

RADICAL ROOTS TO PRACTICAL ACTION—THE CASE FOR PLACE

This is the full version of a speech given to the annual conference of the [Salford CVS](#) on 23 April 2019. The theme of the conference—‘Radical roots to practical action’—was chosen to commemorate both the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Manchester and Salford Council for Social Services (the precursor of the separate Manchester and Salford CVS organisations) and the 200th anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre. The speech sets out NPC’s thoughts about place-based approaches to social change, leading to [our new strategy, published on 3 July 2019](#).

First things first, thank you for having me. I’ve been looking forward to coming up since Alison [Page, CEO of Salford CVS] first mentioned that she might let me speak, just before Christmas. As she was described to me at the time by a fellow speaker as ‘one of the most effective and dynamic social activists in the country’, and this conference is one of the most sought-after speaking slots going, I knew that I had to be here!

The preparation for today has been really useful, even illuminating—which is ironic as in large part I’m talking about my favourite topic. So, thank you to Alison for that too. You’ve given me the shove I needed to collect and compose my thoughts on some work-related issues (more of which in a bit)—and also an opportunity to reflect

and think about what makes me tick, and how that translates into the life I lead today.

My name is Nathan Yeowell, and I'm the Head of Policy and External Affairs at NPC, the leading think tank and consultancy for the UK social sector. We've been around since 2002, leading the charge on impact, on charity strategy and, increasingly, on the practical policy needs of funders, policymakers, and charities, including, crucially for me, community organisations such as yourselves.

I've been with NPC since January 2018, following a career, if you can call it that, as a political hack and then a special adviser-of-sorts, followed by policy and strategy jobs in local government, with a spell spent covering politics for the BBC in Westminster thrown in there for good measure. But I'm getting ahead of myself...

Sixty or so miles away from where Kathy [Evans, CEO of Children England] grew up, Pontypool sits at the very edge of the South Wales coalfield, in the middle of the Eastern Valley, the administrative centre of the rather less lyrically named county borough of Torfaen. It has good claim to be the first industrial town in Wales, the centre for the production of tin-coated iron sheets known as japan ware from the 15th Century onwards. Much heavier industry came to dominate the local economy by the 19th Century, with the long coal boom leading to Pontypool's rapid, relatively prosperous development, half market town/half industrial entrepot where the rolling fields of Monmouthshire abutted the domain of 'King Coal.'

The collapse in commodity prices after the First World War had a profound impact on the extractive industries of Pontypool, triggering the slow recession that continues to this day. From the 1950s onward Pontypool found itself eclipsed by the rise of the new town of Cwmbran to the south, battered by the recession of the 1980s and literally bypassed by improved transport infrastructure.

This then, is the context of the place where I was born, grew up and lived until I was almost 19. My notions of social activism, and what radicalism I possess, are rooted in the history of this place and my relationships with the people who call it home.

I'm going to illustrate this by telling you about three local communities—three post-war housing estates in fact—that in separate ways have motivated, sustained and continue to inspire me.

The first is the Kemys Fawr estate in Sebastopol, halfway between Pontypool and Cwmbran. This is where I grew up and lived between the ages of two and 14. Like all three estates, it was, and still is, characterised by rows of utilitarian, squat, mostly semi-detached and pebble-dashed properties. Whilst much of the estate was developed in the 1950s, a small number of streets, including where we lived on South Avenue, had gone up in the 1930s. Like all the families on our side of the street, we lived in a house with a bay window on the ground floor—which was considered to be posh, doubly so because we had an indoor toilet. It was only in the summer of 1984 that the houses on the other side of the street had toilets installed

inside. Oblivious to the real significance of this, an abiding memory of that summer is playing in skips as the houses opposite were being renovated.

Kemys Fawr is where my grandparents moved to 1954, where my dad grew up, where my 98-year-old grandfather still lives.

A cockney by birth, my grandad Ted met and married my nan when they were both stationed in Portsmouth during the war and he moved to Wales to live with her at the end of his national service in 1947. He brings the past into sharp focus for me, connects me with the reality of life at the end of the First World War, the same period that saw the Creation of the Manchester and Salford Council for Social Services in 1919. In 2008, I sat down and interviewed him. For the first time, almost, he spoke about his life and the daily hardship and depredations that he experienced as a young boy living in the East End of London in the 1920s. He admitted to me—and this was the first time he had told anyone, even my nan and they were married in 1943—that his father had spent part of the decade in the Bethnal Green workhouse:

It wasn't a long period that he was away, but it was... more, I think, something that people even as poor as we were, looked upon as being degrading. You had to go into the workhouse... I remember that my father had this dark green, horrible suit on. Like I say, if you can imagine this very quiet, inoffensive, what I would term a nice, likable fellow, dressed in something like that. I suppose, at the age he married and the age I could remember him, he was grey then. He never altered then—to the day he virtually died.

