

HOPE STRUGGLES SUCCESS

This 'book in eight minutes' brings together the reflections of those who joined the first OUR SOCIETY gathering in Leeds on 20 January 2011.

OUR SOCIETY aims to be a learning and support network for people involved in community action.

Here are some of the hopes, struggles and successes shared by participants.

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'It is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person.'

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie



My hope is based on my children. I have in the past wanted them to achieve success through external measures – exams, school reports, music exams, dancing lessons, sports results. But I have learned that these things are like food that is empty of calories – you get a sugar rush but no lasting feeling of satisfaction.

As a parent I have learned to let go of my anxiety about these external measures (though I still want to support my kids to do and achieve the best they can) and to be satisfied in the knowledge that they have already achieved some important and sustainable 'credits' for the future. These are: their ability to make and care for friends, and to survive the loss of friendship; their capacity for love of their family and partners; their ability

to engage with strangers and new connections and to show an interest in them; and most of all their concern about the world and the welfare of the people in it.

The best decision I made with my husband was to send them to a school run by Quakers. My struggle is to worry that they will find the world a difficult place to live in but my hope and expectation is that they won't.

- Janet Dean

My hope is that what ultimately comes out of the big economic problems of recent years is a new model for life and prosperity that genuinely enthuses and engages large numbers of people. Such a model would look beyond the

'bottom line' to consider more seriously what is really important in life, such as family, community and personal wellbeing, and place far less emphasis on material consumption and traditional measures of economic growth.

Such a vision is undoubtedly political in nature, but could engage people from all sides of the current political divide, who are tired of conventional and unsustainable solutions to the world's problems

- Anon.

My idea of a community that has hope is that everyone has the opportunity to voice their own concerns, express what they want to see, without feeling pressurised or threatened.

- Christine Launder

'My hope... a new model for life and prosperity that genuinely enthuses'

Simon's hope for Cullingworth

The pub's shut – the smoking ban did for that.

The village hall struggles on – managed by two old men both in their eighties now.

There's no junior cricket any more as no-one wants to coach. And the imposition of ever more control, strictures and rules makes it less interesting and more frustrating.

There's not an under-10 football team – the great bloke who ran it (an ex-director of Bradford City) died and nobody stepped up.

Yet it's still a fine place – the Scouts carry on, there's an am-dram group and any number of little groups and activities.

None of this came from Government. None of this resulted from state involvement. I think the Government – local and national – is an obstacle. People have become petitioners – supplicants demanding of other people's money.

There is no freedom. No independence. No autonomy.

We have riots – to get others to pay more.

We have protests – to protect the very state that has failed this place.

Come to Cullingworth. Help us. Guide us. But please stop taking our money and destroying our community.

- *Simon*

'I hope we can find a form of collectivism that is based on individualism.'

- *Anon*

'I hope we don't break down and all protect ourselves, let's hope we open up what we have.'

Anon

Migrant/ethnic minority women empowered

Migrant women, or women from ethnic minority communities, sign up to take part in a short radio production course at the local community radio station.

Some are middle aged, speaking only basic English, having spent two to three decades raising their family after coming as a bride from their country of origin and having met few English speakers in their everyday lives.

Some are young, having come recently to this country and wanting to learn as much as they can.

They learn computing, interviewing, digital editing – all taught in English, with ESOL support where they need it. They make radio programmes and get to know each other.

They quickly begin to grow in self confidence – they put together interviews and short features about topics which interest them. Often, the topics include the darker side of life – domestic violence, elder abuse, female genital mutilation.

At the end of the course they take away with them not just a better grasp of English but also a wider view of themselves and knowledge that their opinions and concerns are valid to be heard.

- *Anon*

'I am Spartacus!'

I am inspired when I see a groundswell of feeling, emotions, opinion.

I experience hope when anger and injustice kicks people into action...

I admire the people brave enough to stick their heads above the parapet...

Social media is an inspiring tool – e.g. the recent #iamspartacus campaign or the various "Twitter revolutions". "I am Spartacus ..." "No I am Spartacus!..."

