that the MPs' expenses scandal first made the news. I sat there with them while the Secretary of State was on the phone to the media trying to explain why he wasn't fiddling his expenses, and I heard exactly the same line we were telling MPs, 'We are living with a complex system.' This was exactly the same line [that can be read] in our research findings – people don't understand the benefits system [and can too easily be accused of fraud] because it's [all] overly complex. We thought he was going to call off the meeting", she continues, "but we [talked] and he

was really keen to work with us. We'd won him over by that stage and we'd won Hazel Blears – who was the Department for Communities and Local Government minister working on regeneration and tackling poverty. Then, shortly afterwards, both Ministers resigned! The piece of learning we had to take forward was don't rely on one or two very senior people; build out from those leaders as soon as possible. Campaigns can have long lives and many of them. Ministers often don't."

However, the campaign had touched James Purnell in a way that had caught his attention beyond the scope of his official role. "He met with me in his flat after that and he said he was not able to talk officially because he wasn't secretary anymore, but that he thought this was the most inspirational campaign he'd ever encountered – it was the impact of people's voices, hearing about real lives. It really had an effect on him and he gave us some advice on how best to approach it: don't go public but go behind the scenes, because it's a controversial topic and even if the Secretary of State wants to help you, they can't be seen to be endorsing benefits fraud. It was incredible but that's why my job changed, from Campaigns Coordinator to Policy and Public Affairs Manager. We recognised that we needed more of a public affairs approach and we realised how important it was to build strong, trusting relationships if we wanted to have the kind of influence that we needed."

By that time it was 2010, and Community Links saw an opportunity to expand some of this work by applying alongside the Department for Work and Pensions to run the UK programme for the European Year against Poverty and Social Exclusion. Winning the bid meant that the organisation could continue to research the ways in which poverty and the informal economy were connected, while strengthening its network beyond Newham and even beyond the UK. "We applied that 'What If' methodology across the country and fed back ideas into mainstream policy", says Aaron.

"We involved over a hundred people on benefits in workshops to identify obstacles and come up with

solutions", explains Maeve. Among participants, the challenges of the labour market and the inflexibility of the benefits system appeared to be recurring concerns. As well as a chance to influence national policy-making from the bottom, as Community Links had done in the past, the experience was a chance for the organisation to engage with a broader dimension, as the Need NOT Greed team attended events in Brussels and met with other European actors to join forces against poverty across the region.

Gradually, the campaign became no longer just about raising awareness on the informal economy but also about identifying and highlighting those barriers that prevented workers from entering the formal economy. "We've shown before how much of the fraud in the benefit system is perpetrated out of need, not greed", wrote Will Horwitz, former Communications Coordinator at Community Links, in a blog post. "Obviously there are those who are greedily playing the system, and they make for great newspaper headlines, but in our experience many people on benefits do a bit of work on the side because they need to. Reforming the benefits system so that people are able to do small amounts of work as a first step back towards the job market would lead to higher employment and fewer people working in the informal economy. Ultimately, less fraud and a smaller welfare budget", he concluded.

The conversations with some of the people who felt they had no choice but to sell their services and skills on the informal market were all pointing towards the need for welfare reform. "We began to steer Need NOT Greed into modernising the welfare system [and how this could have a positive impact on] formalisation activities", explains Maeve. At that time Deven Ghelani had started volunteering with Community Links. He had recently experienced the benefits system and was interested in contributing suggestions for welfare reform. "Deven worked on a tapered benefits proposal which was later presented to the minister", remembers Maeve. This wasn't a new idea; many other voices were simultaneously calling for change, but the timing was perfect. "Shortly afterwards Iain Duncan Smith introduced dynamic benefits – basically a bigger

version of what we were asking for", says Maeve now. These changes were worked up in detail by the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) – a think tank set up by Iain Duncan Smith. The CSJ called on government to simplify working-age benefits by replacing them all with Universal Credit.

There were common threads linking this piece of research and Community Links' conclusions, as in the meanwhile Deven had secured the post of senior researcher at the CSJ. Maeve, who is now Head of Policy and Campaigns at Crisis UK, notes that Iain Duncan Smith had conducted research on dynamic benefits for years, but that, thanks to Community Links, "he incorporated the informal economy into his proposals and, when he became Secretary of State, part of the universal credit design focused particularly on additional revenue to formalise informal activities. The principles were very much the same. It's what we were asking for and we strongly believed that would reduce informal work."

Will, who is currently a civil servant for the Department for Work and Pensions and was involved in the design of universal credit, also says that he's noticed evidence of the Community Links impact on the DWP. In particular, he identifies elements of Deep Value (the importance of relationships in public services as theorised by Community Links) that were then attached to welfare reform: "there's definitely an aspiration amongst the senior leadership to base the delivery of universal credit around the relationship between a work coach and a claimant. It's the claimant commitment – now a core part of how the DWP operates." And, perhaps more than anything else, it's precisely this focus on human interactions that Community Links attempted to contribute to the initial design for welfare reform, alongside the wealth of grassroots knowledge that had filtered for decades through its regular interactions with the front line.

“We took the experiences of the local people to the House of Commons, suggesting solutions but then working with civil servants to look at the different implications”

explains Aaron. “[For example,] we supported the work around universal credit – at the time we thought it would be the best option – because we could see [in Newham that] the benefits system wasn’t working. So [for instance,] we analysed the data to understand why people were coming to see us for advice. A lot of it had to do with delays within the benefits system. We could then take that to the DWP and say ‘Look, 73% of people come to us because of housing, because of the administrative delays. You need to improve that policy.’ Our involvement in universal credit grew out of this. We could see the changes needed and we developed those [ideas] over a number of years.”

But the collaboration with Ghelani offered more than a claim to influence over mainstream policy-making. As a direct result of this work, the demands of the Need NOT Greed campaign acquired more focus and relevance, as the organisation now had a clear picture of how the welfare system should be improved for the benefit of people who had been struggling because of its intricacies.

“Maeve McGoldrick of the charity Community Links says the benefits system simply can’t cope with modern working life”, wrote Jenni Russell in the *Guardian* in August 2009, summing up what the campaign now wished to convey. “It is designed for predictability, and that is just what has become so elusive, particularly at the bottom of the market. If a single mother, say, is offered a steady minimum-wage job for 24 hours a week, the system can deal very effectively with that. It can calculate the tax credits and the housing benefit subsidy that will make work pay.

It falls apart, though, when it has to respond to fluctuating incomes or rapid changes in people’s circumstances.

“McGoldrick says the majority of benefit claimants are now going into unstable jobs. They may be commission-based, or agency work, or zero-hour contracts. ... Jobs aren’t what they were. The government and the welfare system tend to talk and act as if finding work is the end of the problem, and as if happy jobseekers will have nothing left to think about except the gold watch they’ll receive when they retire. But many jobs on offer, particularly those advertised in jobcentres, are precarious, temporary or part-time, or have uncertain hours. Leaving the security of benefits for jobs like these is like stepping out onto cracking ice. ... Trying to deal with that sends benefit offices into meltdown. ... If [people’s] incomes fluctuate from week to week, so will their entitlement, and the system can’t keep up. Weekly changes must be reported, and it can take weeks for each claim to be processed. Meanwhile, panicking claimants may find that their housing benefit has been cut or suspended, on the assumption that what they earned three weeks ago is what they’re earning now.”

What was needed was a simpler welfare system, flexible enough to accommodate all modern work arrangements and realities; not one that was rigid and increasingly difficult to navigate.

“I remember that right at the beginning of Community Links one of the first things we did in [our] little shop was a welfare rights course”, says David, “It ran for four half days – so two days in total – and you could pretty much learn how the system worked. The idea that you could spend two days doing that and master the system now is laughable. Bits have been built on and it’s become so much more complex over the years. Large numbers of people don’t claim what they’re entitled to; there’s a level of poverty that doesn’t need to exist.”

At the time of the campaign, Community Links had calculated that more than 150 minor changes had been made to the housing benefit system since it was introduced and the number was continuing to rise. “It’s evident to anybody who looks at the system that it’s in need of an overhaul, and certainly some way of pulling some of those things together, making it much, much simpler”, David adds. That’s what Need NOT Greed was arguing for. It was an increasingly common view. That’s the context in which the organisation ended up supporting the work on universal credit enthusiastically, even backing – for a while – some of the changes that the CSJ was advocating for. But in the end, “the details of the government’s implementation fell well short of what was necessary”, says David. “When the government introduced a benefit cap, the objectives of universal credit were discredited and contradicted”, similarly concludes Maeve.

Although the final design was not what Community Links had envisioned when it had first started talking about the modernisation of the welfare system, by the end of the campaign political opinions on the informal economy had begun to shift – as the government’s decision to allocate resources to the formalisation of cash-in-hand activities demonstrated. “Politicians understood that the picture is mixed; that while certainly some people are serial fraudsters, the considerable majority in our view were motivated by the right reasons, trying to do their best for their families and themselves; with the right kind of system we could enable that to work for the benefit of the state as well as for the benefit of the individual. These people weren’t getting rich; they were trying to get into the formal economy and the system blocked them rather than facilitated them”, explains David.

Need NOT Greed persuaded Revenue & Customs to think differently about these issues. “The Government secondees who spent six months with us went back and set up an Informal Economy Unit”, remembers Aaron.

The attitude of HMRC changed. “They were no longer just saying, ‘We’re going to catch you and lock you up.’ They recognised that that approach alone just drove the problem further underground. They understood that it was shades of grey rather than binary black and white – informal is bad, formal is good – and so their response should involve more respect, more education, more support, more encouragement and more understanding of real lives and of the subtleties of tax morality”, says Aaron.

It was Community Links’ local experience that had shaped this knowledge and motivated the organisation to pursue a wider culture shift – not the other way round. The charity had first encountered these issues through local conversations; it had then invested resources in listening to – and collaborating with – people who had personally experienced the challenges of an overly complex benefits system. Throughout the process, it reframed the focus, narrative and perspective of its campaign to fine-tune relevance, scope and reach, it proposed systemic change and it continuously challenged the cultural presumptions which underpinned the policies.

In the end, the work on the informal economy and welfare reform came to represent the organisation’s preferred approach to policy-making. Listen to grassroots voices. Embed these insights into every stage of the thinking when attempting to develop solutions. Conduct research, shape proposals and develop a narrative which actively engages popular opinion and conventional wisdom without ever losing sight of real lives and real needs. Engage influential leaders and connect with national policy-makers. Build out from those relationships to engage whole institutions. Act as a link between local experience and mainstream knowledge. Create change, from the ground up.

Telling The Stories

“Stories,” wrote Ben Okri, are the “secret reservoir of values”. I believe that in our national conversations we could devote more time and space to stories “Change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves,” says Okri, and we “change the individuals and the nations”.

(From Gordon Brown’s conclusion to *Britain’s Everyday Heroes*, p.223)

Through the years, Community Links has consistently attempted to accompany its ground-up policy work with regular publications that could spread ideas far and wide, inspire people and increase the chances of initiating systemic change. “A national directory of UK tower blocks was published”, wrote Frances Clarke referring to the first in a series of publications that the organisation had produced to disseminate information in the 1980s, at the time of the National Tower Blocks Network. “[These] kick-start[ed] the Community Links publications programme, which continues today.”

As the organisation grew in size and its projects began to reach a wider audience, this strategy became more relevant. From relatively short reports tailored for fellow practitioners, to books co-written with prime ministers and global bestsellers, Community Links has always attempted to share its constructive take on pressing issues as broadly as possible, mostly by collecting positive examples of good practice rather than angrily denouncing what’s wrong or coldly analysing problems from afar. But content wasn’t the only aspect that Community Links wished to curate; early in the process, the organisation understood that form and linguistic choices were important too.

“I think in our sector there used to be an assumption that, because we’re saying useful things, we have a right to expect people to read what we produce; that we don’t have to present it in a style that is anything other than worthy”, notes David. But busy public officials might flick through reports on the Tube, so production values, competent writing and good design are as important as content. “I think we probably got better at this as we progressed and we tried to reflect the different audiences”, he says. “It’s about selling ideas, also by using phrases that stick. Words define ideas and ideas drive action. It’s a way to influence behaviour.” The terms Deep Value (the revolutionary power of relationships in the context of public services) and Early Action (the importance of preventative action in creating systemic change) are two such examples, according to Matthew Smerdon: “Each of them captures something that others might be talking about, but in a way that describes it differently; they lift the concept and move it into another plane.”

By gathering in one place – and in chronological order – some of Community Links’ editorial projects with national and global reach, this chapter aims to articulate the underlying intent that brought them all into being, tracing the publications back to the desire of the organisation to amplify community voices, share inspirational ideas, discuss potential solutions and, with the help of influential allies and through the strategic use of the written page, generate change.

“We were promoting an asset-based approach to community development”

In 1989, a few years after the end of the Tower Blocks Campaign, the National Directories were succeeded by the Ideas Annuals. These grew out of the recognition that Community Links was repeatedly encountering bright ideas from across Britain – predominantly coming from some of the most disadvantaged local communities in the country. People were finding clever solutions to tackle local problems, but their experience was rarely being shared beyond the boundaries of each individual community. The Ideas Annuals were therefore an attempt to draw together these experiences and experiments to inspire others who might be struggling with similar issues elsewhere.

“We wanted to collect together good practice, though you couldn’t call it that because it was never evaluated: there was always an element of editorial judgement, it wasn’t a neutral, objective decision”, says Richard McKeever, who managed Community Links’ wider publication programme. “They were good ideas, and the intention was to share them with other practitioners, third sector organisations and funders. It was a fairly simple concept. Somebody had found a solution, a way of dealing with something, an answer to a problem, and we would write it up: lead with the need, what’s the problem, what are people trying to do, what they have achieved and, obviously, the impact of that. And then here’s the contact details, directly to the project. So Community Links didn’t act as an intermediary; it simply told the stories of what these projects were doing.”

Some of these case studies were found by “snowball sampling” – asking people to suggest others who were working on similar issues or in similar ways. Some Ideas Annuals were themed. “For example, we did one [specifically] on projects working for refugees and asylum seekers”, remembers Richard. *Small places, close to home* explored a wide range of initiatives set up by or for refugees and asylum seekers to facilitate the integration of their communities across the UK. The title

alone is telling, as it conveys the inherent connection between local action and global justice. It’s taken from the speech that Eleanor Roosevelt gave at the United Nations in 1958, where she introduced the idea that “without concerted citizen action to uphold [human rights] close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world”. The projects covered are local in nature and, therefore, extremely varied: from Amigos in Middlesex, which provides newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers with a web of volunteer support to help them navigate an unfamiliar country, to the Southwark Refugee Artists Network in London, which showcases the work of artists belonging to these communities and celebrates their creativity.

Almost all the featured projects were developed to bridge gaps left behind by mainstream policies. The aims of this publication were simple: as well as providing a resource for practitioners and encouraging the sharing of information to generate new ideas, Community Links hoped that by focusing on the positive contributions of refugees and asylum seekers in community projects across the UK, *Small places* could also help to counter a lot of negative media stereotyping, bringing some humanity to the conversation.

“Quite early on”, says Richard, “we were commissioned to produce two special editions by the Department of Education. They had set up the Children and Young People’s Unit and they had a particular fund available [for organisations] to work [on issues affecting children and young people]. They wanted two [of our] Ideas Annuals to demonstrate what a good application of the fund looked like, showing how [existing] projects were contributing good ideas and [tracing] their impact.”

“They were good, practical ideas, [accompanied by some] extremely good analysis”

says Paul Twivy, a communications consultant who would join Gordon Brown’s Council on Social Action alongside Community Links and others a few years later. Paul helped with the design of another volume of the series, *Ground Up*. This one was celebrating some of the projects that were tackling family poverty at the grassroots level. Just like most other programmes developed by Community Links, the Ideas Annuals, too, were rooted in a strong belief in vulnerable people and their ability to come up with ways to tackle problems directly affecting them, because “they are best placed to pass on their knowledge and understanding to others on the same issues”.

With the series, explains Richard, the charity was therefore “taking what is now called an asset-based approach to community development and asking, ‘What are the good things about living there? What can we do better? Let’s celebrate what we’ve got as a community so that those bits and pieces can be better.’ This idea is similar to that of solutions journalism [a type of reporting focused on sharing stories that highlight positive outcomes], and this, in turn, isn’t a million miles from what David Wilcox – who was involved in Community Links and Chain Reaction – was writing about when he became one of the pioneers of social reporting. This approach has stuck with me, so I’m [currently] involved as a volunteer in a community hyperlocal website. One of the things I think [Community Links] has got right is the storytelling stuff; this focus on the importance of individual stories.”

As communications gradually shifted online and access to information was transformed by the internet, the series came to an end. Print publications were cumbersome and had become disproportionately expensive when compared to the limitless, free, open web. The last Ideas Annual was published around the

time of Chain Reaction, when Community Links and its partners began to develop a community website which attempted to aggregate some of those ideas online.

“We offer this compilation to share ideas we believe in and to simply inspire”

The book you are holding in your hands isn’t the first publication in which Community Links has tried to articulate its vision through the stories, voices and perspectives of the people it’s worked with and some of the thinkers who have shared its values through the years. In fact, as the organisation turned 21 at the start of the millennium, it published a diverse collection of essays called *What If...?*

The title wasn’t a coincidence. “What If” was indeed the mechanism that Community Links had developed at the time of the Social Enterprise Zone to channel the knowledge and experiences of its local community through positive conversations. Underpinning the publication was therefore, once again, the desire to inspire others to create change by amplifying good ideas, communicating thoughts, narrating pragmatic stories and sharing some of the lessons that the organisation had grasped after years of attempting to influence central policy-making from the bottom.

