

Gary, community spirit and the willow tree

Frances Disley and Gary discuss New Hutte Neighbourhood Centre.

Frances: So, you helped set up this community centre. What was the motivation, what's the driver, and why do you keep doing it?

Gary: So, initially, it was the loss of amenities in the local community. This being one of the last remaining assets in the local community, and knowing that there was always a need, so the need was people needing help and support. This building was going to unleash that potential that had never been able to happen in terms of the support that we could offer - you need the asset, you need the place to be based and to deliver from.

So when this school shut down, that was the aim. The local authority bought into that and said okay, we'll make that into what's now New Hutte Neighbourhood Centre. We are the community.

F: That's the thing - when something feels like it's community-driven and/or shaped by the community, it's going to be more sustainable, isn't it?

G: There's a fundamental difference between doing 'to', and doing 'for'. Some people will say they're the same thing, but they're not. The fundamental difference is, if you do 'to', you are in this example, giving this building to the community and saying "look what we've done for you". If you're doing 'for' and 'with', you're saying to the community "we've got this asset, what do you want to deliver from it? How do you want to be part of it? And then make that happen?" It's very different, because although the council at the time, probably with the right intentions, said "we're going to keep this as an asset for the community", they did 'to', not 'with' and 'for'.

F: So you value that as well - the familiarity, you being from here...

G: This was our school, so this is deeply rooted in this community. So whilst I haven't been part of the school since it was built in the 60s, it's been part of my life and part of this community since this community was created. So this was the last thing that could have been lost from this community - if it was gone, it was gone, and it was never going to come back or be redeveloped into what it is now. It would have been demolished, gone. The key to us is to make sure that we retain this as it is, or develop something that still has those same values on this site, that doesn't lose what this building has always been to the community.

F: We were talking the other day about how the café and the shop aid that open door thing - it feels like that's really an important thing, because maybe when you want to come and connect, you don't have to really organise what it is you're getting involved with. You can be like "I know what this is, I can go and sit and have a brew" and that's that.

G: The thing is, if you could design this again, around what you know the community want, it would be lovely to have a blank piece of paper and say "this is what we want to do". But in doing that, you lose what it is now - which has always been part of the community. And it is a difficult position for us, because these buildings are made out of wood, so it's a wooden structure, and wood only does one thing - and that's rot. These buildings never had any more life expectancy than 25 years and this year, it's 60 years old. So it's got to a point where you have to make difficult decisions: do you carry on investing in the maintenance and upkeep of this, or do we spend that time and money and effort looking to build something new? The fear is, building something new, as much as it sounds great to design things that we know could work better - the shop would be much better with the café at the front of the building, so people don't have to come in down a corridor - but you would lose what I feel is the connection with everything else that happens in the middle.

F: Also, you know how fragile... the comfort... there's so many things that go on and have grown around people's familiarity with where things are. It's a funny one because you'd have to be really gentle, wouldn't you?

G: Yeah, if we were to take this building, or to build a new building, there's things that new buildings can't do that this building does. You'd find it very difficult to replicate that feeling of non-clinical. So new buildings always feel clinical - because it's all new, it all smells new, "don't do anything here". In this building, we do similar stuff. We want the building to look presentable but to feel lived in, loved, and feel open to people who come in, within a set of agreed principles that we all live by.

Like, if you live in a gated community you all have to live in a particular way - anyone that's based on the site, they all do their own thing, but we all have to get on with one another, find a way to live with one another. But that aids all of us on the site gaining from one another, whether that be our skills, knowledge and expertise, ultimately it's the community that benefits from that, as they've got access to everything that happens in here. In doing so, when there are serious things that need to be dealt with - for example, someone is struggling with debt, not being able to heat or eat, coming through that gate is not a definition of "you need help". Going out of that gate is also not a definition of "you've been and got help" because you could come here for so many

different things. For me, there's no barrier to what you could come for, but more importantly when you leave, you also don't have this tag over your head where you think someone could have seen me, and I could have gone for this, because that's not true.

F: You're looking after people's dignity, if that's the right word?

G: Yeah, and respecting them.

F: When we talked a few weeks back, we were talking about the Warm Hub. And you were saying that you didn't want to call it that, because it has a certain...

G: It has a negative connotation with - why? We changed ours to be called a Stay Well centre, because the idea is we want to get to a point where they're no longer needed. So you create almost this reliance on you, and we might not be that organisation at one point, we have to be able to say "that doesn't work anymore". But by calling it a Warm Hub, and because there's a national profile for that, we get dragged into all the mess that gets created and all the noise around.

For me, the undignified way of dealing with people's serious issues, like food banks, everyone talks about them and has this fondness of them. I hate them and dislike them because we shouldn't need them, we shouldn't have them, but actually now, food banks feed into this national agenda around feeding people, and that shouldn't be the way it is. That's why we developed the social supermarket - it's a different way and more sustainable way of people getting what they want, not just being, again, done 'to', because that's what a foodbank does.