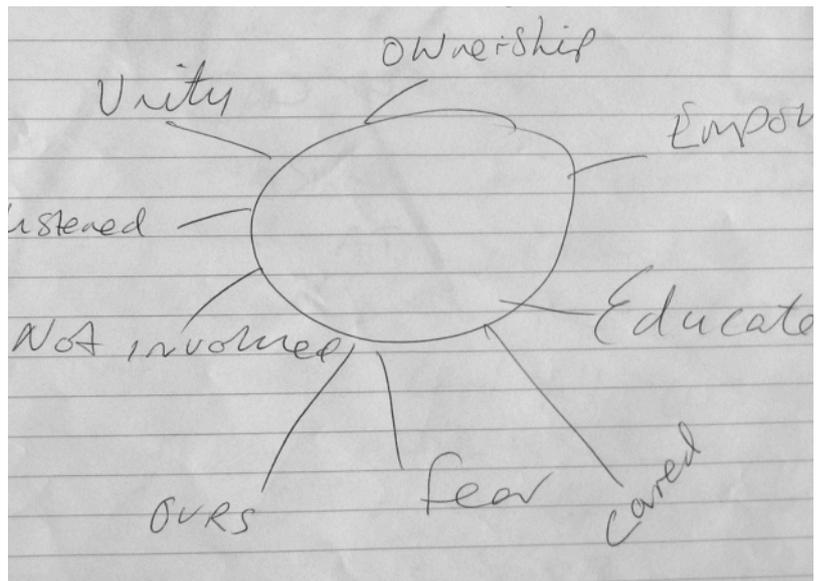




'To walk and visit the countryside, without being stared at, spoken to slowly, excluded from the open spaces which we can all enjoy without hindrance.

It's my countryside as much as it's yours.'

- Anon



'I remain convinced hope is fragile and needs the struggle of many to keep it alive'

My hope is to see a more educated, informed and developed community in where I live. Underachievement and unemployment are major issues.

We need to protect our future generations, give them hope, develop their willingness and desire to succeed in life and take greater ownership of local issues.

Lack of education leads to poor health, welfare, community engagement.

Ensure the community is involved in the local decision making process, has a voice in the various decision making bodies and stages.

- Anon

Struggle

My hope is something I create, and creation is sometimes a struggle. When it comes easy, I have the strength and resources to help, to carry, to nurture and more besides. When I struggle I need others to help me think and reflect and grieve and rest (from time to time) but my struggles make me stronger and more hopeful in the end. Our society will be

full of struggles, hopes and creators, and will not trap me in a single role. Others make me 'me' and I make other people. My help need not be a burden to myself or others, nor will it always need acknowledgement. But I remain convinced hope is fragile and needs the struggle of many to keep it alive.

"One must imagine Sisyphus happy ..." (Albert Camus)

- Anon

Inequality

The Spirit Level argues – rightly, I believe - that social stability and cohesion are directly related to socioeconomic equality. So long as inequality is growing, struggle looks futile.

The market depends on payment of debts – with interest – which leads to rich richer; poor poorer.

Government of the people ... by the rich, for the rich

Success would be government/parliament proportionally representative of all socio-economic groups governing on behalf of everyone.

So sick of multimillionaires telling me 'Money isn't everything.'

- Anon

'It often takes an outsider to bring us to our senses'

The story of Subotica

This is a true story which has inspired me. The city of Subotica in Serbia was historically multi-ethnic/-faith/-lingual with no ethnic majority group. With the Yugoslav war the Serb, Croat, Hungarian communities split apart. Many left – the rest fell into defensive ghettos, stopped learning from each other's languages, stopped co-operating. Social and physical fabric fell apart. In one neighbourhood a large group of Muslim Roma refugees had arrived. The only thing that unified the city was opposition to them. Yet Stevan Nicolic, spokesperson for the Roma, realised everyone suffered from the crumbling roads, buildings and communications infrastructure, but no-one did anything. One day he hired a digger and a bunch of shovels and the Roma people started to repair the road. When a Serb or Croat went past they were given a shovel and by the end of the week they had a new road. This became the basis of a neighbourhood council that got things done. The other neighbourhoods followed suit – now the city is regenerating.

Moral: It often takes an outsider to bring us to our senses.

- Phil Wood

Success would be an opening of the allotment spirit – without the cliques, without the homogeneity, without the adversity ...

- Anon

Success would be measured by a community that has decent housing with good access to transport, public health and a good standard of education.

Christine Launder

Towards successful third places

Our first places are our families and our homes.

Places of work are our second places and they provide many of us with a sense of worth and companionship over many years, but normally we return to our first places at the end of the day.

But a third place is where we go by choice. We can stay as long or little as we like. We meet many people – family, friends or strangers – yet we control how long we spend in their company. We can share ourselves for as long or as little as we determine.

So what is a good third place?

It's the village at the heart of our city, the place of worship, the shop, the theatre, the playground, it's all those social spaces we call public spaces.

Our communities' success is measured by the health of our third places.

See Project for Public Spaces - www.pps.org

- Sean Brady

Redundancy

After 20 years of auditing and inspecting public services I'm being made redundant.

I'd like my knowledge and experience to have meant something – to be available to the public who have paid for it.