“As Community Links comes of age, we offer this compilation to celebrate, to share ideas we believe in and, above all, to simply inspire”, wrote David in the introduction. “At the start of the new Millennium, it is time for us all to reflect on our place in the world and our moment in history. We are of the generation that has wired the world. We can make a difference – individually and collectively. We have the technology and the wealth to include the excluded, here and across the globe. Have we the will?”

Multiple literary and political personalities contributed to *What If...?*, from William Boyd to Steve Hilton, sharing their thinking around issues that were “increasingly relevant to everyone in Britain but [that were] rarely openly discussed in Westminster”, such as child poverty, redistribution, mutual social responsibility and how to go about regenerating communities intelligently. Each chapter was preceded by a constructive quote extrapolated from Community Links’ exchanges with local residents. “The cause of disability does not lie within the individual but within the way society is organised”, says one of them.

“It’s the way society treats me that makes me disabled. We need to change society at all levels, starting with the new generation. I want people to see what I can do and not what I can’t do.”

A few years later, as Community Links turned 30, the organisation similarly published and shared a book containing a series of individual stories that narrated various individual interpretations of what community means. The charity called it *Making Links: Fifteen visions of community*. “The title reflects the creation and development of our organisation over 30 years”, Richard had written in the introduction at the time, “but also the vital connections, person-to-person and person-to-institution, that affect the people we work with in east London and people just like them across the UK ... even across the world.” “Both Gordon Brown and David Cameron contributed something”, he says now. “We took a big, broad look at ‘what is community?’ We asked people to identify what they understood [by that]. They responded with all sorts of things: there was a community of dog walkers in their local park, there was an online community of bloggers and so on. We wanted to record what people mean by community and who they connect

with, so each contributor wrote an essay and then we asked them to include a little piece at the end of it, listing what communities they felt part of. Some mentioned communities [built around] the football team they supported, some talked about geographic communities, communities of interest and of issue. *Making Links* was another way of getting people to think about these ideas and put them all together, so [readers] could then look for their own conclusions and connections.”

What If...? published in 2002, was the first Community Links publication to make any impression in the mass market. There were several positive reviews in the national press and the Andrew O’Hagan chapter, “A portrait of a British teenager”, profiling a young member of the Community Links Education programme was reproduced in full and as the cover story in the *Guardian* supplement.

What If...? spent three weeks in the Waterstones list of 50 bestsellers, a notable achievement at the time for a book that was so different from the mainstream but it was to be another Community Links’ publication, *Living Values*, that would have the longest life. Eleven years after publication it is still regularly downloaded.

Living values

When former chief executive Geraldine Blake joined Community Links in 2004, the organisation was trying to establish new mechanisms that would allow it to push its local learning into nationwide conversations. “We called this Links UK”, says Geraldine. It was a research and policy programme that also integrated project development, training, consultancy and publications. The first piece of work developed by Links UK was a research and consultancy project, and ultimately three publications, focusing on values and aimed equally at charities and funders. This, Community Links hoped, might strengthen the voluntary sector as a whole.

The project grew out of the emphasis on principles that the organisation had prioritised for itself through the years and a gathering concern that this approach was threatened by the then embryonic contract culture which was beginning to transform the relationship between funders, particularly government, and the voluntary sector.

“We were asking ourselves, ‘How do we survive in this new environment and still work from the ground up?’”, continues Geraldine. How could organisations maintain their independence and inherent purpose while responding to government priorities? Just as in the past, the link between Community Links’ individual experience and the broader context in which this was situated shaped the project from the very beginning.

“It was an example of Community Links experiencing something here in Canning Town and thinking there was probably a wider relevance”, explains Geraldine. “We were thinking, ‘If we are feeling that, then other organisations must be feeling that too’. So we brought together a cross-sector ‘collaborative inquiry’ to [conduct] some primary research, to consult and to imagine. At the end of this very inclusive process we published the *Living Values* report.”

Richard, who oversaw its production, remembers how this participative approach was reflected in the design of the publication:

“Although it was produced as a report, it had a toolkit at the back. So it’s now go-and-do-it-yourself stuff. I think there’s a lot of that DIY ethos [at Community Links]; a sort of punk ethos. [And since] the organisation was funded in the punk era, it’s almost appropriate.”

But at the heart, this piece of work aimed to understand and crystallise the values that were driving voluntary organisations and consider how they compared with or contrasted to behaviour in other sectors.

“You’ve got government that does things because they’re statutorily required to do so”, says Richard, “you’ve got commercial organisations that do things for profit; what is it that drives the voluntary sector?”

It turned out that many of the long list of values at the core of the charitable sector were common to the other sectors but the priorities were very different. Wanting to speak to as many voluntary actors as possible, regardless of focus and context, Links UK also spent some time attempting to frame findings in an engaging way. Matthew Smerdon, who also worked on the project, credits a journal article from 1971, written by American sociologist Murray Davis, for much of the inspiration: “It’s called ‘That’s Interesting!’ [Davis had] looked at different academic theories and worked out why they were interesting. His conclusion was that even if something is true, it’s not [necessarily] interesting.

What's interesting is when [the findings] deny an assumption which you thought you had. So we went back to the Living Values work and we asked ourselves, 'What's surprising about this?' We came up with the finding that whilst there were these huge forces at work having an effect on the voluntary sector, the biggest threat was coming from organisations themselves not focusing on their values."

In other words, Community Links discovered that charities were indeed at risk of losing their founding beliefs and identity, but not primarily because of the changing relationship with government. In fact, the threat was predominantly internal: many voluntary sector organisations had been unable to firmly – and clearly – articulate what they stood for. When the environment changed, they changed too, not in a deliberate or principled way, but without consideration.

“That was quite challenging, but it was also quite optimistic”

notes Matthew. “It meant they could do something about it.” A series of national consultancies and training activities ensued, as Community Links went on to assist various organisations across the UK, helping them to put their values back at the centre of their action.

Living Values ended up speaking to a relatively broad audience because “it highlighted a critical issue within the sector then”, says Matthew. Essentially, it was a matter of timing, and of framing the problem in a way that was relevant to the context. “It was prescient”, continues Matthew. “Once the recession kicked in, government behaviour really did start eroding the sector’s values through the funding relationship as it became more important for organisations to survive. You see now things like the Charity Commission saying charities should stick to their knitting; that charities getting funding from government should not criticise it. There are now clauses saying that

if you're under contract with a government department you cannot reveal your performance data. And you see government undermining charities' right to campaign, government performing judicial review, and all the different ways in which the space of civil society has been restricted. It was important to highlight this to the sector, because it's up to us to sustain those values, to fight for them – it's not up to government. They have an interest in not sustaining those. It's our job to hold government to account, to make voices heard. The issue of trying to sustain your values was important when we did the work but has become even more intense.”

Unsurprisingly, of all the publications in Community Links' back catalogue, *Living Values* is still the one that is still most often requested and downloaded.

In retrospect, the Living Values work was also representative of Community Links' approach to policy: it came out of the learning in Canning Town and it was positive and practical. The learning inspired the tools, and the tools were then put to use to inspire others. “And to link this process back to what we do here, we applied those tools [to our organisation too]”, says Geraldine. “We try to be very explicit about how we are using our values. In the end you get a loop”, as the lines separating the teaching from the learning and the local from the national become blurred, and it becomes difficult to understand where one ends and the other begins.

“The society we want to build is dependent on all of us doing ordinary things thoughtfully”

Britain's Everyday Heroes was the next book project and, once again, it was hugely different from the last one. Just as the Council on Social Action was starting to take shape, Community Links came up with the idea: *Britain's Everyday Heroes*, says the cover,

Union Jack colours on a black background. “[By] Gordon Brown with Community Links, the innovative charity at the forefront of community-based regeneration.”

The plan was to use the launch of a book that celebrated social action as an opportunity to announce the Council and a wider programme of work. It was to be Gordon Brown's first major speech as Prime Minister.

Gila Sacks was working as an adviser to the then Chancellor. She remembers the genesis of *Everyday Heroes*: “The idea came when Gordon was still at the Treasury. David talked about a book that would capture the stories of people around the country who were doing something to help somebody – these kind of sparks of kindness and support. This was happening everywhere and we wanted to celebrate that, to shine a light on the great stuff that was happening.”

Shortly before Gordon Brown moved into Number 10 in late June 2007, he and David developed the concept of 24/7. “[They wanted] 24 July to become a regular day in which government celebrates social action and social heroes”, continues Gila, and so the newly elected Prime Minister planned a reception for that date, to simultaneously celebrate volunteers and launch the book. There, he gave the speech [of which the following is just an excerpt]:

Everywhere I have travelled I have been encouraged and inspired by meeting and listening to concerned individuals wanting to do more to make their neighbourhoods safe and strong – people who offer their hearts and their hands, day in and day out, year in and year out. The mothers and fathers helping with the local football team, lending a hand at their school, helping with Comic Relief fundraising, joining the local campaigns to reduce waste or recycle or improve pavements and parks.

Young people mentoring younger pupils, collecting toys or clothes for children who need them more: their energy, their ideas, their devotion, every day changing our country. And it is in these millions of quiet, often unheralded deeds of commitment and acts of humanity that never draw attention to themselves that we can see the greatness of Britain. ... This 24th of July we recognise and celebrate ordinary people in all walks of life and across every neighbourhood who are making a willing commitment to act for social change, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Because the society we want to build is dependent not on exceptional people doing extraordinary things occasionally but on all of us doing ordinary things thoughtfully, day after day, 24/7. I want to see 24/7 every year becoming a day in which I, the government and the country as a whole can honour all those acting for good, and be inspired by the countless acts of social commitment which are shaping our country each day.

The message was clear, and contained that unique attention that Community Links had always dedicated to local struggles and mutual assistance. But the book and the event stood for something bigger than Newham, Community Links and even Westminster: it argued for a better society, one that already existed in thousands of small examples of good practice across the country, based on ideals of support and compassion, yet drawn from the pragmatic reality of everyday living. *Everyday Heroes* wasn't about envisioning a utopian society; it was about strengthening communities by sharing the stories of those who were already contributing to it.

Gordon Brown had just completed a book in which he portrayed eight characters who had been an inspiration to him in different ways. But *Courage: Eight Portraits* listed big people with even bigger ideas, such as Nelson Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi. They were legendary creatures. Unreachable heroes.

“There were lots of individuals who weren’t as identifiable but who were doing equally valuable stuff in smaller, less well-known situations”

explains Richard. “It was them that we wanted to profile and to celebrate.”

So Gordon Brown and Community Links put together a diverse, UK-wide list of such people and started working on the book. Richard remembers the first meeting in the Treasury: “I suggested that this could be like William Cobbett and his *Rural Rides* – the idea of someone from Westminster travelling around the country and taking the temperature of the nation: what’s happening, what are people thinking, what are people doing? In this case, Gordon Brown would be the one looking at what people are doing in this country and what are the actions, activities and behaviours that he, as a prime minister, would like to celebrate and encourage through the Council on Social Action.”

On the list, there were public servants, there was a firefighter from Liverpool, there was a woman who’d been working in Northern Ireland and had been doing cross-community work as a result of the Troubles, there were people that Community Links had worked with and who were connected to projects that had been previously featured in the *Ideas Annuals*. In fact, for those involved, *Everyday Heroes* felt like a natural successor to the *Ideas Annuals*. “But whereas in the *Ideas Annuals* Community Links focused on projects, in this book the focus was on individuals, on personal stories”, says Richard. “It felt unusual, like a bit of a

demarche. This gave people the opportunity to talk about motivation and personal impact rather than just the work of the project. And the book was divided in relatively short chapters (which could equally be presented as blogs), almost like *Humans of New York* [the successful online platform on which portraits of – and interviews with – individuals in the streets of New York City are published daily]. We wanted to make it personal and engaging.”

Throughout the process, Gordon Brown was very keen to carve out the space and time to speak to all the subjects and to hear and retell their stories as faithfully as possible. Gila remembers:

“He was very passionate about the power of storytelling and people’s own voices. That’s quite unusual for very senior politicians, I think. He wanted to share these narratives in a very straightforward way: not layer on lots of ideology or policy, but just listen to what could be achieved when individuals go out and try to do amazing things.”

For Community Links, the experience also felt like a unique opportunity to reach a wider audience. “The book was even serialised by the *Daily Mail*, of all places”, says Richard. “They took some of the stories and published edited versions of them in the week [preceding] the launch. It felt like quite an unusual but exciting collaboration with a newspaper that didn’t support the Prime Minister and was also not the natural home of campaigning but while these were indeed social action stories, the protagonists were framed as everyday British heroes, and so the *Daily Mail* became exactly the place where they should be.” The stories and the messages behind them touched a far larger audience than would ever have been reached by a more

obvious partner and the Mail paid Community Links a very welcome £30k for the privilege.

The entire 70,000 words were written in five weeks. Production went on under a lot of pressure, partly because of the strategic deadline and partly because this was both an unprecedented opportunity for Community Links and a particularly sensitive and confidential project, that would soon be scrutinised and critiqued very publicly and from every angle. “We organised a couple of events in Downing Street so that Gordon Brown could meet and talk again with those people we had interviewed, also the ones he had already met”, says Richard, “so that at no point would the writing and publishing process feel disconnected from what was actually going on on the ground.”

Bruce Crowther from the Fairtrade Foundation was featured in the book and wrote at the time, “it is a great honour to be selected as an example of one of the many thousands of people who do such great work in our country. This can only help the cause that I feel so passionate about The message that comes out in the book is so clear to me and one that it is a privilege to be associated with. Change does not come from great leaders but from the many millions of people who stand behind them. We often put those great leaders up on a pedestal, but that is to miss the point. Change is in ourselves.”

Behind all these fragments of personal experience, behind *Everyday Heroes*, the *Living Values* report, the *Ideas Annuals* lay Community Links’ belief in the power of stories, and in the strategic value of sharing them. But these were not just any stories. They were narratives that reflected what the organisation stood for and its approach to systemic change. They were derived from its policy work, and they in turn shaped the future iterations of that work. They recounted what seemed to work on the ground, what individuals and small groups of people had been experimenting with. They

showed there could be another way of doing things; that even the most disadvantaged communities could attempt to take control; and that, in some cases, it worked. These were stories of empowerment that gave back voice and agency to marginalised protagonists, and they were told with a purpose: To influence behaviour and to create change at all levels, within institutions and without.

Britain’s Heroes raised the curtain on Community Links’ next national adventure - the Prime Minister’s Council on Social Action.

The Prime Minister's Council on Social Action

It is an immense privilege to be here today ... with such a powerful and successful community group – Community Links – ... whose founding belief is one ... that I embrace: “that we all need help at some times in our lives and we all have something to give”.

(Gordon Brown in his first speech as Prime Minister, 24 July 2007)

The good society is made up of willing citizens: the school child who goes over to a new arrival to make them feel welcome; the woman who gives her time to mentor someone; the company chairman who ensures all his staff earn a living wage; the scientist who devotes her career to finding a cure; the nurse who spends time comforting the families of her patients; all those doing the infinite number of things that can make other people's lives better.

(Council on Social Action, *Willing Citizens and the Making of the Good Society*, 2008)

In ... relationships [between people delivering and people using public services], it is the practical transfer of knowledge that creates the conditions for progress, but it is the deeper qualities of the human bond that nourish confidence, inspire self-esteem, unlock potential, erode inequality and so have the power to transform.

(Council on Social Action, *Side by Side*, 2008)

It was in 2007 that Community Links became formally involved in shaping one of the last big social innovation agendas pushed from the heart of Whitehall, before a sustained programme of deep cuts to public spending started to inhibit any similar conversations and experiments. Gordon Brown had established the Council on Social Action and wanted Community Links to co-run it. A few decades had gone by since the organisation had first stumbled upon national policy-makers as it was building up a campaign to improve the living conditions of tower blocks residents in Newham. Now, Community Links was more conscious of what it was doing: it wanted to work directly with government; it wanted to find ways to influence policy-making with its grassroots knowledge; it wanted to get maximum access so it could attempt to create maximum change.

This is the story of how a small community organisation found itself catapulted out of east London and into the decision-making halls of Downing Street; of how it set out to change social policy from within mainstream institutions; and of how it ended up making only modest progress against the background of a collapsing global economy. It was the most extraordinary opportunity to arise from the Community Links approach to “work without borders”, explicitly pioneering and plainly national, yet at the same time more rigidly constrained by the rules and conventions of working at the highest level in government than any other project before or since. Much was learnt from this experience.

“It was not the kind of conversation that was usually happening inside of Number 10”

Gordon Brown was still Shadow Chancellor when he first took an interest in Community Links' insights and stories of some of the people who were struggling to get out of poverty in what was then one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK. As he became Chancellor, this exchange intensified. David asked him if he had talked to any of the people who would qualify for New Deal programmes (New Labour's workfare initiative to create 100,000 jobs for lone parents, the disabled and the long-term unemployed), or any of the families who might be affected by benefits changes. Brown said: “Not as much as I'd like to. Can you fix that?”, remembers David.

Community Links organised a few evenings in Downing Street, where it brought small groups of people who were affected by these policies to meet the Chancellor. The encounters were very informal and without fixed agendas. They were lengthy conversations rather than meetings, and they were confidential – neither side would talk about them. “Sometimes they’d last a few hours. They were very useful and honest, as Gordon Brown was trying to understand the real issues – what policies might be helpful and what wouldn’t”, continues David.

In time, as it became clear that he was going to be Prime Minister, these sessions evolved into more focused discussions on how that type of experience could be brought forward and incorporated into his government. Eventually, it was agreed that some stable mechanism was needed in order to make the collaboration more effective. The first step was to convene a small informal group that included people close to Community Links and others who had worked with the organisation in the past. “We were starting to think about what Gordon Brown might do when he became Prime Minister”, explains David.

