

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE: BUILDING HARMONY IN A CHALLENGED COMMUNITY

Mike Durke

IN THE PAST, CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HARMONY in relation to the urban environment have emphasised the cosmically-aligned utopian city but a challenge we now face is much less philosophical and far more practical: how to restore harmony in disadvantaged communities? This aspiration sits comfortably in the context of modern local government reform and the diverse challenges of building community. Creating positive, supportive, cohesive communities is all about equality, balance, wholeness, social justice, and integration. Consideration of how we might develop communities which are more sustainable, democratic, and autonomous, with less need for costly and consistent state intervention, places Swansea and the Townhill housing estate centre stage. This exploration of one part of one city in south Wales provides a road map which is relevant to disadvantaged communities wherever we might find them.

By the beginning of the 1990s, there were the better part of four-hundred empty Council houses in Townhill: approximately 10% of the housing stock uninhabited, boarded-up, and used as little more than dangerous playgrounds by bored teenagers. The area had developed a reputation in the media as an unwelcoming, socially-disadvantaged community, particularly due to the high levels of car crime.¹ In her response to the 2001 crime plan for Swansea, Council Chief Executive, Vivienne Sugar, explained that crime continued to blight parts of the city identified as community regeneration areas, 'We know from information collected by our housing department, for example, that for around half of all council tenancies ended in Townhill, Clase, Blaenymaes and Penlan, fear of crime and harassment was given as a key factor'.²

Vehicle crime remained a major problem, alongside burglary, issues surrounding public houses, street drinking, aggressive begging, and youth annoyance.³ Arson was twice the problem in Swansea than it was in surrounding areas. Between April and June 2001, there were eighty-four burglaries in Townhill. Members of the public and the Councillors who represented them were alarmed by poor police response times and a growing attitude that crime in the area was not worth reporting. However, there was a level of enthusiasm to find a way forward and Mrs.

CRISIS ON THE HILL

By Chief Reporter
Susan Buchanan

SWANSEA's oldest and largest housing estates are in total chaos, according to a former Lord Mayor and leader of the city council.

Councillor Tyssul Lewis says he is in despair about Townhill and Mayhill and has launched a scathing attack on the estates.

"The whole fabric of society has broken down. The city council has no control there any more," said Mr Lewis, who has been a councillor for 24 years.

"I wish I was a councillor for the Mayals, not Mayhill. It has never been so hard to do the job."

Burgling

Mr Lewis, traditionally a staunch defender of life on the hill, says crime — especially amongst youngsters — is spiralling out of control and parental responsibility has hit an all-time low.

Councillor Lewis' was speaking after the Post approached him for reaction to the final part of its Young and Poor series, which deals with the collapse of family life for many young people.

He says youngsters are being allowed to run riot,

● Townhill and Mayhill 'are in chaos'

● We have no control on estates, councillor

● Family life 'has broken down'

with their parents too busy smoking and drinking to do anything about it.

Children are stealing from neighbours and burgling houses to get goods to sell for cash.



"Social deprivation, unemployment and a terrible lack of parental control is the core of the problem," he said.

"We are in crisis. Family life has broken down and there are no firm hands there to guide youngsters."

And single-parent families have become a major housing problem.

"Years ago being single and having a baby was a big thing. Now many of these

girls couldn't care less," he said.

"I have seen some with two or three children, all by different fathers, knocking on my door for a house. All we are doing on the hill is housing single mothers.

"There is no homeless problem. It's something they've created themselves."

And he revealed that he is currently investigating a case of a brothel apparently being run from a council house in Mayhill.

"It was allocated to a homeless man, but he has never lived there. Every night a taxi pulls up and women get out. They entertain men all night and leave again in the morning."

The council had practically lost control over tenancy of its stock, he claimed, with tenants sub-letting and moving friends in willy-nilly.

"There are so many empty houses which tenants have abandoned to go and live with people. It's total chaos, and I admit I don't know what to do."



In despair . . . Councillor Tyssul Lewis.

South Wales Evening Post

29th July 1992

Figure 1: Councillor Tyssul Lewis was not alone in feeling exasperated by the many issues the Hill communities were facing, *South Wales Evening Post*, 29th July 1992.