The plight of my paternal great-grandfather—and the palpable and toxic sense of shame that it instilled in my granddad—struck a real chord with me and has become a living reminder for me of how far we've come in the last hundred years. Similarly, anecdotes about me rummaging around disused u-bends and concrete tubes, amusing as they might be, serve to highlight social advances that have been made in the much more tangible timeframe of my lifetime.

The pace of social change over the last century—let alone the past 40 years—has been monumental, even for communities at the sharp end of long-term economic trends and shifting social patterns within the UK. But we must be vigilant. **Social and economic progress is not linear, and neither is it inevitable.** This has been highlighted by the news overnight that Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty that some of you in this room spoke to when he was in the country last year, has published his final report criticising the policies of austerity since 2010, arguing that 'much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos.'

Without disappearing into the weeds of the rights or wrongs of current government policy, this intervention underscores the fact that social retreat is a real and present threat. **Progress must be championed. Progress must be fought for.**

The second of my three estates is where my idea of 'the fight' has its roots— Cwmfields, straddling the communities of Cwmyrnyscoy and Pontymoile. It is where my mum was born, where my parents met and first lived, and where I was born. It is the place that drilled the concept of community and kinship into me from a very early age, admittedly in a highly idealised form and without me actually realising it.

My maternal great-grandfather was Chair of the Housing Committee on what was then Pontypool Urban District Council after the Second World War and he obviously ensured that members of his family were given priority in terms of housing allocations, as I remember a community teeming with great uncles, second and third cousins and enumerable aunties, both real and assumed. At the centre of this, or at least as it seemed to me as a child in the 1980s, was a network of strong women who supported and looked out for each other as they all worked and sacrificed to bring up and support their families. My nana was at the heart of this matriarchy, occupying both 'public' roles, helping to run the local community centre, and 'private' roles, taking on a whole host of caring responsibilities for family members and friends. For their part, the menfolk of the family spent their time involved in local politics, be that as rank-and-file activists for the Labour Party, as trade union officials, or as councillors on what became Torfaen Council in 1974.

What have the inhabitants and my memories of this estate taught me? The main takeaway, I guess, is the significance of collective action, the power of people coming together to create and nurture a new community after the Second World War, be that through informal social organisation or more readily recognisable forms

of political activity. At a time when dominant political rhetoric thundered there was ‘no such thing as society’, I grew up thinking the exact opposite—like all of us here today, I’m sure.

Change created together—positive, practical collaboration between people, organisations and places—is much more powerful than anything we can achieve on our own.

The third estate is the one with which I have the most recent association and is the one I’m going to spend a bit more time on. Perched atop a hill overlooking Pontypool town centre, Trevethin does not feature heavily in the pages of Welsh history.

Neither does it appear in any top 25 lists of places to go or things to do west of the Severn Bridge. It does, however, appear in the list of the most deprived local areas in Wales according to the 2014 Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD).

The most populous—and densely populated—part of the ward comes in as [the 35th most deprived district in Wales \(out of a total of 1,900\)](#). Collectively, residents share the 22nd worst health outcomes in Wales, the 31st lowest incomes, 38th worst rate of employment and 39th worst educational achievements. Further research, conducted by Cardiff University’s Sustainable Places Unit for the 2016 report [All Around Us—the Pontypool Deep Place Study](#), suggests that 75% of all children under four live in low income households; 53% of all households—over 800—live in poverty; and just under 37% of the working-age population are claiming benefits.

Yet, despite this—or maybe, joyously, because of it—Trevethin contains one of the most uplifting examples of social activism and charitable organisation that I've ever come across. Staffed and volunteered almost entirely by local residents—themselves almost entirely strong women—[TRAC2](#) is a crisis intervention charity that provides recycled household items to people facing hardship. It is also a community outreach organisation, bringing multiple agencies together under one roof, providing a safe and confidential place for people to meet and seek support.