The *Everyday Heroes* book was the first output, written in the months immediately preceding the new premiership and launched in its first weeks alongside a commitment to formalise and expand the little informal group. That’s how an institutional body dedicated to social action started to take shape, eventually becoming the Council on Social Action in 2007.

“It was a council of independent advisers chaired by Gordon Brown and David”, says Geraldine. Although technically the vice-chair, in fact, David – in the words of communications specialist and Council member Paul Twivy – “basically ran it all”. “He was the catalyst”, agrees David Thomlinson, who at the time was head of Accenture’s business in the UK and Ireland and brought his corporate perspective into the mix of voices animating the Council.

The body was diverse, but not representative. The 15 members were selected from a mixed background to ensure that the project would remain committed to its ultimate objective: generating ambitious, creative ideas. “We were looking for people who were likely to be constructive and interested in similar things; people who had some experience that would help us do something differently – in the middle of it all rather than just from the outside”, explains David.

Some of the members were known for a particular innovation, such as Sophi Tranchell of Divine Chocolate and Tim Smit of the Eden Project. Other members were from the voluntary sector or involved in policy-making, such as Julia Unwin, then Chief Executive of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and Geoff Mulgan, then at the Young Foundation. It was the odd, ambitious and experimental mix that motivated Paul to join the group, he says.

“I got involved because the idea of something that was going to take social entrepreneurs from different backgrounds and mix them with top civil servants and the prime minister, to come up with some ideas that could become policy, was phenomenal.”

And the energy and creativity released by this unlikely combination were something central institutions had rarely seen before. “I remember that first meeting at Number 10”, recounts Gila Sacks. “We were in one of those incredibly formal rooms and we were hearing some people come up with some pretty crazy stuff, thinking, ‘Alright, I don’t think these walls are used to these kinds of conversations, that’s good’. Gordon was there and he was just like, ‘This is fine’. It was not the kind of conversation that was usually happening inside of Number 10, and that was the whole point. Let’s get people together who are very creative, in some ways quite outspoken or just free-thinking, and

let’s see what happens. Let’s not try to have everything under control, let’s just see what happens. It was very exciting.”

Radhika Bynon, a Community Links trustee who temporarily stepped off the Board to join the Council in 2008, similarly remembers those meetings: “You had these extreme, funny, amusing characters and there were always big topics on the agenda, so we never really spent time discussing procedural stuff. It was always about big issues, progress made around big issues, and people would throw these great ideas at the table.”

Fuelled by the variety of ideas put forward by its members, the Council embraced a model of action that had little to do with the measured, uniform and controlled manner in which government traditionally works. “There was no other mechanism in government that we were trying to copy; we did everything in a different kind of way”, explains Radhika. It was a creative experiment, thus flexible to some extent, but it was also guided by a precise set of principles and some deliberate goals. The vision framing the discussion was articulated in *Willing citizens and the making of the good society* – the first report published by the Council (over the next two years it would produce 11 reports, totalling more than 100,000 words, as part of its commitment to open discussion).

The aim of the experiment was to produce work that would encourage and support the participation of every citizen, every community group, every organisation and every institution in moving forward, individually and together. The Council wasn’t just about finding new ways for government to intervene and solve problems. It was about encouraging everyone to do their part. This is why the body intentionally pursued a mix of policy influence and practical action; to get as many people as possible on board. “I think we were trying to catalyse an idea, so we were attempting different projects at the same time”, says

Caroline Middlecote, who at the time worked for Accenture and helped to coordinate the programme on a secondment. “It was like small pieces of policy work actually creating a change that was systemic.”

Although the ideas and projects generated by the Council on Social Action (CoSA) were diverse in nature, they followed some common threads: barriers preventing people from becoming active citizens had to be addressed, communities had to be strengthened by fostering lasting relationships; people and institutions had to feel responsible for one another. Each thread served the Council’s final purpose: to facilitate, by championing social action and through innovation, the creation of

“the good society, a society where we all feel a part of, and play a part in, something bigger than ourselves”

as Gordon Brown put it when he announced the establishment of CoSA. Ultimately, this belief was summarised in the three words that made up the strapline for Chain Reaction, one of the biggest events run by the Council in its two-year lifespan: Connect, Collaborate, Commit.

“What would Davos look like if it was all about social change?”

The Global Forum for Social Leadership – which was later rebranded as Chain Reaction to convey the idea of “a chain reaction of people, introductions and ideas [that releases] energy and connections” – was announced by Gordon Brown with the same speech in which he launched *Everyday Heroes* and CoSA.

The Council wanted to establish a new annual forum on social leadership to bring together innovators from all over the world. The first Chain Reaction, which took place in London in 2008, was imagined as “what Davos World Economic Forum would look like if it was all about social change and social leaders”, remembers Geraldine. She managed the event and Community Links delivered it.

Comic Relief Founder Jane Tewson remembers the event as “really special, exciting and inspirational. It was a privilege to have been asked to be involved alongside some outstanding thinkers and speakers.” It was indeed a big project, designed as a two-day event and attended by over 1,000 people from 17 countries. The entire event relied on an unconfederated approach; that is, on building a space where people could self-organise and come together; “where people [wouldn't] just go and listen to speakers; where they [could] connect with each other”, says Geraldine. The whole agenda was based around social change, “so sport for social change, art for social change, entrepreneurship for social change, investment for social change, everything for social change as well as the more conventional conference presentations”.

Chain Reaction attendee and Star Wards Founder Marion Janner described the experience as:

“exceptional, enjoyable, stimulating, inspiring and super useful. I met some amazing people, I am still in contact with some of them now. I learnt masses, got lots of ideas and had a simply brilliant time.”

Fiona Rawes, director of the Heart of the City, was a little more restrained but no less enthusiastic:

“such an ambitious idea, so beautifully, beautifully executed and with such inspiring results ...”

At the centre of the event was Community Links' desire to encourage people to connect with other participants, and commit to specific projects and collaborations by the end of the two days. More often than not, these interactions were fleeting conversations shared informally at a coffee table, so many of the collaborations that ensued were hard to track down.

Daniela Eavis, from the then start-up Harry Bang Bangs, wrote afterwards: “Chain Reaction fed my soul. So much to listen to and actively participate in, my only regret is that I didn't manage it all. My dream needs finance, so on the second day I braved the finance workshop. I am simply a mum with a vision and the event enabled me to chat with CEOs, one Cabinet minister, a load of inspiring young leaders and a whole bunch of experts. Everyone was saying it was the best conference they had ever been to.”

“Sometimes I would bump into people three years later and they would say something incredible like, ‘As a result of Chain Reaction I met this person, we bought a building together and we started a community radio station’”, recounts Geraldine.

Executive coach Linda Woolston particularly recalls “the optimism ... it left its mark on me very strongly”. Thanks to those two days, Linda decided that she wanted to coach people who wanted to make a difference in the world. She got in touch with Jeremy Gilley, the founder of Peace One Day, after hearing his passionate speech at the event and she has worked with him ever since. “For me it was indeed a chain reaction”, she says. “The whole

event's purpose was to connect people, to make changes. It created a connection and we have made changes.”

Matt Hyde (now CEO of the Scout Association) was Chief Executive of the National Union of Students at the time. He attended with the then NUS President Wes Streeting (now Ilford North MP) and says, “I went away buzzing with ideas and inspiration. Wes and I attended with Angus McFarland, President of NUS Australia. We were really struck by the global nature of the event and started discussing a collaborative event for students across the world focused on global social action...”

It was also an occasion to experiment with early social media, which at the time were just starting to shape communications in the voluntary sector. “We were using Twitter, which was really new then”, remembers Geraldine. “At one point we were trending worldwide.” There was a lot of live tweeting, web streaming, blogging and various other ways to share ideas online as well as in the physical spaces provided. This experience led directly into the UK Catalyst Awards which CoSA designed and launched to celebrate projects that were already using information technology innovatively to improve society.

Chain Reaction 2008 was designed as a first; however, by the time that budgets were set for 2009 and 2010 there was much less money available and the events were much smaller. Learning and exchange continued but the big ambition to do something really different and sustainable was never able to develop to its full potential. Was it all worthwhile? For those who enjoyed the extraordinary excitement of those two glorious days in November 2008 it plainly was. It was not, however, as had been hoped, the start of something bigger.

“The first Social Impact Bond has now become dozens of projects across the world”

Whilst still at the Treasury Gordon Brown had talked to David about the funding of the voluntary sector and David had convened the first meetings between Sir Ronald Cohen and Gordon Brown. Sir Ronald had a very big idea about a “social investment bank”, and as the acknowledged father of the venture capital industry he had the experience to know what worked and the authority to talk about it. The Chancellor was convinced and work began on what would eventually become Big Society Capital. Sir Ronald and Gordon Brown are still collaborating in 2017 as their shared vision of “impact investing”, largely driven by Sir Ronald's skill, passion and insight, has rippled out across the world. For Community Links the thread of this work was continued when Prime Minister Brown asked CoSA to think about innovative funding models.

The ideas behind the Social Impact Bond had first been discussed some time before the official start of CoSA by David Robinson and Peter Wheeler, who was then a partner at Goldman Sachs. At the time, Community Links was working with young offenders, and its projects had been funded on a yearly basis, with little regard for whether the final outcome of helping these people break the cycle of recidivism was ultimately achieved. This seemed ridiculous. For the state, a positive outcome meant saving money. For the individual, it meant having a chance at a good life. It was a win-win situation. Why weren't public bodies seeking to understand what works and investing for the longer term?

Of course public budgets were limited, but by designing around timeframes rather than outcomes government wasn't tackling the causes of reoffending. How might this absurdity be addressed?

When the Council was first set up, these thoughts were brought to the table and the idea of a bond that would raise private investment for complex social issues began to evolve. CoSA member Victoria Hornby worked for the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts at the time. She arranged a grant to bring social investment specialists from the then fledgling Social Finance into the conversation. The Contingent Revenue Bond (later renamed the Social Impact Bond) was born and driven forward by a skilled and passionate team from Social Finance who would go on to develop and successfully deliver the world's first SIB-funded project.

SIBs are a mechanism through which government can work with the private sector to solve long-term social challenges, shifting the focus onto outcomes so that action can be more targeted and truly systemic. The private investor bears the risk. Government pays only for successful results. If a SIB achieves the outcome, then the private funder gets a return, just as they would with any other investment.

There were mixed feelings when CoSA first discussed the concept. The main concern was that the model would give private investors the chance to profit from something that had always been – and should always remain – a state obligation. However, as David explains, “SIBs don't replace state funding. If it works, the investor makes a profit, but that's because the investment carries a risk.” In other words, the profit would always be proportionate to the actual outcomes achieved on the ground. At first, the Treasury didn't show much interest, but eventually, thanks to the hard work of political allies such as Gordon Brown, Stephen Timms (fortuitously by now a Treasury Minister) and Jack Straw, the idea was picked up and implemented.

The first Social Impact Bond was launched in Peterborough in 2010. In July 2017 the final results were announced: A 9% reduction in reoffending by short-sentenced offenders

compared to a national control group. This exceeded the target of 7.5% set by the Ministry of Justice and the Big Lottery Fund. The 17 investors received back their capital investment together with a return of 3% per annum for the period of investment.

Announcing these results in 2017, David (by now Chair of the Peterborough Advisory Board) said, “The multi-agency intervention providing responsive and sustained assistance to people stuck in the reoffending loop has worked, it has provided appropriate reward for our risk-taking partners and, most important of all, it has shown the transformative power of high-quality, often peer-led, support for determined people in difficult circumstances.”

The St Giles Trust were the principal delivery agency. CEO Rob Owen was a CoSA member and so played a part in the first SIB from beginning to end. “St Giles”, he said, was “hugely proud to have played its role in helping to deliver a historic first. The Peterborough Social Impact Bond is great news for everyone. To reduce reoffending rates at this scale by this amount is extraordinary. It's a great result for everyone in society, the clients served and those lives that have been transformed; the thousands of victims not created, the ensuing savings to the taxpayer and ultimately the investors who funded the bond. A true win-win for everyone.”

The Barrow Cadbury Trust was one of those investors. Its CEO Sara Llewellyn agreed:

“At last the proof that the right combination of support and challenge at the right time reduces crime, reduces the number of victims of crime and saves on public spending all at the same time. It's a bullseye outcome!”

Writing in the FT in August 2017 Gordon Brown concluded, “Big ideas are few and far between. Progress usually occurs incrementally, bit by bit. But sometimes a big idea – even one that starts modestly – can thoroughly transform our view of what is possible. Last week, a small social experiment conceived 10 years ago to help 2,000 young delinquents in Peterborough, in eastern England, paid off – literally. More important, the Peterborough experiment has become the guiding light for hundreds of millions of dollars in investment in social reform.”

There are now 88 SIB-financed projects mobilising more than £300m of investment in 19 countries from the UK to Israel, from Australia to the US and more than 30 in the pipeline in the UK alone. “I have been working in Swaziland recently and we did a project for people with HIV that was a Development Impact Bond – an extension of the SIB”, says Caroline, who now works for the Clinton Health Access Initiative. “There's another one in Uganda and I'm writing a paper proposing three more DIBs. I'm involved in this because I had experience with the SIBs, but I now work for a completely different organisation, in a completely different country. It's a good story.”

Ben Jupp of Social Finance notes how, although they have managed to grow the model, the wider journey of implementation “has been illuminating but also really tough”. The New York-based Rikers Island Recidivism Social Impact Bond is an example of how things could go wrong. Its aim was similar to that of the Peterborough project: reducing reoffending, but among teenagers with longer prison sentences. Soon, however, it became clear that participants were not returning to prison at a lower rate than before, and the project was discontinued. The disappointment was tangible, particularly in a country such as the United States, where this model could offer much-needed investments in social policy that the government prefers not to take directly upon itself.

However, Community Links and Social Finance don't think that the failure of Rikers Island means that there is something inherently wrong with the financial model. Rather, it just shows that there is always a risk, and in some cases there's profit while in others there's loss. The idea of the SIB is that the private sector takes responsibility for the risk of tackling complex social issues that the government would not be able to cover otherwise. If the project fails, as at Rikers Island, it is the private investor, not the taxpayer that loses out. If it succeeds and savings ensue, then the private investor is entitled to a proportionate reward. Most importantly, people's lives are changed in the process. The failure in New York, although profoundly disappointing, demonstrates the validity of the financial model as much as the Peterborough success.

There will be more evidence on how useful they can be in the next couple of years as ongoing projects across the world report final results, but the model is now well established. Many partners were involved, but Peter Wheeler says CoSA was the “midwife”.

“It is not only possible for one human being to make a real and lasting difference to another; it is often the only thing that ever does”

Much of CoSA's work focused on promoting a different idea of society: one in which human connections and trusting relationships are given the space to form and develop. In turn, these knit together a fairer, more supportive and resilient fabric; the necessary basis upon which to build stronger communities.

“We expect to be judged on our ability to channel the momentum into wider cultural or structural change”, the Council stated in its second publication, *Side by Side*, in 2008. “If we are able to stimulate a new mindset around the voluntary support of one another, within government and way beyond, that would be success.”

Radhika recalls what this meant in practice: “David says:

“It is not only possible for one human being to make a real and lasting difference to another, it is often the only thing that ever does.”

This is the principle underlying every part of the work that Community Links and the Council focused on. “It’s the idea that all the changes in your life are caused by another human being, sometimes as part of their job, but always the human connection is at the heart of it”, she says. “If you recognise that, then we all have the potential to be that person to somebody else. We wanted to institutionalise a way to encourage, for example, someone working at Jobcentre Plus to recognise themselves as that person, so that they approach their job not just by getting everything done, but they also recognise that they have that personal capacity to make a difference.”

Effectively, this was Community Links’ attempt to inspire central policy-making with basic principles of community work, sharing with government one of the most important lessons that the organisation had learnt after decades of interactions with people in Newham.

The Council’s focus on one-to-one relationships and mentoring went on to become one of the main strands in its programme. “For example, we were talking to employers to increase volunteering culture in

their organisations”, explains Radhika. “We spoke to the civil service about every employee being entitled to a certain number of days they can use to volunteer; obviously they could also do it in their own time, but the idea was that the state should support it and send a clear message saying, ‘This is the kind of country we want, where everybody does this, and we’re going to encourage your boss to help you be that person.’”

Paul Twivy speaks highly of the one-to-one work. “It really stuck with me”, he says. “One of the ideas which I think is still relevant is the universal scheme for mentoring in schools.” The Council was working directly with the Department of Education on developing a “buddy system”. Paul elaborates: “We wanted every person in every school to be mentored by somebody who was a few years older than them – slightly more mature but not so far ahead that they couldn’t understand. That would carry on all the way up from primary school, and when you got to the Sixth Form, you’d still be mentored by people who had left the school and had gone out to university or into work. So it would continue right to the end and then, in turn, they would mentor somebody else – again, a chain reaction of mentoring.”

He remembers Gordon Brown being very keen on the project. “I think that the opportunity to have a third voice outside of your parents and other than your friends is incredibly important, as well as growing the skills to think about others from an early age”, he adds.

Of course, Community Links hadn’t invented the concept: there were schools that were already successfully doing something similar across London and Britain. “We looked at a number of schools that had systems in place for playground buddies. They managed behaviour in the playground by charging children with the responsibility to look out for the kid who wasn’t playing and talk to them”, recounts Radhika. However, Community Links

was contributing a broader, systemic vision, as well as the convening power that derived from its temporary position at the centre of policy-making. From within government, the organisation “wanted to say, ‘People are already doing this, practice exists already, so how can we accelerate that? How can we validate that? How can we share those examples so people can try?’”

