

VOICES
FROM EXPERIENCE



Yorkshire &
Humberside
Empowerment
Partnership

Stories of Connecting
Communities

MARCH 2010

BROOMHALL GROUP OF GROUPS (GOGS)



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 Sheffield 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.

BROOMHALL GOGS

Charmian Pipe, like a lot of other Broomhall folk, is passionate to the point of eloquence about the place. She has lived in the community for forty years or more since being drawn in as a teenager by its warmth and welcome.

'As far back as I can remember, it's always been like a little harbour – a place where migrating people could find a safe haven.'

**'it's
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Terraces of closely hugging Victorian houses certainly look lived in. Tall, slate-topped, mature and imposing, they exude an air of worldly-wise resignation, perhaps even solemnity. Small wonder they attracted the eye of John Betjeman, that most suburban-genteel of twentieth century poet laureates. At the top end of the long straight streets towards Glossop Road some are quirky enough to accommodate businesses. That bit of the area might even be described as leafy were it not for the absence of trees.

**'Multi-
racial to
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bones'**

Broomhall remains a fascinating community. Multi-racial to its heel-bones, poor working class households, many of them black, rub shoulders with middle class students, people employed in the professions, university academics, bohemian intellectuals, single parents, citizens of the world, and the odd artist.

Charmian describes with animation and an undisguised partisanship her own life as an incomer into the community, setting up home in Upper Hanover Street. *'It was a very vibrant happy community. By that time lots of Caribbean families had already arrived. There was plenty of work you see, steelworks and so on at the other side of the city.'*

'My mother came from Ireland and when I was a small child she took me over to live with her father out in the countryside in county Mayo while my dad got things settled here. So having lived outside the country and then travelling back to Sheffield I felt I

shared something in common with people who'd come here from elsewhere. It might have been easier for me as a white person but Broomhall has always been a changing community as long as I've known it, though at that time there were a lot more shared communal spaces and no obvious sense of alienation.'

'Everybody knew each other and there was much less social isolation. There was a lot less traffic so people were out in the streets, in the evenings and night-time as well. It was very lively; there was lots of mutual visiting, lots of places to go for a drink, you know, but I never felt threatened. I always felt safe. People had their problems of course but they had each other and they got along fine.'

**'People
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'It felt to me like an area that was comfortable with itself. There was a lot more multi occupancy. All those great big houses with people from all cultures; you'd have Afro-Caribbean families, young white couples with kids, and students all sharing the same property. Nowadays people seem much more isolated; families tend to occupy their own dwellings and it's often just students that are sharing.'

Charmian's love and affection for the place she remembers is echoed by others who look back ruefully to a time before the social and economic turmoils of the eighties brought indifference, neglect and turbulence to their doorsteps, and before the well documented harshnesses of poverty, compounded by endemic racism, fused frustration, anger and pessimism across layers of the less affluent parts of the community.

A further element of complexity was added by the arrival, into that vortex of decline, of numbers of Somali families fleeing civil war and famine in Africa. Language barriers, cultural differences, housing issues, unemployment, lack of money, paucity of opportunity, especially for the young, all added to the potential for volatility.

Many neighbourhoods across the country of course experienced those hard

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times to a more or less similar degree, even through the trumpeted prosperity of recent years. Perhaps it is a truism but it still needs to be said; each community suffers hard times in its own unique way.

Broomhall has never been a place to take threats to its well-being lying down. It has an honourable tradition of community action, people banding together to get things done. The Broomhall Centre has hosted many meetings over the years where groups have formed to take forward the pressing issues confronting the community. As far back as the late seventies Broomhall was ‘Housing Action Area’ as well as a UK pilot area bringing together local residents and council officers to pioneer ‘planning for real.’ One lasting achievement was the closure of a number of rat runs infested by kerb crawlers around the infamous Havelock Square red light area. Major-General Sir Henry Havelock made his reputation brutally putting down rebellion in nineteenth century India. In an act redolent with symbolism, Havelock was changed to Holberry in honour of Sheffield’s most celebrated Chartist, a leading figure in challenging the authorities and promoting people’s democracy.

