ALL ABOUT TOWNS
Harnessing hope in Britain’s communities

HARD TIMES IN OLDHAM
JENNIFER WILLIAMS

TRICKLE-UP ECONOMICS
TED HOWARD

COMMUNITY BEFORE PARTY
LISA NANDY AND BEN BRADLEY
A TOWN CALLED HOPE

Many communities are missing out in material terms. But they still have a strong spirit. Renewal begins when it’s tapped

TOM CLARK, EDITOR, PROSPECT

A generation ago the term “inner cities” was code for life on the wrong side of the tracks. Since then, happily, the metropolis has fought back. It’s not just inner London, but also the hearts of Manchester, Bristol, Leeds and other great English cities that have enjoyed a renaissance. Inequality and hardship are stubborn, to be sure, but the expanding universities and canal-side developments cannot be missed, and bear testimony to an extraordinary energy.

But if the 21st century has been kind to many cities, it has been much less so to many towns. While infrastructure projects have been concentrated in the conurbations, there are aging and sometimes shrinking populations in many smaller communities. The high streets that gave many of them a vibrancy are hollowing out, and indicators of health and education point to overlapping problems.

Prospect could not be prouder to partner with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for this special report to take stock of where our towns stand—and how to turn them round.

Coastal communities, such as Blackpool—whose problems were poignantly documented by Sarah O’Connor in a Financial Times piece that won the JRF/Orwell prize—have rightly been under the spotlight. Less attention has been given to those more numerous towns that live within the embrace (or, as they may see it, under the shadow) of a neighbouring giant. Here we address that gap, with the award-winning journalist Jennifer Williams’s passionate and in-depth dispatch from Oldham (p2) taking centre stage, powerfully supported by Joel Goodman’s photography.

Williams goes to foodbanks and night shelters and finds all the hardship that you would expect from Oldham’s grim statistics (which Ian Warren displays on p12). But with open eyes and ears, she also finds a remarkable spirit of solidarity and enterprise. One inspiring local voice she speaks to, Majid Hussain, writes for us on p20, and describes how he marshals armies of volunteers to do extraordinarily ambitious things.

Anand Menon and Matthew Bevington report on JRF-funded research on p18 that shows while Brexit dominates the headlines, people are deeply concerned about the things that build cohesive communities: good jobs, low crime and quality housing; while Mike Hawking from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation distils the lessons for public policy (p19). Ted Howard looks at the practical ways in which places like Cleveland, Ohio and Preston, Lancashire, have been creating a new local-first economics, and pulling themselves up by the bootstraps in the process.

Bill Clinton made great play of the town of his birth when he said “I still believe in a place called Hope.” If downbeat officials and analysts only take the time to listen—really listen—to the people in even the most deprived of English towns, they might just find they can remember how to hope as well.

A TOWN IN NUMBERS

The divide between Oldham and nearby cities and suburbs
IAN WARREN

TRICKLE-UP ECONOMICS

How Preston and Cleveland, Ohio, are bringing it all back home
TED HOWARD

THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

A gulf between the southeast and the rest affects towns and cities alike
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A CROSS-PARTY MISSION

Successive governments have neglected proud communities in Wigan and Mansfield
LISA NANDY MP & BEN BRADLEY MP

TIME FOR A GREAT REBALANCING

My own trip to Oldham showed me what’s needed—serious investment and devolution of power
BEN CHU

THE REAL MEANING OF BREXIT

We’ve been listening to hard-pressed towns. Their biggest frustration is that the people in power didn’t
ANAND MENON & MATT BEVINGTON

HOW TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE

Look beyond Brexit and grapple with voters’ day-to-day-concerns
MIKE HAWKING

COMMUNITY PROBLEMS CALL FOR COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

Treat local citizens as equal partners
MAJID HUSSAIN

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Between silent factories and struggling shops, there’s poverty and even hunger. But there’s also a steadfast community spirit which holds the key to turning this town around.

WORDS BY JENNIFER WILLIAMS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOEL GOODMAN
There's a particular image of Oldham that goes some way towards encapsulating decades of its history, successes and struggles.

In the background stand the long-silent mills, testament to a bountiful, industrious identity reaching back more than 200 years. Terraced houses, built for the thousands of people originally working in those mills and, later, for the engineering giants that flourished here during and after the Second World War, curve into the middle distance.

Yet what's missing from the picture is just as significant. Gone from the frame is the pocket of Oldham's library, police station, youth centre and social services department, including a day centre for the elderly. All of these have shut since the introduction of austerity, within a few years and a few yards of each other. Yorkshire Bank closed its local branch in 2017; the post office went late last year.

Not far out of shot, the engineering giant, Avro, once anchored the surrounding community of Chadderton. Home of the Lancaster Bomber and employer to more than 11,000 people, it was eventually subsumed into BAE Systems, before closing in 2012.

The story of Oldham will resonate in many former industrial towns, especially across the north and midlands, that live in the shadow of a neighbouring city. It is the tale of somewhere, and there are many such places, that feels as if it is considered rarely, if at all, by ministers and officials in faraway London. It is a place where a strong identity fights to flourish under layer upon layer of economic bad fortune. Consequently, Oldham's experience can tell us an awful lot about the ferocious currents swirling through our national politics.

But this is not a story about the “left behind,” a phrase that causes eyes to roll when it is uttered here. Those words subtly lay blame with the town itself, suggesting its people were too slow, too short-sighted to keep up with the big boys, be it London or resurgent Manchester next door.

There is much to admire in the Oldham of 2019, and—if you look for it—a great deal of hope. While admitting that times feel tough and power out of reach, people stress in the same breath that their tale is also one of pride and generosity, of hope, resilience, imagination and solutions. It's just that, at times, it can feel like an uphill struggle.

THE ORIGINAL POWERHOUSE

In the 19th century, Oldham was one of the Industrial Revolution's engines, the original “northern powerhouse.” That legacy can still be seen today in mills, facades and parks scattered across the borough, from the recently-renovated old town hall, dating back to 1841, to the landscaped gardens of Werneth Park, built by three local merchant families seeking resplendent views down towards Manchester’s Cottonopolis.

There were more looms and Spinning Jennies in Oldham than anywhere else in the empire. The bottom slowly fell out of the old textile industry, but in parallel another employment base had developed in engineering. And the manufacturing plants that came into their own during the war became the social as well as the economic heart of their communities.

“Post-World War Two,” says Jim McMahon, the Labour (Co-op) MP for Oldham West and Royton and former council leader, who grew up just over the border in north Manchester, “engineering firms had innovated along the way and those skills had been retained. Salaries were good and it was a strongly unionised workforce. Avro had a social club, a tennis court.

“All of that was part of people’s identity—they were proud of the thing they’d created, they had a decent pension, they could see themselves moving up in life. There was immigration, but it wasn’t a time of economic strain in the same way, because people had moved from the mills to engineering.”