Sugar noted some 'excellent working arrangements' in place between the police and new community partnerships. Townhill was at the vanguard of this new way of working thanks to the pump-priming of European funding.

For those engaged with the implementation of the only European Union



Figure 2: Prince Charles, opening the Prince's Trust Office at the Phoenix in March 2002.

(EU) URBAN I Community Initiative in Wales (URBAN), the 2nd March 2001 was the best and worst of days. Prime Minister Tony Blair had visited Townhill and opened the landmark £1.3 million Phoenix Community Enterprise Centre – a first of its kind in Wales.⁴ Later that day, Mr. Ian Spratling, O.B.E., chairperson of the management committee which had steered this innovative programme to fruition, passed away after suffering a tragic accident at home.⁵ With the best of intentions, local people were engaged with the process of regenerating this downtrodden estate through four area committees, but progress had ground to a halt, there were disagreements and some hostilities.⁶ Mr. Spratling was asked to defibrillate the process as an independent chairman. His drive and business acumen ensured that projects were delivered on time and within budget: the Phoenix would rise from the ashes of the burned-out vehicles which had been such a part of the Townhill landscape for so many years.

Over time, statistics had shown that the Townhill and Mayhill communities, 3,850 households collectively known locally as 'The Hill', officially known as the Townhill Electoral Division, were suffering from unusually high levels of social and economic deprivation: high unemployment, high crime, poor health, and low aspirations. Local people shared with their European neighbours dismay at

the constant criticism in the press. These were deprived, damaged, disaffected communities; unsafe and unwelcoming, crime-ridden and dangerous. URBAN was an ambitious remedy. This pilot European structural programme aimed to take a bottom-up, grassroots approach to the tackling of very long-standing community issues in the most deprived parts of the continent. Altogether 165 cities, including Swansea and Townhill, participated in the two phases of the URBAN programme, the first of which unfolded between 1994 and 1999.⁷ The second ran between 2000 and 2006 and included a further initiative for Wales based in west Wrexham.⁸ The EU evaluation of the first phase acknowledged teething difficulties and the amount of time taken to build capacity and secure the support of partner agencies. The council's foresight in spreading a robust community partnership ethos in other parts of the city was praised.⁹

Exponential growth in the population of Swansea saw the number of residents rocket from 17,000 at the start of the nineteenth century to over 134,000 as the clock ticked into 1900.¹⁰ Fortunes were made, great houses were built and dynastic families like the Dillwyns and the Vivians helped to ensure that the town could no longer 'be dismissed as a cultural desert hundreds of miles off the beaten track'.¹¹ Life in the slums, particularly in Little Ireland as the Greenhill area was known, was harsh and uncompromising. This was a time when the production of copper dominated the communities of Morfa and Hafod, with terraced housing for the workers lining Llangyfelach Street, Neath, and Carmarthen Roads. These streets converged at the entrance to the expanding town, where we now have the cross-roads at Dyfatty, and there was a proliferation of poor quality housing. Little Ireland was, 'wedged between the districts of Waun Wen and Hafod, which were overwhelmingly non-Irish'.¹² Swansea's Irish population had swelled after the devastating potato famine caused an exodus from their homeland. There was tension, conflict, and even murder.¹³ Typhus and cholera blighted this community.¹⁴ Housing was unimaginably poor, squalid, and unsanitary, with health reports finding as many as sixteen people sharing a single room,

Irish, Scotch and Welsh, consisting of wives, husbands, children and single people, all in the same room...there must be 250-300 of the commonest prostitutes at Swansea...very debauched in their habits as regards drink; many of them sleep on straw in the corner of the room, whilst they allow ordure [excrement] to cover the floor, or throw it with the ashes; so dirty are their domestic habits.¹⁵

For the Health of the Towns Commission, in 1844, Sir Henry De la Beche showed that one could expect to die far more quickly and younger in the slum areas between Greenhill, High Street and the Strand, than in other communities nearby.¹⁶ Over a three-year period, he found nineteen deaths reported in Mount Pleasant, compared with 450 in the centre of the town and 524 in Greenhill.¹⁷ Swansea Local Board of Health Medical Officer, W. H. Michael, predicted that fatal diseases would return. Once again, they would strike in the most crowded, unsanitary parts of the town like Greenhill and the Strand where there were 'dirty, ill-drained and close habitations...where the entire absence of water renders cleanliness, comfort, or health, almost untenable'.¹⁸

