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The inspiration next door

How well do you know your neighbours? Like most Londoners, I'd say: "not well enough". I chat to the women who live either side of me when we've received each other's post, and I say hi to the other dog owners in the block when I see them out walking, but that's pretty much it.

Here's a tougher question: do you *trust* your neighbours? For this issue's cover story (page 24), I visited Lancaster Cohousing and met its residents, who generously welcomed me into their home. There are plenty of benefits to living in an intentional community, but one of the overwhelming positives that came up in the conversations I had with people in Lancaster was how much they trust one another – even when they don't always like each other.

Community living requires making a few changes, both practical, like learning to share a washing machine or a car with your neighbours, and psychological, like compromising with someone you profoundly disagree with. But, as one resident told me: "This is a giant experiment and we're all doing it in our own way." It's a challenge that, ultimately, is making the residents better at empathising with each other; something that's welcome in our current times.

Another space where a community-minded approach is reaping rewards, is business. Last year, Guy Singh-Watson, founder of Riverford Organic Farm, handed the controlling stake of his company's shares over to its employees. He's part of a wave of UK firms realising that employee ownership isn't just a nice morale boost – it's actually better for the business, as we uncover on page 50.

Doing things differently often requires fearless individuals, too. Like Natalie Fee (page 64), activist, author, and the woman behind a plastic-free revolution who just four short years ago was a single mum struggling to make ends meet.

Likewise, institutions can step up. Avon and Somerset police has taken a radical step this summer; instead of prosecuting young drug dealers, the force will refer them to learn new skills that could help them find jobs or launch a business to break the cycle of reoffending. Read about that, and other constructive approaches to justice, on page 40.

Another idea that's moving in from the fringes is the potential use of psychedelics to help treat mental health problems. We report on the growing body of research behind this, on page 34. But whether it's measuring kindness at work (page 38), advancing the fight against malaria (page 58), or advocating for 'regenerative' businesses (page 56) – whichever story uplifts you most, I hope that at the very least, this issue might inspire you to get to know your neighbours a little more.

Lucy Douglas
Editor (maternity cover)

Cover:
Becky Stones and her daughter, Poppy, members of the Lancaster Cohousing community. Photographed at their home for Positive News magazine by Sam Bush

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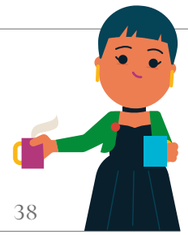

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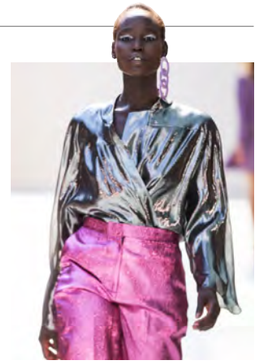


Plus:

Image: Paul Faith / Getty

Fair play

Words by Lucy Douglas
Photography by Paul Faith

Ben Owen was 14 when he gave up playing rugby. He had told his teammates he was gay and, though they had seemed very supportive, Owen assumed they would feel more comfortable not to have a gay teammate.

He didn't start playing again until a decade later, when he was living in Brussels and came across Straffe Ketten RFC, an LGBT-inclusive rugby team.

There are now 84 LGBT-inclusive rugby teams across five continents, according to International Gay Rugby (IGR), the membership body that represents them and of which Owen is chair.

The organisation was founded in 2000 to create safe spaces for gay men to enjoy the sport without fear of homophobia, as well as the chance to socialise with each other in an environment other than clubs and bars. Most recently, it welcomed teams in Japan, where the men's Rugby World Cup tournament is currently being held.

As well as advocating for LGBT issues in rugby, the organisation helps new clubs get up and running and organises international tournaments. One of these, the Union Cup, (pictured here) was held in Dublin in June for the body's European club members.

Some players, like Owen, had played the sport when they were young but "a large proportion start the season having never held a rugby ball before", he said.

"We also encourage all our teams to get very involved in the local rugby community. I think that way we're able to reach people who maybe have no other experience of LGBT people. There's no better way to earn someone's respect than beating them in a game of rugby."

To mark the start of its 20th year, IGR will host its first Pride in Rugby weekend on 5-6 October, which will include a tournament in Japan as well as events run by member clubs around the world.

Although visibility of LGBT athletes has come a long way this century, there remains a way to go in many parts of the world. Earlier this year, Australian international rugby union player Israel Folau posted homophobic comments on social media, and gay former Wales captain Gareth Thomas was the victim of a homophobic assault.

"We'd definitely like to get to a point where we don't have such a social mission," Owen told Positive News. "But I still think LGBT clubs will provide something quite unique. Rugby provides a sense of family and a support network for people. We're growing the game to a whole new demographic of people who might not have ever played rugby."

Citizens' assemblies go mainstream: a way to bring about radical change?

Citizens across the UK are convening to address issues such as the climate crisis and Brexit. Could they help to overcome political deadlock?

With faith in politics at a low point and concern mounting over the state of democracy and the planet, some governments and councils are turning to citizens' assemblies for answers.

A citizens' assembly is a form of 'deliberative' democracy, in which randomly chosen members of the public are brought together to engage in open, respectful and informed debates on specific issues.

Westminster and Holyrood plan to host citizens' assemblies this autumn, with climate change on the agenda at the former and the latter focusing on Scotland's response to Brexit. The Welsh government has already hosted its own citizens' assembly, which asked "how can people in Wales shape their future?"

Camden Council in London, meanwhile, hosted three citizens' assemblies on climate change this summer. Participants put forward 17 proposals for action, including installing solar panels on all available roofs, and car-free zones. The recommendations will now be considered at a council meeting.

"The next step is to translate these areas of focus into the community-led action and borough-wide policies that are urgently needed to fight the climate crisis," said councillor Adam Harrison, cabinet member for a Sustainable Camden. Devon, Sheffield and Oxford will also hold citizens' assemblies on climate change.

Above: the Welsh government held its first citizens' assembly in July

"Embedding these new ways of doing democracy at the local level is extremely important because our current system of representation is very small," said Michela Palese, research and policy officer at the Electoral Reform Society. "It's a way of giving people at the local level a say on the issues that actually matter to them."

According to Tim Hughes, director of Involve, a charity that campaigns for public participation, issues like the deadlock over Brexit have created an appetite for a different kind of politics.

"People recognise that a new form of democracy and a new form of politics is needed to tackle some of the complex and challenging questions that we face today," he said. "Over the past few months, the number of councils committing to run citizens' assemblies has been unprecedented – it feels like the tide has turned."

Another catalyst for this change has been the 2016 citizens' assembly in Ireland, which helped break years of social and political stalemate over the issue of abortion.

"It captured people's imagination about the role that a citizens' assembly can play," said Hughes. "The work of Extinction Rebellion in calling for a national citizens' assembly on climate change has also helped to raise the idea up the public and political agenda."

The format has its limitations, however. "[Citizens' assemblies have] to start from a place where all sides recognise the need to build a consensus and at the moment, on Brexit, we're not seeing that," said Hughes from Involve. "It's still a fight between ideologies."

But building a consensus about what path the country takes after Brexit could yet fall to citizens' assemblies, which have been championed by politicians from across the house, including Rory Stewart and Stella Creasy. "Slowly," said Palese, "they are starting to become more embedded as a way of doing democracy."

Three good things
Combatting loneliness

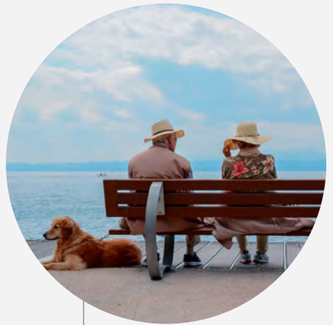
1 | Intergenerational nurseries

Research suggests that interactions with children can combat loneliness, lower blood pressure and delay mental decline in older people. But according to the Intergenerational Foundation, since 1991, the number of areas in which half the population is aged over 50 has increased seven-fold.

Intergenerational nurseries aim to bridge this divide, uniting young and old in communities.

One example is Apples and Honey, which sits in the grounds of Nightingale care home in Wandsworth, south London. The nursery brings old and young together for storytelling, singing and excursions. "We create a cohesive, exciting, stimulating and challenging programme," said director Judith Ish-Horowicz. "The children's personal, social and emotional development is way above what you would expect at that age and some residents say it gives them a reason to get up in the morning. It's a win-win."

2 | Chat benches



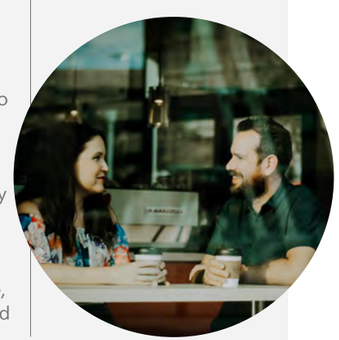
"Sit here if you don't mind someone stopping to say hello." So reads a sign on Burnham-on-Sea's new 'chat bench', unveiled this summer by Avon and Somerset Police as a way of tackling loneliness. It's one of two 'chat benches' launched by the force, with the other in nearby Taunton.

"The sign simply helps break down the invisible, social barriers that exists between strangers who might find themselves sharing a common place," explained police community support officer, Tracey Grobbeler, who launched the initiative. "Simply stopping to say 'hello' to someone at the chat bench could make a huge difference to the vulnerable people in our communities and help to make life a little better for them."

3 | The Chatty Café scheme

"When you're feeling lonely, a conversation with another human can really brighten your day." Alex Hoskyn speaks from experience. After giving birth to her son, the social worker found herself feeling lonely at times, often when she was surrounded by other people in cafés. "You can be out of the house all day yet have no interaction with another person," she said.

To address this Hoskyn set up the Chatty Café scheme, which encourages pubs and cafes to set aside a 'chatter and natter' table, where punters can sit and chinwag with strangers. More than 1,300 premises have now signed up to the scheme, which won the 2019 Innovating for Ageing award. "It's not just for old people, though," said Hoskyn. "It's for everyone."



Images: Citizens' assembly: National Assembly for Wales; nursery: Apples and Honey; bench: Nathalia Bariani; cafe: Christin Hume

Where next for Extinction Rebellion?

The movement is preparing to mark its first birthday with its biggest protests yet

Sit-in: XR activists protesting in Greenwich in August

▶ Extinction Rebellion turns one in October, but the movement has little time for retrospection. Instead the group is planning its biggest act of civil disobedience to date – a worldwide campaign that aims to paralyse dozens of cities, including London.

"We need so many people willing to get arrested that we win simply because it's impossible for them to deal with the situation," said Zion Lights, Extinction Rebellion's UK spokesperson. "We know we have mass numbers – it will be interesting to see how many of those come out."

"I think they have made a huge impact," said Michael Powell of the People's History Museum in Manchester, which is currently running an exhibition about the history of protest. "They have been especially effective in terms of putting the climate emergency on the political and media agenda."

Extinction Rebellion's biggest achievement to date arguably came in April, when protesters occupied four sites in central London, including Parliament Square and Waterloo Bridge, for a fortnight.

"I helped take Waterloo Bridge and I thought there is no way we'll still be here in an hour," recalled Lights. Two weeks later, protesters were packing up of their own volition, feeling they had made their point.

Ultimately, the movement's three demands remain unmet: the government is yet to declare a climate emergency (although parliament has); it hasn't moved to halt biodiversity loss and bring emissions down to net zero by 2025 (a demand some scientists say is unrealistic); and it hasn't set up a citizens' assembly on climate change (though six select committees of the House of Commons have promised they will).

> "Last time we were hopeful, but this time we are organised"

However, many councils have declared a climate emergency, established their own citizens' assemblies and committed to being carbon neutral before the government's own target date of 2050. "They are definitely steps in the right direction, we just want them rolled out in all counties," said Lights.