As Britain’s manufacturing base began to decline in the 1970s and especially the early 1980s, however, Oldham was
hit again. The engineering plants withered just as remorselessly as the mills had, until cotton-spinning stopped altogether here in 1998. But this time the cut-backs and closures of the old factories came with the bitter twist that there was no new industry to ride to the rescue. Simultaneously, higher education was rapidly expanding nationwide and in spades in nearby Manchester, whose universities now include two of the largest in the country. But for a place like Oldham, which has a further education college but no university, the effect was to export many bright young people to the cities, while offering others vocational training—a poor relation in terms of government attention and resources.

“At the height of the industrial revolution,” says Graham Foulkes, vice-chair of the local clinical commissioning group, “there were more millionaires here than any other place in the world. If you look now, we have no industries that employ large numbers of people.” Perhaps not industries. But retail giants like JD Sports have moved in, bringing zero-hours warehousing contracts with them, with none of the social identity, real career opportunities or anchorage once provided by the likes of Avro. Wages here are, according to official labour market statistics, £96 a week behind England’s average. The government’s social mobility commission ranks Oldham as one of the nation’s “cold spots,” places where—by looking across a range of indicators—they judge it unlikely that individuals who have grown up in deprived neighbourhoods will go on and succeed.

England, and the midlands and north in particular, has no shortage of mid-sized towns which once seemed happier and more desirable than the inner cities whose markets they served. Yet today, those towns can feel overshadowed by local metropolises like Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester itself, which have begun bouncing back in the 21st century. And if Oldham is typical of many an English industrial town in its history and geography, it has the full social mix too. It has thriving middle class neighbourhoods, elegant interwar housing in areas like Coppice, in which university-educated, upwardly-mobile second-generation British Pakistani families have increasingly settled, and also the cluster of pretty villages across Saddleworth, on the edge of Yorkshire.
It also has neighbourhoods where working class homes were thrown up fast for workers of the once-burgeoning mills. “The mills needed large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers to come to Oldham and the housing stock reflected the sudden increase in high numbers of people,” says Foulkes, referring to rows of high-density terraces built in the early 20th century, many of which were later lived in by workers from Pakistan and Bangladesh, ushered in to staff the mills particularly during the 1950s and 1960s.

“By today’s standards, it wouldn’t get planning permission. But you still have many, many people living in poor housing, overcrowded. Poor housing stock, poor health.”

He traces the borough’s extreme health inequalities back to that. “In Oldham you have some of the biggest differences in life expectancy, more than 11 years between the wealthiest parts of the borough and the poorest. That disparity is one of the widest in the country.”

Remarkably, three of the 20 worst wards for child poverty nationwide (and there are 9,000-plus in total) are found in the centre of this modestly-sized town. Improving housing here could not be more urgent, and yet when the cuts hit in 2010, the government immediately axed its housing renewal programme for Werneth, the poorest ward of the lot.

The abundance of relatively cheap housing has also led the government to send thousands of asylum seekers to Oldham under its “dispersal” programme, but with no extra money for health or council services. Oldham houses around 800 asylum seekers at present, often people in need of significant support.

Oldham is not alone in this respect. Elsewhere on Manchester’s peripheries, three other industrial towns—Bolton, Wigan and Rochdale—house around 1,000 asylum seekers each. All are areas that have also suffered disproportionate council cuts. Theresa May’s local authority of Windsor and Maidenhead has no asylum seekers. Neither does David Cameron’s back yard of west Oxfordshire.

**NORTHERN EXPOSURE**

As I write, Philipp Hammond is on television, rejecting the UN rapporteur’s scathing report on British poverty. “Look around you, he says. “That’s not what we see in this country.”

A few days before, hundreds of miles away from London, where the chancellor makes his comments, I had been sitting down with three volunteers at Oldham’s central foodbank, tired at the end of a busy shift. Their drop-in next to the Spindles shopping centre is packed full of tins and donated children’s clothing. Thank you cards are pinned up behind the counter. Two thirds of the people using it are in work, but demand has risen year on year with cumulative benefit cuts, and especially since Oldham’s Universal Credit pilot began in 2013.

“I can’t even describe it,” says volunteer Diana Walsh, 53, looking momentarily lost for words, of the new benefit intended to top up low pay as well as provide for the workless. “But we will give it a good go.” Between them Diana and her fellow volunteer Zoey Stansfield, 46, plus manager Lisa Leunig, 52, reel off a catalogue of delays, administrative errors and refusals. “A man came in the other week with a broken foot. He’s got a warehouse job,” says Diana. “You can’t do a warehouse job with a broken foot. They wouldn’t give him housing benefit, so he was just on statutory sick. We often see grown men in tears because they can’t believe they’re here.”

Men cry through a mixture of humiliation, relief, and being overwhelmed, the women agree. Diana tells, appalled, how earlier this year a television crew from Brazil came to film at the centre, sympathising about the levels of poverty.

At the start of the pilot, when some thought there were just “teething problems,” it took two to four months for people to get their payments, says Zoey. “In that time, you had nothing. That’s when a lot of people lose their homes, lose everything, just trying to survive. They go into arrears and then climbing out of arrears is impossible. And it’s not got any better.”

Foulkes, of the local NHS commissioning group, agrees with the volunteers. “I’ve seen it on a personal level in community meetings,” he says, adding that people with mental health problems or struggling with literacy have been driven to the brink of suicide trying to fill in forms.
I’ve seen people drowning in debt and absolute poverty.

Arrears at the borough’s social landlord, First Choice, have risen by nearly £500,000 since Universal Credit came in. “Which is shocking,” says Zoey, “considering we were one of the initial pilot areas. If anything, we should be seeing things getting better, not worse. Half a decade is long enough to show the government it’s not working. But they don’t care.”

In February some men turned up having last worked on Christmas postal and warehousing shifts. The Jobcentre had assessed their income based on their last pay packet, long since gone, and allocated Universal Credit accordingly. “They were coming in with £30 for a month, including housing benefit—£30 to pay your rent, feed yourself and keep warm? In February?”

ANGELS OF MERCY

I meet Peter Russell on a Saturday night in May, at Oldham’s Street Angels outreach project.

Set up by the Dean of Oldham’s CoE parish church, Jean Hurston, the team helps people out on the town over the weekend, as well as the homeless.

Peter, 26, has been helping since they got him off the streets a few weeks ago. “I think there’s just a break in the system,” he says. “With zero-hour contracts, it’s hard for people to keep their home. I was living in my house six years and getting into debt and arrears and becoming homeless, paying them off then going back into them... It was the month’s difference that always set it off, when you lose work and go on to benefits. I feel for people in that situation.”

Peter speaks with quiet anger of the spiral he and others have found themselves in. “It’s trying to keep a rhythm, trying to keep things flowing,” he says of juggling rent with wages. “I’ve worked on the markets, I’ve worked cash in hand doing walls and flagstones, painting, bakeries, I’ve just had to keep a bit of a flow up.”