I'm struggling to see an easy way for me to do this, hence my interest in contributing and being part of the network.

- Michael Newbury

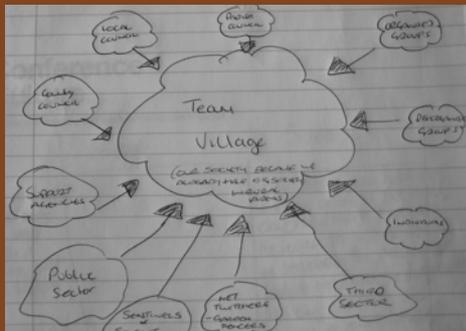


What would success look like?

Through choice and opportunity to be involved, allow mutuality and respect among everyone within and external to rural villages to create the means to work alongside each other and progress towards strong, resilient and sustainable future.

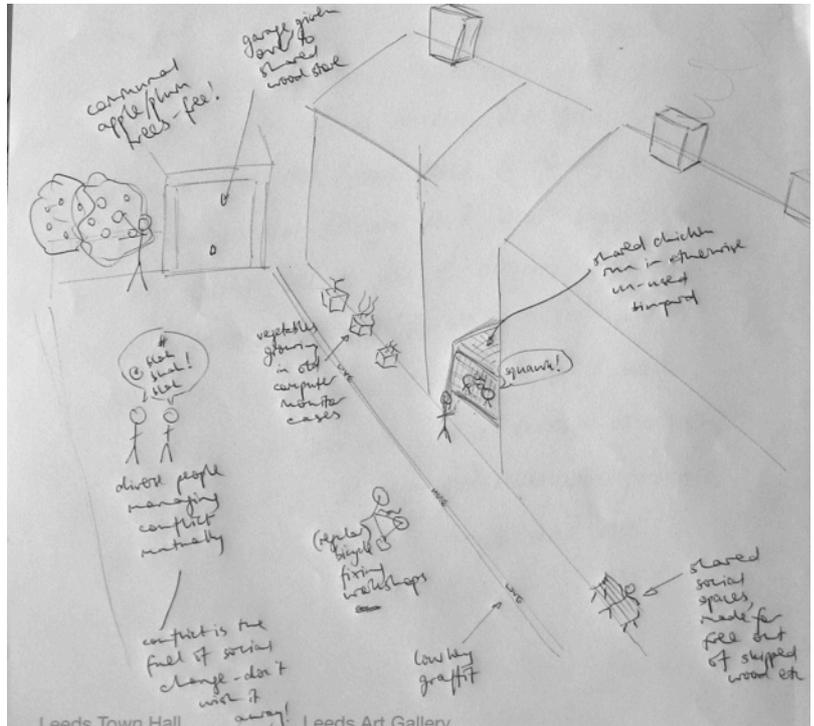
- Sharing stories
- Respecting difference
- Acknowledge the right to remain on the margins
- Genuine partnership working amongst all
- Stepping together to achieve mutual goals
- Allowing space and safety to air and resolve conflict
- Working for the common good and not someone else's vision / ideology of what 'common good' should be
- Permitting uniqueness and individuality
- Stop the paternalistic rot and social apartheid

- Anon



'Success is a community-run bus system'
- Anon

'Success is having nothing left to do/win'
- Anon



'It all seems so simple – I struggle all the time with why it doesn't happen'

'Show me some love'

- Community groups coming together to fix problems or cracks in their community.
 - Groups sharing knowledge on making their groups better
 - People spending time outside their jobs to offer something back to the community.
 - Businesses/influential (ordinary) people – keeping their promises and getting the job done properly.
 - Expectations fulfilled.
 - Teenagers/adults (18-24+) getting into employment
 - Businesses doing more to work with deprived areas.
 - Everybody sharing – more caring – 'show me some love'.
 - Keeping everyone up to date; communicating with people.
 - Friendship, support, collaborating.
- Anon

Action has to be political

Success has got to be linked to reducing some of the inequalities that exist in this country (and this world). I think

the danger of taking politics out of the discussion is you might lose the consideration of power differentials.

Community action has to be political (but not necessarily party political) to change society.
- Anon

Towards equality

Success would be a society with less inequality. I think that would start with financial equality and then we could go from there. In my personal and work life, that would be people living in decent standard housing, not a street where even school-kids know it is 'rough'. It would be where children had clean and tidy clothes and didn't stand out as 'not very nice' and the subsequent bullying (or becoming a bully) that follows. Where all young people had high expectations, or equal opportunity to travel, go to the pictures, have good coffee (good coffee features very highly in my successful society!).

It all seems so simple – I struggle all the time with why it doesn't happen.
- Alyson Scott