Extinction Rebellion predicts its forthcoming campaign, due to start on 7 October, will be much larger and better organised than April's.

"Last time we were hopeful, but this time we are organised," said Lights, though she acknowledges that the police will also be more prepared.

"They don't have water cannons, although Boris Johnson did like that idea, but we are quite aware that there is going to be a crackdown.

"They're not going to let us just shut down London for two weeks, which is what we're planning to do. It might be that things become heavy, but we will remain committed to non-violence."

Extinction Rebellion claims to have swelled its ranks by engaging with groups not traditionally associated with activism. "We have faith groups coming, we have farmers coming," said Lights. "We haven't had to work hard to engage farmers because they see firsthand what's happening to the land – they want to get involved."

Will they bring tractors to help with the roadblocks? "A lot of our boats have been confiscated now – they're sitting in Scotland Yard or wherever – so tractors would be great," said Lights.

Images: Extinction Rebellion: Benjamin Darlington; solar rail: Andy Aitchison/10:10 Climate Action

A takeaway without the throwaway

▶ A returnable lunchbox scheme is being trialled at a London food market in a bid to reduce packaging. It is being rolled out at Tachbrook Street Market in Pimlico, a lunch spot popular with office workers.

It works like this: when ordering, diners flash their membership cards at vendors, who then serve their takeaway in a biodegradable lunchbox made of rice husks. Each box has a barcode, which is scanned, along with the membership card, and assigned to the customer.

Once they've eaten their food, diners take the lunchbox to a nearby drop-off point – in this case a branch of Waitrose – and rescan it to confirm its return. Dirty lunchboxes are then taken away, cleaned and delivered back to vendors for the process to begin again.

The scheme, which costs £5 to subscribe to, is being operated by a startup called CauliBox, in partnership with Westminster Council and local food vendors. "Traders told us that they wanted to stop using single-use containers," explained a spokesperson for Westminster Council.

Only a couple of hundred lunchboxes are in circulation so far, but the council will make more available if the trial proves a success. "We are hoping to expand it," the spokesperson added.

Network Rail line gets solar power

▶ Railway signals and lights on Network Rail's Wessex route, in southern England, are now being powered by a direct supply of solar energy, thanks to a new project that hopes to prove the renewable energy source can reliably power Britain's railways.

The First Light project, launched in August, saw a 100-panel solar rig in Aldershot, Hampshire, connected to an ancillary transformer, bypassing the National Grid.

The project is run by social enterprise Riding Sunbeams with Department of Transport funding. It seeks to build on research that suggests solar panels directly connected to rail, tube and tram lines could meet a significant share of the UK's electricity needs. Leo Murray of Riding Sunbeams said: "Helping to get the railways off fossil fuels in this way will cut running costs at the same time as helping to tackle the climate crisis."

By the end of 2020, the group hopes to build and connect the world's first ever full-scale community and commuter-owned solar farm to UK railways.

Left: engineers work in Aldershot on the solar panels that will power the Network Rail line

Tapping into useful waste water

▶ Public buildings in Stirling, Scotland, are being kept warm by heat recovered from a nearby sewage works. It is thanks to a £6m energy hub, which opened in September and is the first of its kind in the UK. The Stirling District Heat Network delivers low-carbon heat to public buildings, including a leisure centre and football stadium. Organisations such as Zero Waste Scotland and Volunteer Scotland also benefit. Scottish Water estimates that the project will save 381 tonnes of carbon a year, equal to 1.5m miles driven in a petrol car.

University ditches beef to beat climate change

▶ Students returning to Goldsmiths, University of London, this autumn will notice beef dishes missing from menus. The university has decided to ban the red meat in a bid to become carbon neutral by 2025. Students will also have to pay a 10p levy on bottles and single-use plastic cups. Professor Frances Corner, the new warden of Goldsmiths, said declaring a climate emergency "cannot be empty words". The move has been criticised by farmers, who claim beef is reared more efficiently in Britain than overseas. However, many scientists affirm that reducing red meat consumption will help mitigate the impact of climate change.

Teachers to get mental health training

UK programme aims to help teachers and mental health service providers better work together

Above: around one in eight UK children have a mental health disorder

Teachers can now take advantage of specialist training to help them better support pupils who are experiencing mental health issues. It is thanks to a project that is being rolled out nationally following a successful pilot.

The Link programme, which launched nationwide in September, offers training to teachers and people working in Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The aim is to encourage better collaboration and communication between the groups and, ultimately, better care for young people.

"Schools know the children and their families really, really well," said Jaime Smith, director of the programme at Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families, which is running the programme. "We want to make sure that all of that knowledge is picked up by the mental health services."

The training is offered to teachers working with young people in any educational environment: from nurseries to sixth form colleges and including pupil referral units.

According to recent NHS figures, one in eight children aged five to 19 has a mental health disorder. For women aged 17 to 19, the figure is as high as one in four. It is hoped the training will give teachers a better understanding of mental health issues and how and when to refer students on to mental health services. "Education and health professionals often speak a slightly different language," Smith added.

The structure of the NHS means that mental health services vary significantly across the UK. Smith says the training programme will not take a "one-size-fits-all" approach, but will take into account the circumstances of each area. "How we work with a small London borough might look very different to how we work in a large area like Hertfordshire with 500-plus schools," she explained.

In some areas of the UK, teachers cannot refer their students directly to CAMHS, making it much more challenging for them to help students access the care they need.

A pilot of the programme launched in 2015 to 250 schools. "It showed improved communication and joint working, greater knowledge of mental health issues, greater understanding of referral routes, and improved timeliness and appropriateness of referrals," Smith said.

"We want teachers' knowledge of students to be picked up by health services"

Prosthetic limbs from plastic bottles

An engineer at De Montfort University has developed a prosthetic limb socket made from recycled plastic bottles. Prototypes of the prosthesis, believed to be the first made from recycled plastic, were successfully tested on two patients in India.

Dr Karthikeyan Kandan used polyester yarns spun from ground plastic bottles. They cost around £10 to produce, compared to an average of £5,000, and are comfortable and durable, said Kandan. "Upcycling of recycled plastics and offering affordable prosthesis are two major global issues that we need to tackle."

New treatment for drug-resistant TB approved

The US medical regulator, the Food and Drug Administration, has approved a new drug that has been found to cure around 90 per cent of patients with drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis. They were previously considered untreatable. The drug, pretomanid, has been approved as a treatment for such types of tuberculosis when used in conjunction with two other pharmaceuticals. In 2016, some 460,000 cases of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis were reported worldwide, according to the World Health Organization. Pretomanid has reportedly been "well-tolerated" in clinical trials.

Images: school pupil: Pan Xiaozhen; couple in field: Jaddy Liu; Zachary Norris: Brooke Anderson

Benefits of a glass half full: study suggests optimism extends life

"Always look on the bright side of life" could actually be constructive health advice, new research indicates. A study led by scientists at Boston University School of Medicine suggests that optimists are more likely to live longer, healthier lives.

The study, which spanned several decades, was based on 70,000 women and 1,500 men. The men were monitored for 30 years and the women for 10; both were assessed to measure their optimism levels as well as overall health and lifestyle habits.

Participants were compared based on their optimism scores from the beginning of the study and the researchers found the most optimistic groups of men and women lived on average 11-15 per cent longer than the least optimistic groups.

Although there is plenty of research into lifestyle risk factors for diseases and premature death, little is known about the relationship between psychosocial characteristics and healthy ageing.

"This study has strong public health relevance because it suggests that optimism is one such psychosocial asset that has the potential to extend the human lifespan," said Dr Lewina Lee, lead author of the study. "Optimism may be modifiable using relatively simple techniques."

Left: co-founder of Restore Oakland, Zachary Norris, speaking at its launch

"Strong communities need strong, community-centred organisations"

'First-of-its-kind' community restorative justice hub opens in California

A community hub in Oakland, California, has opened offering conflict resolution through restorative justice circles, alongside legal services, job training and business advice.

The Restore Oakland centre, which opened in July, is a partnership venture between the Ella Baker Centre for Human Rights, a non-profit organisation, and Restaurant Opportunities Centres United, a group working to improve wages and conditions in the restaurant industry. It will also serve as a base for local non-profit groups that work in restorative justice.

"I increasingly see [Oakland] dividing along economic and racial lines. Strong communities need strong, community-centered organisations," said Zachary Norris, Restore Oakland co-founder and executive director of the Ella Baker Centre. "We hope that our centre serves as a model for other cities as a place where folks impacted by prisons and punishment can unite, access restorative justice services to resolve conflict, and create opportunities rooted in healing."

The Bay Area, in which Oakland and nearby San Francisco sit, has some of the highest housing costs in the US, as well as some of the top rates of income inequality and unemployment.

Deanna Van Buren, co-founder of the architecture organisation that designed the hub, said it could model how other cities can create infrastructure that improves the justice system, while also 'advancing economic opportunity'.

Campaign to reduce air travel takes off

Travellers pledge to quit planes as Sweden's 'flight shame' movement touches down in UK

"My last flight was in 2007 and I have no sense of loss. This is an emergency – climate and ecological – and giving up flying is one way that an individual can reduce their carbon footprint dramatically."

Sue Hampton, an author, is one of a growing number of people to quit flying to help save the planet. Though she abstained from planes years ago, she reaffirmed her commitment recently by signing up to the Flight Free UK campaign, which aims to get 100,000 people to give up flying next year.

It follows a similar movement in Sweden called *flygskam*, or 'flight shame', which stigmatised flying through social media. A more constructive sister campaign, *tagskryt* ('train brag'), encourages people to feel virtuous about taking the train instead of a plane. Both appear to be contributing to a shift in travel habits in Sweden, where demand for rail travel soars while air passenger numbers fall.

According to Swedavia, which looks after 10 of the country's largest airports, the number of travellers passing through its terminals fell by 4 per cent in the first half of 2019. Contrast that with figures from the country's state-run rail operator, SJ, which reports a near 10 per cent increase in train journeys during the same period.

"The flight shame debate has had an impact on the spike in growth we have experienced for the past 12 months," a spokesperson for SJ said.

"Giving up flying is one way an individual can reduce their carbon footprint dramatically"

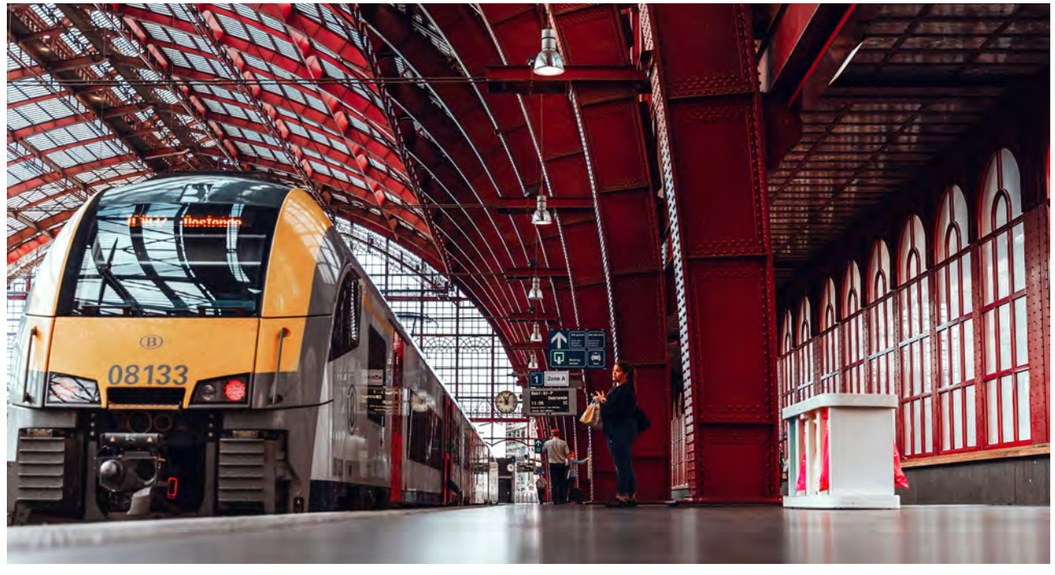
Flight Free UK wants to get 100,000 people to commit to give up flying in 2020; with the hope they will abstain permanently. The group, which has 3,000 signatories so far, is also campaigning for a tobacco-style ban on airline advertising and wants the government to start taxing aviation fuel, which is currently exempt from duties.

