

VOICES

FROM EXPERIENCE



Yorkshire &
Humberside
Empowerment
Partnership

Stories of Connecting Communities

MARCH 2010

THE VIKING CENTRE



The background features a light blue gradient with several stylized gears in shades of grey and yellow. Two hands are shown in silhouette: one at the top right reaching down towards a yellow gear, and another at the bottom center reaching up towards the same gear. The overall theme is community and interconnectedness.

STORIES OF CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

By Ray Hearne

Ray Hearne is Chair of the No Masters Co-operative, a grouping that celebrates writing of prose and songs that address issues: "that is rooted in its time and its communities; that is engaged with the struggles confronting and reshaping those communities..." (www.nomasters.co.uk). Ray has been a pioneer of the writers' workshop movement helping people of all ages across South Yorkshire's communities and beyond to find their voices, in story, verse or song.

FOREWORD

Stories should inspire us, challenge us and make us think in a different way. So, I am pleased to introduce this story, one in a series, which does just that. The series has been commissioned to give a voice to those individuals and communities who are in areas that have received funding from the CLG Connecting Communities programme. I hope you find them as enthralling as I do.

Isobel Mills

Deputy Regional Director

Government Office for Yorkshire & The Humber

Connecting Communities

This is one of a series of stories from the 'Connecting Communities' areas within Yorkshire and the Humber. Connecting Communities is a programme of activity designed to promote cohesion and specifically, to address the marginalisation felt amongst some sections of the community in deprived neighbourhoods. This Connecting Communities project in North Lincolnshire is being managed by the local authority.

Yorkshire and Humber Empowerment Partnership is grateful to Ray Hearne who has compiled this story and particular thanks go to the residents who provided their thoughts and insights.

As you leave the M180 on the first bright winter day after weeks of snow and grey, picking up the A15 and driving along through wold and flatland down into Barton, you might be forgiven for believing you were in a part of the world that was eminently comfortable and relaxed about itself. A smart, busy little market town, with notable churches, more than one windmill, well turned-out shops and houses, red-orange Lincolnshire pantiles gracing the roofs of just enough buildings to add a certain gravitas and self-assuredness to its compact thoroughfares.

Barton seems a town that wears its history lightly but confidently. Anglo-Saxons succeeded scatterings of Roman settlers and initiated workings that grew steadily over the centuries, right up to the Victorian era when it was a key stopping-off point in the river Humber's industrial coming-of-age. In earlier times Barton was renowned for its maltings; later it became a centre for the manufacture of bricks and those self-same tiles. From the mid-twentieth century large-scale industrial activity went into decline though there is still some engineering, chemical manufacturing and even oil refining to be found.

These days Barton makes it onto tourist maps. The old clay pits that produced the raw stuff for the bricks were turned into a nature reserve, which sits alongside the Water's Edge country park and welcomes visitors from everywhere imaginable. The opening of the Humber Bridge in 1981 hugely increased the town's accessibility, though local businesses would be pleased to see many more transient bridge-crossers calling in to sample Barton's pleasures and to spend a few more tourist pounds. The bridge itself has never proven to be everyone's cup of tea, but to come upon it all of a sudden, even if you've seen it before, is sight enough to challenge even a teenager's world-weary complacency. Further additions to the town's attractions include all the year round arts and cultural programmes ambitious enough to put many larger places emphatically to shame.

We're far from the language of idylls here, but visitors to Barton have every reason to feel that it's doing ok and for the most part they would be right - it's that other little part that outsiders tend not to see into which so many issues

‘what seems is not necessarily what is’

are packed. In that respect, for all its uniqueness, Barton on Humber is characteristic of so many other not quite connected up communities across the region at the end of a new century’s first decade; to bowdlerise a tension most consummately explored by Shakespeare himself, what seems is not necessarily what is.

I was sure I’d taken the wrong route through town so I parked up. Map in hand I was looking for a street sign to confirm my location. *‘Are you lost?’* chirruped a voice. An elderly man stood watching his dog perform its sniffing rituals. *‘I’m looking for Caistor Road’* I said. *‘Straight ahead, over the main road and you’re on it’* and then chuckling added, *‘have you got your tin hat?’* as the dog set off with him in tow.