“While I was homeless, I still had my job over at JD [warehouse]. I was still doing my 12-hour shifts. I struggled to sleep through the day and also do my work. I didn’t really have a great Christmas with the weather.”

It became “harder to hide it for work,” he says of sleeping rough. “Luckily they had showers there but people were realising I was staying back to have a shower when everyone else was rushing off. It became noticeable.”

Peter came of age roughly as the national economy hit rock bottom. He says he has been in his recent situation “a few times—everything ‘coming to crash: family, health, one after the other’.”
after losing work. Street Angels, he says, was “the first place I’d ever asked for help.”
And I could fill this article many times over with stories like his.

At 11.30pm, a man called Jim comes in for a brew and some cake, before wandering back into the night. A couple of hours later, Gemma, the team’s paramedic—who patrols the area to find people who might need help—appears and says she’s found Jim. He’s out of it, drunk.

They’re not sure who to ring. His last house, he mumbled, was in Rochdale, so they call Rochdale council’s out-of-hours housing department. Rochdale say he is from Oldham. Oldham council’s team say they can help in the morning, but he will need to phone them then.

He doesn’t have any money or a mobile. He’s 69. At 2.45am, we sit looking at him asleep in a chair. “Look at that face, how much character there is in it,” says Jean, quietly. “A life well lived.” As they prepare to take him to A&E in a taxi, they have put £2.50 in his pocket with a note asking him to ring the council the following day. They know full well the hospital will quickly realise there’s nothing wrong with him, but at least it’s warm there.

It is ironic that even when this team has an NHS-funded paramedic, intended to relieve pressure on the hospital by bandaging people up when they’re out on the town, there’s still nowhere for Jim to go: so they end up having to send him to A&E anyway.

I’m left feeling angry and guilty. When they go back to A&E the next day, Jim has gone.

If Oldham is to thrive in the 21st century, if people like Peter are to get out of the trap, it will have to adapt its economy. Local leaders know this.

Alun Francis, principal of Oldham College, says towns like his—places that don’t have the benefit of a university in the “knowledge economy”—tend to be “forgotten.” More generally, he admits, former industrial towns on Manchester’s northern fringes, from Ashton to Wigan to Oldham itself, have not benefited from its growth in the way the more degree-educated areas to the south have done. Greater Manchester has, many people here acknowledge, its own north-south divide.

That has been a source of political tension for some time, with council
leaders in outlying areas pushing for more focus away from Manchester. But Francis still believes the town can only move forward as part of Greater Manchester. “It can sometimes feel a bit like we are in extra time, 3-2 down and need to score two goals in injury time to turn things around,” he says of the conurbation’s attempts to punch its economic weight against London. “The teams who succeed in those circumstances are the ones who stick together, keep to their plan, and work very hard. And even if you sometimes lose, you get up and start again the next day.”

Greater Manchester’s approach, despite tensions, has been one based on collaboration. Its combined authority, with Oldham’s council leader Sean Fielding leading on skills, approved a £9m grant to the college to expand its construction courses. Oldham’s growth sectors are—and need to be—construction, health and social care, digital and business, says Francis, so the college is trying to skill up the next generation accordingly. Ask him about businesses in the town and he quickly points excitedly to a raft of firms which have been quietly innovating.

One of them, Ultimate Products, started as two men—Barry Franks and Simon Showman—selling suitcases on Oldham market in 1997. It now has a turnover of more than £100m. The converted mill housing its world headquarters is an Aladdin’s Cave of household goods you would never know were distributed from, or developed, branded, even designed in Oldham: Russell Hobbs kettles, Salter kitchenware.

Marketing director Craig Holdham admits they could have long ago moved to a distribution hub somewhere on the side of the M6, but chose not to. “Oldham is a fundamental part of our history,” he says, adding that their conversion of two local mills into their offices has been a labour of love. It is labour that has created good jobs in the town as well.

But when they started trying to recruit people to their graduate scheme, they quickly noticed a problem: “We found early on that we were getting a lot of people applying that were from outside of Oldham.”

The firm didn’t just want graduates coming across from Liverpool or Manchester, he says, or even Stockport—it wanted young people born and bred in the town, attracted back following their degrees. “So we put a lot of emphasis on trying to redress that. When we started, we had eight people in OL postcodes” applying, but “now we have 80.” The firm now goes into universities to explain to students—and, indeed, to the universities themselves—that graduates “don’t have to go to the bright lights of London or Manchester.”

It has also joined up with Oldham College to start an “academy”: training people at 18 to have the confidence to work for them. That doesn’t just mean in warehousing, he says, but in higher-skilled supply chain jobs, digital, design. “They might not have all the skills or experience,” he says, “but we feel they have got the talent. We want to harness it.”

Down the road in Glodwick, social entrepreneur Majid Hussain is also positive. In fact, the man behind the Ghazali Trust project is relentlessly positive. “Some things have become Manchester-centric,” he admits of the way the region’s economy has developed. “Not by intent, but by the sheer nature of Manchester. But we are reaching for the sky. Manchester is Manchester and Oldham is going to shine.”

He says it is his “responsibility” to contribute, particularly in the wake of cuts, which have seen Oldham lose £337 per head in council spending since 2010. Meanwhile, according to Centre for Cities analysis this year, Oxford has by contrast gained £115 per head.

The Ghazali Trust was established in the aftermath of the Oldham riots in 2001, when tensions between British Asian and white youths erupted in Glodwick. “People don’t wake up in the morning and think ‘I’m going to start launching bricks at cops and causing chaos,’” he says. “We thought: ‘There’s something behind this.’ That’s when we decided we can’t wait for someone to come and sort this out. We have to start talking to people.”

That was the start of what is now 18 years of community engagement. He gives one recent example that has coincided with a gradual rise of low-level crime as policing and youth services have been depleted. “On Bonfire Night, you get youths throwing fireworks at 999 services,” he says.

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“Last year, we took responsibility [for] managing that with police, council and fire services. We got 50 volunteers to manage those few days.” The community essentially grouped together to keep an eye on potential anti-social behaviour, talking to the kids and monitoring for any flashpoints. It worked. “In 2017, Oldham was one of the worst in Greater Manchester for violence around...
fireworks night. This year in Gledwick, there were zero incidents, down from 40-odd the year before.”

Two years ago, the charity bought the old leisure centre that the council was shutting down as it sought to save cash by merging facilities. That story of “rationalisation” is common enough in towns like Oldham, but the trust has set about turning the building into something distinctive.

As we stand at the building site, Majid points to where each thing will be. Here will be a dementia-friendly café. There, a community orchard. Here, a space where lads can come in to do wrestling. There, GCSE catch-up courses, Here, a gym. Some will be revenue generating, to cover wages; much of it will be run by volunteers. If you set a smart and idealistic school student an assignment to design a facility that could help fix Oldham’s problems, you can well imagine they might dream up something exactly like this.