Charmian herself was a member of Broomhall Cosmopolitan twenty years later, dedicated again to bringing together key representatives of major communities in the area to negotiate its regeneration. Relationships were nurtured and developed once more with appropriate Council departments and officers, and much time expended.

Another ‘Planning for Real’ day was organised in February 2003. Much energy was given over to proposals for renewal of the area around St Silas’s church, a central space within the community. Lack of any concrete success around these ideas however damaged the group’s momentum. Some members went on to join an emerging Broomhall Forum to pursue similar agendas in what promised

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to be a broader, more representative grouping closer to the ear of the Council. Others like Charmian felt exhausted and needed to take a break from the relentless grind of meetings. Anyone who has served their time as a community activist is familiar with ‘burn out’ syndrome. Week after week, evening after evening, fitting it all in around work or families, sometimes both; sitting in meetings with paid officers who can take the time off in lieu, and then all the stuff between meetings. It can take its toll, particularly when it doesn’t seem to lead anywhere.

‘It’s difficult to describe the enormous effort it takes to get the Council, and those with authority, to act. After a while you think, are they just not listening? Or are they just cynical, or have they got different agendas, or just too many agendas? You just don’t know. And you see all your work come to nothing. That’s what burns people out.’

**‘If
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Only for a while in Charmian’s case it seems. ‘If you love a place, you can’t just sit by while it disintegrates around you. There’s a void now at the centre of the community. We’ve got groups of young people right across the area feeling angry and dissociated, and it’s obvious why. It’s the natural outcome of under-resourcing a community. Everybody knows. You’ve got to provide a focus for your young people. That drive-by shooting last year rocked the authorities and they had to be seen to be doing something. But something like that was so clearly going to happen. We need resources to help local people build their own community cohesion, to prevent the obvious! Communities that are not nurtured will inevitably disconnect.’

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Charmian’s energy is back. She’s had an ‘emotional battery recharge’ and can sustain again that note of passion. *‘Some of us are getting older but we refuse to remain downhearted, and even though the complete regeneration of this community won’t probably happen in our lifetime, we refuse to accept defeat. We*

BROOMHALL GOGS

won't give up.'

£42.5k of Connecting Communities funding has arrived at what seems an opportune moment. With its emphasis on developing community leadership and strengthening local voices, in stark contrast to some other areas across the region with low levels of development in those regards, that funding, limited though it may be, can be put to immediate practical use.

**'we've
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'We need support and we need resources, yes, but we've got the people here in the community who can take it forward. It's still that same question of getting the right people around the table.'

If anyone can do that at this moment in history then it's the Broomhall Group of Groups or GOGS as they felicitously dub themselves. To spend an hour in the company of just three GOGS reps is to be reminded of the true wealth of human resources, in terms of brain-power, energy, experience and commitment that sits like an artesian basin beneath so many of our communities. Set them across the table from any three Council officers or Government officials you might name and you'd have a match. In most cases, it occurs to me, the advantage would lie with GOGS. That being the case we can surely look forward to the gradual renewal of Broomhall along the lines being laid down by the community through their GOGS mouthpiece? In accordance with the ministerial exhortations underpinning Connecting Communities programmes? Anything less would be a travesty, in any community language.

Mike Fitter chairs the group. He brings to the position years of active community and voluntary experience, plus a career as a university academic and teacher, work in the Health Service, in mediation, on the Local Strategic Partnership as a faith sector rep etc. He tells me how GOGS has worked hard to make itself truly a representative group. As the 'group of groups' it has sought to bring together the different voices of already established and working Broomhall groups, to get them talking, and to try to formulate from that open

and voluble conversation, a coherent and agreed agenda for the community's betterment. Groups involved include two Tenants and Residents Associations, Broomhall Forum, Two churches, the Muslim Welfare House, ISRAAC, the SOMALI Community and Cultural Association, along with some others.

Mike's two colleagues both represent different Parents' Groups in the community; Abdirasak, himself Somali, from the Broomhall Parents Group, and Adele from 'One Broomhall and Citywide Parents' Forum.' Mike summarises the formation of GOGS, going back to the summer of 2008.

Tensions between some groups of young people in the community had increased leading to some eruptions of small-scale violence. A widespread concern grew up that if something wasn't done then it could get out of hand. A meeting was called at the Broomhall Centre attracting over eighty people. Lots of people had things to say and it was a bit chaotic. It took time translating into Somali and so on. That was good though because it meant people had to listen.