"Fuel for coach travel and car use is taxed, but kerosene is not," said Anna Hughes, lead campaigner at Flight Free UK. "The playing field is not level."

A leaked report for the EU calculated that a tax on kerosene sold in Europe would reduce emissions from aviation by 11 per cent. The airline industry currently accounts for around 3 per cent of global CO_2 emissions. The International Civil Aviation Organization reckons the industry's carbon footprint could swell by 700 per cent within 30 years under a business-as-usual approach.

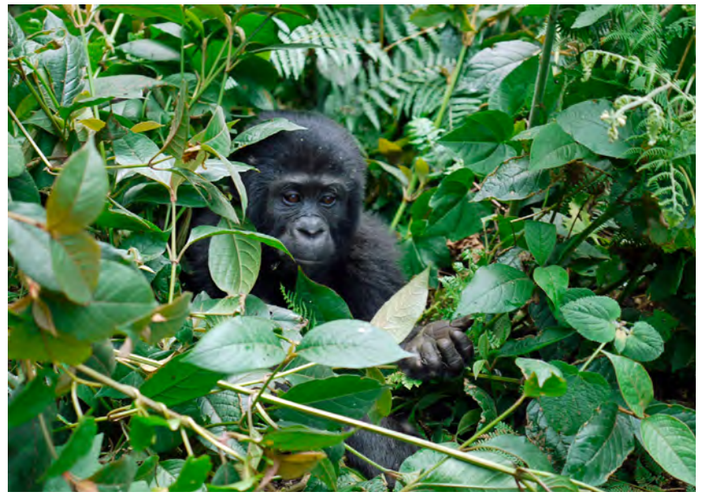
There are some signs that change is in the air, with easyJet claiming it will fly electric planes within 20 years and the Norwegian government aiming to make all short-haul flights electric by 2040. Dutch national carrier KLM has taken the surprising step of asking travellers to fly less.

The campaign to reduce air travel has some high-profile backers, including Greta Thunberg, the teen Swedish climate activist, who recently sailed to the US to avoid travelling by plane.



All aboard: demand for train travel is on the rise in Sweden, where the 'tagskryt' campaign started

Images: train: Vitor Pinto; gorilla: MonikaP; bridge: Clark Stevens, architect/Raymond Garcia, illustrator; oysters: Charlotte Coneybeer



'Economic progress need not come at the expense of wildlife'

Growing national economies need not spell bad news for the wildlife of low and lower-middle income countries, according to new research.

A study by the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and University College London compared bird and mammal populations in 33 countries against their wider socio-economic trends over the last 20 years.

The analysis of the developing nations found consistently positive relationships between economic growth, gender-parity in governments, and abundance of wildlife. The study's lead author, Judith Ament, said the research indicates that economic progress need not come at the expense of conservation. It "underlines the need for further integration of sustainable development strategies" she added.

Not all wildlife saw benefits. Dr Chris Carbone of ZSL noted that improved water sanitation and treatment had a negative impact on water bird populations, for example. "It's only by understanding these relationships that we can mitigate them," he said.

Plan to save LA's mountain lions – with a big bridge

Officials in California are planning an $87m (£70m) bridge across a 10-lane highway to allow wildlife a safe crossing between sections of the Santa Monica Mountain range close to Los Angeles. For the region's endangered mountain lions, this means more freedom to roam – and more mountain lions to mate with.

A 2018 report found the big cats were at risk of extinction in southern California within 50 years if their genetic diversity is not increased. Along with other wildlife in the region, such as coyotes, deer and snakes, mountain lions have been restricted from wandering by the busy highways that feed Los Angeles, limiting their mating prospects.

The bridge (pictured below), now in its final design phase and slated for completion in 2023, will offer animals safe passage across Highway 101. It received a reported $13m (£10.4m) in private donations.

'Mother oyster' sanctuary in Essex could restore species

A conservation project that aims to restore native oysters to the River Thames is under way.

The 'mother oyster' sanctuary has been established in an Essex estuary, and is run by the Essex Native Oyster Restoration Initiative. The project includes oyster experts and conservation groups, led by ZSL.

Native oysters have suffered a 95 per cent decline in the last 200 years due to overfishing and habitat loss. The sanctuary was created by laying a bed of recycled shells – a process known as "laying the cultch" – providing the hard surface oysters need to breed.

Adult ('mother') females were introduced in July and have since spawned. Spat collectors – plastic A-frames to monitor the baby oysters – have also been deployed, and experts will check their progress later in 2019.

Bus stops in Utrecht designed to benefit bees

More than 316 bus stops in the Dutch city of Utrecht have been transformed into mini urban havens for bees.

The bus stops, which are owned and managed by operator RBL Outdoor on behalf of the local government, have been installed with green roofs to help meet the city's requirements for healthy urban living.

Green roofs help to capture fine dust and rainwater and encourage biodiversity by providing ideal conditions for bees to thrive.

In 2018, the European Parliament's agricultural committee warned that "urgent action" is needed to protect Europe's bees. According to its research, 84 per cent of plant species and 76 per cent of food production in Europe depends on pollination, yet in some member states the number of bee colonies has declined by more than half.

Utrecht will also unveil a bee-friendly advertising mast before the end of 2019, featuring "the largest bee-hotel in the world".

"Green roofs help to capture rain water and encourage biodiversity"

London borough hails green transport scheme

Waltham Forest's award-winning schemes include a major upgrade of cycling infrastructure

A 'radical programme' that involved closing dozens of roads to cars, offering free cycle training and introducing a bike cargo delivery service is having a 'significant impact' in Waltham Forest.

Since launching the programme, the borough has upgraded cycling infrastructure with 24km of segregated cycle paths, and delivered cycling training to 15,000 adults and children. The local authority has since announced plans to extend the work, including building a further 5km of segregated bike lanes.

Paul Gasson, chair of the Waltham Forest Cycling Campaign, said the area could serve as a model for other urban centres in the UK. "It's a massive way of reducing carbon emissions. It's so powerful. People from across the country want to come and see this stuff because it's working," he said.

Above: Waltham Forest's programme to boost walking and cycling appears to be paying off

Independent research commissioned by the borough found that residents were more likely to cycle or walk in areas where the infrastructure had been improved.

Style with substance: a model in one of Hungarian designer Kata Szegedi's looks at Helsinki Fashion Week in July

"In London, the focus was on the relationship between creativity and sustainability"

Helsinki Fashion Week organisers bring sustainability drive to New York, London, Milan and Paris

Following its sustainable fashion showcase in July, the organisers of Helsinki Fashion Week hope to nudge the global fashion industry toward a more ethical future. The event's founder, Evelyn Mora, hosted a series of events to coincide with the four leading fashion week showcases, in New York, London, Milan and Paris.

The aim of the events was to encourage "much-needed dialogues and address fundamental issues" in the fashion industry. The New York version included a panel discussion on sustainability and cultural influences. In London, the focus was on the relationship between creativity and sustainability.

Helsinki Fashion Week has included a focus on sustainability since its launch five years ago. Designers showing collections for the 2019 event in the Finnish capital included Kata Szegedi, who uses recycled materials in her range of tailored womenswear.

Meanwhile British designer Patrick McDowell showed a collection made with waste fabrics collected from high fashion houses such as Burberry.

Images: bee bustops: Gemeente Utrecht; Helsinki Fashion Week: Wongwannawat

Reforestation schemes gather pace worldwide

Millions of new trees have been pledged after a study indicates their 'mind-blowing potential' to tackle the climate crisis

A slew of tree-planting schemes have been announced following findings by Swiss scientists that mass-scale reforestation has "mind-blowing" potential to help combat the climate crisis.

According to the study, published in July by researchers at the Crowther Lab in Zurich, planting trees across the 0.9bn hectares of land suitable for reforestation globally could capture as much as two-thirds of all emissions that have been released by human activities.

Since the report's publication, local and national governments as well as companies have pledged to plant millions of trees. Lancaster City Council urged residents to help fulfil a plan to plant 1m across north Lancashire as part of the Northern Forest scheme. Cornwall Council has pledged to cover 8,000 hectares of the county with trees.

In August, Ireland's government announced plans to plant 22m trees each year until 2040.

Boot brand Timberland has pledged to support the planting of 50m trees by 2025. First, it will work on projects in the US, Dominican Republic, Haiti, China and Mali.

"It's a tangible way people can make a difference," says Tracey West, chief executive of The Word Forest Organisation, a charity that supports tree planting in Kenya.

Social enterprise search engine Ecosia, which uses its revenue to support reforestation, reported a spike in downloads in August, in response to the fires devastating the Amazon. The Berlin-based company has pledged to plant an extra 3m in Brazil next year.

Closer to home, the Woodland Trust is gearing up towards its Big Climate Fightback awareness campaign, encouraging people in the UK to help plant 1m trees on 30 November. Michael Peacock from the charity, said: "Planting trees is the natural solution – they absorb harmful CO2 and produce oxygen. But we are not planting anywhere near enough."

WHO'S PLANTING?

A snapshot of the organisations that committed this summer to reforestation projects

JULY

Cornwall Council: 8,000 hectares by 2030

Lancaster City Council: 1m as part of the Northern Forest scheme

AUGUST

11 members of Water UK: 11m by 2030

Ecosia: 3m in 2020 in Brazil

Ireland: 440m by 2040

SEPTEMBER

Timberland: 50m by 2025

Woodland Trust: 1m on 30 November

Woodland Trust: 60m – one for every UK citizen – by 2025

Image: Daria Nepriakhina

Plastic-free paradise: the Greek island that aims to eliminate plastic waste in three years

The Greek island of Paros is famed for its blue and white painted houses, beautiful beaches and turquoise seas. And very soon it may be able to add its environmental credentials to that list, having been picked to become a model for a future free of plastic waste.

The Clean Blue Paros project, which is being run by UK-based NGO Common Seas, hopes to make the island free from plastic waste within three years. The work will include eradicating some types of plastic, overhauling the waste management systems, educating residents and changing legislation. This is the first time that a holistic, whole-systems change approach to plastic pollution has been attempted anywhere, claim organisers.

Paros was chosen because of its size and complexity; 13,000 people live there all year round, but it welcomes approximately 400,000 tourists every summer. The team has its work cut out – 95 per cent of waste in the Mediterranean is plastic and mostly linked to tourism.

So far, 50 businesses have committed to reducing plastic, and the team anticipates that more will come on board. Other initiatives include turning used hotel bedsheets – otherwise sent to landfill – into reusable shopping bags; giving schoolchildren reusable water bottles and installing school drinking fountains.

The ultimate goal, though, is to scale the project to even larger communities. "If we'd chosen somewhere smaller, it would have been too easy," says Jo Royle, managing director of Common Seas. "Plastic pollution is complex and there's not one solution. But we hope if these systems work, they can be applied elsewhere too."

Good figures

9.83m

megawatt hours have been generated by wind turbines in Scotland in the first six months of 2019.

The wind power was enough to fuel 4.47m homes; twice as many as there are in Scotland. The country is well on track to meet its target of using renewable energy sources to power 100 per cent of its gross annual electricity by 2020.

0

There have been no cases of wild polio diagnosed in Nigeria – or anywhere in Africa – since 2016.