Its £250,000 build cost has been funded by local donation: some from the council, some from the waste processing firm Viridor, some from the police and some from Sport England. It will have taken vision, energy and enterprise to convince all these outfits and bureaucracies to dig deep. But it is the £80,000 raised from a charity dinner in the local community that stands out. “We said to the community: if you really care, what are you going to sacrifice?” says Majid. “And this guy comes up to the stage with his car key. How much do you think it was worth? £21k. And he wasn’t rich, he was a small business owner.”

Majid sits on an array of Oldham’s public bodies, so he knows the effects of the cuts full well. “Oldham disproportionately has taken a bigger hit than a lot of other places,” he says. “But in a place that’s on the wrong end of most statistics, for the people in these communities to really take the bull by the horns and say ‘we are going to turn our fortunes around’ is commendable.”

The overlapping and self-reinforcing effects of all the recent cuts to benefits and services here have come on top of long decades in which Oldham’s economy has been subjected to the chill winds of international trade, with little that could be called an industrial strategy to help it compete. Closing factories have long threatened the town’s sense of identity, and now—as shoppers have moved online or jumped on the tram to Manchester—multiple closures on the high street are again straining this place’s sense of itself.

Control has never felt further away. “We feel ignored, irrelevant to the government and the country,” says foodbank volunteer Diana, as she mulls over how the town she loves has changed during her own lifetime. Bob Kerslake’s review of the divides in this country for the UK 2070 commission published in May, was intended to look back 50 years at regional inequality in this country, as well as forward another half-century. It describes how that guttural frustration came about in communities like this. Comprehensively, the former head of the home civil service picks apart decades of what he calls an “unstated” bias within government towards London which consistently “countervails” occasional rhetoric about rebalancing. The result is gaps between the southeast and everywhere else in skills, life expectancy and earnings.
Expectations need to be lifted, he says. “Unless we create more centres of decision-making and investment across the country, we will constantly face the sorts of experiences that you’ve got in places like Oldham, that are seen as, if you like, remote and easily used as guinea pigs, places that are left to their own devices and not supported.” What’s needed is a “plan for England” with proper devolution, beefed up local governance and a major programme of infrastructure all now essential.

Even Manchester, next door, has been “going up a down escalator,” he says, swimming against the tide. At some point, he believes, there will have to be a “break in the clouds”; if nothing else, London and the southeast cannot continue to hoard such a disproportionate chunk of jobs and growth.

Bolton-born Ian Warren, of the Centre for Towns think tank, agrees there must be a proper debate about “who holds power,” rather than decisions being “reached in rooms in Whitehall with little or no knowledge of the needs of a place like Oldham.” Local voters are “not wrong,” he says, “when they choose to express their dissatisfaction with an economic and political settlement which appears to prioritise putting the jobs of the future somewhere else.”

“The good news is always the people within these towns themselves,” he adds. “They are our best chance to turn around towns like Oldham.”

LOOKING AFTER ITS OWN

Even without the necessary power to determine its own future, Oldham has proved its mettle time and again. All three of the women at the foodbank speak with emotion about the support they get every single day, especially from people who have the least.

“Even though we’re classed as a deprived area, the generosity and kindness of people is amazing,” says Zoey. “We have a lad, Ibrahim, who is 13. He’s on Twitter and he retweets things and donates… every time he gets so many likes. For his last birthday he had no presents and gave everything to charities. I always think teenage boys are much maligned in the mainstream media, but he is my shining light.”

Jean, at the Street Angels project, does not begrudge the role she and her volunteers undoubtedly play in filling the gaps left by a retreating state. “There are people who will say we shouldn’t be doing it, we’re propping up failing services,” she says. “But actually, I think we should be doing it, because we should practise what we preach.” So does Majid Hussain: he sees it as his duty. Acknowledging that Oldham’s 2001 riots continue to be exploited by hard-right politicians—in recent weeks by Nigel Farage, but also Tommy Robinson—he insists Oldham is not defined by that, noting they’ve not yet got very far.

“Look, the fact we’ve never had a BNP councillor here says it all,” he says. “Poverty and deprivation affect people of all backgrounds. Oldham, because it gets branded, doesn’t get the opportunity to shine when it does awesome stuff. I think there’s going to come a day when the good stuff we are doing in Oldham is going to make us a leading light.”

Or, in the words of Peter Russell, as he spends his Saturday night helping other men back on their feet: “Don’t get me wrong though, Oldham’s a lovely town. They look after their own.”
A TOWN IN NUMBERS
There are huge divides between our towns, cities and regions
IAN WARREN, CO-FOUNDER, CENTRE FOR TOWNS

Oldham’s story is not unique. At the Centre For Towns, we see huge disparities between towns and cities, some of which are captured in the numbers shown. Oldham’s story is utterly different to a leafy Mancunian suburb like Altrincham just 10 miles away, but equally different to the city of Manchester’s own recent history. Similar gaps are repeated within regions, just as much as between them, across the length and breadth of the UK.

The truth is that, while the north-south divide is certainly important, it is a pretty crude way of looking at the British map of opportunity and deprivation. Towns like Oldham have seen industrial decline and many of the old jobs go, but without the subsequent changes in employment patterns which our cities eventually benefitted from. Our towns have struggled to adapt to the new economy. They have, for one thing, only low proportions of citizens with advanced qualifications. And lacking the benefits of agglomeration which apply in a big city such as Manchester, Oldham has, like many other post-industrial towns, fewer of the jobs that young people yearn for.

Little surprise that many see their future away from Oldham. Our towns are aging rapidly, meaning they have fewer people of working-age with the income to sustain a thriving high street. Older people in towns like Oldham have less disposable income and little of the equity tied up in bricks and mortar that we see—for example—in Altrincham down the road. Banks, post offices and major retailers make market decisions to remove themselves from such places, further eroding their vitality.

It is not only a spirit of optimism, but also pro-active public policy that will be required to arrest the spiral.

MANUFACTURING JOBS
Factories had further to fall in Oldham than the big cities

QUALIFICATIONS
The graduate (defined as level 4 or above) share of the population is only around half the national average

SOURCES: CENTRE FOR TOWNS ANALYSIS, CENSUS FOR 1981-2011, 2011 CENSUS, HOUSE PRICE INDICES, ONS ESTIMATES AT MSOA, POST OFFICE, BANK CLOSURE LISTS
Manufacturing jobs
Factories had further to fall in Oldham than the big cities

Oldham, 1981
43% of all jobs
12% of all jobs
6% of all jobs

Manchester, 1981
27% of all jobs

Qualifications
The graduate (defined as level 4 or above) share of the population is only around half the national average

Average house prices
Leafier parts of Manchester have left Oldham on the floor

Average disposable income
Families in Oldham have less to spend than those across the UK as a whole

Census of services
Could shuttered services spell financial exclusion?