Time Well Spent

At this point, a lot of the thinking around the benefits of the one-to-one approach was starting to prove uniquely relevant to the provision of public services too. In its *Side by Side* report, the Council had argued that public service design should start from the most important stage in the process: delivery. That means that everything should be done to ensure that the relationship between those who deliver a service and those who are on the receiving end is effective, productive and, above all, human. Could more meaningful relations improve public services? Could solid connections perhaps even contribute to absorbing emerging problems at the source, preventing them from growing in size and becoming unmanageable?

“Gordon Brown had been looking at how many government interventions there were in the lives of families with multiple social problems”, remembers Paul. Typically, this involved several government partners, from pensions and social security to education, but each one of them acted separately – with separate budgets, separate people and no coordination. “And wouldn’t it be much better if a single person who lived locally was skilled enough or trained enough to know how to call on the services, to understand what was needed, was able to win the trust of the family and form a real relationship? I think this idea was followed through when the Troubled Families unit was set up under the coalition. I think there was very clear evidence of the work of the

Council in all this. The coalition approached it differently, perhaps in a way many under Gordon Brown would feel suspicious of, but the principle [behind it] is here to stay”, Paul concludes.

This crucial need for deeper relationships between staff and service users was articulated in detail in one of the final papers produced by the Council: *Time Well Spent*, in 2009. It focused specifically on legal advice workers and their clients in sensitive areas such as debt, housing, benefits, employment and immigration, where advice is fundamental to overcome discrimination and to empower the most vulnerable. The paper demonstrated very powerfully how the qualities of the personal relationship between the adviser and the client determine the calibre of the outcome.

“This piece of work was picked up by advice agencies and used in a number of campaigns about legal aid”, remembers Matthew, who wrote the report. “It was partially superseded by the public expenditure cuts, but it captured a strong anxiety that the sector had about how it was being changed through funding. Advice workers could no longer consider people’s needs in a holistic way; they were being forced to be very transactional, particularly about legal needs. That was something that the sector was trying to resist – public services needed to be designed in a different way.” They had to put the personal relationship at the centre of design and delivery, they needed to be “humanised” and they needed to reach deeper, beyond mechanical interactions. Community Links called this Deep Value. CoSA and Community Links weren’t the only actors to be thinking about these ideas, but they were at the forefront and in “deep value” they gave it a name.

Several years later in 2015 Steve Hilton, David Cameron's senior adviser under the coalition and the driving force behind the Big Society, acknowledged the influence of the CoSA work on his brainchild – the Troubled Families programme – in a public conversation with the Think Tank Policy Exchange:

“Community Links have been working with some of the poorest families in our country for over 25 years. They told me a story of a boy who was, I think, eleven years old, and he was going off the rails and coming to the attention of all the bits of government – social services and the criminal justice system and so on. And there was a conference arranged with all the people that were responsible for helping him and there were eleven people in that meeting – the probation officer and social care and all the rest of it. Eleven people in the meeting, and the mother of the boy phoned Community Links and said: ‘would you please come to the meeting as well?’ And they said: ‘Why? You’ve got all these people, there’s nearly a dozen people. You don’t need us as well.’ And she said: ‘Yes, I do. I need someone who’s on our side.

“And I just thought that was incredibly sad, to feel that this person thought that all these people that were there to try and help were actually not on her side. I’m sure they were sincere about their efforts to help that boy, but actually what they do when they come to a meeting like that is that they bring to the table their own bureaucratic priorities, what they can achieve through their system that’s been designed with their needs in mind, not the whole life of that boy. And it’s a real allegory, I think, for what’s gone wrong with government, because even though those people all mean well, the structures they’re in don’t allow them to give that boy and that family the human, personalised help that they need. And the mother really understood that, and that’s why she wanted someone there who was ‘on her side’.”

Importantly, there is a clear link between these ideas and the way in which Community Links tries to work on the front line, notes Matthew. These weren't abstract concepts; they reflected the values of this organisation, “from the awareness that people who experience a problem know it best to the importance of treating people with respect, listening and doing your absolute best to support them and help them take control of their lives. That’s what Deep Value was all about. It traced its origins back to these core beliefs”, and because these were backed by decades of local experience and evidence, the Deep Value work offered top officials authoritative insights that they had little pragmatic knowledge of in the first place.

“The empowered willing citizen is the partner of the enabling state and not the alternative”

The CoSA experiment revolved around the idea that none of us on our own can change the world; not governments, not businesses, not charities. “We succeed when we work together”, tweeted Chain Reaction at the time; it was an early formulation of an idea of society in which every individual and every agency shares some responsibility for the rest.

“I want to recognise and celebrate a growing spirit of service in our country”, Gordon Brown had said in 2007, as part of his inaugural speech. “I want ... to mark the start of a new partnership of individuals, independent community organisations and a government working together to empower and help all those working for social change.” Here we can identify the influence of Community Links coming through very clearly.

In the *Willing Citizens* report, Community Links called this “the good society”. “There is much that is bad in the world; talent wasted, aspirations unrealised, illness endured and harm done”, states the publication.

“But there is much more that is good; people supporting one another, communities finding solutions to problems, generosity and differences resolved.”

The idea was that since these positive dynamics already existed in society, Community Links wanted to inspire institutions to remove barriers so that everyone could contribute their skills, values, creativity, dedication, passion and compassion to strengthen local realities, communities, neighbourhoods, cities and beyond. Citizens had to take responsibility and become active participants, but government and other institutions had to play their part too: they had to create the conditions that would enable people to direct their energy towards constructive goals; they had to assist vulnerable members of society; they had to eliminate inequality. “The good society is not just something that happens; it has to be made and continually sustained”, reads the report, and “it needs coordinated action between individuals and institutions all pulling in the same direction ... the empowered willing citizen is the partner of the enabling state and not the alternative.”

This view was passionately shared by Gordon Brown who used the launch of the *Everyday Heroes* book in July 2007 to announce a “new commitment as a government to do all [they could] to support and develop an active society”.

Later on, when the coalition headed by David Cameron started discussing the Big Society, there was a sense that some of Community Links’ thinking around the good society could seep through new institutional appointments and into changing political priorities under the new administration.

Radhika remembers her initial excitement about the Big Society: “I thought, ‘We’ve achieved it, social action is mainstream! It didn’t happen under Gordon Brown, it will

happen under the next prime minister.’ But”, she continues, “that isn’t what happened. It’s so toxic as a brand now, but that’s because when they implemented it, it got mixed up with implementing austerity. The state should enable that kind of society, not abandon people to it. It wasn’t within the scope of my imagination that someone would have taken away all the enablers and just left social action on its own, kind of naked”, letting the Big Society become a mere filler for the space left void by an ideologically smaller government.

After CoSA officially ended, a number of members of the Council were invited to contribute to the Big Society. “We were invited to the very first meeting of the coalition government”, says Paul. “We were there, in the same room we had used for CoSA meetings, the Cabinet room, with a different prime minister, talking about the Big Society ideology and how to make it work. I was inspired by the work done on CoSA with Gordon Brown to think, ‘Actually, although this is a Tory policy and it’s coming at a time of cuts, we can make this very practical’.”

David Robinson also attended the meeting, and Steve Hilton spoke to him about reinventing the Council under David Cameron, but David was unconvinced. “I didn’t feel that the values underpinning it were the values that I wanted to be supportive of”, he concludes. “I knew that the CoSA work had barely begun and I was eager to build on all that we had learnt, but I felt that the new government was coming from a different place. There were some core principles about equality, for instance, cross-sector collaboration and the role and size of government, which were at the heart of the CoSA proposition and which the new government did not support. I didn’t think a CoSA mark 2 could work in this environment and I certainly didn’t think Community Links should be centrally involved.”

As the Big Society programme unfolded, David chronicled his growing anxiety in two open letters to the PM. Both were reprinted and covered at length in the *Guardian* and elsewhere. “We didn’t want to be continuously negative, but it was very clear that lessons which could have been learnt from our work were overlooked or consciously rejected. Of course every new government wants to set its own direction and pick its own people. We completely understood that, but it is a pity that an initiative that was so avowedly inclusive and non-partisan should be overtaken by a new one that talked about similar aspirations but actually learnt nothing from what had or hadn’t worked in the past.”

“From 105 to Number 10”

CoSA was the first time Community Links could attempt to influence social policy by occupying a formal position at the very heart of government. It was a unique opportunity for an organisation of that size, and everyone was determined to take full advantage of the experience. The structure of the Council itself reflected what the organisation had been trying to do for years: bring government thinking in touch with practical knowledge – and vice versa.

“I really learnt how valuable it is to bring in the perspective from other spaces and sectors”

confirms Gila Sacks. “[As a civil servant,] you’re trying to make policy for people out there, all with very different experiences, and you can’t do that from a bubble. You have to bring that power of stories, of real people, of real perspectives and individuals into what you’re doing; you have to think about what something you’re working on really means for them; who is that person or that business or that charity or that community or school who’s going to experience or do something with this

decision you’re making? Government is very busy and you have to try and make everything work for your minister, but try and always remember what is actually out there – who are these people? Whose are these stories? – and bring that into your policy thinking.” These different ideas and perspectives were also challenging for government because they were conceived in a different way: they were stories; they were intuitions; they didn’t respond to rigid standards of accountability; they didn’t incorporate measurable targets and goals.

In a way, CoSA was the epitome of one of the main ideas that had driven the organisation from its early years: use the experience of people living and working in disadvantaged areas of the country to attempt to shape national policy.

“Community Links had a long tradition of saying, ‘From 105 to Number 10’”, notes Radhika. “The way it conceives policy is, ‘we will use the experience of what we see on a day-to-day basis to influence national policy, not just to solve people’s problems at 105 [Barking Road]. All that experience is learning, so that we can then reflect it back to people who can really make the strategic change.’ So it’s never just about solving people’s problems, but about using those people’s experiences as a lever to then unlock systemic change.”

Unlike in the past, with CoSA Community Links had managed to institutionalise for some time a direct channel through which it could exchange local evidence with the ultimate organism responsible for driving change: Downing Street. This time, the aim was to bring about broad changes in the way the entire system worked, not just solve a few issues or alter some small mechanisms.

The ambition was bigger than at the time of the Social Enterprise Zone. CoSA was about attempting to tackle problems at the roots by adopting a radical approach: if society

was failing its most vulnerable members, then the same concept of society had to be discussed again. That’s why, from the start, the Council had determined to leave aside all the initiatives and ideas that might have been worth pursuing in other circumstances but that wouldn’t put to use the convening power of the prime minister in order to be implemented. Those were, by definition, not ambitious enough. Individual ideas like Social Impact Bonds and Deep Value gained traction, but the projects that CoSA had worked on never really came together to fundamentally transform the system at its core. That was probably an unrealistic expectation in the first place, particularly given the resources and the time frame at its disposal. Government is complex. Without multiple allies it was difficult to get anything meaningful done quickly, and Gordon Brown was prime minister for less than three years. Most experts agree that systems change in government takes at least twice as long.

It was also a rigid ecosystem, one that struggled to absorb the creative energy of an unusually diverse group of people. In the end, what remained was a useful but disparate collection of connections and experiments, a modest catalogue of ongoing projects, and for Community Links a newfound awareness of which strategies to adopt to increase the chances of bringing about systemic change in the future.

Most people involved in CoSA remember the experience as a constant negotiation between a complex bureaucracy on one side and the boundary-breaking way in which the Council operated on the other. “There was a feeling that all that energy that was being generated on our side of the table was being absorbed by this kind of grey machine. Anything vaguely risky was taken out”, remembers Paul, who also worked on the Big Lunch – an annual “get-together for neighbours” now involving 6 million people across Britain – with Tim Smit, and launched it with the Council’s backing in 2009.

“Lots of things about government don’t make it easy to get things done if you don’t know really well how to operate the system”, agrees Gila when asked about this tension. “And the context at the time was very challenging, as this was not most people’s priority”, she adds, as the financial crisis was looming and Gordon Brown’s government began to come increasingly under fire.

Gila was new to government then, and perhaps because of this she was the best mediator Community Links could have hoped for. “I learned a lot along the way with David and the others. It wasn’t easy working out how to harness all the potential and energy of this kind of half-in-government, half-not-in-government structure. No one quite knew what it was, no one had done it before, it wasn’t easy to figure out how to get something done and what we would have the freedom to do and not do. You have the convening power of government, you have a prime minister who’s really behind you, you have this diverse group, but trying to work out what the levers were was challenging.”

As the Council was about to dissolve against the background of the financial crash and then a change of government, CoSA found it “more of a challenge to influence and provide ideas that really picked up”, notes Matthew. He is convinced that “if Gordon Brown had been able to stay in power for longer, some of these would have gone much further”.

CoSA's most ambitious policy report was the last one – a paper called “Stronger Communities, Stronger Economy”. It resulted from consultations on the challenges and opportunities for social action arising from the massive disruption in the global economy and it envisaged a set of ideas that could become “as much a part of the UK's recovery plan as bailouts and loan guarantees setting a new aspiration for the country – not only a revitalised economy but also stronger, happier, healthier communities”. It included, for example, a “Common Good Agreement” for inclusion in bank bailout arrangements, drafted pro bono by City Lawyers Allen and Overy, a national volunteering programme with fiscal incentives and third sector secondments and apprenticeships as well as targeted investment. The paper was never published. It is salutary to read it again now as politicians discover, post-Brexit, the so-called “forgotten” or “left behind” communities.

The story behind the failure of “Stronger Communities, Stronger Economy” to gain any traction in Whitehall illustrates the importance of building wide support. Hazel Blears, then leading the Department for Communities and Local Government, was the relevant minister. She shared the Prime Minister's interest in the programme and offered to present and endorse the paper, with the Prime Minister in attendance at a full meeting of the Council. David remembers checking the meeting room immediately before the critical session. The Minister's place, opposite the Prime Minister and flanked by the departmental director, was reserved as usual. David left the room to join other members gathering for coffee in the anteroom. He found them watching the TV on the wall. Hazel Blears was announcing her resignation – another victim of the expenses scandal. Her departmental director, hearing the news for the first time, hurried out.

“By the time I went back into the meeting room the name plates had been removed and the chairs respaced. Hazel Blears, I was advised, would not be speaking. The waters had already closed around her. Sadly she took down with her a stream of work which, precisely because she supported it so passionately, we had neglected to embed with departmental colleagues. Maybe there wasn't the time. Maybe we didn't make it the priority that we should have done. Either way the new minister did not share her priorities. “Stronger Communities, Stronger Economy” never recovered. It was a vital lesson – never think the support of one or two people, no matter how senior, is ever sufficient. Embed from day one.”

Looking back, David summarises “the three fundamental structural weaknesses” in the CoSA model: “Chiefly, we didn't have time. We were trying to do something different in the body of a beast that is slow to adapt if not actively resistant to change and we spent most of the first six months trying to fathom out how to have an impact. By the end of year one, we were making progress. By the middle of year two, the economy dominated almost everything at No. 10 and out across Whitehall and then it was all over.

“Our team certainly lacked the insider understanding to hit the ground running at the start but even if we had had those advantages I don't think we could have achieved a great deal more in the time available.

“Second, independence was our strength and our weakness. We had some terrific people who thought outside of the Whitehall box and we had freedom to make new suggestions, but we weren't wired into the system in a way that enabled us to do what we wanted to do without a lot of persuading and cajoling. That all takes the time which we didn't have.

“Third, it's possible that neither of the above would have been insurmountable with sufficient resources. In fact, when we were at peak capacity we had the equivalent of two full-time workers and a private sector secondee. We were taking a pea shooter to the business of influencing a government. If I had the chance again I would say that a body like CoSA can do important work but we need to have the confidence to expect serious resources, to wire it into government (accepting that this would impose many more constraints as well as help to get things done) and, ideally, to plan for a longer term of office.

“We did some useful work despite all this but it is a pity that no one has, as yet at least, been able to build on the learning and do it better next time.”

During his last hours in office on the afternoon of 11 May 2010, Gordon Brown sent a handwritten note from Westminster to Canning Town: “... as I leave No. 10 I wanted to thank you for the remarkable contribution that you make to our country. Your recent work with me makes me proud to have worked with you all. ...”

“If the Prime Minister's Council on Social Action didn't achieve as much as we all hoped that it would”, concludes David, “it wasn't for a want of desire.”

We Are What We Do / Shift

Simply brilliant.

(The Creative Journal)

I've left my job to find an answer to the question – what should a million Dutch people do to change the world.

(A reader in Amsterdam)

Although by now diverse and improbable partnerships had become the hallmark of many of Community Links' more innovative projects, We Are What We Do took a different approach to social change from most of Community Links' work and involved different partners. It was, like all else, rooted in the day-to-day experience of Community Links.

Shortly before Community Links' 30th birthday, staff began to reflect on how patterns of engagement with the organisation had changed over the years. They noted how it had become more difficult to recruit volunteers for the sort of formal opportunity that demanded regular commitment but at the same time easier to recruit for episodic participation, team challenges and informal support.

They realised that theirs was not an isolated experience. When Community Links began, more than 60% of people in their 30s in the UK were active members of local community organisations. Twenty-five years on and across a similar section of society the figure had dropped to less than 10%. Church attendance across Europe halved over a similar period, and political party membership in the UK once nudged 3.5m but was struggling to reach half a million by the early noughties.

These were dramatic changes over a relatively short period with, Community Links began to suggest, wider implications: the proportion of the population who believed that other people could be trusted had fallen from 60% to 29% in 50 years and, although individual prosperity had increased by more than 80% over this time, the UK Life Satisfaction Index showed that the population as a whole was happier in the harsh years of post-war rationing.