Nigeria is the last African country to have seen an outbreak of the virus. Following the announcement in August, the Africa Regional Commission for Certification of Polio Eradication can begin its final checks to confirm Africa is polio free.

10,242

firearms have been collected by police in New Zealand in the first month of a gun buyback initiative in July.

In the wake of mass shootings that killed 51 people at two mosques in Christchurch in March, Jacinda Ardern's government pushed through legislation banning semi-automatic weapons. An additional 1,269 were handed in under amnesty.

5

In five years, all clothes produced by Inditex will be made entirely from sustainable fabrics.

The commitment from the Zara parent-company, which is the world's third-largest apparel manufacturer, was announced during the company's annual shareholders meeting in July.

12.5k

is the number of bikes that can be stored at a new multistorey bike park in Utrecht, Netherlands.

The facility, beside the city's railway station, opened in mid-August as part of a wider strategy to enhance cycling infrastructure and encourage more people to cycle and use public transport.

19%

The decline in UK children dying from sudden infant death syndrome (Sids) – from 2016 to 2017.

Cases of Sids fell to a record low of 183 in 2017, according to Office for National Statistics data. The unexplained infant mortality rate now stands at 0.27 per 1,000 – almost half the rate it was in 2004 (0.5 per 1,000).

2,967

The number of wild tigers in India – an increase of more than 30 per cent on four years ago.

India is on track to hit the target set in the St Petersburg Declaration in 2010. As part of the agreement, countries pledged to double their wild tiger populations by 2022. At that time, India had an estimated 1,700 wild tigers.

54

hours is the time it took Sarah Thomas to swim the Channel four times non-stop.

The first person to achieve the feat, the 37-year-old American is a breast cancer survivor and finished the swim in September, just a year after completing treatment. Thomas dedicated the achievement to "all the survivors out there".

2035

is the year by which Finland will be carbon neutral, according to a pledge by its government.

The new Finnish government made the announcement in June. In the same month, city officials in Helsinki launched an app to encourage residents and visitors to reduce carbon emissions by choosing more sustainable options in areas such as dining and transport.







SHARING THE FUTURE

With co-housing on the rise in the UK, it is touted as a model for better homes and stronger communities. In Brexit Britain, can this type of living – where decisions are made by consensus and everybody pulls together in times of crisis – also help us become better citizens?

Words by Lucy Douglas
Photography by Sam Bush

Poppy Stones is redirecting trains. It's 9am on a Sunday morning and, on a homemade map of Network Rail's London North Western route that takes up most of the living room floor, she is diverting the miniature locomotives from their assigned course, much to the irritation of her five-year-old brother, Jasper.

At 15 months old, Poppy is Lancaster Cohousing's youngest resident, and she and Jasper have lived in the intentional community all their lives. "We were really drawn to the way of living where you know your neighbours – it felt like an old-fashioned village," says their mother, Becky Stones.

Forgebank, home to the family's community, is one of 27 such developments in the UK. Poppy and Jasper's home sits on a quiet terrace along with 40 others, facing south across the River Lune and overlooking the woodland opposite.

Like Stones, many residents are attracted to living in a way that affords better relationships with the people around them. "I don't think it's actually natural for humans to live alone," says Mary Searle-Chatterjee, a retired anthropology lecturer.

She is Lancaster Cohousing's oldest member – although she says: "I don't believe with age comes wisdom" – and lives on her own. She wanted to balance her independence with being part of a community. "I wanted to live in co-housing. This one seemed practical, down-to-earth, politically committed and in tune with my views," she says.

Like any other street in the UK, the households along Forgebank contain a spectrum of human life: residents (some 60 adults and 15 children) range in age from one to 77 years. There are young families and couples expecting new arrivals, households with teenage children and empty nesters, child-free couples, LGBT couples, people living alone – all with their own private homes with a lockable front door.

Unlike other streets, however, it also has a common house halfway along it, which is shared by everyone who lives here. It's a large, high-ceilinged space with an industrial-sized kitchen, tables for group meals, plus a log fire and sofas. French windows lead out on to a terrace overlooking the river, where there's patio furniture and a recent addition: the children's trampoline. With the idyllic river backdrop, it feels a little like a holiday camp.

Across the walkway, there are letterboxes and the communal laundry, deliberately separate to encourage residents to chat with each other. Several storerooms have been given over to a small grocery shop as well as a bike room, a kids' playroom and a meticulously organised garden shed.

Vehicles are confined to a carpark near the main road, meaning Jasper and other children on the street can safely whizz between each other's homes on their scooters.

"We could have chosen very different options. We wanted to live as part of a community and somewhere that would be really great for kids," says Charlie Little, a social worker who lives with her partner Johnny Unger, a linguistics lecturer at Lancaster University. They are expecting a baby this autumn, and Unger also has a four-year-old son, Byron.

Co-housing began, in 1960s Denmark, based around the philosophy that "a child should have 100 parents". "It's ideal for children – and parents," confirms Becky. "You have instant playmates without having to plan things all the time."

There's also instant support. "When Poppy was born, one of our neighbours came and washed up for us for about four weeks, which was incredible. The next-door neighbour said, 'if you ever need me to hold Poppy while you do something'. I've only done it a few times but it's so helpful when there's something that I just can't do while I'm holding the baby."

And it's not only parents with young children who feel the benefits of living communally. "This is a very stimulating place to live. It's full of opinionated people, a lot of whom are quite independent, and I value that," says Searle-Chatterjee.

"There are so many different people with different interests organising different things," says Patrice Van Cleemput, a retired health visitor who lives with her partner Corinne Cambrey, an ambulance driver. "We have lots of experiences that we probably would never have had if we didn't live here."

Co-housing is gaining in popularity in the UK. In 2013, there were 14 completed developments – just over half today's number. This year alone has seen two new projects finalised – Marmalade Lane in Cambridge and Cannock Mill in Colchester – with a combined 65 new homes between them.

Often described as a model for a better way of creating houses, it offers alternatives to a host of problems – and is increasingly attracting the attention of councils and housing associations.

For a start, homes are designed by or for the people who are going to live in them – one of the defining characteristics of co-housing developments. "It's people-powered housing – getting people to think about what's best for them and their community, as opposed to being passive recipients," says Angela Vincent, a board member for the UK Cohousing Network.

For the community in Lancaster, one of the project's original aims was to create sustainable, energy efficient homes. As a result, the houses and common house have been built to Passivhaus standards, a German-originated building style that promotes passive heating (such as heat via the sun) and insulation, and which require, on average, 75 per cent less energy to heat, compared to standard new-builds in the UK.

"The access to resources that living here gives me has been so normalised that I don't even think about it"
— Chris

The homes are heated via a biomass-powered district heating system and receive electricity from solar and the nearby Halton Lune Hydro plant. "Growing up in Austria, I find that houses in the UK, particularly newer ones, are built with pathetic levels of insulation and very little thought to sustainability," says Unger. "It's really good to have a house that's really well insulated, and has a district heating system and renewable energy."

Lancaster is not the only community to have chosen to build their homes to such a hi-spec: Cannock Mill has also built Passivhaus homes. The 20 homes at Lilac (Low Impact Living Affordable Community) in Leeds include some Passivhaus features and other low-carbon building methods.

"I think we've managed to persuade the council that if they build council houses again, they should build them to Passivhaus standards," says Chris Coates, a Lancaster Cohousing member who lives with his partner, Kate.

Then there's the community aspect of co-housing, a potential cure for the 'loneliness epidemic' sweeping the UK. According to figures published in 2018, 5 per cent of UK adults "often or always" feel lonely, and 16 per cent feel lonely some of the time. The number of people living alone surpassed 8 million in 2018, up from 7.7 million in 2017, and is projected to rise further.

There's also evidence to suggest that living alone has an impact on health. People aged 65 or older who live alone are 50 per cent more likely to go to A&E than those living with other people; they are also more likely to suffer with a mental health condition.

There are limits to its ability to solve the UK's ills, however. While some communities (such as the one in Leeds) have found alternative financial models to make ownership accessible to people on lower incomes, co-housing often presents the same barriers as any other housing – it's unaffordable for many people.

Sunday brunch is a regular communal meal time for Lancaster Cohousing. This week, it's veggie fritters with mushrooms and homemade beans and around 30 people trickle into the common

Becky, Jasper and Poppy Stones

Becky moved into the community with her now-husband Robin in 2012. Since living in Forgebank they've got married and had two children: Jasper, who's five and Poppy, 15 months. "It was great to move here and find lots of people who were really enthusiastic about things we were enthusiastic about," says Stones.

Clockwise from top centre: Forgebank's shared bike store; a communal kitchen in the shared common house; residents take turns to cook for the community; many Lancaster Cohousing members are passionate about environmental issues

What is co-housing?

Co-housing is a type of intentional community living, combining private homes with shared facilities. Far from the 'co-living' developments that are gaining popularity, which are typically owned by a developer who charges premium rents for extras such as cleaning and organised social events, co-housing projects are designed by or on behalf of their residents.

The community in Lancaster is intergenerational but others are specifically for certain groups, like LGBT people (one community in London is specifically for lesbians over the age of 50). Senior co-housing is seeing increasing interest among older people, who often view it as a way to maintain a healthy independence while avoiding isolation.

Mary Searle-Chatterjee

Mary is a retired anthropologist and has lived in the co-housing community since 2013. "We're not singing from one hymn sheet," she says. "But I feel going into the future with people who are active in different ways – for me, I feel that's a good way to live."

"We're not all singing from one hymn sheet at all. But I feel going into the future with people who are active in different ways – for me, I feel that's a good way to live"
— Mary

house from about 10.30 am. The community had originally hoped they'd eat together four times a week. But in practice, it's proved tricky to organise 60 adults that frequently.

"The scale excites me but I know it doesn't other people," says Coates. "We afford the scale of communal resources because we're the size we are. At some point, it became cheaper to do district heating than to provide everybody with a central heating system in their house."

Sharing within communities allows the individuals to consume less. There's a car club, with a pool of six vehicles including two electric. Anyone wanting their own car has to meet strict criteria to prove why they need it. Three washing machines in the laundry serve 41 households.

The on-site grocery shop sells everything from bread and milk to pulses and pasta, Fairtrade coffee or chocolate. Everything comes from brands carefully selected for their ethical and sustainable values that aren't always available in mainstream supermarkets: tinned groceries from co-operative Suma; dried food in bulk containers so residents can avoid single-use packaging; toilet roll made from recycled tissue.

"We were really worried if we let too many retired people in we'd have to look after them. It's completely the other way around. The retired people look after the community, because they've got the time," explains Coates.

Keeping everything running is no small task. "There is always something that needs doing," says Van Cleemput. A condition of membership is giving two and a half hours per week to "necessary work" for the community, such as helping with finances or overseeing the grounds.

They're also collectively responsible for running Halton Mill, which sits at the top end of their site, nearest the main road. Once a factory for an engineering firm, it was derelict when Lancaster Cohousing was looking to buy the site in 2010, and restoring it became a condition of the community's planning permission.

It now serves as a village hall, with studios to hire that are used for events or yoga lessons run by local instructors, as well as office space and a hotdesking hub that several co-housing residents work from.

"The access to resources that living here gives me – there are people here who run a food co-op; I can drive cars I'd never be able to afford because I'm part of a car club," says Coates. "Those things have been normalised and I don't even think about them. The mill is the icing on the cake."

Though he rejects the term 'founder member' ("too much baggage – we're way past that now") Coates was one of the five people who first formalised their intention to create a co-housing development in 2006 by incorporating Lancaster Cohousing Company Ltd.