5 Post Offices closed in Oldham*

6 Banks closed in Oldham

17 ATMs lost across Oldham

*Two folded in to nearby newsagents

(per household, measured after housing costs, and adjusted for family size; 2016/17 data)
TRICKLE-UP ECONOMICS
How Cleveland, Ohio, and Preston, Lancashire, are bringing it all back home

TED HOWARD, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, THE DEMOCRACY COLLABORATIVE

Just occasionally, something exceptional emerges from a town or city in crisis. New ideas are deployed to meet the challenges. Communities like Cleveland in the US and Preston in England were left in freefall by the collapse of traditional industry and the failure of trickle-down economics. Thanks to local efforts, what emerged from the chaos was a new model—one I call “community wealth building.”

The idea is to grow the economy from the bottom up. You make better use of local assets—like the purchasing power of non-profit and public institutions—to create opportunities for local businesses. You reverse extractive patterns of outsourcing and disinvestment. The end result is the revival of once struggling towns and cities. Importantly, the evidence shows that this is more than a theory—a recent PwC study named Preston, one of the most distressed communities just a few short years ago, as the most improved city in the UK.

Community wealth building is not merely a way to smooth over the rough edges of an ultimately sound economic system. It is the kernel of a comprehensive new approach, which is why Marjorie Kelly and I called our forthcoming book The Making of a Democratic Economy. The redirection of spending by local public institutions has grabbed most attention, but it is part of a broader toolbox which is still being furnished. Ultimately, community wealth building is a set of principles—democratised ownership, local investment, and so on—that allow us to intervene in practical ways to create a new economic model, with “the local” at its core.

There is no shortage of examples of this method being put to use. Consider, for instance, the Evergreen cooperatives in Cleveland. This network of businesses, owned by local workers, was one of the first comprehensive models built around the procurement streams of local hospitals and universities. With a wealth of experience, Evergreen is well placed to support individual cooperatives. Now the network is advancing further, taking on responsibility for the laundry service at the Cleveland Clinic care centre. Work that was previously done by a multinational, outsourcing firm will be taken on by locally-owned businesses. In return, the clinic will invest in key upgrades at Evergreen’s new facility, advancing local prosperity and shoring up a more reliable supply chain. Perhaps most importantly, Evergreen is launching an ambitious new fund, which will help convert other local businesses to employee ownership, retaining jobs and wealth in the economy.

In the UK, Preston, for its part, has focused on public ownership as a key strategy—for instance with its award-winning new public market, built to provide an area for small enterprises and revitalise civic space. Especially noteworthy is the use of public resources for the common good: local pension funds to drive investment in urban development, and a planned public financial institution to help accelerate progress across the city. Similar creativity can be found in many other UK towns, which have begun to share best practice in partnership with organisations like the Centre for Local Economic Strategies, the Local Trust, and Power to Change.

Local efforts work best when they are not operating in total isolation. In the US, we have a healthcare network that brings together over 40 health bodies, collectively employing more than one million people. We are building a national web to ensure healthcare is at the heart of new community projects. Of particular interest is the way many of the bodies—each composed of numerous hospitals, some spanning multiple states—are beginning to use system-level resources, like their reserve funds, to drive investment in policies that will improve health: for example, the building of affordable housing. In the UK, similar momentum is building within the NHS, which recently affirmed a commitment to the principles of community wealth building. And as well as being supported by wider intervention, local reforms in places like Cleveland and Oldham can foster that wider change—by pointing the way towards a broader vision.

“A RECENT STUDY NAMED PRESTON AS THE MOST IMPROVED CITY IN THE UK”

Large scale policy is needed—and it is being developed. Wales’ Foundational Economy programme includes a fund to help local economies find a new approach. The Scottish government is supporting the development of community schemes in Glasgow and other cities. On both sides of the Atlantic, there are proposals to ramp up the share of the economy in local, democratic ownership through “inclusive ownership funds.”

Calls for public ownership in key industries—such as presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren’s call for the public manufacture of vital pharmaceuticals—are also accelerating in both the US and UK. An increasingly sophisticated discussion of “democratic public ownership” is taking place in a Labour consultation process under Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell. It points the way towards a new role for the state, which departs from the top-down, postwar nationalised corporation, and connects back to the local democratic renewal we see afoot in cities like Preston, Bristol, and Birmingham.

For community wealth building to live up to its promise, we must see it not just as a promising local practice that can make immediate improvements in the economic fortunes of our towns and cities, but as part of a wider transformation. The doctrines that emanated from Thatcher and Reagan in the 1980s swept much of the world. Forty years later, the UK and US can again lead—this time driving the creation of a truly local, truly democratic economy.
DON’T FORGET THE REGIONAL DIMENSION

My commission saw alarming disparity between the southeast and the rest, affecting towns and cities alike

BOB KERSLAKE, FORMER HEAD OF THE CIVIL SERVICE AND CHAIR, UK2070 COMMISSION

Much has been said and written since the EU referendum on under-served places in Britain and the predicament of many of England’s towns.

There is good reason for this. Economically, many of these places have fared badly over some decades, particularly outside of the southeast. This economic decline has been accompanied by reduced opportunity for those who live there and, in some instances, by deep rooted social issues. A symbol of all this in recent years has been the rapid and visible deterioration of town centres, with a rise in the number of charity shops or vacant buildings.

Coastal towns such as Grimsby and Blackpool have fared especially badly as their traditional businesses have faced rapid change. There has been a spirited fightback by local leaders who have made a difference, despite the limited resources available to them.

But in May of this year the UK2070 Commission, of which I am chair, published its first report into regional inequality. It found that the UK is the most unequal large country in the developed world in this respect. To turn this around will require concerted effort over a long period of time.

For anyone familiar with England’s towns, the challenges they face has been evident for some time. The surprising thing has been how long it has taken some national politicians to wake up to them.

What has brought the issue to a head, of course, is that in many of these towns, large majorities voted for Brexit. This in turn led the main political parties to look more closely at the voting intentions of those living there—and how they might impact on their own political fortunes.

This renewed focus should be welcomed by anyone who has watched the decline and wanted to do something about it. However, there are real risks in the narrow way in which the arguments are being made that could endanger the very thing that people are seeking to achieve.

First, while much can be done in the individual towns themselves—and I have seen this for myself in the excellent Greater Grimsby development initiative—the economies of towns do not sit in isolation. They form part of—and critically depend on—the success of the wider economy of their surrounding areas. So towns do need their own plans to improve education and skills, attract new investment, and renew their centres. More government support is certainly required through regeneration and investment initiatives such as “Town Deals.” But good connections to much stronger regional economies will also be vital.