Only half a mile up the road, outside the town, sits the estate. At first glance it appears neat and quite well looked after. The dwellings look like council houses from the late sixties, early seventies, the ones with wooden slats attached to each frontage, between the top of the ground floor, and the bottom of the upstairs window. Some are red brick, some are darker. The overall effect is pleasant and far from unwelcoming. They did indeed used to be council houses though since 2007 they have been part of the stock of North Lincolnshire Homes, a Registered Social Landlord that currently owns and maintains almost 10,000 dwellings across the region.

As a charity, North Lincolnshire Homes cannot trade for profit. All its income has to be reinvested into its housing stock to maintain its properties, improve services and finance new builds. At the moment they are well into a major refurbishment of the estate and the striking green cabins of the contractors catch your eye as soon as you turn on to the estate. Things are clearly happening and a constant stream of yellow-coated workmen beetles back and forth across the road.

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‘This centre has been the hub of every endeavour locally to effect changes on the estate’

Directly behind the cabins stands the Viking Resource Centre. It used to be two separate houses which were knocked together in the late 1990s to form the current building. This centre for and of the community has been, since that inception, the hub of every endeavour locally to effect changes on the estate. Within that context a significant share of £16,000 worth of government funding under the Connecting Communities banner will be fruitfully employed in and around the Centre to build the confidence and support the development of a new generation of community leaders. In addition, work will be initiated to transform local service provision to make it more amenable to the expressed needs of residents. In other words, service providers need to hear and listen to the voices of local people and change the ways they operate. These are of course ambitious undertakings. And that is a small amount of money.

Responsibility for running the centre lies with a management committee made up of local residents as well as representatives of service providers and user organisations. The Centre’s day-to-day activities however are overseen by Maureen Hardman, ostensibly ‘Services Co-ordinator.’ Maureen’s story is instructive. It throws some of the well-meant rhetoric of neighbourhood improvement into stark relief. Her experiences along with many others like her ought to be required reading for policy-makers, community planners and strategists, not alone their admirable achievements, but the cost in terms of personal commitment necessary to sustain them.

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Maureen joined other locals from the estate in 1995 to form a Residents’ Association. She became Vice-Chair. A key issue for the group had been lack

of facilities for children. Kids had to play out in the street. Added to that, residents had nowhere to come together for social or community activities. Meetings with the council proved positive and the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) provided resources to knock the Resource Centre into shape. The Health Authority at the time came on board as a partner and the Centre was in business.

Within a year, after another strategic restructuring, the Health Authority pulled out of the partnership. European Social Fund resources were drawn in to

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support a Centre Manager and Maureen became a paid admin. worker. After the Manager left in 2001

Maureen took over the running of the Centre.

With only two years of SRB monies left, fund-raising on the Centre’s behalf became a priority and its programmes of activities got bigger. Listening to Maureen recount the astonishing list that keeps her busy today you could not fail to be humbled by her dedication

to the place and by the passion that drives her. It is

almost as an aside that she mentions her remuneration.

She gets paid twenty-five hours when there is sufficient money in the bank, otherwise she works out of love and commitment. *‘What can you do? The bills have to be paid and we’ve put too much effort in to turn our backs on it. And anyway, what are the kids going to do without it?’* Her quiet husband beams in admiration as he collects coffee cups for washing. He takes them through to the beautifully refurbished kitchen, something Maureen negotiated with the contractors in exchange for the use of the facilities for the duration of their work on the estate.

‘Public Liability Insurance on its own costs well over £1000 a year, and that takes some raising...’ It suddenly seems clear to me that pay-checks to Maureen are probably few and far between.

I’m with her husband beaming, but I’m fuming at the same time. It’s the story

of so many so-called ‘neighbourhood centres,’ so many dogged and devoted individuals, so many little platoons sacrificing personal time, energy and life-juices for long periods, powered by altruism for the betterment of their own communities, yes, but also delivering at ground-level on the frankly too often complacent rhetoric spouted by governments national and local. The labour and effort contributed on a completely voluntary basis rarely finds its way onto project or programme balance-sheets thereby skewing completely any final account of its cost. Possibly it’s the jaded Utopian in me awakened by Maureen’s passion. Probably it would be a different story if more local residents got involved and took a share of the burden. That of course is one of the binds politicians and funders trap you in.