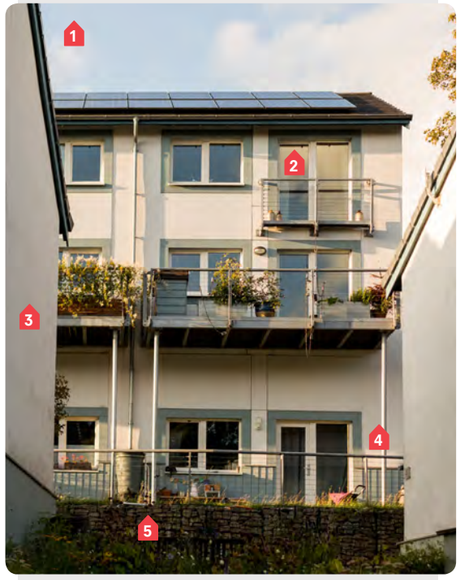
He and his partner, Kate, are also the only members of Lancaster Cohousing to have previous experience of living in intentional communities, which perhaps explains why he's the only one of the original five still there. "You have to be a bit thick-skinned to live communally, to a certain extent," he cautions.

Because for all its benefits, co-housing comes with pain points, too. "It's the longest and most expensive personal development course you'll ever go on," says Jo Lyon, a knowledge and learning specialist in the charity sector who lives in the community. "You learn so much about yourself and other people."

"The thing that has caused me to re-evaluate so much is realising that what I understood as diversity was actually a very narrow form of diversity," says her partner, Miles Doubleday,

What is Passivhaus?

Passivhaus is an international design standard for buildings that are both highly energy efficient as well as effective at providing a high level of comfort for the people in them. Compared to standard new-builds in the UK, Passivhaus buildings require around 75 per cent less energy to heat.



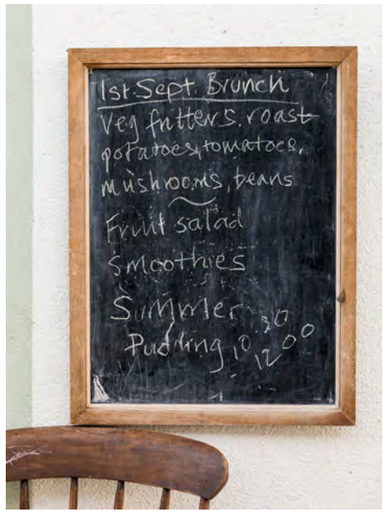
1 South-facing to optimise passive heating from the sun

2 High-performance windows and doors with insulated frames

3 Very high levels of insulation with no 'thermal bridge' – a break in the insulation through which heat can escape

4 Airtight building fabric; there are no gaps – for example a letterbox – through which warm air might escape

5 Each home has a mechanical ventilation system to recover heat



Above: Lancaster Cohousing's district heating system; right: the community eats together a couple of times a week; far right: members run a small grocery shop

a software developer. "The breadth of the axis on which two humans can be different from each other – my eyes have been totally opened to that."

Like any society, Lancaster Cohousing has a set of policies that community members must live by. There are general meetings every other month to discuss policies and other community matters. Decisions are made by consensus, as opposed to a majority rule. "Anything by consensus is slow," says Van Cleemput. Some people might find a certain policy draconian; for others, it's too weak. But, crucially, everyone needs to agree.

"We woke up the morning after the EU referendum and Miles said 'I wish we'd done that by consensus,'" says Lyon. "One thing I've really learned [since living here] is the power of consensus decision making. We follow quite a structured process and we've really worked hard on making that better and making sure no one is using power to influence other people.

"It takes a lot of active listening, really trying to empathise with somebody that you don't agree with. It feels like the complete opposite to the way we seem to be making a lot of our political decisions at the moment. That 'winner-takes-all' approach is horrendously divisive and potentially quite dangerous."

There is one topic that has caused factious rifts in the community: food. Specifically, the presence of meat and animal-derived foods in community meals. On one side, passionate vegans; on the other, omnivores who enjoy eating meat.

It's a conflict that has nagged at the group for years. There have been unpleasant meetings and arguments; community members have left. It's become a bitter war of ideologies: Lancaster Cohousing's private version of Brexit.

Unlike Brexit, however, both sides have to address their differences head-on. "We had some strong conflict and high emotion," says Chambrey. "[But] we can't run away from here. We have to solve it." If you don't learn to compromise, she says, the alternative is shrinking away from community life altogether.

Hours have been spent in meetings trying to reach a mutually satisfying solution, trying different methods of conflict resolution: restorative justice circle; one-on-one meetings between key protagonists.

It has required a tremendous amount of patience and compromise. "When you move into a community, it's never going to be the community you dreamt of, because other people come and bring their own ideas," says Chambrey. "You have to adapt."

Not everyone can. Several people have decided that communal life wasn't for them and moved out (the first few years typically bring the most movement for co-housing communities). "I don't think there was any way of knowing if it was wrong for you," says Coates. "We were selling a concept."

Ultimately, it comes down to putting a desire to be part of the community ahead of a desire to get your own way on individual issues. It's a sharp contrast to the politically polarised state the UK currently finds itself in.

"Because we're all in this space together, you have to work out how to maintain your friendships while sometimes profoundly disagreeing on an issue," says Lyon. It's a skill, she adds, and one that everybody has been forced to develop. "The number of casual relationships I've got with people who I don't see eye to eye with is great."

One thing everyone does appear to agree on: community living really comes into its own in times of crisis. "Storm Desmond was the best bit of community-building we've ever done," Coates says. "All differences went out the window."

The 2015 storm resulted in floods that put parts of Lancaster and Cumbria under more than a metre of water. Miraculously, the rising river stopped short of the homes at Forgebank, however there was still talk of evacuating the street. Luckily, the community was organised to deal with such an event.

"Something happens, and we're like a team of ants," says Chambrey. "Everybody knows what they have to do, when they have to do it and we all check on each other. That's brilliant."

Last year, the community dealt with its first death. "It was very moving," says Coates, but, "it was a very positive experience. It didn't feel in any way tragic, because of the way it had happened."

Roger had moved into the community knowing his cancer was terminal. "He was living on his own, feeling very lonely so he moved here and got very involved in the community," Coates explains. As the side effects of his treatment got worse, however, Roger had decided stop taking the drugs. "He made an announcement, said: 'I'm quite happy to talk about it; quite happy not to talk about it if you find it upsetting. Come and see me'."

"We're all in this space together, so you have to work out how to keep your friendships while profoundly disagreeing on an issue"—Jo

Jo Lyon and Miles Doubleday

Miles, a software developer, and Jo, a learning specialist in the charity sector, moved from Oxford to join the community. They were the first members to move into Forgebank, in August 2012. "I look around the world at people falling out with each other; the only way I could imagine trying to work against that was to move to an intentional community," says Miles.

Johnny Unger and Charlie Little

Johnny, a linguistics lecturer at Lancaster University and Charlie, a social worker, have owned their home on Forgebank since August 2018, having rented for six months before that. They are expecting a baby in the autumn and Johnny also has a son, Byron, four. "Having people around that you can depend on if it comes down to it was the attraction," says Johnny.

So his neighbours sat and chatted with him and friends took care of him. At his suggestions, a coffin was placed in the mill for the community to write messages of farewell on. "For the last two weeks he was in a hospice and the nurses could not believe he'd been looked after for the previous six months by his neighbours. He would have been in hospital well before the last two weeks if he hadn't been living in co-housing."

Every member has their personal gripes with the community, but a shift in perspective is often all it takes to remind them of everything they get right. "I'm a member of a tennis club and our committee meetings are so disorganised compared to our meetings here," says Van Cleemput.

"It's a giant experiment, what we're doing here, and all of us are working on it together in our different ways," says Doubleday.

The rift, although not completely healed, has found an equilibrium. The people who have left have been replaced by new members who don't carry the baggage of past conflicts; Little and Unger, for example, bought their home in August 2018. "When we came in we were all fresh-eyed and full of energy," explains Charlie. "I think that was quite good for the community."

And life carries on. Since moving in, Lancaster Cohousing has had intra-community marriages and a handful of babies born – with two more due to arrive before the end of the year. "We've matched, hatched and dispatched," says Coates.

"I feel incredibly lucky and privileged. This is far more than I thought we could ever achieve. I cannot believe what we've done here, from where we started.

Co-housing around the UK

Older Women's Co-housing, London
The first co-housing scheme for older women in the UK, OWCH in London is home to 26 women over the age of 50. The idea was first formulated in 1998, however community members did not move into their homes until late 2016.

Low Impact Living Affordable Community (Lilac), Leeds
An intergenerational co-housing community in 20 eco-homes, founded in 2006 and completed in 2013. It has pioneered its Mutual Home Ownership Scheme, to make homes affordable to would-be residents who might otherwise be priced out of the market. As well as energy-efficient building, the community share resources and grow food on-site to keep their carbon footprint down.

Cambridge K1 co-housing, Cambridge
The intergenerational community that lives at the new Marmalade Lane development of 42 homes, which range from one-bedroom flats to four-bed houses. Like Lancaster Cohousing's Forgebank, the Marmalade Lane plot was abandoned in 2008 by the developer working on it. The local council, unable to find other developer, decided to take the bold step of supporting the K1 co-housing group in bringing their vision to life.

Cannock Mill Co-housing, Colchester
A co-housing scheme due to be completed this autumn, Cannock Mill features 23 new homes built to Passivhaus standards for its community of people aged between 50 and 70. A Grade II-listed timber mill on the site serves as the community's common house and is even planning to get the mill pond ready for wild swimming.

Down the rabbit hole

Words by Gavin Haines

Illustrations by Pâté

Psychedelics are class A drugs, but their potential for treating mental health conditions is becoming harder to ignore

Every route I had taken to help with depression had failed. The medication wasn't working and the talking therapies weren't working – I thought 'what have I got to lose?'"

Michael, a 56-year-old web developer from County Durham, recalls what led him to take part in a clinical trial to see how psilocybin, the active ingredient in magic mushrooms, affected people with depression.

Conducted by Imperial College London, the trial in 2015 saw Michael take two doses of psilocybin, the first of which sent him tripping into what he believes was the afterlife. It was a profound journey. "A lot of my depression was caused by the fact my mother had passed away and my friend had committed suicide," he tells Positive News. "When I had that glimpse into the afterlife, I thought 'well they're OK, I know they are fine. I know what's there'."

Since then, Michael, who's reluctant to elaborate on the experience for fear of coming across "new agey", claims his depression lifted. What's more, he says, the experience gave him a newfound appreciation for nature and a desire to make music, a hobby he had long abandoned.

Michael is one of thousands of volunteers to have participated in a new wave of psilocybin trials investigating how the drug impacts people suffering from depression, addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health conditions. Around 300-350 million people worldwide suffer with depression, and an estimated 20 per cent of them do not respond to existing treatments.

Imperial College, which opened a dedicated Centre for Psychedelic Research in April, is a world leader in the field and one of a number of institutions conducting the trials. King's College London and Compass Pathways, a life sciences company, are also at the forefront of research. More recently, Johns Hopkins University in the US announced the launch of its Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research in September, which it says will be the largest psychedelics research facility in the world.

"Early studies suggest that coupling a psychoactive medicine, such as psilocybin, with supportive care can provide an immediate and sustained reduction in depression following a single treatment," explains Ekaterina Malievskaia, co-founder of Compass Pathways. "It won't work for all, but we hope it will help many of the millions of people who don't respond to existing treatments [for depression]."

Such research had been commonplace before the 1960s, thanks partly to Swiss scientist Albert Hofmann, who in 1938 became the first person to synthesise LSD. Hofmann observed that the mind-altering substance seemed to dissolve his ego and he continued taking it for many years. He died in 2008 aged 102. As well as opening doors into Hofmann's consciousness, LSD opened up new avenues of research for neuroscientists, who became fascinated by the substance's ability to alter the mind – for better and worse.