Second, we must avoid the temptation to see this debate as “towns vs cities.” There have been some undoubted successes in revitalising our major regional cities. Anyone who has seen the new developments in the centres of Birmingham and Manchester, for example, will testify to that. It is therefore not surprising that the contrast is made with the condition of many of our town centres.

However, you don’t have to go that far out of central Birmingham and Manchester to see areas of great deprivation. In reality, the economic gap between our towns and cities is less than in many other European countries.

Cities do have the potential to play a powerful role in driving economic growth for their regions. But an Economic and Social Research Council-supported study has shown that those outside London and the southeast have at best kept up with economic growth when compared to the national average. They are still some way short of their full potential.

This brings me to my third and perhaps most important point. The real issue that we need to focus on is the economic gap between different regions. Our report findings drove this home. Just look at the problem in the UK relative to elsewhere. In a comparison of 30 countries across a range of 28 indicators, done for the commission by Philip McCann of Sheffield University, the UK comes 28th. This inequality is bad enough, but the report finds that the gap has widened and will continue to widen in the future unless we do something about it.

So what must be done? The 2070 report calls for much greater devolution to the regions, a proper plan to guide investment to where it is needed, a focus on new economic opportunities, and a renewal fund of £250bn to be invested in rebalancing over a period of 25 years. These are ambitious proposals but nothing less is likely to reverse the trend. This is as much in the interest of citizens in London and the southeast, who will face increasing housing costs, longer travel times to work and environmental degradation unless this imbalance is tackled.

Investment in our towns is certainly required. But this will not be enough unless we also have strongly performing cities and regional rebalancing to match. Then, and only then, will all areas of the UK be in a position to reach their full potential.
THE REVIVAL OF BRITISH TOWNS SHOULD BE A CROSS-PARTY MISSION

Successful governments have neglected proud communities in Wigan and Mansfield

LISA NANDY, LABOUR MP FOR WIGAN
BEN BRADLEY, CONSERVATIVE MP FOR MANSFIELD

British towns face myriad challenges and we need a national agenda to overcome them. We represent different parties, and will disagree on much of what a vision for a prosperous Britain would look like. But our constituencies of Mansfield and Wigan face a common struggle, and so far it has not been met with effective solutions.

Successive governments have failed to revive the jobs, high streets and public services to ensure our communities thrive. It has led to a politics of turbulence as the voiceless find a voice. We must listen—and secure a bright future for our constituents.

A thriving community with everything it needs to support its citizens would have little trouble retaining a young workforce. But our towns are aging. In recent decades, as industrial jobs have been lost and investment and opportunities concentrated in cities, young people have left the communities they grew up in and often will never return. Towns like ours have lost much of their working age population and consequently pubs, banks, bus services and high street shops.

We face an acute loneliness challenge as a result of our older populations. The inability to find a cross-party consensus on social care is felt here first and foremost.

Centre for Towns research demonstrates the extent of the challenge. Wigan’s overall population declined by 2.4 per cent between 1981 and 2011; with a 21.5 per cent decline in 16-24 year-olds but an increase of 20.5 per cent in over-65s. Mansfield’s population grew over the same period, but while the over-65 population grew by 30.3 per cent, the number of 16-24’s fell by 14.4 per cent.

The roots of this challenging trend go back much further than 2010 and span both Labour and Conservative governments. Funding for services is a big part of it, but there’s more needed than just money. We need better, well paid jobs so that people have the disposable income to invest in our towns, which have declined drastically in the last few decades. From the post office to the pub, these institutions are part of the social fabric. Their loss is felt very deeply. Those who do have the cash often go elsewhere. If we are to make our towns into vibrant social hubs again we have to encourage a new diversity on the high street, offering experiences as well as shops and incentivising the businesses and services that you just can’t get online.

Decision-making has been heavily concentrated in cities over successive governments. The promised trickle-out effects of city growth haven’t materialised. We need investment in infrastructure—transport, digital and skills. For so many businesses now there’s no practical reason to be based in a city centre, work can be done remotely, but we somehow haven’t yet provided the package to suit them and draw them to towns like ours.

Skills in particular should be a top priority. Relatively few from towns like these go to university and those that do tend not to come back. Further education is the poor relation in our education system, but it’s the path into work for our young people. With improved funding and a plan to raise the esteem of vocational qualifications and work-based learning, our colleges would be considerably better equipped.

Towns have huge assets. Wigan is well-located, with a legacy of engineering skills from our mining days, low rents and a loyal, willing workforce—that is how we have attracted and retained food manufacturing companies like Heinz. Mansfield is the historic centre of the legendary Sherwood Forest and surrounded by tourist attractions, with good connections to the nearby M1. It has a beautiful town centre full of listed properties and is one of the cheapest places around to buy a home.

With the right investment and the ability to decide how it’s spent, both towns could benefit from so much more, build so much more. There is a sense of frustration that these issues aren’t properly debated or understood in Westminster.

Despite this, in both Wigan and Mansfield, there is a huge amount of pride about the role we played in the last century through industry. Nobody imagines we can simply reopen the factories or mines, but they do want jobs that allow young people to stay in the area, earn money and make a contribution to the community they love.

Our towns are rightly proud of their history. It’s time the voices of Wigan and Mansfield are heard.
TIME FOR A GREAT REBALANCING

My own trip to Oldham showed me what’s needed—serious investment and devolution of power

BEN CHU, ECONOMICS EDITOR, NEWSNIGHT

It wasn’t for nothing that when I was sent by BBC’s Newsnight to investigate Britain’s yawning regional inequalities, I pitched up, one chilly spring evening, at the Premier Inn on Oldham Broadway. In 2015 Oldham was identified as the most deprived town in England by the Office for National Statistics. When you throw gauges of well-being such as income, health, skills and housing into a statistical cauldron and stir it around, the place that, apparently, comes out the lowest is this former global textiles superpower in the northwest. For a film about the “two nations” of modern Britain—the prosperous and the not-so-prosperous—Oldham, sadly, was a natural place to illustrate the latter.

Jennifer Williams’s report on the town (p2) resonates with what we learned. There was an uncomfortable sense among locals that improved transport connections—through the Metrolink tram—to the flourishing city of Manchester has merely made it easier for Oldham residents to get out of their own town to work, shop and play. “Lots of people are on these trams but they’re not getting off until Manchester,” David Whaley, the last editor of the Oldham Chronicle lamented (the print edition shut in 2017 after 160 years of publication).

But in interview after interview we also found the same quiet, but defiant, sense of local civic pride, despite the adversity, that Williams also identified. Around a sixth of the metropolitan borough’s 250,000 population is Asian. Unskilled Pakistani and Bangladeshi labourers arrived to work in the town’s textile mills in the 1950s and 1960s, encouraged to come by British ministers to fill gaps in the labour market. Then, in one of the nasty ironies of globalisation, they lost those jobs as textile production shut down in the UK and shifted to the lower-cost developing world in the 1970s and 1980s.