In 2017/2018, TRAC2 donated over 4,400 items to 243 households across Torfaen, mainly in the form of new home starter packs, providing vulnerable and disadvantaged families and individuals with the essentials they need to live a more settled and stable life. More than this, the team at TRAC2 provides outreach support and referral services for the victims of domestic abuse; those living with and tackling mental health issues; and the growing number of rough sleepers across Torfaen. They've taken a very visible lead in the local orientation process for Syrian refugee families (Torfaen was one of the first Welsh councils to sign up to the relocation programme in 2015) and have even won a number of prestigious recycling awards, held in the decidedly swanky ballrooms of Park Lane—which might as well be a million miles away from Pontypool!

I think that TRAC2, and the staff, volunteers, and supporters that make it into a vibrant, living organisation—are fantastic. But then I would say that, as I've been a supporter and then trustee since the summer of 2015. [Take, instead, the word of actor Michael Sheen, a very high-profile supporter, who said in May 2018:](#)

TRAC2—The Really Amazing Charity—and it is exactly that. [But] TRAC2 should not exist... The impact of [cutting Communities First across Wales](#). The changes to local authorities. The fear at what our resettlement after Brexit will be. All of this makes life harder—and it was already too hard for too many in our communities. That is why TRAC2 exists, and that's why it will continue for some time. Sue [Malson, the Manager] leads a team, a community, a network of partners all stepping in to help people who have no other options in place...

The crisis intervention delivered by the team, supported by the volunteers and the community is saving lives. It is treating people with the dignity and the love they deserve. And it is love... it is a tough love, a get-your-hands-dirty love, it can sometimes be a furious love, and it is what gets things done when they need to be done. Whether it is as simple as ensuring that someone has a kettle and some electric just to make a cup of tea. Or someone who will talk to someone, show some solidarity, share their experiences, draw on what they've gone through to connect with someone who is going through it in that moment and feels like they might be alone. Finding someone a home after years of living on the streets. The interventions that TRAC2 deliver really, really matter.

TRAC2, the people of Trevethin and those from Kemys Fawr and Cwmfields, both past and present, have been much in my thoughts as NPC has sought to refresh and articulate [our new strategic priorities](#). We've done this to help us improve the practical impact of charities supporting and championing those people, places and

causes at the frontline of social change. For me, working with people to help create, sustain and promote great places is one of the main causes and chief objects of social change as we look ahead to the 2020s.

Everyone here agrees that civil society, and the spaces that we share, bind our communities together and are vital to the creation of the great places we all want to see. The places where we live and work define who we are and what we do. They determine the nature of our relationships with our fellow citizens and the communities we create together.

But what does 'place' in the context of policy? I think it's **the pursuit of long-term change**. It's about the realisation that **places and the people who live in them** endure long after time-limited interventions are forgotten. Essentially, we need to strive for more sustainable approaches to achieving progressive social change, ones which local residents recognise as solutions to identifiable problems or grievances.

To quote The New York Times columnist David Brooks:

It could be that the neighbourhood [or the place], not the individual, is the essential unit of social change. If you're trying to improve lives, maybe you have to think about changing many elements of a single neighbourhood, in a systematic way, at a steady pace... One of the signature facts of the internet age is that distance is not dead. Place matters as much as ever, and much more than we ever knew.

Any such shift will depend upon a **proper understanding of local needs, priorities and geographical context**. As a refugee from local government, it may come as no surprise that I find the argument for subsidiarity and more bespoke solutions to local problems to be a compelling one. And I've found it's one which chimes with many grassroots charities and activists as they campaign locally for their beneficiaries. But we also need to be agile enough to ensure we **adapt to, and learn from, changing local priorities**. As with progress, social change is neither linear nor static—it is continuously evolving.

Of vital importance to all of this is the **need for more fundamental local collaboration**. Organisations and individuals need to put aside their institutional prejudices and prioritise the needs of the people and culture of the places they operate in. They should pool resources, develop shared goals and strive for a collective approach to both the diagnosis of need and the solutions that make the most sense in their local areas.

Although significant thought has been devoted to the evolution of place over the last 10 to 15 years, the social sector has been largely ignored. This has meant that the unique role local charities and voluntary organisations play in creating social capital has not been adequately recognised by national policymakers.