However, these numbers only told a part of the story: people might have been less inclined to vote, but huge street demonstrations against the war in Iraq were bigger than any previous protest. Different forms of volunteering were emerging to replace the traditional commitments and many utilised the new potential for networking online. The Jubilee Campaign to Drop the Debt and, later, the Make Poverty History movement were mobilising a large and diverse following that was largely unaligned to parties or organisations. These were all indicators of something new. Behaviour was changing, but it was too simple to say that people didn't care anymore.

Community Links' work on Action Match and its growing familiarity with the corporate sector had introduced new insights and offered an alternative perspective on the changing scene. "Nike", David Robinson wrote at the time, "began selling training shoes to basketball players at about the same time as Community Links began. Theirs was a small niche market but they gradually expanded the appeal into 'urban fashion' and onto a 'lifestyle product' owned by four out of five Western males. British men didn't suddenly start playing basketball. We realised that Nike weren't just selling sportswear; they were selling a brand and that brand was shaping attitudes and behaviour, commanding loyalty and weaving a sense of identity around shared aspirations and experiences. If it could be done for shoes, then might we do the same and develop a brand to inspire simple changes in attitudes and social behaviour?"

Marketing and branding agency Interbrand donated time to exploring the idea. They concluded that for such a project to succeed it would need to overcome three obstacles:

- 1) “I am sympathetic but I don’t know what to do.” The project should not underestimate the need to repeatedly communicate basic information in places and styles where people hear it, understand it and remember it.
- 2) “My little bit won’t make much difference.” We are paralysed less by apathy, more by a sense of powerlessness.
- 3) “It’s boring; not for people like me.” The project would need a style, a “tone of voice” that didn’t just reach beyond the usual joiners but that started somewhere else. It became an article of faith that its first press coverage should not be in the *Guardian*. (It wasn’t. It was in *Heat* magazine.)

The team at Interbrand helped to develop the name – We Are What We Do – and an identity for the project. A public relations specialist, Eugenie Harvey, joined Community Links to develop the project, at first as a full-time volunteer, then as a paid manager. Her dynamic enthusiasm inspired a burgeoning team of volunteers from the worlds of social action, public relations, advertising and marketing, and work began on the first product. *Change the World for a Fiver* was a quirky little anthology of 50 everyday actions – “decline plastic bags”, “learn first aid”, “register as an organ donor” – all compiled in answer to the question “what should a million people do to change the world?” and each one presented in a style that was surprising, provocative, entertaining, sometimes rude and often beautiful.

Short Books (who had also published *What If*) agreed to publish it in September 2004 and a

punt was taken on a print run of 20,000. The publishers, the retailers, the distributors and everyone involved either donated their services or worked at a substantial discount, allowing a book that included fancy pull-outs, a packet of seeds, a post card, a poster and 50 full-colour spreads to be sold for £5.

What happened next was as unexpected as it was spectacular.

Within two weeks a further print run had been ordered, by the end of the month the book was in the *Sunday Times* top 100 (it would stay there until Christmas and reach number 5), the *Independent on Sunday* proclaimed it “one of the great ideas for the 21st century” and *The Bookseller* “a great idea beautifully executed”.

Over the coming months Gordon Brown would say that it “captured the spirit of the age”, David Cameron would quote from it in his first New Year message as leader of the Conservative Party, Sainsbury’s would issue their reusable bag for sale at the checkouts alongside the book, Channel 4 would run short films about a different action from the book every night for a week, *The Brownies Annual*, *The Post Office* magazine and *The Customs and Excise Journal* would feature spreads taken from the book, so would the *Sunday Times* and, eventually, the *Guardian*.

Local editions were published across the world. The Swiss edition was a bestseller, *Stern* magazine devoted its cover and 12 inside pages to “Einfach die Welt Verändern”, the Victorian state government bought 70,000 copies of *Change the world for 10 bucks* and gave one to every school leaver, and more than a million copies were sold across the world.

It was indeed, as *The Bookseller* said, a “publishing phenomenon”.

Other books followed: *Teach your Granny to Text* was produced for children and by children beginning with a national competition and *Change the World 9 to 5* capitalised on the adult market with a similar format but with ideas focused on the workplace. Both were modest successes, but neither approached the performance of *Change the World for a Fiver*. It was time to think about other products.

“I’m not a plastic bag” was a designer tote bag building on the first action in the first book. It was a collaboration with market leader Anya Hindmarch and backed by Kate Moss and it, too, was a spectacular seller, attracting queues at major stores and international press coverage.

“Real artists ship”, says Steve Jobs, and We Are What We Do was certainly shipping in this period, but sales figures could only tell a part of the story. Were any of these products really changing behaviour?

As with a lot of Community Links’ earlier work, the outcomes from these opening stages of the venture were not rigorously evaluated. This is a particular pity for We Are What We Do, as the numbers were extraordinary and the exposure exceeded anything else achieved since the Tower Blocks Campaign.

Once again lots of strong anecdotes have survived. Dismas Ootari, a headmaster in Uganda, organised his entire community around the 50 actions; an Australian *Big Issue* seller sold the book to the Prime Minister (*Big Issue* were involved in several ways across the world, including devoting their 15th Anniversary issue to the second book). A Customs and Excise employee in London made Action 42 (Recycle your specs) her own, and eventually extended her campaign to 26 offices across HMRC. An Accenture manager from Melbourne took the book to a meeting in Chicago and gave it to a colleague from Canada. He went home and pre-ordered 5,000 copies of the Canadian edition.

All of these anecdotes paint a picture, but we still can’t be sure how much of this colourful activity subsequently matured into lasting changes in behaviour.

We Are What We Do ran an online tracker capturing the stories and recording numbers engaged alongside each action. The tracker could also be customised for schools, businesses and other organisations. At its peak the tracker was recording tens of thousands of “ticks” every week and was widely adopted and adapted by individual schools, workplaces and communities. It is not unreasonable to imagine that some of the children in the most active schools started to adopt behaviours that have stayed with them ever since, or that some of the businesses made adjustments to their day-to-day conduct and the corporate culture which have also endured.

“It’s hard to understand now why we weren’t more rigorous at the time”, says David, “but I think we see the same pattern in the Tower Blocks Campaign, Action Match, even the Social Enterprise Zone. An enthusiastic group of people are excited by the momentum in the project, carried forward by the wave of opportunities that suddenly unfold and committing every spare hour to exploiting them. No one at the time questioned for a moment whether the effort was worthwhile, and it probably was, but exactly how worthwhile and what has endured we just can’t say.”

Part of the reason, of course, is financial. All of these projects began with very little money and were heavily dependent on volunteer labour. Engaging an independent external partner to monitor and assess or allocating some of the scarce and stretched internal resources to evaluation would have felt like an unjustifiable indulgence.

Nick Stanhope began at We Are What We Do working in schools, training teams of young people to lead and support their peers. He took over as CEO after the first phase of development. In addition to redefining and refining the process of product development, he has recognised the importance of high-quality preliminary research, understanding in depth the issue to be tackled, and of rigorous ongoing evaluation, understanding the full impact of the work.

Products and the process have become more subtle and sophisticated. The little experimental project has blossomed into an independent social enterprise applying a rigorous research, design and venture-building process to issues like mental illness, poor diets, social isolation and energy inefficiency. The name has been changed to the rather more manageable “Shift”, and products have won a Webby and a Google Global Impact Challenge award and been recognised in the *Observer’s* New Radicals and the *Sunday Times* Applist.

The approach has even rippled out to Whitehall: Steve Hilton was one of the volunteers who helped with the creative work on the books. He was so inspired by the idea that when he moved into No. 10 as David Cameron’s principal adviser six years later he established, in Downing Street, the government’s own Nudge unit – now called the Behavioural Insights Team.

Roll forward 12 years to October 2016, and Shift is launching its latest product. This time a video game, *Champions of the Shengha*, pioneering emotionally responsive gaming as a way to increase resilience to mental health problems amongst young people. *Champions of the Shengha* trains and rewards players for controlling their emotional state. This is tracked through a unique wireless wearable device called a BfB Sensor. Independent clinical trials have shown not only that participants enjoy playing the game, but also that it is a very effective way of training emotional regulation skills and that the young players learn, very quickly, how to apply these skills in their everyday lives.

Online gaming is an enormous market. Many of the existing games are compelling, even addictive. Clear and uncontested evidence shows that regular playing of these games affects our behaviour and damages our mental health, particularly in the vulnerable adolescent years. *Champions of the Shengha* doesn’t just mitigate these dangers; it turns them upside down – it, too, is compelling and fun and commercially viable but it builds rather than reduces the players’ emotional resilience and it improves rather than damages their mental health.

The new game and the first little book are very different products, but both have been explicitly designed to drive positive behaviour change, to influence social and cultural norms and to help prevent complex, expensive problems. These are what Nick calls the “incidental effects” of Shift products that are bought not for their social purpose but because they are attractive, desirable and competitively priced.

David elaborates, “*Change the World for a Fiver* was a very simple idea and, although of course no one was using those words at the time, it was probably the first consumer product explicitly designed to ‘nudge’ – to change behaviour without threat or exhortation. *Champions* is the most recent and the most sophisticated, with several other Shift products in between – Historypin, Buttons and Box Chicken – each valuable in their own right and further refining our thinking.”

In a recent lecture Nick further explained, “over the last ten years Shift has developed an approach to behaviour change and social innovation that focuses on the role of consumer products. Existing consumer landscapes tend to reflect and compound inequalities, and as a result the products that surround disadvantaged, vulnerable or socially excluded audiences tend to ignore, aggravate or even cause problems. This provides a strong remit for disruptive social innovation which can populate

these environments with products that provide positive behavioural influences, build resilience to problems like poor health and offer relevant opportunities for advancement. Our approach to research, design, and venture-building aims to harness the unique potential of consumer products to prevent and reduce social problems.”

Shift has now been independent of Community Links for many years but the relationship remains close and strong. Much of Shift’s work is trialled in Newham, and David chairs the board. In Nick’s description of the purpose and value of Shift’s work the connections and the roots are explicit and prominent:

“Community Links has always described the importance of an intricate network of support within communities, which, at some points, is just above the surface as formal public services or community organisations and, at many others, disappears into the relationships and interactions of everyday life.”

“This latter part of this vision, which seeks to help populate communities with mutually supportive influences that blend into community life, has always been at the heart of our work.

“At Shift, we try and understand those everyday influences as intimately as possible, particularly through the lens of consumer products and services. While consumerism may seem to some like the nemesis of community, we regard it as an extraordinarily powerful influence. The shops on our high streets, the apps on our phone or the services that sit in the background of our lives combine to shape and reflect behavioural and cultural norms in ways that we often can’t perceive.

“Sometimes, this role is insidious, creating or aggravating problems and inequalities.

Sometimes, it can be constructive, meeting important needs, building relationships and reducing anxiety. We believe strongly that introducing more positive influences within this consumer landscape is a crucial companion to work to improve public services and the organisational and associational life of communities.

“In this way, we have and will always see ourselves as another arm of Community Links’ work. Often, this has been most visible in the way in which we draw on its expertise and network during the early stages of new products. Many of the roots of Shift’s products and ventures can be traced back to work in Newham, with partners developed through Community Links:

- The very first Historypin storytelling test sessions in 2009, which invited older local residents to share their old photographs and memories of the area, were run alongside Community Links’ bingo sessions.
- Box Chicken, our first experiment to compete against chicken shops with healthier, but equally cheap, tasty and convenient fast food, set up shop at the corner of Woodgrange Road and Sebert Road, just outside Forest Gate station.
- Our mental health tech venture ran its first major impact trial with students at St Angela’s Ursuline School in Newham.”

Some projects in this book, the Tower Blocks Campaign for instance, have done what they were established to do and wound up. Some have ended without completion of the task – CoSA, for example. Some, like Shift and the Early Action Task Force, are still developing in new directions – Shift now as a valued but independent partner, EATF, our next and final story, firmly within the organisational structure of Community Links.

The Early Action Task Force

Then an old sage remarked: “It’s a marvel to me That people give far more attention To repairing results than to stopping the cause, When they’d much better aim at prevention. Let us stop at its source all this mischief,” cried he, “Come, neighbors and friends, let us rally; If the cliff we will fence, we might almost dispense With the ambulance down in the valley.”

(Joseph Malins, *The Ambulance Down in the Valley*, 1895)

We need a different kind of society – one that values sustainable solutions above short-term crisis management. Isolated programmes paper over cracks.

(*The Deciding Time*)

Talking about Early Action, about readiness, is really critical for that shift in mindset towards a more people-centred approach. It’s absolutely critical for civil society and third sector organisations. At a time when there’s not a lot of inspiration out there, with spending cuts [that are] making people less and less ambitious, more and more focused on a narrow agenda, I think this offers a real alternative. I think that’s what Community Links has been able to do.

(Dan Paskins, Big Lottery Fund, 2016)

This chapter describes how Community Links came to put early action at the heart of its national work, identifying it as an essential component of any meaningful social reform in a period of diminishing resources and escalating needs. Here also are some interim conclusions to one of the primary threads of this book: the story of the evolving relations between a small organisation and central government. These have been shaped and refined in attempt after attempt, idea after idea in an undulating journey of setbacks and successes.

By 2011, nobody at Community Links imagined that all of the answers lay in a powerful ally at Number 10. CoSA’s lifespan had shown that that wasn’t enough, although equally no one would have denied that it could be a major asset. Pressure networks need to be articulated in a more sophisticated manner around all the key relationships, taking into account structural links and broader cultural trends.

Drawing on experiences as diverse as the Tower Blocks Campaign, Action Match, Need NOT Greed and We Are What We Do, the Social Enterprise Zone and CoSA, Community Links could see that systemic change involves perceptions and habits and established working patterns as much as rules and powers and resources. The organisation began to think of this complex cocktail as a triangulation of systems, leadership and culture. Each element reinforced the others. Sustainable change needed simultaneous impact on all three.

Although it hadn’t been noticed, or planned deliberately at the time, the Tower Blocks Campaign revealed this at the local level. The expertise of Sam and the architects presented a strong and compelling challenge to the rules and systems, the raw passion and tenacity of the tenants, and their canny use of the media drew in popular support and the bold leadership of, on the one side, Community Links and, on the other, key politicians pulled it all together. Ronan Point and other large-panel blocks around the country would not have been demolished without the work of all three points on the triangle.

The Early Action Task Force is the latest model. It brings four sectors together – public, private, voluntary and academia – in pursuit of a big goal – to build a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that deals with the consequences – and it works with a wide range of leaders on the systems and the cultures that are barriers to early action.

“It’s not just about tackling problems; it’s about investing in people”

Early action isn’t an original idea – Joseph Malins, the poet quoted at the start of this chapter, was writing in 1895. In 2010, however, when austerity became the main principle informing central policy-making, early action – with its idea of making public investments more targeted, effective and sustainable – began to gain a whole new layer of relevance. Community Links’ front-line work had always prioritised prevention, particularly in its community development projects and its work with children and young people. Now it was time to push the concept beyond the purely local.

In 2011, the government-commissioned Allen report “Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings”, made the case for a specific type of “early intervention”, mainly designed to give young children the best start in life. This was good but not enough. A broader approach was also needed. Preparing for a healthy retirement is just as much early action, and just as sensible, as preparing for parenthood, and if it wasn’t possible to prevent the teenager’s first offence it is still important to prevent the adult from reoffending.

“Ultimately”, said Will Horwitz, former adviser to the Task Force, “[Community Links’ broad conceptualisation of early action] is an argument against austerity.” And in that specific context, early action did become an argument for different values, priorities and interactions; an invitation to always consider the future when investing in the present, choosing ambitious visions over quick fixes, even at a time of perceived scarcity. By shifting the focus onto early action just as spending cuts were starting to awaken deep social tensions, Community Links was implicitly advocating for government to resist the impulse of scrapping basic services by highlighting the long-term implications.

“Paradoxically, austerity also created an opportunity”, notes Task Force member Caroline Slocock, currently director of Civil Exchange, formerly a Private Secretary for Home Affairs to two Prime Ministers and a senior official at the Treasury. “Because the more [public] expenditure is ratcheted down, the more difficult it becomes to just cut back and make a few incremental savings through efficiency. You actually have to start thinking radically.”

“To tackle causes, not symptoms”, Community Links’ mission statement had always promised.

“Find solutions, not palliatives.”

Ben Robinson, the former head of policy and research at Community Links and now Director of the Early Action Funders Alliance, first came

across the charity precisely because of this focus, as he was working in public policy and focusing on ways to transform systems to tackle underlying problems. “As an approach, it infused all of Community Links, work”, he explains now. “It was really clear, although they weren’t then using the language of early action.”

As the organisation began to explicitly formulate its early action framework, the CoSA experience and the big chunk of funding that government had enthusiastically set aside for it were already starting to feel like distant memories. Threatened by cuts and fighting for its own survival, Community Links started wondering why it was that if everyone could agree in principle that acting early is common sense, why isn’t it common practice? What are the obstacles? How could they be understood and surmounted? And, most importantly, how could the urgent need for such investment be communicated in a way that might resonate with a diverse audience?

“We understood that we could do that best by collaborating with other people”

says David Robinson, something that Community Links had tried to do from the very beginning.

Much had been learnt through the decades. CoSA had offered the organisation unique insights into the workings of central government, and also a close-up view of some of the levers that would need to be pulled in order to create systemic change. The heart of mainstream policy-making had been a fascinating yet complex place to be, where it was hard to get things done. Any new alliance would now have to be developed outside of Number 10 to influence government most effectively and it shouldn’t be a rigid coalition of similar kinds of organisations. This might imply that everyone shares exactly the same perspectives, something that would likely create tensions in the long run – or at least absorb more energy

than it could liberate in the endless pursuit of perfect consensus, and it would, says David, “limit the gene pool. We’d learnt that very different sorts of organisations bring different insights and assets.” Instead, it should be a loose consortium of people sharing similar goals and values; practitioners and public officials, bankers and business people, social innovators and academics. Without this, any charity attempting to interact with the Treasury would too easily be dismissed; but “if a leader from UBS or Accenture alongside, say, a professor from the LSE and a couple of people with senior-level experience in government, are all saying very similar things it becomes an entirely different kind of exercise”, explains David.