So people had a chance to voice things, but no clear way forward emerged. It took another meeting and more talking to come up with the 'Group of Groups,' at which each individual organisation in the community would be represented.

'So we began to work together, sharing problems, concerns and ideas in a determined way to confront the pressing issue of youth conflict. We meet regularly and we have made progress. Our clear aim is to defuse tensions and to get people to live peacefully, as a basis for taking the community forward together.'

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Abdirasak affirms the two key aims of the Broomhall Parents' group; tackling anti-social behaviour amongst young people, and raising educational standards and achievement amongst children and young people. It's about parents themselves getting together and NOT relying on agencies. Listening to Abdirasak's account of how he and other parents were able to nip in the bud confrontations between local Somali lads and others from across

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‘the confidence and the vision to bring about a cessation to the conflict on their own terms’

the city is quite inspirational. They were able to pool their collective parental skills, listening, counselling and organisational, and to conscript Sheffield United’s football academy to help them get the lads playing together as a team. This gave the young people the confidence and the vision to bring about a cessation to the conflict on their own terms. Even in such challenging circumstances Abdirasak is convinced that the parents were much better placed than any external agency to bring about that reconciliation.

Adele’s group brings together Afro-Caribbean parents primarily. When tensions spill into conflict people get dragged in; parents inevitably back their own children. *‘We wanted to try to bring about some way of mediating with Somali parents, to start talking and to start empowering parents across the community to take more control of the situation with young people on the streets.’*

Both groups were already linked by that shared belief in the major role parents have in making Broomhall a better place to live, and the formation of GOGS has given a larger focus for the exploration of those and other common threads.

GOGS seems to be characterised by its commitment to ‘conversation’ in the most generous sense of that word, that is, speaking without suspicion of ulterior motives, openly, honestly and respectfully with each other. Inevitably, that can take a while to evolve. There is a lot of history in the air above any discussion of Broomhall. Much of it in terms of external perceptions and reporting by outsiders especially, has in the past been damagingly negative. Local people are wary, and not without justification, of having their words, images and histories twisted and distorted by anyone looking for a story. Some of that can leak into relationships within the community itself.

‘At first we didn’t know each other, and we weren’t being totally frank. Over eighteen months we have had some difficult conversations. People have different perspectives and you have to build strong relationships in order to talk about difficult problems.’

You've got to build confidence and the courage to face difficult issues. Between us now we have created that confidence and trust, and we can share problems and try to talk them through.'

**'we
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It is patently clear to the listener that this is true. This is a small model of cultural maturity that many in contemporary civil society would do well to embrace.

**'We
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'We feel very strongly that the issues in Broomhall are for our community to deal with. We welcome help and support, but on our terms. We are happy to invite agencies such as the police for example to our meetings, to give reports and so on, but they need to remember that it is our meeting. The invitation has to come from us, and what form any help for our community may take is down to us in the community to decide upon.'

Even though some of Broomhall's problems are unique to the community, GOGS members are sharply aware that some issues cannot be divorced from broader structures, attitudes and experiences in contemporary society as a whole. You start with issues close to home, then the lens gets wider and wider and a local issue suddenly takes on country-wide significance.

The experience of young black men is a good example. Difficulties in Broomhall have to be seen in the context of many years worth of difficulties across the nation, whether it be disproportionate levels of exclusions from school, or over-representation within the criminal justice system. Skewed notions of what you can expect from 'those people' lead to the crudest stereotyping, so that whenever an incident occurs it confirms to the police and to others that their prejudgements were correct. Whatever people see, hear, or read about things happening elsewhere is bound to colour their attitudes towards places like Broomhall.

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For young Somali men on the streets, for example, the concept of Islamophobia has a hard edge. In the wake of the ‘war on terror’ and the current climate of supposed ‘radicalisation’ of many young Muslims, they undoubtedly attract more than their share of unfair negative attention. They are getting more stick locally as a result of global occurrences.

‘In our small groups’ says Adele, ‘we are powerless. That’s the BME background in a nutshell. What we have to do is to borrow power from wherever we can. Our feeling here is that we HAVE changed some perceptions.’