‘The labour and effort contributed on a completely voluntary basis rarely finds its way onto project or programme balance-sheets ’

On the wall of the Centre is a notice revealing that the Christmas Fair raised a total of £171, less than a fifth of the annual cost of insurance. *‘We try to have regular raffles as well but you can’t go to people too often, they haven’t got a lot of money to spare.’*

Complaint is the farthest thing from Maureen’s lips. She has built up an impressive level of activity in the Centre and she and the Management Committee have successfully rented space to a formidable bevy of paying service providers which clearly helps to sustain its existence. Freshstart, Surestart, Podiatry Service, Youth Offending team, Shared Care substance misuse team, as well as an active Neighbourhood Watch. Upstairs there is a computer suite and the WEA runs a regular ‘gentle yoga’ class. The Centre also houses a breakfast club, after-school and holiday activities for local kids. After the breakfast club there is also a ‘Stay and Play’ for pre-school kids, and on a Friday morning a slightly eyebrow-raising ‘Baby Viking Fun’ for the complete nippers. Some of those service providers are represented now on the Management Committee along with reps. from the TARA and from Neighbourhood Watch.

'We've had some great school holiday activities; we've worked closely with the police a lot, and with 'Ropewalk' who run arts programmes. The kids have done environmental diaries and made bird feeders, T shirt printing and felt pet-making, and they've had some wonderful music sessions, didgeridoos and everything.'

Somebody mentions that Rosie Winterton MP has referred to Maureen as a heroine. Maureen herself is overjoyed that she has been invited to a Buckingham Palace tea party for the second time in a couple of years. She regards that as recognition for her unrelenting hard work.

**'People
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'People who live in this community and knock it, get me down. There's some lovely people on this estate who work really hard all the time, and yet they all get tarred with the same brush. It's not fair. People outside don't know the half of it.'

Maureen continues. *'When I think back I had a great childhood and I want some of these kids here to get a bit of that too. The family unit as we used to know it no longer exists, it's just different today, but if some of these kids get some of the feeling I had as a child then I'm happy. I've done what I set out to do.'* There's a sense of that feeling embedded in the brickwork of the place.

It's grown ups today though who are full of feeling. A meeting has been called at the Centre to float the idea of local community members taking part in a 'Community Ambassadors' course. Two mornings a week for six weeks, the course will look to enhance and develop participants' skills in terms of community leadership, including raising awareness of funding culture as well as building the profile of the Viking Centre as a potential mouthpiece for local need and demand.

One relative newcomer to the estate who has come along to see what it's all about is already rubbing some folk up the wrong way after three or four negative comments about young people. *'Look at the way they treat the place, there's beer cans, litter, rubbish dumped in gardens, drug stuff chucked everywhere – you can't do anything with them!'*

The riposte is restrained and measured, led by Andy, mid thirties, shaven headed, ear-ringed, muscled. A stereotyper's delight, except for the little baby in pink that he's dandling on his knee as he speaks. *'Look, young people round here have got nothing to do. Some of them get into mischief and yes, drugs is a real problem, but compared to some other areas I'd much rather live here.'*

A woman pipes in, *'there's too many negative attitudes around here, especially from people who don't do anything. Either put up or shut up, that's what we say here.'*

Andy again; *'Good folk shouldn't have to put up with it, that's true, that's why we're all working together to change the culture. Some folk have got themselves into a rut, all they can think about is survival. They can't see a light at the end of the tunnel. There's lots in debt for instance. How am I gonna get out of it, they're thinking, and then it's easier not to think. If you're long term unemployed it's hard. If you've never worked then you've got a big problem.'*

I was aware suddenly that I had stumbled upon a masterclass on the actualities of life in a marginalised community.

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'If someone could give them a bit of guidance and support, and tell them – this is what could be – then they might be able to change. They might be able to do something about it.'