That might have been a recipe for alienation and anger among those affected. And it would be vain to deny that those emotions exist as times become harder. But what’s interesting is that one finds just as much local devotion from Oldham’s Asians as one does from the white community. “I’m proud to be from Oldham—proud of the history, the people,” Rabina Kauser, who works for the Aksa Housing Association, told me on an earlier visit to the town.

Yet the fact remains that Oldham is a troubling case study for economists and policymakers—one which underlines just how strenuous it will be to achieve a rebalancing, to pull such places back into the caravan of rising national prosperity.

The hope has been that encouraging the growth of big cities like Manchester, Birmingham and Newcastle will benefit depressed outlying towns, that the growth will “trickle out.” That just doesn’t seem to have happened for Oldham, despite being less than nine miles from booming Manchester. Complaints about the impact of the local tram connection suggest proximity has been a mixed blessing.

“HOWEVER BLEAK THINGS MIGHT LOOK FROM ON HIGH, THERE’S MUCH TO WORK ON DOWN ON THE GROUND IN PLACES LIKE OLDHAM”

Or, at least the “trickle out” phenomenon has not happened yet. Perhaps it’s a matter of time. It took decades for Oldham to become the textiles powerhouse of the 19th century. It took decades for that progress to reverse. Why would we assume that prosperity could be restored overnight?

The conviction of locals—and local experts—is that it will take major long-term national investment and genuine devolution of decision-making power to people who have the on-the-ground knowledge to use it most effectively, whether on skills, housing, health or transport infrastructure. And that’s probably the best bet for towns not just like Oldham, but others close to the top of the ONS deprivation league table such as Walsall, Birkenhead and Middlesbrough.

One of Theresa May’s last attempts to do something to extinguish her “burning injustices,” famously mentioned in the inaugural speech outside No 10, was a £1.6bn Stronger Towns Fund. But, sadly, this turned out to be a demonstration of why the government’s regional development policy has failed: this was an under-funded, last-minute, sticking plaster-style solution cooked up by ministers and civil servants in distant Whitehall, all while they stumbled around in the Brexit quagmire.

As we left Oldham it had turned into a bright, though somewhat hazy, day so we stopped on Copster Hill to take some shots of the view down to the towers and cranes of the Manchester skyline. A red brick tower drew our eye down to an old mill just below us. We decided to descend and get some close-up shots of what we assumed would be a grim, albeit telegenic, symbol of Oldham’s neglect and hopelessness.

But as we got closer we realised the 1905 Heron Mill had actually been converted into a gleaming new distribution centre for Ultimate Products, the local, graduate-training, consumer goods firm that Williams also writes about. A lesson then. However bleak things look from on high, there’s much to work on down on the ground in places like Oldham.
THE REAL MEANING OF BREXIT

We listened to hard-pressed towns—their biggest frustration is that those in power do not create jobs and wealth. As we often heard, and as one man in Newport put it, “we’ve got to look back at the basics of society.”

So while Westminster contorts over extra runways at Heathrow and high-speed train lines to London, it risks missing the bigger picture: many, perhaps most, poorer areas lack even the simple provisions that would allow them to succeed. Better maintained public spaces or an education system allowing them to succeed. Better maintained public spaces or an education system tailored to the local economy were among the ideas our participants came up with. And rather than rule from on high, our research made one thing absolutely clear: local people know better than Westminster the challenges facing their areas—and they also know better their strengths and assets. What’s required is not just change in policy, but change in approach to deciding policy. Given the strength of feeling, it’s not surprising that almost everyone felt disillusioned by the inaction of central and local government, and also of local service providers. As one woman in Newport put it, “you’ve got… drug dealers coming in and dealing drugs outside your place. You phone the police, nothing gets done.” But at the same time, there is a recognition that local councils often don’t have the resources to address these issues. There is, strikingly, a widespread austerity mentality. Almost everywhere we went, but particularly outside the southeast, participants had internalised the idea that resources were scarce, if not completely absent. “There’s no money available,” as one man in Worksop summarised.

All of which contributes to a pervasive sense of pessimism about the state of the country. Brexit has confirmed low-income voters’ worst fears about politicians. They see a litany of issues that need addressing in their local areas, and yet they sense there are no resources or political will to do anything about them. And their personal financial situations remain precarious. As one man in Glasgow said, “When they created this minimum wage, I don’t think it was a minimum wage they created, it was a maximum wage.” Even basic expectations of having a job that pays enough to live off are not being met. All too often, it isn’t possible to live well, especially in households with children, despite working.

As departure from Europe sucks the life out of our politics, it risks spiralling into a wider crisis. Yes, the relationship with the EU is important. But there are no end of domestic policy issues that a functioning government could begin to address regardless. Brexit cannot just mean Brexit. It’s about far more than that.

The 2016 vote was, above all else, about demanding change. It has divided the country like nothing else, but the burning desire to rebuild our communities is something that can unite all sides.
HOW TO BRIDGE THE DIVIDE
To rebalance Britain, look beyond Brexit and grapple with voters’ day-to-day concerns

MIKE HAWKING, POLICY AND PARTNERSHIPS MANAGER (WORK), JRF

It is simply not acceptable that there are parts of the UK that have been locked out of opportunity for so long. The lack of vibrancy in some towns and cities contributed to the vote to leave the EU, with many citizens just wanting to see a change, any change, that might help to improve the prospects in their local area.

In the workshops we held with The UK in a Changing Europe—expertly outlined on the previous page—we detected a real sense of frustration from low-income voters with the dominance of London and the surrounding area in our economic and political life. This wasn’t a view expressed just in the north either; voters in Southampton and Hastings identified the same problem.

Those seeking to lead our country need to sit up and listen. Low-income voters form an increasingly significant part of the electorate. Not only are they turning out in greater numbers, but new research by Matthew Goodwin for JRF shows this is the group most likely to switch parties.

We heard differences of view between participants from larger cities and those from smaller towns, and over Brexit and its likely impact on the local economy. But while Brexit is important, for most participants the need for government action on living standards drives their voting choices. The party that develops a policy agenda that responds to these concerns could reap real electoral rewards.

But what could that agenda look like? A common vision emerged from those we heard from, one which bridged the divide. The workshops were split evenly between Leave and Remain voters and when speaking about issues beyond Brexit there was real consensus about the challenges facing their local areas. They wanted to see prosperity unlocked across the country to rebalance the economy, make sure work pays, and ensure people have the skills to make the most of opportunities in their area.

“THIS IS THE PERFECT MOMENT TO FIND COMMON GROUND”

With all political parties talking about loosening the purse strings, giving people and places the tools to thrive is essential. An immediate step the government could take is to get on and deliver the promised UK Shared Prosperity Fund to reduce inequalities between communities. This should target regions where pay and employment are lowest and at least match the £2.4bn a year that currently flows from the EU Structural Funds it will replace.