Recently though, we've seen some encouraging signs that the social sector is back on the agenda of policymakers. First the publication of the Civil Society Strategy in August 2018 was welcome though with Mrs. May's imminent departure there is no guarantee that it will remain a priority come the autumn. Then the Civil Society Futures independent inquiry, which reported in November last year, enshrined 'the places that matter' as one of four thematic areas it felt need greater attention if we are ever to achieve a more empowered and aspirational social sector. Finally, my fingers are firmly crossed that the Labour Party will be equally demonstrative when it publishes its alternative civil society strategy next month.

Of course, we at NPC know we can't wait around for decision makers to take notice. We want to ensure that the expertise in this room is recognised in ongoing policy debates—and we want to champion the role that the sector can, and should, play in shaping and fulfilling this agenda.

We're making the case that place needs to be the basic unit of social change, and we're encouraging charities and funders to think more systematically and constructively about the opportunities that greater place-based activity might inspire.

What does this mean for our three key stakeholder groups—charities, policymakers and private funders?

On charities, taking Salford as an example of the kind of thing we want to do, the aim is to work with **Salford CVS, local charities, and voluntary organisations** to better map and understand the strength and potential of the sector—thinking of new, practical ways to improve partnership and collaboration within the borough and across Greater Manchester.

This is tough stuff. You know better than I do, the general funding environment and shift towards contracts has made genuine, open-handed collaboration a trickier proposition but I think that we all know that this has to be the way forward. We want to explore the possibility of maximising collective impact around place and to start thinking about how we can come together to pool our charitable mission. That is, to think more about beneficiaries and causes as part of the DNA of the places in which they live, not in isolation from them.

Turning to **local policymakers**, we want to work with councils and their public service partners to identify new models of cross-sectoral collaboration and local public service provision. Can we identify the most effective and impactful local charities and promote them as the blueprint for potential service redesign? For example, where I live in Lambeth, the [Mosaic Clubhouse](#) is an award-winning, community-embedded organisation, committed to promoting positive mental health by co-designing and co-delivering services and activities with its members. How might we scale, evolve and replicate this model of mental health provision in other places and use it to inspire other areas of social need?

Alongside this, we want to bring the social sector into the heart of local decision making, working with local authorities and NHS bodies to agree place-based objectives, outcomes, and the strategies needed to make them a reality. This is currently being done piecemeal across the country—we need to ensure it becomes the new norm.

A couple of examples for you. [Lambeth Together](#) is a collaboration between major health and care stakeholders including local charities, aimed at changing cultural behaviours in lockstep with place-based integration and better patient involvement. A couple of miles away in the London Borough of Sutton, [The Sutton Plan](#) is an attempt to get all the key stakeholders in the borough—including the local CVS, the volunteers' centre and large local charities, such as Age UK Sutton—to create and promote a shared vision for the borough, underpinned by new ways of working.

Lastly, in our work with **funders**, we want to redraw the parameters of place-based philanthropy and push charitable trusts and foundations to think more systematically about how they fund locally, in order to maximise their impact. A number of large funders are already thinking about this, with six of them coming together to use their collective resources, experiences and strengths to maximise what they call 'the power of place' in the form of the ['Local Motion'](#) project. We've been developing a framework for place-based funding, which we're hoping to publish later this summer.

This will be the first concrete output of our place programme. I'll make sure that Alison knows when it sees the light of day.

But as ever with NPC, we want to push further. Firstly, we want to investigate the possibility of bringing public, private and philanthropic funders together to think about how we shape new, pooled and consolidated place-based funding interventions. Secondly, we want to see how we better align emerging place-based philanthropic mission with place-based public service and charitable priorities. We want to know how we can fund these priorities in a more focused fashion—in order to address local needs, unlock local assets and stimulate local social capital.

There's a lot to digest here, and it will require serious thought and a lot of hard work. But I'm confident that by working together, we can push the social sector towards the centre of the place debate—and the discussions we need to have about the future of the country.

As in 1819, at the time of Peterloo, there is a palpable sense of social unease that needs to be addressed and somehow dispelled. As in 1919, in the aftermath of the First World War, there's growing clamour for political and economic reconstruction—whoever's in government and whatever happens with Brexit.

I'm not sure whether my reflections on my journey from the council estates of Pontypool to this stage today provide you with examples of the practical action that might bring all of this about. But I do hope that, in some small way, I've provided you with a possible road map for the radical action that we need to pursue if we are to create and sustain the change that we want to bring about in our local communities.