Professionals, charitable organisations, politicians and some of the rich, powerful land-owners of Swansea society turned their thoughts towards the complexities of social welfare. The working masses were provided with recreational spaces where they could walk, breathe clean air, play and have fun. William Thomas's speech, on 9th July 1874, arguing for open spaces for recreational use, was ground-breaking in Wales. Convinced by this compelling rhetoric, John Talbot Dillwyn Llewelyn donated land at Cnap Llywd Farm and a cash donation to work with the council on the creation of a new park.¹⁹ Parc Llewelyn was transferred into public ownership in a manner which would make the authors of the 2015 Well-being of Future Generations Act proud: to be forever utilised as a park, and for no other purposes whatsoever, and properly maintained for public benefit.²⁰ Swansea was by this time established as an economically powerful regional hub and there was increasing national and local interest in the lives of the working poor.

The great reforming Liberal governments of 1905 and 1914 were building on the foundation laid by their Victorian counterparts with an expansion of the role of the State in the provision of social welfare. This would transform the lives of so many of the town's less affluent residents. David Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909 proposed a national insurance scheme, income tax revision, support for the unemployed and the Old Age Pensions Act. After the war, his determination to tackle the hidden miseries of the lower classes was clear,

Those of you who have been at the front have seen the star shells, how they light up the darkness and illuminate the obscure places. The Great War has been like a gigantic star shell, flashing over the land, illuminating the country and showing up the dark, deep places. We have seen places that we have never noticed before, and we mean to put these things right.²¹

Housing was a national priority so that the returning servicemen could be provided with homes fit for heroes. As early as December 1906, Swansea Councillors, C. T. Ruthen and H. G. Solomon, attended a housing reform conference organised by the National Housing and Town Planning Council. They forged links with visionary architect and town planner, Raymond Unwin, and in 1910, the South Wales Cottage Exhibition was held in Mayhill.²² Prior to the First World War, an eager Swansea Council secured a government subsidy of £2,250 from the Local Government Board (LGB) to build eight show houses on land adjacent to the exhibition site. Garden City principles were followed (cul-de-sacs and gardens rather than monotonous terraced housing) and works were carried out under 'direct administration'. The Council built the houses without use of private contractors, completing the project £300 (approximately £24,000 today) below the cost of the lowest private tender. The housing campaign was but one expression of the 'desire to build a genuine new world in which the disadvantaged could share'.²³ When the post-war call to pursue major construction programmes came, Swansea was quick to respond and the Council wrote to the LGB to request a loan of £278,353 (in the region of £10m in 2019) to erect the first 500 houses on the Hill.²⁴ Nationwide, the target of 500,000 council houses might not have been achieved but, within five years, 213,000 family homes were built and new communities were taking root.²⁵

In 1957, when two teenage Teddy boys were fined for carrying dangerous weapons to a showing of the film *Rock Around the Clock* at the Odeon in Sketty, the magistrate protested that the use of knives and razors was 'un-British and unworthy of Swansea inhabitants'.²⁶ Disorder and delinquency had become so problematic that by 1961, the Home Secretary had cause to approve a new by-law against unruly behaviour in Swansea's places of public entertainment. Magistrates railed against disruptive youths who populated over-crowded dance halls and indulged in under-age drinking, fighting, gang-warfare and stabbings, with named offenders tending to reside in the communities of Townhill, Mayhill, and nearby Mount Pleasant.²⁷ Residents of Uplands, Cwmbwrla, Clase, and St Thomas were singled out for stealing from businesses through breaking and entering, with young girls and middle-aged women from across the River Tawe and up the Swansea Valley being responsible for the retail crime of shoplifting. In 1966, the 110 bicycles reported as stolen were overshadowed by the 761 motor vehicles illegally taken. Inattentive parents, who lacked discipline and were too ready to take their children's side against the authorities, were blamed for the increase in crime and moral decline, along with unemployment, the attrac-

tions of popular culture, and bingo.²⁸

The URBAN programme for Townhill was approved by the European Commission on the 6th November 1996. The net was cast as wide as possible to engage a full range of public, private, and voluntary agency partners. Residents were expected to play a key role in the delivery of projects which were designed to make a tangible difference. Research from a broad range of sources established that local problems were characterised by a high benefit-dependency culture; low self-esteem and a lack of community spirit; poor health outcomes and low levels of health awareness; community facilities and services which were, in some cases, outdated or inappropriate; and, high levels of crime and vandalism, along with an associated and pervasive fear of crime.²⁹