In 2011, Community Links brought together the Early Action Task Force to address the question: How do we build a society that prevents problems from occurring rather than one that, as now, copes with the consequences?

“I think it’s really successful because it’s a broad alliance of lots of different organisations and people”, says Caroline. “We knock around ideas. We take along the way all the richness of people’s thoughts and experience. It’s a bit like building a movement. We have events to draw in ideas, but also to disseminate them; to learn from each other.”

The initial findings of the Task Force were published in a report that also set out the work of this broad alliance: *The Triple Dividend* (2011). “Forestalling problems, not coping with the consequences, is socially and financially a smart thing to do”, announces the publication. “The Task Force proposes that early action should be a fundamental principle shaping the way in which both government and civil society spend their resources and judge their success. Investing wisely and early in social wellbeing yields a triple dividend – thriving lives, costing less, contributing more.” The report is practical and positive, making a series of recommendations for developing communities that are “ready for anything”.

The innovative element added by Community Links to the widely understood idea of preventative intervention wasn’t just the labels of “readiness” and “Early Action”. Above all, the organisation and the Task Force managed to communicate the concept in ways that made sense for account managers, civil servants and activists alike, so that everyone, despite their specific interests and priorities, could agree on the need to act “one step sooner” before social issues become too big or too costly. It mirrored, to some extent, the strategic attempt of the environmental movement to brand climate action as not only good for the people and the planet, but good for business too. It linked social elements to financial considerations, showing that if one side thrived, the other would too.

This type of reasoning, of course, wasn’t without its critics. Some members of the Task Force wanted to see the importance of social prosperity recognised in and of itself, without the need to monetise it. For many others, particularly those working across government and the private sector, the social element alone wouldn’t have been enough to trigger action.

“The Triple Dividend highlights growth”

says Task Force member Dan Corry, now CEO at New Capital Philanthropy and formerly Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit and Senior Adviser to the Prime Minister on the Economy. “We have debates about how some of the members don’t really like growth, but I think that’s essentially why we’re getting people. [It’s an argument that shows how to] go from austerity to growth.”

By aligning these two sets of priorities, in the end, “everyone – although they might be a bit sceptical – could see the logic of it”, says Ben Robinson. “[Personally,] I love how the Task Force later developed its definition not just in negative terms”, he adds. “So it’s not just about stopping problems, not just about saving money, it’s about investing in people. You might happen to save money, you might happen to grow the economy, but the most important [thing is that] people flourish on the back of it.”

It was that same belief in people that had shaped the Social Enterprise Zone and the work on the informal economy and many other projects. It was indeed about saving, but it was also and above all about putting the human element back in focus, about letting optimism flourish.

“Early action is not just prevention”, says Luke Price, former research officer at Community Links. “There’s a more positive side to it – we talk about readiness, about enabling people to seize opportunities and do positive things in their lives, often in the face of difficult circumstances.”

This approach, according to Caroline, mirrors the optimism at the heart of Community Links. “It’s a completely undervalued quality in the voluntary sector, which is too often just pessimistic and angry”, she says. “You can see why, but to be constantly optimistic about being able to make things much better is good, [especially] in the face of a lot of [adverse] experience.” She refers to the Council on Social Action – “a great initiative that didn’t have as much impact as it should have had”. “Community Links [seems aware] that it’s here for the duration”, adds Caroline. “Governments come and governments go, [but the organisation still has] that drive and determination, [and knows] that however difficult the environment might be, something can be done to make it better.”

Rather than temporarily losing sight of its broader vision and trust in people to dedicate itself to exclusively fighting cuts, Community Links has continued to cultivate both. “The story around the impact of the welfare reform has been incredibly negative – and rightly so – for five years”, says Ben, as it revolves around how “it’s getting worse and worse for people in poverty and how they can’t cope. Being able to then look at the Task Force and think ‘but a different way is possible’ makes the other side easier to manage as well.”

“It’s better to build fences at the top of the cliff than invest in ambulances at the bottom”

“Government knows how many 12- and 13-year-olds are not functionally literate”, says David. We know the likelihood of them emerging from school still not literate. We know how this will affect their employment prospects. We know the cost of an unemployed 17- or 18-year-old. We also know the costs of reading recovery work. We know the success rate. We have all the figures we need to evaluate whether as a society it’s better to pay for the literacy of a 13-year-old or wait until they’re 18 and unemployed. The economics point unequivocally towards early action. But we don’t do it; in fact, it’s been systematically cut in recent years. Why?”

In its second report, *The Deciding Time* (2012), the Task Force unpicked the explanation: Central policy-making seemed consistently unable to plan for the long term. The cost of the unemployed 18-year-old five years from now doesn’t enter into the planning process. And government departments worked in isolation rather than pool resources and bear costs collectively; even if they saw the need for early action. Consequently the costs of reading recovery would be borne by a different budget from the one that would benefit from the gainful employment of the 18-year-old.

And so the Task Force began to think about how it could introduce longer term planning and break down the silos that prevented government from working in a holistic manner. Why was it that the Treasury could, for example, entertain long-term considerations when investing in a new motorway? Why was it that, in those circumstances, government would commit to investing a consistent sum of money over a period of at least five years, to ensure that the motorway would last six decades or more? Why did it accept that, when investing in infrastructure, tarmacking a bit of ground as cheaply as possible could not be regarded as a sustainable solution? And, most importantly, if government was already capable of doing this for physical infrastructure, why wasn’t the same reasoning applied to social spending, too? What would our society look like if government thought about every unborn child as a capital asset and a financially sound investment? Surely, waiting for the potholes to appear and a few accidents to happen before repairing a motorway would never be regarded as the most cost-effective option, so why would this be an acceptable solution when attempting to tackle social issues?

The problem, the Task Force concluded, went back to the way that systems, culture and leadership operated together. There can’t be any structural improvement without someone who chooses to take it upon themselves to inspire others, no cultural shift without the right mechanisms in place, but also no cultural shift without leadership and no sustainable structural improvement without a cultural shift; ultimately, as so much of Community Links’ work had shown, systemic change couldn’t be brought about without pressing these three levers at the same time.

After articulating these issues in *The Triple Dividend* and *The Deciding Time*, two reports that effectively constituted a manifesto for Early Action, the Task Force attempted to shift behaviour and facilitate the creation of new structures by engaging the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the National Audit Office (NAO). Margaret Hodge,

chair of PAC, was invited to respond to the *The Triple Dividend* at its launch in Westminster and, in particular, to address the recommendation that the PAC should ask the NAO to conduct a “landscape review” scoping the current extent of early action spending. She and her committee agreed, and the Task Force secured its first serious foothold in Westminster and Whitehall.

The Task Force worked with the NAO and, in particular, helped with the development of a system for classifying early action spending which it later extended to work extensively across other sectors. The conclusions of the NAO Review were very similar to those that the Task Force had previously shared in its reports, but this time two authoritative institutional voices were acknowledging the importance of early action in the design of social policy. A dialogue began, particularly with the Treasury but also with other government departments, on the barriers to early action and the opportunities for overcoming them.

Government change was important, but wider systemic change depended on the engagement of other parties too. “Charitable foundations don’t fund preventative action that much either ... it’s much easier to raise money for a soup kitchen than it is to raise money for the causes of why people are there. It goes deeper than just government being problematic.”

The fences and cliffs metaphor often deployed by the Task Force is taken from the Malins poem. It is a vivid representation of the tension between two different sets of priorities: the need to invest now, at the point of crisis, and the need to prevent that crisis from happening in the first place. According to Ben Jupp, a member of the Task Force, Director at Social Finance and former Director of Public Services Strategy at the Cabinet Office, the main challenge lies in attempting to meet the needs of individuals who are in a crisis today while finding the time and resources to put in place

“an infrastructure of learning, development and constant reflection”

that takes into account people’s lifetime rather than just their point of need. But government and organisations often don’t have the money to do that, so someone else would need to fund a similar shift, at least at the beginning.

“If you want to transition out of spending on the ambulances to spending on the fence”, says Dan, “you can’t suddenly stop the ambulances, because for some time people are going to still be falling off the cliff. So someone has to double fund the transition for a while.” And that’s why the Task Force also worked with charitable foundations to get them to support “organisations that would love to be more preventative but can’t stop picking up the pieces”.

In order to do that, the Task Force gathered a group of leading independent funders and offered to classify their spending in a process similar to the one that they had helped the NAO apply to government. They were working on the hunch that, as in government, the results would reveal the misalignment between common sense and common practice. Most trustees thought prevention was a good idea; few in reality funded it to any great extent. This work (subsequently written up and widely shared in *How to Classify Early Action Spend*, 2012) eventually inspired the initial group not only to review their own practice but to set up the Early Action Funders Alliance stimulating and supporting the funding of early action across the sector. It, in turn, has established the pooled Early Action Neighbourhood Fund and encouraged initiatives like the CAF fund for smaller organisations. The Alliance started as a Community Links’ project but became independent, run and funded by its own members now numbering more than 60, 15 months later.

At the same time, the Task Force has continued to research the ways in which this concept could be used in practice to tackle a broad range of big social issues. In its report *Looking Forward to Later Life*, they particularly wanted to confront the presumption that early action is only relevant to the young. The report argues that a more systemic approach to managing an ageing society would benefit both the people approaching their later years and wider society. For example, befriending services to alleviate loneliness are useful because they identify an immediate need, states the report, but they are not an acceptable solution in the long term. “Just as we should be working to eliminate the need for foodbanks, we should aim to abolish befriending schemes. Their existence is an indictment of a wider failing, and that is what we should try to solve” (p.29).

In another report, *Secure and Ready*, the Task Force showed how the same type of reasoning could be applied to in-work benefits – something that Community Links had already begun to explore when conducting research on the informal economy – and in *Thriving Minds* argued that early action could also offer solutions to one of the most severe crises of our time: mental illness.

“Action that takes place now sets a pathway to a more sustainable future”

As the Task Force began to advocate for a different way of doing things, share examples of good practice and show that early action made logical sense in most circumstances, it began to influence and support practical early action transitions across Britain. It has attracted more than 600 members to its early action network. These practitioners and policy-makers get a monthly bulletin, access to training events and occasional individual support. They give back the intelligence and insights which drive the work forward.

The work with the Lancashire Police is a powerful example: soon after the *Triple Dividend* was launched Andy Rhodes, then Deputy Chief Constable, came across the report as he was “doing a little Googling” on prevention and problem-solving applied to neighbourhood policing at a time of austerity. When the publication came up in his search results, he immediately felt drawn to the way it was framed and written: “As a police officer, I could really see those issues. [The report] wasn’t aimed at the police, but we feel at the bottom of the cliff [too] sometimes – where prevention and early action have failed.” Recognising in the *Triple Dividend* that same urgency for radical reform that had motivated him to actively look for different ways of implementing public services in the first place, Andy started working with David Robinson and a few local partners to introduce early action as a core principle at the heart of policing in Lancashire. “The cliff metaphor became part of our language”, says Andy. “It’s referenced on the crime plan, it’s in our recruitment, promotion and Learning and Development with a master’s in Early Action at UCLAN and tons of front-line toolkits. In four years, we’ve taken a department-wide approach. We secured the biggest Police Innovation Fund grant in the country and are using it entirely for early action initiatives ... the first Early Action police cohort that came out of this selection process and training programme was immediately assigned to work on prevention in intensive neighbourhoods and an Early Action board has been set up to facilitate collaboration between different partners and agencies sharing the same purpose in the region.”

To what extent would it be fair to credit the Task Force with these achievements? While the connection is undeniable, it was surely thanks to Andy’s own ambition, leadership skills and sensitivity to these issues that the Lancashire policing system committed to this cultural shift. “We would never even be on this journey without the Task Force”, wrote Andy in 2016.

“We are experiencing real challenges through austerity and the work of the Task Force has helped us to light some candles, instead of complaining about the dark.”

Andy was promoted to Chief Constable, head of the Lancashire Constabulary in March 2017 and his enthusiasm for early action is as palpable as ever. “I am now leading on a national consensus that’s developing a new model of local policing, integrated with partners and community assets – amazing opportunity despite the huge cuts everyone is facing.”

This is a classic example of what the Task Force has tried to do: spread information; share the recognisable, ready-to-use label of Early Action to nurture similar interpretations of preventative action; offer assistance to anyone who is determined to apply this concept to their local or regional dimension; learn from it and share it again as an inspiration to others. Andy has spoken at two Task Force training events.

Andy’s belief that investing in people is better than arresting people matches the vision of the Task Force. “From the outside, people see the police as enforcement”, he says. “But policing is about social impact; it’s about people feeling safe where they live, about people who are vulnerable being protected. The lock-up-and-throw-away-the-key-system isn’t working. We need to spend upstream.”

In 2016 Andy told the Task Force that the Lancashire Constabulary was spending 48% of its time dealing with issues that might have been prevented had they been addressed earlier.

The Task Force offered positive language and a useful framework in which to develop preventative action and, above all, a new interpretation of success; a systemic view with people at its centre rather than a statistical account of narrow achievements. “Policing is traditionally measured on arrests, just like firefighting was originally measured on how many fires you put out”, explains Luke. “If you’re moving to a preventative firefighting service, or preventative policing you have to think differently about what you measure rather than necessarily worrying whether there is something to measure. This demands the cultural change that Andy Rhodes describes when he talks about ‘moving away from enforcement, not charging around under flashing lights catching criminals’, but actually aiming to have fewer calls to 999 in the first place.”

The Task Force also helped the Welsh government to enshrine early action principles in policy-making. The Labour Party won the 2011 election in Wales on the campaign promise of “A more sustainable Wales”. This commitment was largely focused on environmental policy, which is still how many people think of sustainability, but, of course, it could also be argued that Wales is “more sustainable” if its workforce is healthier and well educated and if its government is better able to address the divergent trends of needs and resources across the public sector. Here was an opportunity for the Task Force. Expanding the scope of the campaign pledge ran with the grain of intention and led ultimately to the Well-being of Future Generations Act embracing the “social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales” and requiring public bodies to “think more about the long term, work better with people and communities and each other, look to prevent problems and take a more joined up approach”.

“The work of the Early Action Task Force has been really influential in the development of the Well-being of Future Generations Act”, said Peter Davies, the former Commissioner for Sustainable Futures in Wales. “*The Triple Dividend* brought much-needed focus on

action that can take place now, preventing long-term consequences and setting a pathway for a more sustainable future.”

With this Act the Senedd shifted the focus of government onto prevention and working together, and away from what Caroline calls “the commodification of policy” or “retail politics” – a policy environment that looks like a supermarket with a range of products, and where voters ask for short-term solutions, or “special offers”.

“Hopefully the natural short-termism of government will be counterbalanced”, says Caroline, as every initiative will have to be measured against a broader idea of well-being, encouraging the formation of a society in which mere survival is no longer an acceptable outcome, where people thrive together and where narrow measurements such as the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will be perceived as obsolete.”

Although it is too early to judge how much these changes will actually shape public expenditure, the Welsh project aims to show what could happen if, instead of just one mechanism, the entire system demands an early action perspective. It promises a more inclusive interpretation of what success and prosperity should look like: one that builds on statistics by putting flesh on numbers; one that reframes the values and priorities at the heart of society; one that is often articulated in terms of human interactions rather than strict causal chains, of “contribution rather than attribution”, as Debbie Pippard of the Barrow Cadbury Trust – one of the first funders that supported the early action programme back in 2011 – now explains.

Early action is also a call for funders to reframe how they interpret outcomes, away from technical measurements that don’t take into account human elements and social arguments. Increasingly, small and big funders alike have shown, again and again, that they see value in this too.

One of the most striking examples is the Big Lottery Fund’s support for the work of the Task Force and its decision in 2016 to include early action as one of the three core principles that will inform its £2 billion spending for the next five years. The support of the Big Lottery Fund was a very big win for the Task Force. Not only is it, far and away, the UK’s biggest funder, it is also the most prominent thought leader and the sector’s most visible exemplar.

“Early action is a concept that’s still growing”, says Dan Paskins, Senior Head of Portfolio Development at the Big Lottery Fund. “There is a lot more potential in terms of awareness raising for the future.” According to him, the impact of Community Links’ work has been “tangible”, which is why the Big Lottery Fund decided to use the language that the Task Force previously developed when reviewing its funding priorities. “We want to make sure that people applying to us get comfortable with thinking about the work they’re doing in terms of early action; we want to support that common understanding, that learning [which, in turn,] generates further ideas.” Eventually, Dan hopes, an early action “microcosm” will take shape: “More offices of public services, more funders, more organisations [will be] thinking this way, spreading the early action agenda [and giving it] the potential to really thrive.”

“Now we simply need to apply this concept to other aspects”

So far, the Task Force has tried to show, both theoretically and with practical examples, how early action isn’t a utopian view but, on the contrary, makes logical sense. “If you look back over history, it’s clearly not impossible”, says Caroline. “Until the 19th century we didn’t invest in education. We left much of our population illiterate. And we didn’t invest in public health. But at various stages we have understood that it’s really important to invest in people and in an infrastructure that makes society more stable and that creates social and economic

prosperity. You need to invest in good health because it makes people happier, but also much more productive. On the environment, [too,] it’s taken many years but now there’s a consensus across the globe. Now, we [simply] need to apply this concept to other aspects.”