Vince Mancini, Community Cohesion Officer for the area makes an early intervention. *'This Community Ambassadors' training could help – we're looking for some young people to join us – if we can get hold of a few, we'll be able to give them that guidance and perhaps lift their aspirations a bit, and if they stick at it they'll be able to help the Centre. And the Future Jobs Fund will soon be on stream – sure it's hard, but that could give them six months paid work and that would be a good step towards possible full time employment and changing some attitudes.'*

'That's what we all need' Andy continues, *'we need a leg up. Folk have got to be*

made to feel good about themselves. Lots don't want to be on the dole, but how you get out of those doldrums? How do you get through that glass ceiling? When you're like that you need somewhere to go, you need to feel wanted'

'And it's not just teenagers. If anything it's even more difficult for older more mature folk. There's hardly anything in terms of training or support for us, it's all 16-25. Many of the worst drug takers are 30 plus. And you get caught in that benefit trap where it's not in your interest to take on temporary work. Temping is no good for a family man. I know, I've done it. You work for three or four weeks. You lose council tax support, and help with utility bills. Then there's rent and school meals to find. And of course you've got to run a car to even get to the job. Then the work finishes and you have to climb that benefit hill again, and wait for everything to be re-assessed and so on. It puts family finances into turmoil. Why would you go to work to get less than you get on benefit? We're stuck in that Catch 22.'

'It shouldn't all be targeted at youngsters – I mean I'm all for training for the young but they're missing out whole age groups – all those things that added maturity can bring to a job.'

A local town councillor has popped in to offer encouragement. 'And the problem is, small employers, especially in a recession, can't pay enough to take people above benefit level.'

'And some folk can't afford to retire now, and leave the jobs for the youngsters' says someone else, 'because they're in the pensions poverty trap. If you get a small pension that takes you just above the threshold then you get no benefits at all. There's lots round here like that.'

'So the government sets the minimum wage threshold' continues Andy, 'and employers can't or won't pay it – round and round it goes – the madness – and that's why it leads some to drugs and alcohol.'

'Why can't you go on training as part of being on benefit? There needs to be more flexibility in the system. There's too little incentive to break out of that trap, and it can

destroy your sense of yourself as a citizen making your contribution to society.'

Vince demonstrates understanding and empathy towards the points made, before offering a more challenging perspective. *'But there are some development opportunities around and a few opportunities to progress. Benefits never let you do that and like you say, you have to break those psychological cycles. When someone goes on a course and gets new skills they are obviously in a better position when a job comes along.'*

'Many people have never had anyone to give them inspiration. It's true that going to college can be frightening, at any age; we all have that knot in our stomachs, we're all afraid of assessments, of the feeling of being set up to fail - but there's also the feeling of coming out the other side saying, I did that. That's hard to beat. This training could be just the first step.'

Vince goes on to explain how the Ambassadors training course is also linked to the Crosby Employment Bureau (CEB) in Scunthorpe, a not-for-profit social enterprise with a good track record in finding employment for people who have managed to take those first steps. *'Once you make that start, you can get a foot in the door, make an impression, get both feet under the table. A short contract can lead to longer if you do a good job. That's how the cycles get broken.'*

'It means you've got to take a leap of faith' says Andy again. *'And you know qualifications are not always the answer to anything. Me and my wife have both done the ECDL. Did it here in the centre. Passed the whole lot. It was supposed to be the next big thing but it never led us anywhere.'*

'But the CEB links qualifications to work' counters Vince. *'Qualifications and experience. That's what employers want.'*

Vince introduces Meera working with him on a temporary basis. Meera is a law graduate who can't find employment in her field, so via the Bureau she has found temporary work with the Council as a project support worker in the great hope that it will lead to a more permanent position. Meera will be

available to help participants doing the training at the Centre. People shake their heads at the thought of Meera, with all her post-graduate qualifications, all those years of study, and still no 'proper job.' After depressing months in the wilderness however, Meera is brimming with bright energy and optimism, determined to make the best of this small opportunity and to model the attitude of mind required by the job market in all its harshnesses.