A key local councillor is now very much on board, and the Leader of the Council has attended meetings as an observer, listening, taking notes, making things happen. That would not have happened without the concentrated efforts of GOGS.

‘In some ways we are lucky, in the make up of local people and their class profile for example. Broomhall sits between two universities. We have academics living here, professional people, and even a Council Chief Executive. We have to borrow some of the power that those middle class elites possess, to get us where we need to be, to get the big issues addressed.’

Abdirasak stresses the continual self-reflection and self-questioning as a group that is crucial to sustaining local legitimacy. *‘We agree that we are representative, what we ask ourselves is, how effective are we, and how can we ensure that we remain on track, asking the big questions of the right people?’*

Working with the Council’s temporarily funded Neighbourhood Management initiative roots those questions into local realities. The rhetoric echoes all the right noises; engaging and empowering residents; helping local people to take a more pro-active role in decision making; making services more responsive, and improving community cohesion along with something called ‘liveability.’ But

‘What we have to do is to borrow power from wherever we can... we HAVE changed some perceptions’

will the agenda be shaped and managed by the Council or by the Community?
GOGS is firm that it has to be the Community.

Relationships are good at the moment. There is mutual respect between GOGS and the Neighbourhood Management team but even with good will all around, community control of the agenda might not be easy to achieve. Council structures, ways of working, planning schedules, protocols for allocating, managing and accounting for public resources, all press heavily against the flexibility required to facilitate 'responsiveness' on the part of a large organisation. The abiding fear is that the smaller partner will inevitably be swallowed up or assimilated into the larger. GOGS is aware of those dangers and works hard to minimise them. More conversation and less formal meeting procedure is a principle they are determined to maintain.

Agendas should always have space for 'support slots' they believe, to give community members the opportunity to voice issues of importance. This requires expert chairing skills but Mike has made it clear that Neighbourhood Management business at any meeting might on occasions have to be ditched if some unexpected matter of community significance comes to the fore.

***'the
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One of the things all of us should have learned by now is that the importance of signals given out to communities cannot be underestimated. GOGS wants to be perceived as a group that listens to its own community members rather than dancing to the tune of the Council or of anybody else. GOGS wants to sustain that idea of conversation between neighbours as its prime means of operating, and its prime source of legitimacy. The group is nevertheless keenly aware that to move things on, the community's conversation has to be directed outwards; it has to elbow its way into, and in the process begin to transform, the very discussions from which it is currently excluded; those maintained by the movers and shakers that make policy and allocate resources.

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'When we talk to our own groups we are constantly talking to people without power. Where we need to be is talking to those WITH power. That's where our conversation needs to take place.' That's how Adele sums up the situation. *'How do we get to that point? Where our voices are not only heard but acted upon?'*

'When we talk to our own groups we are constantly talking to people without power'

Whole new levels of trust have to be built at those 'strategic' levels, and whole cultures based on batteries of prejudgements have to be dismantled and reconstructed. *'We' need to talk to 'them' and 'they' need to talk to 'us.'* GOGS is confident that such a conversation can be achieved. It might even be on its way.

Adele is optimistic. Some progress has been made, both locally via GOGS but in the world at large too. The Neighbourhood Management team have had small successes in drawing in pots of funding for play facilities and some visual improvements in the area.

At the global level the fact that Barack Obama is now in the White house is hugely significant and symbolic. There are more black people visible now in the professions and on television. The question remains as to how any of that can be used to increase opportunities in Broomhall, but it must be.

Mike pays warm homage to his fellow GOGS members for the work they have achieved and for the great satisfaction derived from working together with an aim and a purpose. Each is an experienced leader in her or his own right, and huge resources of collective human empathy underpin the practical skills and expertise that they possess. Everyone feels downhearted inevitably from time to time but the joy of the GOGS is that if one person gets low the others are there to pull him or her back up and to raise their spirits. That is something rather special.

Adele employs some of that celebrated Broomhall eloquence in summation.

***‘Now
at least we
feel we are walking
together’***

For so long the grass has been growing, the horse has been starving and we have all been galloping over each other. Now at least we feel we are walking together towards the grass.



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