One of the reasons for optimism on this agenda is the fact that the language that the Task Force has developed for early action has gradually entered mainstream political conversations. In the 2015 national election, for example, for the first time all the manifestos of the main political parties included some reference to early action. Speaking at the launch of *The Deciding Time*, Dame Louise Casey, Director General of the Troubled Families Team at the Department for Communities and Local Government, said, “Community Links’ work on the Early Action Task Force and more generally is an enormous powerhouse in terms of social policy”, but whether it transforms practice on the ground, not just in some places but everywhere, remains an open question and a work in progress.

The next step is to show that this programme can work when actually applied across an entire system – perhaps by converting one of the newly devolved city regions. “I think that’s an interesting place for early action”, considers Dan Corry. “We have to put it on the agenda not only in Whitehall, but also for the new mayors in Liverpool, Manchester, the West Midlands. They’re all places where power and budgets are coming together so it might be easier to get different departments to cooperate.” For Community Links, this will also be a chance to complete the loop again, to go back to that attention to local action which has characterised its work over the past four decades and from which so much has sprung, and another opportunity to evolve its understanding about how to turn projects on the ground into ambitious, systemic change.

The Learning From The Doing

To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.

(Thomas Edison)

Vision without action is merely day dreaming. Action without vision is passing time. With vision and action we change the world.

(Nelson Mandela)

People give up their power by thinking they don't have any.

(Alice Walker)

The greatest social reformers were children of their time. To read Canon Barnett or Marjorie Fry, Beatrice Webb or Eleanor Rathbone today is to be reminded of a different economic context, a different legislative framework, different challenges, cultural norms and political sensibilities. These giants of their time changed lives but, unlike the major artists or architects or sculptors, their work could never be completed because their goal was social progress, an unending dynamic. The great reformers didn't leave a Pietà or a David; they laid stepping stones.

Our work has all been relatively recent and, of course, tiny in comparison, but reading through the stories in this collection I am struck by the extent to which the context for our projects has also changed and moved on even in just 40 years. Looking back now we can place the stories into four categories:

- 1) **The obsolete:** A couple of projects now seem very distant, the Ideas Annuals for instance – a smart and valuable idea at the time has long been overtaken by technology.
- 2) **The eclipsed:** Some “solutions” have been overshadowed by new problems – we may have secured some important advances on Tax Credits, for example, but the rapid growth of the Food Bank movement in recent years reflects the dark reality that there is now more poverty, not less.
- 3) **The keepers:** Many achievements endure, although some may not have been sufficient. Ronan Point is gone for ever but, as Grenfell Tower brutally attests 30 years on, there are still tower blocks in Britain that are disasters waiting to happen.
- 4) **The growers:** The kind of work that might be most useful is the hardest to score – these are the projects that have continued to move forward. Our contribution to the development of social sponsorship, behavioural insight, deep value / relational welfare, social impact bonds or early action needs placing in the context of its time. Here, if what we were saying or doing several years ago now seems old hat and common practice, it is probably an achievement – we contributed to the momentum; perhaps we even started it. On our best days Community Links has laid stones, sometimes the first ones. Others have followed and laid more.

Here are some headline observations about what I think we have learnt on the way:

About Funding

Fundamental shifts in the attitudes and behaviour of funders over the lifetime of Community Links has changed the activity of our organisation and of the sector.

Funding dissent

In Community Links' first decade it was possible to attract funding for campaigning activity like the Tower Blocks Campaign. The project was small political and often contentious although consistently even handed in its opposition to the tower block policies of both the Labour local authority and the Conservative government. The Newham dimension to this work, which was particularly critical of the Labour-led borough council, was largely funded by the Labour-led GLC; the national development was supported by the Gulbenkian Foundation. Both funders were consistently supportive.

The Gulbenkian Grants Director Paul Curno would say in 2002 that, "In our view Community Links is one of three or four leading community agencies which has set a standard for other similar organisations to aspire to." But it was still a bold punt at the time and it is difficult to imagine any part of government, local or national, funding any such activity today.

A healthy democracy needs opposition as much as it needs governance but with important exceptions, civil society has been losing its voice in recent years. Time was when councils would be loudly implored to not set a rate that couldn't sustain essential services, when a Wednesday night TV play about one homeless family could spark national and transformational outrage and when charities were expected to disturb as well as to comfort. The Tower Blocks Campaign was part of that tradition. Now Food Banks are the response to hunger at home, not a Poor

People's March on Parliament. The changing attitudes of funders isn't the only reason for the shift, but it is a significant contributor.

Best guesses

Third sector innovation is dependent on leaders who have the support to think as optimists, the freedom to work as explorers and the responsibility to evaluate as sceptics. A mature relationship between funders and funded respects and supports all three.

Rigorous monitoring and evaluation was a rare bird in the sector in the 1980s, seldom expected or required. That was not good. A lyrical bid writer could succeed with a sloppy proposal and the wider benefits of an apparently effective project like Action Match were neither tested nor captured and exploited.

Times have changed. The Pollyanna visions have been necessarily displaced by evidence-based proposals, and the sweeping narrative of the typical annual report has been superseded by the finer-grained precision of the monthly dashboard.

It is morally right to be clear about our plans and accountable for our performance and it is also common sense. Targets and outputs are an essential part of good management particularly if change is an integral part of the project, but evaluating an idea is not the same as monitoring a contract.

If we lose the distinction, voluntary organisations will promise only what they are very confident of doing without stretch or imagination and then deliver it without questioning, learning or deviating. It may make for the tidy completion of the contract and be, within those constraints, an effective project but it is an approach that will never break new ground. I worry that the pendulum may well have swung too far.

I am concerned that startling vision and insight now struggles to break through because it is just too unpredictable, too far removed from the

proven or even from the immediately provable. Action Match was a punt – a sparky idea, well supported by a diverse range of experienced people, but there was little evidence to support the speculative suggestion that the burgeoning movement behind art and sport sponsorship could be extended to social welfare. At that time almost all of this sponsorship money went into the high end – national theatre companies, top six football teams, etc.

A Community Links is a very different beast from a Royal Philharmonic or a Manchester United.

In 2017 a wealthy individual might pay for the exploration of this flimsy hunch, although probably not with two-year funding for four staff. I doubt whether any charitable trusts would look at it without much more groundwork and it certainly wouldn't get government money. Does that matter? I think it does. The moon shots have to start somewhere and someone has to pay for the groundwork, or they don't get launched. I am not sure where it sits best, but the nation needs a budget for best guesses, perhaps some form of funders collaborative to maximise expertise and to share risk?

Paid to roam

The freedom to work without borders at Community Links and to follow the evolving evidence has led to new organisations like Shift or the Children's Discovery Centre, to new approaches like social sponsorship, deep value or the Social Impact Bond, and to change in other places like the Lancashire Constabulary's commitment to early action or the creation of the Early Action Funders Alliance.

Some outcomes have been entirely incidental. Jane Tewson, for instance, founder of Comic Relief, TimeBank and Pilotlight says, "The team at Community Links have inspired all aspects of my work and each and every charity I have founded is a tribute to them. Community Links were fundamental to the development of

TimeBank. Indeed, they inspired and came up with the idea of people giving what they are passionate about as opposed to people giving their time because they feel it is their duty."

While the results of this exploratory approach have been varied, none began with a strict contract and detailed plan. Our capacity to roam in this way is threatened by the inflexible contract and the fixed outcome schedule. Thomas Edison observed, "To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk." We might add "and trusting, patient sponsors".

Not everything works. When the National Lottery franchise was retendered, we developed a very big fundraising idea based around combining the better parts of the Lottery with a reinvented premium bond. It was a proposal that excited some influential partners, and international advertising agency BBDO donated a secondee for six months to help to develop the details. Despite repeated false dawns, most recently in the spring of this year, we still haven't found the necessary combination of backers. Yet.

Some exploration took us down a winding path. Set against the aspirations at the outset, the experience of the Social Enterprise Zone, for example, was frustrating. Ultimately, the project did some very good work but not as we had originally imagined. There is an important distinction to be made between what we might call "good failure" and "bad failure". Bad failures result from poor preparation, weak management, and incompetent execution. Good failures suffer from none of these faults but still the project falls short on its original objectives. Lessons are learnt, changes are made. Progress incurs risk and risk incurs failure. It is good to be wrong; that is part of the journey. It is bad to be wrong for long.

Funders of medical and scientific research may be better at acknowledging this than funders of social welfare. To the extent that cancer has not yet been eliminated – the top line objective – we might say that all the research has failed, all the money misspent, but of course that would ignore all the step changes in prevention, care and even, sometimes, cure. Some of this could have been incidental, unexpected, but all of it would help to build towards the greater goal.

In this we are helped by our size. Community Links is small and nimble. None of the projects described in this book had more than eight staff; most had two or three. Learning from our “good failures” and changing direction could be easy and quick and largely accomplished without reputational damage. Compare this agility with, for example, the National Citizens Service which has recently been examined and criticised by the Public Accounts Committee. I have sympathy for managers on the ground who say that the scheme is still bedding in, that staff are learning and that the numbers are moving in the right direction but, with £1.5bn worth of public money pouring in, scrutiny is understandably intense and patience is short. If innovation is necessarily a voyage of discovery, it is not best undertaken in an oil tanker.

The freedom to roam is an exceptional privilege. It cannot come freighted with £1.5bn, but nor should it ever be lost.

Unintended outcomes

Even within the framework of a clearly defined project, remaining open to the unintended maximises value. Looking back on the Tower Blocks work, Frances Clarke noted how many of the most active tenants went on to become school governors or to volunteer in other Community Links projects or with other agencies, and how many decided to apply for training or seek different work. Building individual confidence and self-belief wasn't

an objective of the campaign, nor part of the funding bids, but is as much a legacy of the campaign as the houses and gardens now occupying the old Freemasons estate. Having the freedom to spot and pursue unintended outcomes requires trust and maturity in the relationship between the funder and the funded and a willingness to revisit objectives, even to recalibrate targets, without fearing that such changes are an implicit criticism of the original bid.

Proportionate monitoring

All the projects covered in this collection began on a shoe string, a couple of workers and a lot of volunteers. With such limited resources it is important to ensure that every penny works, but monitoring has now become an industry embraced with particular zeal by a number of the big corporate sponsors whose processes have become disproportionate to the scale of the grant. As I write, a colleague across the room is preparing for a “routine” monitoring visit where she is required to provide bank statements which demonstrate not only that Community Links has paid the people that we said we paid, but also that the payments have been cashed.

Given that all our accounts are audited in the usual way, that there is no suggestion or history of fraud and that the project on the ground is exceeding its targets this seems, to say the least, disproportionate. On our side of the table it is hard to say this without appearing to be afraid of scrutiny. We absolutely recognise the need to be accountable but there will come a point where we have nothing to be accountable for if the demand on staff time for ever more detailed monitoring continues on present trajectories.

The sector needs to give more thought to what is good practice in monitoring, and what is not, and it needs to feel more confident about saying so.

Count the value, not the saving

Funders and funded are increasingly converting the legitimate measurement of outputs into a crude and far more dubious assessment of cost and saving.

Community Links has helped to drive the development of social investment, particularly Social Impact Bonds. We have argued that some outputs save money and that that saving can be related back to the cost of the input. For example, Community Links debt advisers regularly prevent family evictions. The local authority has a statutory duty to house homeless families, often initially in expensive temporary accommodation. We can count this cost night by night and compare it very easily to the cost of an advice worker.

However, in other projects it isn't always so easy and we shouldn't pretend that it is. Some things that we cannot count and price, or at least that we have not yet learnt to count and price, may nonetheless be amongst the most important. The development of the hospice movement over the last 50 years is surely one of the third sector's greatest achievements. It hasn't reduced the benefits bill, got the unemployed into work or equipped the next generation to be economically active, but it is often, for those whose lives have been touched by it, of literally immeasurable value.

Charity is not first and foremost about relieving the public purse and although many of us, including Community Links, will sometimes argue that we do, it is not why we are here. In our zealous pursuit of measurement we, funders and funded, must not become the generation of third sector leaders that knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

Go back to the future

When I speak about early action I often begin with the “Ambulance down in the valley” poem quoted at the beginning of chapter 9, partly because it captures the essence of the approach lightly and vividly but mainly because it was written 120 years ago. This makes the point powerfully – early action is not a new idea. It has been common sense for a very long time; why isn't it common practice?

Deep value and the importance of strong relationships is another idea at the heart of our front-line services and of our policy work, and again it isn't a new one but we and other grant seekers often pretend that these are ground breaking ideas because we think that that is what funders want to hear.

This has two possible consequences: either we pretend and offer old wine in new bottles or we really do abandon old ideas in constant pursuit of new ones. Neither outcome is satisfactory. We need experimentation and pioneers but we also need to recognise that, for instance, human beings change lives, not apps. Deep value relationships, like early action, is not a new idea but nor are these approaches universally adopted. Until they are, policy development must be as much about embedding timeless truths as it is about the next big thing. Maybe Nesta should give over half its money to a new National Endowment for the Development of the Tried and Tested?

About Partnership

One of the characteristics of all the stories told in this collection has been the dependence on a very wide range of partners. Funders are obviously important but skills, knowledge or practical resources have also been drawn from organisations as diverse as the Inland Revenue (a secondee for work on the informal economy), major advertising agencies (a pro bono copy writer and several creatives for We Are What We Do), the Canterbury College school of architecture (student architects surveying blocks for the National Tower Blocks Network), the Accenture management consultancy (two-year secondee for CoSA and several shorter projects), the Home Office (secondee for the development of the Social Enterprise Zone).

Unlikely friends

It is always easiest and most tempting to work with people just like us, but partnerships are most productive with partners who are most different. *Change the World for a Fiver* sold a million copies because it was funny, creative and beautifully produced. The in-house team that produced the Ideas Annuals at Community Links could have come up with the 50 ideas, published them neatly and sold 2,000 copies. Combining the skills of those who understand social change with outstanding creative talent shifted a million copies of a product that neither side could have produced and sold on their own.

On top of their specialist skills these unlikely friends often brought challenge and sometimes disagreement.

The Inland Revenue manager began with a negative view of the informal economy, but she rightly pointed out that embedded and often unquestioning opinions at Community Links could be equally one sided. We had no interest in preaching to the choir. If we wanted to influence a wider audience, and in

particular the Treasury and the tax authorities, we needed to not only know their policies but to understand the experiences, the values, the principles and, to a certain extent, the attitudes and opinions which underpinned them. A little organisation like Community Links cannot influence the behaviour of a very large one with a big stick. In almost every policy success Community Links has built a coalition of the willing, albeit perhaps with people who didn't start on the same page. As you can't impose willingness or retro fit it, this would have been much harder to achieve, probably impossible, if we hadn't coproduced from the outset with our improbable partners.

Sometimes it's not so much about the skill set as the perception. In working with public officials on the Council on Social Action it was often helpful not just to use the slick presentation produced by the Accenture secondee but to say it was produced with Accenture even though all the ideas may have come out of a session with third sector partners. Similarly at the moment we find that it helps to open doors for the Early Action Task Force at the Treasury if we mention that UBS are active partners. Indeed, the decision to create the Task Force to campaign for early action, rather than just campaigning for it on our own, actively embodies the lesson that we have learnt from previous projects: diverse coalitions reach parts that single agencies, or single sector coalitions, never can.

Give and take

Different kinds of organisations, although sympathetic to the top line objective, are likely to be additionally motivated by a different goal. Sam Webb, for example, was able to mobilise an army of student architects to undertake the structural surveys because his students needed the practical work experience.

The idea that "we all need to give as well as to receive" is enshrined in our founding principles. This applies as much in our relationship with

other organisations as it does in our work with individuals. It is obvious that different organisations can give different things. It is less obvious that what they need to get back is also different, but successful partnerships are dependent on a frank, pragmatic and mutually supportive understanding of what's in it for you as well as what's in it for me.

Sharing the work involves sharing the control and sharing the credit. We Are What We Do, CoSA, the Early Action Task Force, the Tower Blocks Campaign and most of the other projects in this collection would not have evolved as they did if they looked like a Community Links subcommittee. Partners participated enthusiastically because they felt a sense of ownership for the process, responsibility for the outcomes and pride in the achievements.

There are two risks:

First, that this approach distorts, or at least dilutes, our objectives. At worst the project could take off in a direction that our own trustees oppose.

The community development model which is at the heart of all of our work, local and national, is built on the understanding that we empower people most effectively by acknowledging that we don't have all the answers, or at least, all the parts of an answer. Other people hold other pieces. The claimants that led the work on Need NOT Greed, for example, knew more about the experience of life outside the formal economy than any salaried "expert" at Community Links or anywhere else. A comparable point could be made about the tower block tenants or even the varied interests gathered round the Early Action Task Force table. The best-laid plans of Community Links managers can be changed in a single meeting by others who know better.

Learning how to lead collaborations has been a clear strand in the development of our work. We've learnt the importance of being explicit

and uncompromising on the values and the headline objective from the outset. These are non-negotiable, but beneath the top lines different priorities and strategies are more than welcome; they are actively encouraged. Staff, funders, managers, partners, trustees need to recognise that, at least at first, the process can be untidy and the outcomes unpredictable. This necessarily demands the welcome embrace of uncertainty and risk, but all our experience demonstrates the importance of keeping the faith. The results are invariably better in the end.

Second, that the sub brands (the Task Force, Shift, CoSA, etc.) become better known than the parent (Community Links) and that we are therefore unable to capitalise on our track record when we promote the next idea. It is true that if Community Links' part in all this work were more widely recognised it might be easier to fundraise, but then if we hadn't collaborated as we did most of the achievements would not have happened. On balance we have learnt to agree with Harry Truman – "it is amazing what you can achieve if you don't care who gets the credit".

Partners or protesters?