The £6.3 million total investment through this initiative, match-funded by Swansea Council to the tune of £2.7 million, was spent in accordance with four measures: community revitalisation (improving facilities, reducing crime, providing childcare); vocational education and training (enhancing local people's readiness for work); economic development (boosting the local economy through business and entrepreneurialism); and, environmental improvements ('greening the hill' to tackle eyesore areas, reconstruct pathways and remove graffiti). Each of these measures would help to build on an already strong sense of community spirit. The Community Development Foundation (CDF) was commissioned to explore the possible creation of a charitable company as the vehicle to keep the momentum going after the grants dried up. The recommendation that the Council 'should support the establishment of a development trust...in order to take the regeneration initiative forward' was accepted.³⁰ Alan Twelvetrees, the author of the report, made some important observations:

- the European Commission emphasised three criteria for the regeneration of disadvantaged areas: a multi-agency partnership; strong community involvement; and, a forward strategy for long term sustainability;
- such initiatives should not overburden local authorities financially;
- without community engagement, such approaches are not effective or sustainable in the longer term;
- funds need to be drawn from a variety of sources, including trading, to lessen the dependency on public funding; and,
- the lead officer would need to have the right combination of qualifications, knowledge, and personal attributes, including excellent communication skills and a genuine interest in people.³¹

The Hill Community Development Trust Ltd (HCDT – originally called the Phoenix CDT until a more apt name change in 2008) was incorporated in 2001 as a company limited by guarantee with charitable aims. The Board of Directors would be populated by volunteers selected from the community, from public agencies or from elsewhere for their specialist knowledge and skills. This multi-faceted partnership would see a diverse range of perspectives shared around a single table with a focus on gathering information, identifying the issues, and exploring the options for bringing about improvements. The company would control its own affairs, sets its own direction in accordance with a three-year rolling business plan, employ its own staff, create its own policies and procedures, generate its own income through trading activities and secure government grants; all with minimal bureaucracy and delay.

At the official launch of the Phoenix Centre in March 2001, a few important statements were made which stayed with me in my twelve years as Chief Executive of the Development Trust. For example, Mr. Spratling, a successful independent businessperson, acknowledged the importance of assets being transferred to the trust debt-free with the potential for financial sustainability. This was an example of EU funds being used through true partnership, dedicated to the purpose of bringing pride back to the Hill and directly improving people's quality of life. The late Townhill Councillor, Tyssul Lewis, said, 'In all my many years as councillor for this area, I can truly say that the Phoenix is the most significant development in the estate's history'.³²

Swansea was once again in the 'vanguard of planning and design'.³³ Mr. Spratling was supported by colleagues like Housing Director, Arnold Phillips, a true ambassador for innovative community regeneration. Arnold was Chair-Designate from the date of Mr. Spratling's untimely demise until 2003. The Phoenix was created to build on the URBAN Initiative Foundation and to work towards financial self-sustainability when the grants ran out. This would be achieved by utilising the space at the Centre to provide services by and for the local community: business units to be let at a reasonable rent; a community café; a fully registered children's nursery and playground; a floodlit all-weather sports pitch; a fully-functioning modern library and information centre; and, a flexible conference space. The cynics came out in force: who in their right mind would rent a business unit on the Hill ... where was the demand for a community café and a children's nursery in the middle of this estate ... what a waste of time this venture would prove to be ... yet another case of public money wasted!