Inevitably, perhaps, LSD soon moved out of the lab and on to the streets, where it became synonymous with counterculture of the mid-20th century. In the late 1960s, however, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic had the drug outlawed, thus prohibiting further scientific research. "The research died after that," explains Dr James Rucker, who leads psilocybin trials at King's.

A DAWNING APPRECIATION

But as attitudes towards illegal substances soften – highlighted by the recent legalisation of cannabis in Canada, Uruguay and some US states – a new era of psychedelic research is dawning.

"We are picking up the baton 40 to 50 years later," explains Rucker. "That's fine from my perspective, but it's a shame for all the people this treatment might have helped all those years ago."

Though research is ongoing, there is mounting evidence to suggest psilocybin could offer effective treatment for depression, anxiety, PTSD and addictions to other drugs, such as the tobacco in cigarettes, and alcohol. Psilocybin has also been attributed with helping people who are close to death accept mortality. Consequently, Rucker predicts that psilocybin will be a licensed drug within five years.

Some people, however, aren't prepared to wait and are travelling to the Netherlands (where psilocybin in truffle form is legal) to take part in one of the growing number of psilocybin retreats springing up across the country.

Psychedelics in treatment

For addiction

In 2014, researchers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore put 20 long-term smokers on an addiction treatment programme, which combined psilocybin with cognitive behavioural therapy. After six months the abstinence rate was 80 per cent, significantly higher than the estimated 35 per cent success rate attributed to other medications.

For palliative care

A US study in 2016, dubbed the Psilocybin Cancer Anxiety Study, investigated the effectiveness of psilocybin in reducing stress among 29 cancer patients. It found psilocybin produced immediate reductions in anxiety and depression, with around 80 per cent reportedly showing sustained benefits nearly seven months later.

For depression

In 2017, researchers at Imperial College London gave psilocybin to 19 people with treatment-resistant depression. Fewer depressive symptoms were observed in all patients after a week, with 47 per cent reportedly depression-free five weeks later. Imperial College has since opened a dedicated centre for studying psychedelics.

Matthew Couch, a 40-year-old high school teacher from Denver, Colorado, attended one such retreat this summer in a last-ditch attempt to treat persistent depression and PTSD, which were sparked by the death of his mother and his involvement in a car accident.

Couch had previously been prescribed antidepressants, which he found ineffective, and received cognitive behavioural therapy, which he says was helpful. But he claims his biggest breakthrough came on a psilocybin trip, during which he believes he met his late mother ("she wasn't the best of moms") and made peace with her.

"I felt like I dealt with a lot of the trauma that I've been carrying all my life," he explains. "Some of the old patterns still pop up, but I'm able to notice them really quickly. I'm able to let things go that I wasn't previously able to let go of."

Since his trip, Couch has turned vegetarian, taken up new hobbies and has been taking better care of himself. "I'm eating less and exercising more, I have gone to tai-chi and started taking guitar lessons," he says. "During the trip I was like, 'man, I want to learn the guitar'."

JOINED-UP THINKING

Sarah, a 39-year-old nurse from Bristol, who declined to give her real name, also claims to have dealt with the death of her mother on a psilocybin retreat. While under the influence of the drug, she says, she received an apology from her mother, who had been physically abusive. "What came from that was compassion: for my mum, for me and for all of humanity. It was a weight off my shoulders."

Most retreats have strict screening processes and do not accept people with serious mental health conditions such as schizophrenia or psychosis. Many follow best practice for administering psilocybin as laid out by researchers behind the clinical trials, and put an emphasis on creating a peaceful setting, which can make the difference between a good or bad trip. Retreats also typically offer other activities, such as yoga and group therapy. But none are regulated and there have been reports of charlatan operators, leading critics to describe the burgeoning industry as a "wild west".

"It's the wild west of people's minds, too," explains Biz Bliss of The Psychedelic Society, outlining the potential dangers. The Psychedelic Society was established to increase public awareness about the potential health benefits of psychedelics, and though the UK-based organisation puts on psilocybin retreats in the Netherlands, it is clear that psychedelics are no panacea for poor mental health.

Indeed, the organisation advocates combining them with talking therapies, and insists they should be seen as part of the journey towards better mental health, not the destination.

"I think it's really important that within the community we are critical about [psilocybin] and do not see it as a cure-all," explains Bliss. "It's not magic, it's hard work."

"I felt like I dealt with a lot of the trauma I've been carrying all my life"

It pays to be kind

Some businesses are leading the way in creating a culture of kindness at work, and measuring it too

Words by Lucy Douglas Illustration by Spencer Wilson

Kindness might not be the first thing to spring to mind when you think about work. But more businesses are recognising that it is just as important to company culture as communication or collaboration.

Being kind to others stimulates serotonin and oxytocin – hormones associated with happiness. Research also shows that people who are regularly kind have significantly lower levels of the stress hormone, cortisol.

Now, the business world is starting to take note. "We're a small, close-knit team, and showing employees that management cares is motivating," says Alex Spencer, a marketing executive for gifting company Prezzybox.

Staff there are encouraged to carry out random acts of kindness for colleagues, while boss Zak Edwards often buys everyone lunch and encourages early finishes on Fridays.

Spencer quickly felt the benefits of a kind workplace. Receiving a present and card on her birthday, despite it only being her second day at the company, made her feel part of the team right away. She was also well supported by her manager when a family member fell ill.

"I think this approach stems from the company being family-owned and run," she tells Positive News.

"We're much more likely to want to stay with the business if we're treated with kindness. Staff turnover is really low and there isn't much of a hierarchy – we're all afforded the same kindnesses and we feel respected and appreciated as a result."

A kinder approach is embedded within the B Corp movement: businesses that balance purpose and profit and which are legally required to consider the impact of decisions on their workers, customers, suppliers and the environment.

UK retail giant John Lewis was established with a core belief in fairness and kindness to employees, while kindness is the central philosophy at skincare brand Simple.

Most businesses are familiar with key performance indicators (KPIs), but some experts now recommend firms implement kindness performance indicators. This could involve developing a kindness policy, regularly surveying employees' experiences of kindness in the workplace, and reviewing the results as a team.

Four ways to clock in with kindness

1 Real face time
Get away from your screen and chat to colleagues in person. Especially if teammates work remotely or on freelance contracts, make time for human connections.

2 Schedule kindness
From helping research a colleague's presentation, to emptying the office dishwasher, get into a routine of doing altruistic things for the people around you.

3 Pay a compliment
Too often, we're only told when we've done something wrong; let your colleagues know if you're impressed by their work on a particular project.

4 Offer support
If a co-worker is under pressure or going through a stressful period, offer to help ease their workload, take care of an errand, or bring them lunch as a surprise.

The lend game

Five ways to borrow, not buy

1 A-dressing waste

Hiring for a special occasion or a summer holiday lands you a new outfit without adding to the more than 300,000 tonnes of textiles that end up in landfill each year in the UK alone. Hire Street lets you borrow dresses and jumpsuits for up to 16 days at budget-friendly rates, while My Wardrobe HQ, due to launch this autumn, loans high-end gowns.

2 Hire power

Dubbed 'Airbnb for stuff', Fat Llama allows people to rent anything from campervans and tents for a weekend's camping, to marquees, DJ decks and even AV equipment for weddings. The platform connects people who are in need of specific, hi-spec items with owners who hope to make a bit of extra cash.

3 Bundles of joy

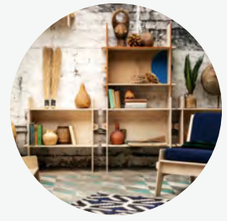
Clothes for growing little ones inevitably have a limited shelf life, no matter how well made. Bundlee rents batches of sustainably produced, cotton babywear for tots aged up to 24 months. Each bundle contains 15 items including onesies, leggings and sleepsuits. Once the clothes get too small, parents send them back in exchange for a larger set.

4 Wheely shareable

A new wave of rental services is making it possible to carpool with strangers. Startups like Drivy allow motorists to hire cars from local owners for as little as a few hours. Its service allows bookings via an app 24 hours a day, complete with insurance and roadside assistance – with hybrid and electric options available.

5 Sofa, so good

Ikea already runs a furniture exchange service, allowing people in Scotland to return old Ikea furniture to be sold again. The interiors giant is now set to launch a rental scheme worldwide following a trial earlier this year. Walsall-based family firm Fully Furnished has worked in this space for 18 years: offering an "affordable" alternative to furniture ownership.



Images: dress: Hire Street; speakers: Igor Starkov; babies: Bundlee; car: Sean Whalen; shelves: Ikea

Roger Moore Patrick in his Caribbean restaurant in Bristol, which opened in November 2018

Progressing past punishment

New initiatives popping up across Britain are taking an alternative approach to criminal justice – one that aims to break the cycle of reoffending and set people with convictions on a more positive course

Do the hustle

A radical new scheme in Bristol is helping young drug dealers find a brighter future

Words by Wil Crisp Photography by Damien Hockey

Thirteen years after he started his first career as a drug dealer, Roger Moore Patrick is preparing to open his second Caribbean restaurant in his home city of Bristol.

"If you want to survive in the drug world you have to be tenacious," he says. "You have to have courage and wits. You can't be too trusting and you have to pay attention. My past has given me an edge in the restaurant business that you can't learn at school."

Patrick is a product of Street2boardroom, a Bristol-based initiative that recently partnered with Avon and Somerset police as part of the new Call-In project, a scheme that's offering young people arrested for drug dealing offences a lifeline: instead of being entered into the traditional criminal justice system, they're given access to job training and sports facilities.

It is the first scheme of its kind to be offered in the UK and is based on a model first used by police in the US city of High Point, North Carolina, in 2004, where it led to a dramatic reduction in violent crime and drug dealing.

Patrick, who started selling cannabis when he was 16 before moving on to heroin when he was 19, believes the new strategy is likely to have similarly positive results in the UK, where violent crime has soared over recent years.

"So many of the young people selling drugs in the UK are doing it because they don't have any choice," he says. "If you get to people living in deprived areas when they are young and offer them opportunities to make money legally they won't need to turn to crime."

Right: Roger Moore Patrick's Caribbean restaurant in Bristol; far right: before opening his restaurant, Patrick ran a casual takeaway from his mother's kitchen

When he left school at 16, Patrick's mother was unemployed and in debt. He couldn't find a job and felt his only option to support his family was to turn to drug dealing. "It was never the lifestyle I wanted; when I was growing up I saw so many people end up either deported, imprisoned or killed because of dealing," he says. "There were some dealers around me that had money, fast cars and nice clothes – but even at a young age I knew these things were only temporary."

By the time he was 23, Patrick had been involved in multiple violent clashes with rival dealers, and on one occasion says he was kidnapped and had a gun held to his head. He was looking for a way out – but he couldn't hold down a legitimate job and kept having to do occasional drug deals in order to survive.

When he attended the Street2boardroom course in 2018, the course's founder, Clayton Planter, put him in touch with experienced professionals such as accountants, lawyers and business experts, and helped him transform the makeshift food delivery business he was operating out of his mother's kitchen into a legitimate restaurant, which opened in November last year.

"The most important thing I gained was a new mindset," says Roger. "I realised I was capable of things that I previously thought were impossible."

As well as funnelling young offenders into the Street2boardroom course, Avon and Somerset police is paying for young people to have driving lessons and take boxing classes at Bristol's Empire Fighting Chance boxing club.

Dr Mohammed Qasim, a criminologist and research fellow at Leeds Beckett University, believes that the Call-In project is a step the right direction, but will need close scrutiny to make sure that it produces the desired results.

"The criminal justice system is struggling against rising violent crime and there isn't the capacity to lock up this many young people," he says. "Long-term monitoring is going to be needed to ensure this is benefitting communities."

Qasim believes that helping young drug dealers learn to drive and teaching them to fight could make some of them more appealing to gangs that need young people with these skills. He also says that the new project needs to avoid simply rewarding those that break the law.