In the work with Job Centres arising from the Social Enterprise Zone it would have been easy to criticise the managers for the number of applications that were treated incorrectly or for the long waiting times. The project could have mobilised a protest outside the Centre or an eye-catching flash mob inside but both would have been a conceit. Claimants don't have labour to withdraw; small charities don't have investment to relocate. At most we can expose and damage reputations but the problem here was not deliberate intent. It was administrative overload and insufficient time, possibly insufficient imagination, to work on a solution.

Instead of making Job Centre staff the enemy it made more sense to offer our help to change a system that manifestly wasn't working. Of course the offer could have been rebuffed, but assuming good intentions, partnering with, rather than campaigning against, and trying to change systems from within has become our default strategy because it plays to our strengths and not our weaknesses.

This isn't to say that it is the only way. The huge achievements of London Citizens on the Living Wage, for instance, would not have been achieved without their many boots on the ground, and of course within our own history the Tower Blocks Campaign massed some serious crowds at critical council meetings. In general, however, we have chosen to challenge more as partners than protesters.

The big danger here is that we are coerced into feeble compromises. Again it is obviously important to be clear about our objectives and about our red lines but that doesn't mean that others can't work for the same goals for different reasons. The Job Centre manager was at least equally interested in achieving national targets and in the well-being of his staff as he was in delivering the service that we thought he should. Identifying these alignments may lead to a different presentation of the problem but that doesn't necessarily matter so long as it doesn't compromise the pursuit of the solution.

The Early Action Task Force has achieved considerable traction around its presentation of the threefold benefits of early action – thriving lives, costing less, contributing more. Left to its own devices Community Links might well argue that the social argument – thriving lives – is the only one that really matters. However, effective early action does save money from acute budgets and does strengthen the workforce. Presenting these arguments as a “need reduction strategy”, deliberately aping the ministerial language about deficit reduction, alongside the

purely social case opens different doors and widens the coalition of support. It does not compromise our principles or our objectives.

Sometimes a facility for understanding and for co-opting the objective or the language of other parties requires also a certain fleet of foot. The work of the Task Force on shaping and supporting the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (described on page 94) built out from Labour's “a more sustainable Wales” campaign pledge with a much bigger idea that ran with the grain of intention but incorporated the “social, the economic and the cultural well-being of Wales” as well as the environmental.

An inward journey?

This book began with an independent campaign of direct action that was very critical of local and central government. Gradually the approach became more and more collaborative to the point where CoSA was, quite literally, located in Downing Street. It is a clear trend, more than a shift in emphasis, but we mustn't post rationalise. Sometimes history is, as Arnold Toynbee said, “just one damn thing after another”. To some extent we just responded to the issues and the opportunities as seemed appropriate at the time, but looking back I think there is more to the pattern than simple serendipity:

Community Links has learnt how to use its assets – the authenticity of its deep local roots, the expertise derived from that experience, the reputation for imaginative problem solving and the enthusiasm for collaboration and coproduction. We have also followed opportunities and sought to maximise them – a period of economic growth and a chancellor and then a prime minister that was passionately committed to the third sector was a short-lived, but once in a generation, opportunity.

We have adapted to the changing environment, not least the kind of changes in funder attitudes and approaches described above and we have been alert to dangers: berating the council through the Tower Blocks Campaign when we were tiny and unfunded wasn't risky. Offending them as we did with the “Uncounted” work when we were in receipt of over £1m worth of grant funding for front-line services required more consideration.

This takes us to the next question about proximity to power. Was the evolution in the approach from outside to inside subconsciously influenced, if not overtly determined, by receipt of government funding and, if so, at what cost?

I cannot recall a meeting when anybody has said, “we mustn't do this because X might stop our funding”. If it was ever a subconscious influence I think it made us smarter campaigners – thinking more about targeting our fire, building coalitions so we aren't conspicuously isolated, putting forward solutions rather than aimless opposition, and always being certain of our evidence and respectful in our disagreements – the policy might be bad; the person isn't.

Furthermore, and, importantly, if delivering state funded services ever inhibited our voice it also gave us more to say: We were doing more and learning more.

Friends for life

Careful readers will have already noticed that some of the same names pop up over and over again in this book, often moving into new roles as time passes. That's important. Although Community Links has never stopped seeking and welcoming new friends, it is easier to keep important partners than it is to find new ones. This is as true of individuals as it is of organisations. Others who didn't get a mention in the book are just as important. It would be unfair to pay tribute to a few and

boring to list them all, but no organisation, movement or project is just a corporate entity. It is the sum of the people within it. This book, and the story of Community Links, belongs to those people.

About Qualitative Policy-making

“Evidence-based policy” became a Whitehall mantra in the Blair years. Nothing moved without numbers. Ministers in the Cameron government then cut back on targets and placed less reliance on the data. Today, officials certainly want data but ministers are equally likely to pursue an idea they believe in and assemble the numbers as they go. One Treasury official described this to me as “policy-based evidence”.

Community Links has negotiated this inconsistent world by exploiting its assets. We do not have the resources of a university or of the big consulting firms. We do have the experience of need pouring through our doors every day, and we do see how policy which looks smart in the Whitehall committee room plays out on the ground. This has led us towards the qualitative approach. The granularity of stories and the authenticity of lived experience isn't better or worse than the random control trial or the large-scale study; it is a different dimension and it is what we are best placed to do well.

When Community Links service users spent evenings in Downing Street with Gordon Brown discussing their day-to-day experiences, they provided insights that this most assiduous of Chancellors never found in the red box. Marshalling and distilling that kind of “qualitative evidence” into reports, events and campaigns has become the dominant Community Links' approach.

The current series of publications on the cumulative impact of welfare reform, for example, began in 2014 and follows 16 households with an independent, intimate and trusting approach that enables us to see how the systems really work. Maria, for instance, lives in private rented accommodation. Her husband had been the main breadwinner but recently left. She is now a single parent with one child and another on the way. She works part time but since her partner left, she can't afford the rent on a house that is unnecessarily big. "We don't need this big place", she said. "It doesn't make any sense to have them help us live here." But when Maria asked the council for a smaller home or for help with a deposit to secure a more affordable property in the private sector she was advised that the council could only provide emergency temporary accommodation and that she would need to be evicted from her current home before they could do anything.

No one designs systems to be deliberately unhelpful but sometimes it is necessary to understand the "customer" perspective to see how one problem compounds another and how the simple linear theories of individual policies play out very differently in real people's lives.

Other participants shared similar stories ...

- "I didn't even have £10 so I couldn't attend (the job interview). So I spoke to them and said you've affected me from getting the job, because of their mistake I was sanctioned. You can't describe how it feels. When you're so desperate to earn more and you realise that one of the reasons you couldn't do that was because of their mistake."
- "I've got to stick with 99p microwave dinners which are not good for you. You need fresh veg. I should be eating fish and things because of my bone deficiency but how can I? Unless I put them in my pocket, know what I mean?"

- "They told me, 'we put adverts on the TV and have been talking about it (the benefit cap) for 2 years now. If you don't understand the adverts we won't be able to explain it to you today.' They send so many letters and I don't understand. What can I do about it?"

The reports conclude with recommendations that arise from these accounts. Mostly they are improvements or amendments in practice rather than major reforms, relatively easy to adopt but potentially transformational for the people that the system was set up to serve.

The risk in this approach is that small numbers produce unreliable evidence, but the record suggests that, done well, this can be overcome. Community Links' first report on welfare reform focused on 25 families. At the time the DWP felt that the work was too limited to be reliable. Within three years, however, it was clear that the conclusions were prescient and the recommendations were relevant and helpful. By understanding, in detail, how people were coping at the start it was plainly possible to see how they might manage in the future and to spot the difficulties. Asking the right questions, and taking time to listen to the answers, yields a quality of intelligence that is never captured in the customer feedback surveys.

Community Links is careful to identify representative samples and to locate its detailed work within the bigger picture. We don't say that everybody in circumstances similar to Maria will want the same things or experience the same difficulties but, if we avoid the obvious outliers, the qualitative approach can help us to make what lawyers might call "reasonable person" decisions and to develop policies that work. To return to Maria, for example, enabling her to downsize will suit her and benefit a wider community where the supply of family accommodation is currently inadequate. However, the rules, far from encouraging this reasonable behaviour,

actively obstruct it. It doesn't really matter whether there are five other Marias across the UK or five thousand; amending the rules makes sense.

Other organisations can do all this but the constant exposure to the issues through the front-line advice work enables Community Links to do it with particular expertise, efficiency and sensitivity.

Telling a good story

We began this book with a short description of the first Community Links bus and the young people involved. As you might have guessed, it is one that I have told many times before and the details, largely forgotten, are not relevant to the rest of the book. I tell it because it isn't really about a bus. It is about what Barack Obama has called the "audacity of hope". It is a good story and good stories drive social change.

In *Britain's Everyday Heroes* we quoted Ben Okri on the "secret reservoir of values. ... Change the stories individuals and nations live by and tell themselves and we change the individuals and the nations ... if they tell themselves stories that are lies they will face the future consequences of those lies. If they tell themselves stories that face their own truths they will free their histories for future flowering."

We can see the power of story telling in shaping attitudes and behaviour throughout history from biblical times to the European referendum or the election of Donald Trump. These victorious campaigns in 2016 didn't necessarily have the strongest case, but they did tell a story which voters recognised. They offered hope and inspiration. The winners were the best story tellers.

Stories that drive change aren't primarily about facts and figures or even policies. They are compelling narratives populated by people just like us. Stories are the threads that we weave with, through and around the characters.

That is why the random anonymised "case studies", without which no modern policy report is considered to be complete, are of limited value and should not be confused with a proper "story", although the words are often and unhelpfully used interchangeably.

Good stories never stay still. They are carried on the currents of the time.

Truth should be important (although sadly some politicians have shown that it isn't necessary). Details certainly don't travel.

It is for all these reasons that we used the Gordon Brown opportunity to consider poverty, refugees, gun crime, trafficking and many other issues in conversation with the change makers and the bridge builders on the front line. It is why the Tower Blocks Campaign in Newham focused so relentlessly on Ivy Hodge, April Merrin and David Cash, why Chief Constable Andy Rhodes is so important to the Early Action Task Force and why the Ideas Annuals weren't full of independent evaluations but the personal accounts of people who were doing the job.

There is a danger that fictions grow around the edges. That is why we also need to learn from other forms of evaluation; but it is stories that expose pain and injustice in ways too visceral to ignore and it is stories that make us believe not only that change is possible but also that we can be involved.

About Attitudes

“Whether you think you can or think you can’t, you will be right.” The Henry Ford maxim graced the wall in one of our training rooms for many years. Self-belief isn’t always sufficient, but doubt and negativity is always destructive. In all our work we have tried to be positive and ambitious and to believe that whilst we may not have the capacity to do as much as we would like, we all have the power to do something.

Building as well as demolishing

At the start of the Gordon Brown meetings, the Chancellor observed that in his first few months in office he had listened to many charities present compelling arguments against existing systems and structures. When he then asked for recommendations he heard a repeat broadcast of the same complaints. “Everyone presents problems”, he said. “No one brings solutions.”

In different ways all the stories in this collection are about solutions. Clarity and good evidence on the problem to be addressed are essential precursors but from the Tower Block campaigners to the Early Action Task Force every project harnesses solutions to problems. We try to not complain until we can answer the question “what would you do about it?” and, as far as we can, we try to ensure that our answers reflect political and financial realities. Sometimes the obvious answer is “spend more”, but where that answer is plainly unworldly we know that we squander the opportunity to influence with an artless reflex. It is better to wait until you have got a realistic answer than gain a reputation for naivety.

I think there is also something here about being optimistic as well as about being practical and positive. Too much political discourse, and subsequently too much political or social action, is driven by fear: fear of immigrants, fear of claimants, fear of Europe, fear of the media, fear of the sack. It may be easier for us to be optimistic than it is for politicians. We used to run our local projects under the strap line “we can all do great things”. The same belief has underpinned our national approach. Optimism in community development is not so much a moral duty as an operating imperative. Despair demoralises and destroys. Hope nourishes and inspires.

Thinking big

We have been thinking recently about the development of our work on deep value, about a “devaluation in the currency of relationships” and about how it might be done. I concluded a blog on the subject with these lines, “Voluntary organisations like ours don’t have all the pressing mandatory duties of a statutory authority. We have the freedom, and with the freedom a responsibility, to try to understand not just how we manage or ameliorate a problem but how we build a better society.”

This may sound grandiose but we have always regarded “thinking big” as a responsibility, whilst knowing that big thoughts are of little value if we are not also aligning them to the real world.

Many years ago I spoke about leadership at a voluntary sector conference in Milton Keynes. It was held in a primary school on a wet Saturday morning, and on the wall behind me was a display by Year 3 children. They had each drawn a picture of themselves and completed the sentence, “My name is ..., I am ... years old and I am good at ...” Several stood out:

“My name is Ruth. I am 7 years old and I am good at making rabbit noises.”

“My name is Robert, I am 8 years old and I am good at driving the car.”

But it was Michael’s contribution that I particularly enjoyed:

“My name is Michael. I am 8 years old and I am good at making big dreams.”

Michael didn’t say he was a day dreamer, as his teachers or his parents might. Instead he talked about making big dreams. It reminded me of Nelson Mandela’s famous lines, “Vision without action is merely day dreaming. Action without vision is passing time. With vision and action we change the world.”

Community Links has always endeavoured to not only have big dreams, big, some might say, beyond our station, but also to make them happen. This principle is captured in our statement of purpose with the line “Driven by dreams, judged on delivery”. It is an audacious ambition and inevitably some projects fall short but the search for that biting point, the place where action meets vision, hasn’t changed since the old bus first sputtered down the Barking Road in 1978.

We think of our early tower blocks work as an example of success. It was, within the borders of the Freemasons estate and the other large-panel block estates across the country which were then demolished, but as we can now see so clearly in the horror of the Grenfell disaster it wasn’t successful enough. There was nothing but despair in Sam’s voice this morning as he told the *Today* programme that we knew it would happen; it could have been avoided. It shouldn’t be necessary for a rich, sophisticated and well-networked society to learn lessons more than once. If that means saying unpopular things, making the same points over and over again, and behaving as charities have largely forgotten how to behave we shouldn’t be afraid to do it.

At the conclusion of the second story in this book we considered how unusual Action Match would look in the voluntary sector landscape that has evolved in the intervening years. We wondered if the sector “no longer has the appetite for risk, the funding for experimentation or even the belief that an idea shared is an idea doubled?” The last chapter described how our current work on early action has been shaped by Community Links’ “undulating journey of setbacks and successes”.

I think it is increasingly unusual but more important than ever that at least part of the voluntary sector should be devoted to pushing out the boundaries. If our journey in the years ahead, as an organisation and as a sector, were to be less bumpy I would worry that we had settled at the wrong point on the risk curve. If our collective purpose is not to “make big dreams” and constantly juggle “vision and action”, then who will? And what are we for?

Now is a good moment for social change.

I don't think there is ever a bad time to be working in the voluntary sector and to be working for social change, but I think a period of austerity can be particularly fertile. The twin trajectories of escalating needs and diminishing resources are unsustainable. We know that it is an insanity to do the same thing repeatedly and expect different results. We need new solutions, and history tells us that real innovation rarely comes from within government. The future is always on the periphery.

Besides, austerity will end one day, maybe this year, maybe next; eventually it will happen and then we will face a choice of three scenarios: to look back and seek to restore everything to 2010 with a fraction of the money. To look inwards, repair the estate, make the pay rises and look after the producer. Or to look forward with a modern post-austerity narrative and practical new ideas for gripping old problems. The options aren't exclusive – we probably need to put back some things that have proved to be essential and we will need to mend the estate to a point where it is ready for option three, but essentially, I believe, the future belongs to the change makers. Be ready.

“People give up their power by thinking they don't have any”

The introduction to the second Early Action Task Force report (*The Deciding Time*) concluded with an important caveat.

“The implementation of these recommendations would be worthwhile, indeed in some cases transformational, but not sufficient in the context of an unequal society and an economy in recession. These issues are far bigger than the Task Force but without also reducing inequality and improving social cohesion we will always be battling against an overwhelming tide. We focus on the technocratic aspects, the bureaucratic plumbing, because we feel that we can make a measureable difference here. The Ten Year Test, Transition Plans and other recommendations are practical tools, but we hope that their development will also lead to a bigger conversation – one about values, priorities and the fundamental nature of the society in which we live.”

The details would change but much of the sentiment could be applied to everything we do and all the stories in this book – the obsolete, the eclipsed, the keepers and the growers.

Sometimes I fear that the opposite will happen, that instead of leading to a bigger conversation the day will be deferred, that by reforming systems and structures and by supporting and improving practical projects we make the essentially indefensible just about workable for a little bit longer.

Our national projects as much as our front-line services operate in the shadow of towering inequalities, but all those who have played a part in our work over the last 40 years have made a judgement and that judgement has framed all that we have done: we believe that the Community Links' approach to community development has a value beyond the borders of our community and that we all have something to contribute. Like Alice Walker, we see that “people give up their power by thinking they don't have any”. We don't fool ourselves about the scale of our contribution – as Grenfell Tower has most recently and ferociously reminded us, it is not enough – but that's not a reason to give up. It's a reason to try harder.

Community Links has been generating change since 1977.

It tackles poverty and social exclusion in east London and it shares the experience by supporting practitioners further afield, influencing policy-makers and developing new ideas.

This book is a telling of stories about that national activity, the achievements, the disappointments and especially the lessons.

Much has changed over four decades, some as a result of this work, but many of the issues that Community Links was founded to address continue to impoverish lives across the UK.

Generating Change is for change makers everywhere, full of tips and insights gleaned from experience. Above all, it is a compelling collection of remarkable stories about trying to make a difference, sometimes winning, and learning all the time.

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