Phrases like 'building towards financial self-sustainability' are easy to say but



Figure 3: Prime Minister Tony Blair made a special trip to open the Phoenix Centre on 2nd March 2001.

much more elusive to fully understand. Townhill needed a person with higher-order commercial expertise to steer the ship into the future and we were lucky to find one. At the board meeting of 26th September 2003, when Mr. Roy Phelps was confirmed as the new chairperson, he explained that it was a real honour to have been offered this voluntary position. As a friend of Mr. Spratling, Mr. Phelps had a good awareness of our background and success:

I will try to bring additional, new skills to the board and will look forward to working with the board in moving the business forward alongside its plans to achieve our goals. I will ask that in everything we do that we at all times project integrity whilst always remaining open and honest with each other.³⁴

Mr. Phelps's role was pivotal at a crucial time for the new company. He was instrumental in auditing the position of the Trust, opening discussions with key partners, and setting direction towards a solvent and sustainable future. He strengthened the Board with colleagues who had the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience needed to make progress. Content to give up some of their time, for a new way of working in which they believed, these were people with high

levels of commercial expertise. From day one, Mr. Phelps was crystal-clear about a number of necessary critical success factors which remained unchanged over the years we worked closely together, including,

- the line which separates the role of Chairperson and CEO which should never be crossed. The Chair oversees the Board and deals with the higher-level strategic matters and line-manages the CEO. The CEO has complete responsibility for day-to-day operational matters;
- the highest levels of public governance must always be adhered to;
- openness and transparency are everything and the principle of ‘no surprises’ must always be respected; and,
- if the community does not want it, then the Trust should not be doing it.

The Trust took on responsibility as the local branch of the Welsh Government’s Communities First programme and board members, staff, and key partners got on with the process of addressing local needs and driving up income levels. It is fair to say that, slowly, we earned our spurs. The head teacher of Townhill Community School, John Brown, valued the way that the Trust had brought together so many different agencies with an active interest in servicing the Hill communities so that people could pool plans and efforts at a time of increasing austerity. Chief Superintendent Mark Mathias, who had experienced first-hand the intense frustrations of car crime in the 1990s as an Inspector in the South Wales Police, was an enthusiastic and committed supporter,

I have seen the Townhill Ward move from a community of despair to a community of hope and aspiration. HCDDT [Hill Community Development Trust], the Phoenix Centre and Communities First have been important elements in developing a strong partnership working approach which continues to bring very significant community benefit.³⁵

The community partnership ethos brought a bright-eyed, solution-focused mindset. The ‘No More Repeats Anti-Burglary Initiative’ was lauded for its ingenuity and success.³⁶ A scientific analysis of the data ensured that officers concentrated on clear targets: victim analysis identified repeat victims and the most vulnerable; offender analysis identified those with criminal records for similar offences; and, there was a pro-active drive on crime prevention and community engagement. Repair time for burgled properties was reduced from twelve weeks to two. Crime

Prevention Officers provided ‘secured by design’ knowledge so that risks could be controlled and avoided and new windows and doors were installed where most needed. Dimly lit areas were illuminated and high trees and hedges trimmed to improve visibility. Eighty-four burglaries between April and June 2001 might have translated into 336 in a full year. No wonder people were leaving in droves due to the fear or experience of crime. ‘No More Repeats’ resulted in a reduction in burglaries by an average of 50% for the entire community, with a decrease of almost 70% in some parts of the Hill.³⁷ There were consistent reports of improved communication between personnel from different agencies.

Two-thirds of the Council-built housing stock on the Hill remained in the possession of the local authority while one-third was sold to those taking advantage of the government’s right-to-buy scheme. As a result, the Housing Office experienced an increase in rental income as burglaries fell and the exodus slowed. The decrease in void properties fell from its high point and, over the last ten years, has evened out at between forty to fifty houses at any given time.³⁸

Despite what the cynics said, every aspect of the Phoenix Centre proved far more popular than expected. Later described as a world-class example of sustainability by UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the Centre was just one of six international projects showcased at a major United Nations exhibition in Barcelona to highlight best practices worldwide in cultural diversity, sustainable development, and peace resolution.³⁹ The café and children’s nursery were instant hits, both being run to professional standards by local people. Sports clubs clamoured to book the new floodlit all-weather pitch. The business units were snapped up and have remained fully occupied since their inception. Bookings for the conference space came in thick and fast and the target of 12,000 users of the library within the first year was trebled, with not a single book lost to vandalism or damage.