But action cannot stop there; much greater ambition is needed if we are to spread opportunity outside London and its orbit. The UK 2070 Commission recently called for a national “Renewal Fund,” £10bn per year investment above and beyond existing spending commitments, for the next 25 years. But this can’t be about choosing between towns and cities—their fortunes are interconnected. What matters is giving places the power to prosper.

Toil and trouble
Crunching the labour market numbers reveals the northwest is disadvantaged relative to the rest of the country on every score, and that likewise, within the northwest, Oldham is disadvantaged on every measure.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Great Britain</th>
<th>Northwest</th>
<th>Oldham</th>
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<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic inactivity</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Children in workless homes</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hourly earnings*</td>
<td>£14</td>
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*MEDIAN
SOURCE: JRF ANALYSIS OF ANNUAL SURVEY OF HOURS AND EARNINGS, AND THE ANNUAL POPULATION SURVEY

The low-income voters we heard from wanted to see action on the minimum wage to ensure it covers the ever-increasing cost of living—currently being discussed by Labour and the Conservatives—but they also raised concerns about job insecurity too. Stronger local public transport systems and more generous childcare offerings, especially for people with younger children, were interventions that people thought could really help.

Among those we met, the provision of high quality apprenticeships and support for adults to retrain were recurrent themes. However, the changes made to the apprenticeships system in 2017 have resulted in a worrying decline in uptake among lower skilled people, and significant cuts to adult skills budgets in recent years have coincided with plummeting participation in adult training. The recent Augar Review suggested ways that the system could be improved, with more funding, simpler access, and more financial support for those on low incomes, while driving up the quality of non-degree qualifications. Political parties should embrace these recommendations.

At a time when the country is so profoundly divided over Brexit, this is the perfect moment to find common ground and push forward with an agenda that can unite people. Too much emphasis has been placed on how to appeal to Leave or Remain voters as separate groups, and far too little on how to bridge that divide. Participants in our focus groups told us what the priorities should be: improving living standards and restoring pride to towns and cities which for too long have been overlooked.
COMMUNITY PROBLEMS CALL FOR COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS

To transform somewhere like Oldham, treat local citizens as equal partners

MAJID HUSSAIN, CHAIRMAN, CLINICAL COMMISSIONING GROUP OLDHAM

Born here, raised here, and having remained here, it is easier for me than it would be for an “outsider” to spot the hope and community spirit which are still abundant in Oldham. By tapping into that spirit together, we are beginning to turn things around. But you can’t harness hope if you simply fail to detect it is there.

The grim way in which some read our town is not surprising. We are at the wrong end of most of the national economic statistics, and we have certainly faced more than our share of austerity. There is no getting away from the fact that the consequences can be brutal. Confronted with real hardship and deprivation, it can be tempting to presume that local spirits must have been crushed. But if you’ve lived, worked and been to school in a community, you know its people better: their mutual regard for one another, and all the dreams that refuse to die.

Grasp that, and you begin to flip the conversation. You start to consider all those resources that you’ve still got, instead of only those things that have been taken away by forces beyond your control. And with imagination, all those resources—buildings, places and above all people—can make an enormous difference. You’ve got to manage them properly, focussing on the most pressing local needs. But who is best placed to gauge that? Well, the local community itself of course.

In her accompanying essay, Jennifer Williams describes how—through the Ghazali Trust—we have come together and acquired a closed down leisure centre (Clemency House); she also explains how residents have worked with local police officers to make the streets safer. This is only the start. Some of the 200 volunteers involved with the transformation of Clemency House are now going out beyond Oldham, and doing things for people elsewhere, for example helping communities affected by floods as far afield as Hebden Bridge. With the history of the 2001 disturbances, we sometimes get written off as a hopelessly segregated town. The truth couldn’t be further away from that.

Today we have Muslim community groups providing foodbanks in a church, mosques working with charities feeding the homeless, churches providing advice, shelter and foodbanks for asylum seekers, and the list goes on.

The state of the streets affects the mood of every one of us, and so we in the community are sorting it out. Through Clean Glodwick the physical appearance of the place has been transformed. A volunteer on each street is enlisted, and they clean their own house—front and back—and do what they can to encourage their neighbours to do the same. Help is recruited for neighbours too elderly or disabled to get stuck in directly. The initiative has inspired other neighbourhoods to follow: we have now seen My Coldhurst, and something similar in Hollinwood. And from Clean Glodwick, we’re moving to Green Glodwick, again improving the look of the place by getting the community planting.

“WE GET WRITTEN OFF AS SEGREGATED, BUT THERE ARE MUSLIM GROUPS PROVIDING FOODBANKS IN A CHURCH”

All the initiatives—the ideas—come from the bottom up. The role of the community network is to make sure talents are fully deployed. If the brainwave of a local youngster needs a grant, which relies on forms being filled in, then we have local professionals—lawyers and dentists—to help. There’s also Action Together which helps strengthen community and voluntary groups by providing support to run their team, finding resources and encouraging everyone to work together to do more.

What, though, do we still need if we’re to step up the scale and pace? Public investment could obviously help, and sometimes a very modest outlay can make a vast difference. Take the £500 “Fast Grants” which can enable citizens to unlock community ideas. For the borough, this is a rounding error on a spreadsheet. But if used—to give a real example—to buy a load of yoga mats, and publicise a yoga class, then it can get local kids off the street, doing something healthy a couple of nights a week. Likewise a small grant to get the word out about a new walking club could get citizens moving and strengthen community ties. There is a return for everyone there, including the local health service.

But it isn’t just about money, it is also about mutual regard and respect, listening to citizens as equal partners. Councils need to keep their minds open to the possibility that the solutions for communities in hard times will often lie within those communities themselves. When we went to see officials about the idea of buying the leisure centre earmarked for closure for the community, the first hurdle was having the idea taken seriously. They didn’t nod it through without going through the proper process, considering rival bids. But—crucially—Oldham did listen, and did factor in the broader social, as well as the narrow financial, value. We needed the council to take us seriously, and were fortunate that they were wise enough to do so.

If Whitehall and local authorities elsewhere want innovation, town halls everywhere need to learn that fundamental lesson about open ears and minds.

Community groups need an open door too, the ability to get in and see senior people and get a hearing. Openness to doing things a bit differently is essential. In cleaning up our communities for example, a bit of material help is important—providing spades, for example—but we also need a willingness to shift the service a bit, for example collecting rubbish on a Sunday instead of mid-week, because that is when the community is able to do its bit.

David Cameron talked about the Big Society, but here in Oldham we’re actually doing it. What England’s seemingly-struggling towns need as much as anything is to be trusted to come up with their own solutions, and then backed to improve their own luck. It can only be done, though, if you can first of all spot the hope and the generosity that still pulses through a community such as Oldham.