"I'd rather see the police try something new instead of doing the same thing and expecting different results"

Avon and Somerset police have said there will be a rigorous academic assessment and review process for the scheme, as well as follow-up programmes for those who participate.

Meanwhile, Street2boardroom's Clayton Planter is optimistic the Call-In project will make a difference for the young people that pass through it. "It can't be much worse than the existing system," he says. "As things stand, 40 per cent of young people reoffend. That's a huge percentage. I'd rather see the police try something new instead of doing the same thing and expecting different results."

Just how much of a difference the project will make over the long-term remains to be seen. Police hope it will build on the success of Bristol's Bright Outlook intervention scheme, which was aimed at young people aged between 10 and 16 who were deemed to be at a high risk of participating in criminal activities.

Avon and Somerset police say that 90 per cent of those who passed through the scheme did not become involved in crime. If the Call-In project produces the same kind of success it could well result in similar schemes being rolled out across the country.

Restoration project

Can promoting empathy between perpetrator and victim lead to better outcomes for both parties?

Words by Abby Young-Powell

When Peter Woolf, then a self-described "career criminal", broke into Will Riley's house in Islington in 2002 in an attempted robbery and hit him over the head several times, he didn't know the crime would transform his life. But years later, in prison, Woolf was asked to take part in a restorative justice trial, which involved a face-to-face meeting with Wiley. "He told me all the things I'd done to him," Woolf says. "About his emotions and trauma. For the first time in my life I experienced another human's pain." It sparked a transformation in Woolf, who was then addicted to drugs and alcohol. "I was overwhelmed," he says. "I didn't have a grasp on reality, so to suddenly get this empathy was a big deal."

In the years that followed, Woolf kept in touch with Riley and set about transforming his life. He got sober, left prison and studied at university. Riley is now one of his best friends, he says, and together they founded the charity Why me? Victims for Restorative Justice, in 2009. The charity runs a restorative justice service that facilitates meetings between victims and offenders. It also campaigns to improve access to the service across the UK. Since the 2016 EU referendum it has been running three projects that focus specifically on hate crime.

"We selected hate crime because it's so prevalent and so of our times," says Lucy Jaffe, director of Why me?. Hate crimes – in which people are attacked because of their race, religion, sexual orientation or another characteristic – have more than doubled in five years in England and Wales. Analysts have directly linked the surge to the EU referendum and terrorist attacks.

Jaffe says restorative justice can help tackle hate crime by uniting people. "It brings people together at a time when as a society we feel very atomised and fragmented," she says. "It's a way [to] see the humanity in each other and create connections."

Victims often feel marginalised and excluded by the criminal justice process, which focuses on detecting crime and prosecuting the offender, Jaffe says. Restorative justice enables them to be heard and to get their questions answered. For the offender, the process makes the victim come alive for the first time since the crime, she says. "They can feel shame and realise that they've hurt someone. [Both parties] are often nervous, but we prepare people carefully, so it's safe."

In one case, the charity helped facilitate a meeting between victim and perpetrator of an antisemitic attack. The victim wanted the perpetrator to write an essay about the Holocaust so they could understand what Jewish people had been through in the Second World War. "Hate crime is distinct in that you're attacking someone's identity and then [they] go on having that identity," Jaffe says. "It gives the victim a chance to articulate the harm and makes [the perpetrator] think twice."

Woolf, who has since been married, become a criminologist and written a book, says he is proud "beyond belief" of the work the charity continues to do. He's also proud of his own transformation. Restorative justice has enabled him to become "a caring person, a loving father and a good man," he says. "But it's what I'm not that's important. I'm not a crook and I'm not a drug addict or an alcoholic. I've got such a cool life now," he says.

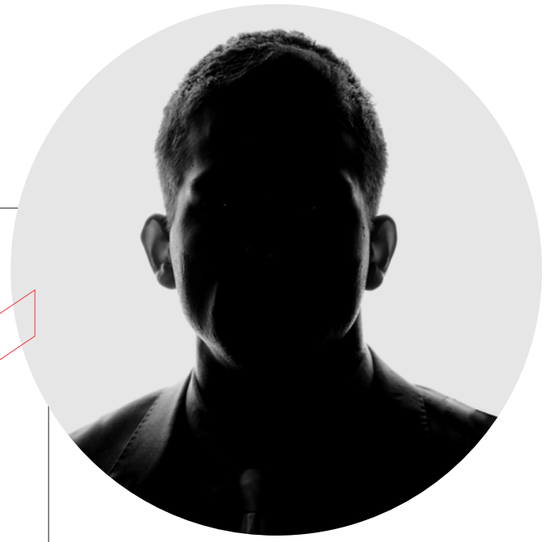
"Restorative justice is a way to see the humanity in each other"

Right: Peter Woolf (left) met Will Riley while he was in prison. He says taking part in restorative justice has changed his life

In the circle

A compassion-led approach is steering people convicted of sex offences away from isolation and reoffending

Words by Abby Young-Powell



The Corbett Centre, opened in a secret location in Nottingham in February by the Safer Living Foundation (SLF), is said to offer the world's first holistic approach to integrating sex offenders back into society. Here, men who have committed sex offences and served sentences are given support to make friends, find jobs, learn to cook and to manage inappropriate sexual thoughts. The Aurora Project at the centre, meanwhile, helps men who have not committed an offence but are worried they might, because they are disturbed by unhealthy sexual thoughts.

Organisers recognise it's controversial, but say the aim is simple; to prevent sexual abuse. "It's a community centre for people with sexual convictions," says Professor Belinda Winder, head of the research unit at Nottingham Trent University which is piloting the scheme in partnership with SLF and HMP Whatton, Europe's biggest prison for men who have committed sexual offences. "To our knowledge there isn't another one in the world."

According to the Office for National Statistics, 121,187 sexual offences were recorded by police in England and Wales in the year ending March 2017. The reoffending rate for such offenders is around 10-15 per cent.

But previous schemes haven't always worked. In 2017, the main sex offender treatment programme for England and Wales was scrapped after a report revealed it led to more reoffending. The study suggested sessions had become too generic.

The Corbett Centre hopes to succeed where previous methods have failed. One of the biggest precursors to sexual reoffending is social isolation, explains SLF's David Potter. "With a sexual offence more than any other, people are disowned and written off by society. If you're in a bedsit with no friends, family or job, [you're more likely to commit another offence and] go back to prison," he says.

At the centre, Potter runs 'circles of support and accountability', where volunteers meet regularly with an individual who has committed a sexual offence. Through tailored, compassion-focused therapy Potter and his colleagues help them manage their sexual thoughts. "We try to help people see they are more than their offending behaviour and they can do more for society," he says. "It's quite a leap for a lot of people to get their head around, but ultimately it is about preventing further victims." Such circles have been shown to reduce sexual reoffending by 70 per cent.

"I've seen people who would barely speak get jobs and relation-ships. It feels like we're on the cusp of something new"

Circles usually involve a social activity, like going for a coffee. Volunteers, often criminology and psychology students, listen and offer guidance on how to limit isolation, manage the risk of reoffending or find a job. One man says joining a circle at the Corbett Centre has helped him break a cycle of offending triggered by isolation and low self-esteem. "I've now got a real incentive to sort myself out," he says. "I didn't have that in the past and the upshot was I reoffended. Now, if I have a bad day, I have a walk. I genuinely haven't had a desire to reoffend since leaving prison." Without this help, he believes he would have been "much more likely" to commit another sexual offence.

Such comments may be difficult for some to accept. "I understand the stigma," Potter says. "There's a misconception that sexual offences are premeditated; quite often they're not. They're not all about sexual urges." There are a number of reasons, including past trauma, abuse and disempowerment. To reduce the likelihood of reoffending, offenders must understand why they committed the crime, he says.

Critics may argue the centre supports perpetrators over victims and directs funding away from survivors. "We're mindful of that," Winder says. "We say we need both; we absolutely need to help survivors, but there also has to be prevention." Others may be concerned the centre makes the nearby area unsafe. "[But the alternative is to] have twenty people wandering around Nottingham city centre with nowhere to go," Winder says.

The full impact of the Corbett Centre has yet to be evaluated (preliminary results are expected in 2020). But Potter says he has already seen positive results. "I've seen people who would barely speak get jobs and relationships," he says. "It feels like we're on the cusp of something new; a more humane, person-centred way of dealing with people who have sexual convictions."

Images: Woolf and Riley: Why me?; silhouette: Chris Pecoraro/Getty Images

The coffee industry has a big waste problem, but in Bristol, one innovative roastery is doing things differently – building a business from things sent to the scrapheap

A better brew

Words by Gavin Haines
Photography by Damien Hockey

'The Womble is my spirit animal'

→→ Dave Faulkner has spent a lot of time in skips. In fact, he built his business – Bristol-based Extract Coffee Roasters – on stuff other people had thrown in them. Scrap metal and wood became tables, a neglected bike was refashioned into a coffee blender. "The Womble is my spirit animal," he says.

From trash to treasure

→ Extract's four roasters (one of which is Betty, pictured) were all rescued from the scrapheap. Repurposing other people's junk was a necessity in the beginning. "We started the business with little money," says Faulkner. "We didn't have the budget to buy lots, so we looked around for what we could get for free. You won't believe the things people throw away."

Built, not bought

→ Even though Extract is now an established business with a team of 36, the philosophy of salvaging raw materials from scrap has never been lost. For its London training centre, which opened in 2018, Faulkner built the bars from the wooden floor of a shuttered pub.

Labour of love

↓ Restoring the vintage roasters was a time-consuming task. "We got our big roaster, Bertha, (pictured, previous page) from Bosnia," explains Faulkner. "She'd been sat outside for a couple of years and was pretty derelict. We spent four years restoring her." Betty, Extract's 1950s vintage roaster, was found wasting away in Wales. "She's now the heart and soul of our business."

They don't make 'em like they used to

↑ Extract's coffee roasters have been retrofitted with the kind of technology you'd expect from a modern machine. "The saying, 'they don't build them like they used to', is definitely true of the old roasters," explains Faulkner. "If they're looked after they will outlive us."

Bags of potential

→ Extract receives its ethically sourced coffee beans in hessian sacks. Though the bags are biodegradable, Extract reuses them. "We donate them to animal shelters, which use them for bedding," says Faulkner. "It's not just about sourcing ethically; we believe in doing our bit to operate ethically here in the UK too."

Fuel for good

← Much of Extract's own waste is recycled. Organic matter, such as coffee chaff and grounds, are turned into biofuel by another Bristol-based company called GENeco, which uses it to power its vehicles and supply the National Grid. "They collect our organic waste and put it through an anaerobic digestion process," says Faulkner. "This gives them compost and methane."

Positive.News
Brands of inspiration
EXTRACT COFFEE ROASTERS

This article has been created by Positive News and is supported by Extract Coffee Roasters. www.extractcoffee.co.uk

Rooted in unity

Employee ownership is having a moment in the UK. Founder of Riverford, Guy Singh-Watson, explains why he handed the reins to his workforce

Words by Anna Turns Photography by James Walker

"The need for an alternative approach to business has never been greater," says Guy Singh-Watson. He is foraging along the banks of the River Erme at low tide, searching for marsh samphire – the crunchy, salty plant with vibrant green stalks – to go in some of the 50,000 veg boxes that will be dispatched tomorrow. Regularly joining half a dozen pickers to cut samphire during the few weeks it is in season, he is clearly happy to get his feet wet and muddy on the frontline.

The alternative approach Singh-Watson has in mind may once have sounded radical, but it is growing in popularity among UK businesses. In June 2018, he sold three-quarters of the shares in Riverford, the Devon-based organic farm and veg box company that he founded in 1987, to its 741 employees for a quarter of their market value.