Generating a new independent income stream was the greatest challenge for the Trust. From a standing start in 2001, trading income grew steadily to reach £100,000 in 2007. The Trust took on direct responsibility for the nursery and community café and levels of self-generated income reached £248,000 in the 2009 financial year. In the last ten years, income has been maintained at similar levels and, remembering the old adage ‘turnover is vanity, profit is sanity’, costs have been tightly controlled. Since 2002, a total income in the region of £5 million, half from government grants and half generated through trading, has been reinvested in staff and operational costs. Given the number of large companies that managed to secure many millions of pounds sterling in public contracts but



Figure 4: Phoenix Manager, Leanne Dower, with her 'Breakfast for £1' campaign.

still find themselves bankrupt, such as Carillion, Interserve, and Dawnus, this community-based social enterprise approach does pose an interesting alternative way to get things done efficiently whilst adhering to professional standards of governance.⁴⁰

Perhaps the grassroots partnership approach, best coined by the term 'community practice', does not hold the keys to unlock all of society's problems, but it does take us some way along this path. We can certainly learn the lessons, explore the map to the pot-holes in the road and apply key principles in any interested community, 'deprived' or otherwise. Gabriel Chanan and Colin Miller offer a compelling rationale for community practice.⁴¹ The breeding ground for poverty and social disadvantage consists of low social capital, a lack of community activity, conflict, and the absence of productive dialogue within communities and with public services. Conversely, high social capital, vigorous community activity and harmonious community relations, combined with productive dialogue and collaboration with public services, all help to improve the quality of life for residents and contribute to a reduction in poverty and disadvantage. Our most challenged communities place a disproportionate pressure on public services. They can be perceived as black-holes for public funding where resources are sucked in without any sign of positive impact. Community practice mobilises communities.

New opportunities for participation increase the number of volunteers which fosters new communities of interest and local groups. We see an improvement in dialogue with public services, energy and enthusiasm spread, and aspirations rise. Community practice has two kinds of value: a) *intrinsic* wherein relationships, cooperation and mutual support are cultivated within the community; and, b) *extrinsic*, as local conditions and facilities are improved through closer contact with public service providers. Both improvements help to reduce excessive pressures on overburdened public services, leading to less crime, more employment, better health and education.⁴²

In 2019, the statistics continue to suggest that we have a concentration of issues on the Hill that we do not find in most of the other thirty-six electoral divisions in Swansea.⁴³ 13.7% of the working age population have never worked or have been unemployed for extended, long-term periods compared to 5.2% for the city as a whole. Net household income stands at £20,000, 26% below the city average. Smaller houses can be purchased for £25,000 below the average of £109,000 for Swansea, with savings in the region of £60,000 if you set your sights on a more substantial semi-detached home. However, the improvements continue: the council continues to invest in the housing infrastructure, in the three community centres which provide social and recreational activities, in the three primary schools and two comprehensive schools which educate local children, in the children's social services which remain essential for our most vulnerable young people and in adult social services for our elderly residents. Volunteers continue to run so many community groups and sports clubs. Faith communities look after the spiritual needs of believers and the West End Social Club provides a lively place to socialise. Last year, the Development Trust's fourteen-year campaign for major improvements at Mayhill Park came to fruition with the opening of the £2 million Mountain View Primary Care and Family Centre.⁴⁴ The original aspiration for the Community Development Trust to run the Centre was not realised, but this major investment in the community is boosting the health and well-being of residents. The Phoenix has received an uplift thanks to several grants, totalling £285,000, from the Welsh Government.⁴⁵ The new library is spotless and as busy as ever and the expanded children's nursery will be opening shortly. In addition, when we consider data covering a range of crimes on the Hill, we see significant improvements over time including burglary rates which fell to thirty-nine in 2018, just over 10% of where they were heading in 2001.