Vince moves the discussion on to how the training might help residents to organise their collective voice in a more effective manner so that services all round on the estate might be improved and developed. More formal structures of communication with the council which might be able to build upon what has already been achieved but in a piecemeal fashion. The Council's Stronger Communities Team has the government's focus at the moment, as well as the 'buy in' of the Local Strategic Partnership, so the time is right to push for some kind of 'area based management' of services.

Andy recounts some recent successes on the estate. When an infamous local gang started to get too big for its boots Centre Management Committee members had to 'stand up to be counted,' even to the extent of pursuing gang members through the courts. *'O yeah we had a few threats, but nothing we couldn't handle. We've worked closely with the Police, with Safer Neighbourhoods and other Council services, and North Lincs. Homes. We've got better pathways, and lighting and fences and blocked off a few rat runs, and you can see the whole estate is being refurbished as we speak. I'm happy to let my kids go out and play now. I wouldn't have said that at one time. That's what got me involved in the first place. I was sick of anti-social behaviour and I wanted a safer place for my kids to live. People deserve to live in decent homes in decent areas.'*

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'We still get troublesome families moved in from elsewhere, just a few, that cause trouble wherever they go. But contracts for tenants have got a lot better. There's responsibilities built in now about keeping the garden reasonable, getting broken windows seen to and so on, and a lot of the trouble has shifted.'

‘That’s because our voice was heard... What we’ve got now is manageable’

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‘A lot of people say they should just round up the riff raff and lock ‘em up, but that’s not the answer. They’re the community’s kids, they’re our kids, and they get up to stuff because there’s nothing for them to do. They need things to do. We need to make them proud of their environment so that they’ll look after it, instead of setting fire to wheely bins and such. Six years ago some parts of the estate were no go areas. What we’ve got now is manageable.

We’ve just got to keep a grip on it.’

‘Trouble is, it’s only ever a handful of people who do it all. Lots of people complain but they don’t do anything about it. Some of them don’t even vote. But if they see more things happening then we might get more folk involved. We used to have a youth club here but there weren’t enough volunteers to manage it properly so it had to close’

‘We need a kids’ play area on the estate. We’ve actually got the land and planning permission. We just need the money to make it happen, then if people see success they’ll give you their support.’

‘if people see success they’ll give you their support’

Andy points through the back window to an elevated patch of grass. *‘My idea is to get a conservatory built out there, so we could extent the Centre and make it more suitable for discos and other stuff for young people.’*

‘What we need to do is prove the case for the need’ says Vince, ‘and take some control of this constant scrambling around for funding. If there’s going to be less funding around then it’s going to go to those who know their way around the system. The big challenge, as you know here in the Centre, is sustaining things once you’ve got them up and running. We need to increase awareness generally of what communities can do for themselves by getting hold of their own funding. It’s about getting your voice into other arenas and onto other agendas, and we can learn from other communities

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that have done it.’

Andy is securing the sleeping infant in her pram. *‘After the refurb is finished we should organise a mass Community Day and have a competition to rename the estate. That’s what we’re up against a lot of the time, the reputation of the estate. Mention Caistor Road estate and what do they say? Pull it down!’*

‘What did one councillor say?’ someone intones, *‘they’re all gypsies and thieves up there! He did!’*

‘And what about that workman the other day, carrying window frames with the contractors? He had his name badge tucked inside his shirt so you couldn’t read it. That’s not much use, I said, so he says, well if I don’t do that on this estate it’ll get ripped off mi neck!’

I kept the earlier dog walker’s genial remark about tin hats to myself.

And other hair-raising stories of vernacular demonising, along with official neglect and occasional contempt bring the meeting to a colourful conclusion. There is a general consensus that the only way to move forward beyond that history of prejudice and ingrained ignorance is for more residents to play an active part in the area’s management. Get service providers, officers, elected members and local reps together on some kind of management board then voices have to be listened to. Many of those old myths and attitudes could be slowly demolished and a positive future for the estate built. It’s all about working together, but as partners, ‘and that should mean as equals’ says a voice on its way out the door.

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