Julie James is the Assembly Member (AM) at the National Assembly for Wales who represents the interests of the 83,000 people who live in her Swansea

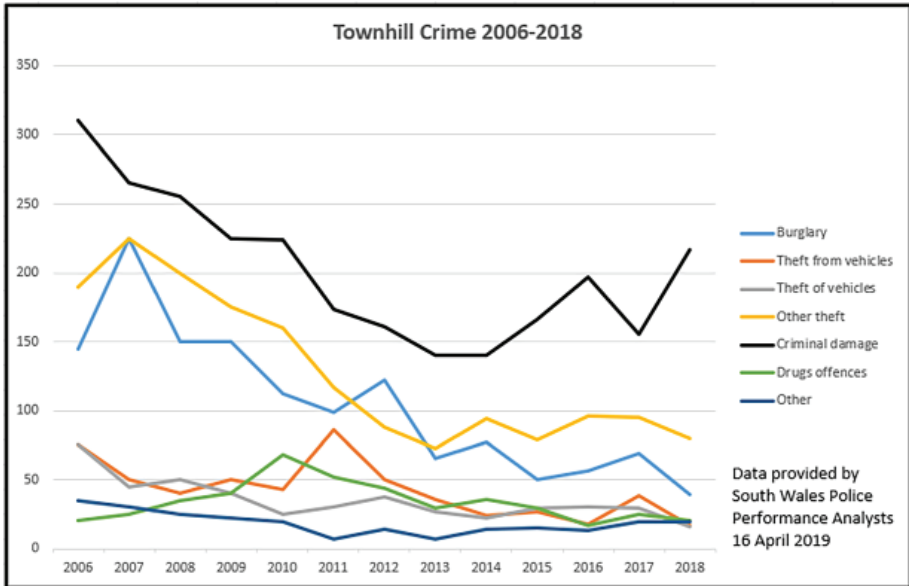


Figure 4: Phoenix Manager, Leanne Dower, with her 'Breakfast for £1' campaign.

West constituency.⁴⁶ She is energetic in her role and maintains a high level of visibility in the many communities she serves, including Townhill and Mayhill, but her familiarity with the Hill runs much deeper than that. When Vivienne Sugar shared such serious concerns about particular communities across the city, Julie was head of legal services at the City and County of Swansea. She has seen the community evolve over decades and her perspective is clear:

I have been involved with the Hill community and the Trust for many years and in many roles – from working on the original legal documentation to representing the community as its Assembly Member. In all my interactions with the community it is obvious that given the right enabling support the community can both identify and deliver the solutions and services it needs for itself and this history of the community and its efforts illustrates that emphatically.

In recent years, as an academic and a city councillor, I have had the opportunity to pause and reflect carefully on my thirty years in public services – in policing, youth work, child and family social services and community development, working at a local authority and on the national level, on the frontline

and in management roles. It seems clear to me that, as we look ahead to the radical reform of local government in Wales, we must pause and reflect carefully on the lessons learnt, not just by the Townhill experience, but by so many other approaches we have seen from so many different key partners and organisations: from national government to local, from successful corporations to grassroots social enterprises, from major charitable companies to local volunteers who shape their own communities on a daily basis. Face-to-face skilled, supportive, open and honest communication is everything – that is where the magic happens. In his high-level report to the Welsh Government, Joe Simpson was perfectly clear in his appreciation of the need for up-front, close and personal, community-facing public services:

It is in local communities where the connection with citizens can be most fully developed, where community leadership can be exercised and where the opportunities for service integration can be best grasped.⁴⁷

Wales is not alone in seeing the role of elected members evolve towards more collaborative forms of democratic engagement which can only be achieved in the heart of communities themselves.⁴⁸ Dynamic community organisations, rooted in the life of the communities they serve, must have a pivotal role if we have any chance of shaping communities from within, as the First Minister urged in a previous ministerial role, by spinning a golden thread to link community aspirations with national goals.⁴⁹ Saul Alinsky was right: treating people as ‘passive, puppet-like recipients’ of services we design and deliver for them is a denial of human dignity and democracy and will never work.⁵⁰ If we apply what Barack Obama called Lincoln’s simple maxim - that government should only do for communities what they cannot do for themselves - we could well see an upsurge in innovation from frontline professionals like teachers, doctors, social workers, social carers and police officers working with local residents and businesses to search for the solutions to their own problems.⁵¹ The Townhill experience stands as an intriguing example of what can be achieved, even in the most challenging circumstances.

NOTES

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