But switching the business to an employee ownership (EO) model wasn't done simply out of generosity. Singh-Watson considers it a shrewd business move too. "We need to encourage staff to have more control over their own jobs as well as the direction of the company," he tells Positive News. "That feeds their motivation and wellbeing and, as a result, creates a more productive workforce with a greater sense of unity. Employee owners are more invested, and the business will be more profitable in the long-term."

Kirsty Hale, head of recipes, has worked at Riverford for 11 years and says the workforce is now more cohesive. "Day to day, my job hasn't really changed, but there is more shared decision-making now and people are empowered to make positive change," she notes. It is key, Hale suggests, to balance giving people autonomy with consolidating the processes and structures that are in place. "Making sure everyone feels connected, whether they're in the barn packing veg boxes or in the office, is essential. It's a work in progress but it's quite enlightening to realise that it's commercially beneficial."

Because by many measures, the move has proved a success for Riverford. One year on, Singh-Watson has noticed a greater sense of pride among his fellow workers. The company reported its strongest financial growth in 30 years – thanks partly to favourable weather and bumper harvests – with a turnover of £65.9m for the year to April 2019, a 10 per cent increase in sales and 24 per cent rise in new customers. It is now on track to exceed a £70m turnover by 2020.

Most crucially for Singh-Watson, staff turnover has reduced by 15 per cent since the transition. Could this be due to the staff council consulting on issues such as wellbeing and work culture, and the recent company-wide 3 per cent pay rise? "So far, it's working fantastically well," he says. "We are making better decisions, although maybe it takes slightly longer to make them."

Employee ownership is nothing new, of course. The John Lewis Partnership has been owned by staff since 1929, and now has 83,900 partners. With gross sales of more than £11.7bn for the 12 months to January 2019, it's the largest EO business in the UK according to the Employee Ownership Association. Riverford is the 30th largest by number of workers and joins the likes of food wholesaler Suma, which has its headquarters in West Yorkshire, Brighton-based Mooncup, the 15,000-strong international engineering company Arup, and a more recent convert, electronics retailer Richer Sounds.

In November 2018, Bristol-based studio Aardman Animations followed suit in order to 'secure its creative legacy'. "I believe that those creating the value should benefit, rather than external third parties," says studio co-founder David Sproxton, who handed over a 75 per cent stake to 140 employees. "The EO model fits well with our collaborative, collegiate culture. It gives people a voice, and once people understand that they can make a difference, it revolutionises the way that business works."

Right: the Watson family, including the late John Watson, who inspired his children to form a new generation of farming enterprises, and Guy Singh-Watson (far right)

Employee ownership in numbers

60%
Growth in the number of UK EO businesses since 2014

83.9k
Number of employee partners at the UK's largest EO company: John Lewis Partnership

370
Number of UK businesses that are known to be employee-owned

7.3%
Year-on-year increase in productivity at the top 50 UK EO firms. The UK averge is -0.1 per cent

£19.8bn
Combined sales of the UK's top 50 EO companies in 2018

"To concentrate control in the boardroom is incredibly dangerous – most safe governance relies on the division of power"

"There is more shared decision-making now and people are empowered to make positive change"

EO businesses have been steadily growing in the UK, in both size and number. A survey conducted by the White Rose Centre for Employee Ownership shows that since 2014, when the government introduced Employee Owned Trust tax incentives, the number of EO businesses has risen by 60 per cent. Meanwhile the number of employees a firm needs to have in order to enter the UK's top 50 EO businesses has increased from 143 in 2014 to 403 today. Combined, the 370 companies known to be owned by staff contribute 3-4 per cent of the UK's annual GDP.

PASSING ON POWER

Many small businesses face an uncertain future as their founders approach retirement; around 80,000 financially solvent companies owned by someone over the age of 60 are wound up each year in the UK. For founders such as Sproxton or Richer Sounds' managing director Julian Richer, employee ownership is a way to secure a company's future while protecting the interests of the people who work there. With none of Singh-Watson's four children wanting to take over the farm, he felt that EO offered a patient and long-term approach to running the business: "It's virtually impossible for Riverford to ever be sold – if it was, all the money would go to charity, so co-owners wouldn't benefit," he says.

Under Riverford's new structure, employees collectively own 74 per cent of the shares, which are held in an employee trust. (Singh-Watson owns the remaining 26 per cent). As well as a conventional board of directors, the company now has an elected staff council, too. "To concentrate control in the boardroom is incredibly dangerous," suggests Singh-Watson. "Most safe governance relies on the division of power." The traditional shareholder model leads to endless production, he notes, that in turn drives the depletion of fossil fuels and other forms of environmental damage.

Under the fresh model, one of the functions of the employee trust is to ensure the company is run democratically while conforming to

Opposite: Singh-Watson says he is still happiest when in the fields with his crops

This page, clockwise from top: permanent workers on Riverford's field teams, seen here picking borlotti beans, are also co-owners; Riverford champions vegetables that thrive in British soils, such as the trusty swede; Ian and Alison Samuel, members of the South Devon Organic Producers Cooperative that Singh-Watson set up to supply Riverford; Nigel Venni, manager of Riverford's Sacrewell Farm in Cambridgeshire

Right: 75 per cent of Bristol-based Aardman Animations will be given to employees in a bid to 'safeguard independence'. The company is behind such works as Wallace and Gromit and Shaun the Sheep

"It gives people a voice and once people understand that they can make a difference, it revolutionises the way that business works"

Singh-Watson's 'founder's wishes'. These include a commitment to organic and a pledge not to be swayed by public opinion when it comes to sustainability best practice.

For example, Singh-Watson insists that local isn't always best. In collaboration with the University of Exeter, research conducted by Riverford found the carbon footprint of importing tomatoes from Mediterranean climes where they grow naturally to be 10 times smaller than growing them in polytunnels in the UK.

By investing time and money in research, Riverford aims to overturn assumptions about organic farming and minimise the business's environmental impact. (Singh-Watson explores such topics to charismatic effect in Riverford's Wicked Leeks online magazine.) Scientists at the University of Exeter are now working on a sustainability audit for Riverford, to gauge what can be improved further.

"Most environmental solutions are complex and require a long-term view," says Singh Watson. "Short-termism is one of the great weaknesses of capitalism. There's a deep-rooted unwillingness to deal with complex issues because the focus is solely on profit."

According to Deb Oxley, CEO of the Employee Ownership Association, EO businesses "do well while doing good". Unencumbered by the short-term expectations of reward by external shareholders, they can plan sustainable growth over the longer term. And, adds Oxley, the model keeps companies resilient in tough times.

"Employee ownership allows the business to preserve its values, ethos, employees and suppliers by rooting the business in its locality for the longer term."

In 2010, researchers at Cass Business School found EO businesses had higher rates of sales growth and job creation in the recession than companies with conventional ownership. Staff at Aberystwyth-based Aber Instruments chose a temporary 10 per cent pay cut during a downturn, for example, which enabled the business to recover quickly. Subsequently, revenue grew by 30 per cent over two years.

Five of Riverford's employee-owners now sit on a remuneration committee, consulting on issues around pay, bonuses and pensions. If poor weather leads to poor harvests, for example, they may decide to forgo co-owner bonuses that year.

"The stability and resilience of employment ownership makes this model better placed to withstand crises such as the looming climate catastrophe," concludes Singh-Watson. With that, he fills his trug with samphire and wades back across to the riverbank with his harvest.

Juliet Davenport pioneered a new way of powering homes when she founded Good Energy 20 years ago. Now, she's at the forefront of business leaders proving that companies can do right by the planet as well as their shareholders

Change generator

Words by Anna Turns

Climate change rarely made headlines in the 1990s. Although the science was there, many people hadn't heard it. Juliet Davenport felt there was a need for someone to take responsibility, but the lack of widespread knowledge made her self-appointed task of setting up a renewable energy company all the more challenging.

Good Energy, which she founded (and still runs) to offer consumers "an option to become part of the solution", celebrates its 20th anniversary in November. But in those early days, persuading people to power their homes from a network of independent renewable energy generators was quite radical. "When we started, no one would fund us and government didn't really understand what we were doing; the legislation has been slightly against renewables," she tells Positive News.

Davenport's introduction to cleaner, greener energy began almost 30 years ago as an Oxford physics undergraduate. "You can't study atmospheric physics without covering climate change and that was my early awakening," she explains. "I researched green energy sources and looked at what the opportunities were; my instinct was to go direct to consumers rather than lobbying government."

Today, it's a different story: the company buys power from 1,500 independently owned generators, on top of the two wind and six solar farms it owns. It also has one of the UK's largest feed-in tariff customer bases, with more than 160,000 homes that receive a financial incentive for the renewable electricity they generate, often via solar panels on their roofs. What's more, the climate crisis is a now a concern for the majority of the population – "a significant shift in awareness" since 1999.

And alongside growing Good Energy – and lobbying government and industry on behalf of clean energy for consumers – Davenport has a new mission: persuading more businesses to become "regenerative by design".

"If we continue just to look for short-term shareholder return, we won't survive as a society. We live on a planet that is finite and that incentivises extraction not regeneration, so how corporations behave is fundamental," she says.

The premise is rooted in Kate Raworth's theory of 'doughnut economics' – a model for the 21st century that aims to balance society's needs like food, safety, healthcare and a political voice within the limits of the planet.

A regenerative business considers all its stakeholders: employees and customers as well as shareholders. "We also think of 'future holders', which leads us to consider whether a business strategy is sustainable for future generations of consumers in years to come," Davenport explains.

In Good Energy's case regenerative business practices range from a commitment to paying a living wage to using its extensive expertise on renewable energy to improve awareness, support new generators, influence government and work with the regulator to help protect green consumers. "We also focus on research and development of future renewable technologies," she adds. "We invest in the future and create a place where renewables can thrive."

A BETTER WAY

For some businesses, the idea that shareholder return isn't the single priority can be a culture shock, points out Davenport. It's a tricky balance, although there are often times when doing what's best for customers, staff or the planet is ultimately in the best interests of shareholders, too. Good Energy's first investors were customers who believed in its mission, and it maintains a strong crossover between customers and shareholders. Even fossil fuel companies are now attracting activist investors, who challenge them to take urgent action on climate.

Davenport is also part of the British Academy's Future of the Corporation, a three-year research programme defining a new framework for business. "We're considering the future role of business in our society, asking whether businesses have an obligation beyond their shareholders, and ultimately thinking about how we'll need to change legislation," she explains. "If an overarching piece of regulation set out that businesses must protect the planet, that would change the way business operates – it would make a huge difference."

The good news is, according to Davenport, there's appetite among a growing number of businesses to run in this more responsible way. Alongside Raworth, she has run a workshop on the benefits of regenerative models for forward-thinking companies like Lush and Triodos Bank.

As with any major change, it's taken the enthusiasm of a few bold leaders to demonstrate what an alternative might look like. "Huge companies like Unilever are adapting, and others like [clothing company] Rapanui are front leaders. Our job now is to prove that this model works," she explains.

"We're starting to see change in the UK. Once we have a certain number of secondary adopters, more companies will follow and then there's space for legislation – because that's what we need to get everybody over the line."

"If an overarching piece of regulation set out that businesses must protect the planet, that would change the way business operates"

Good Energy founder and chief executive Juliet Davenport

Biting back

Despite significant headway since 2010, progress in tackling malaria has stalled in recent years. A new vaccine could spell a breakthrough for people across Africa

Words and photography by Peter Yeung

At a modest public hospital atop a steep hill in the Ghanaian city of Cape Coast, dozens of women stand clasping their babies outside a small, nondescript room for what is a historic moment in their country's healthcare.

The Ewim Polyclinic, based in a low-income neighbourhood of the former European colonial capital, once the largest slave-trading centre in west Africa, has been chosen to launch the world's first malaria vaccine into Ghana.

There is an air of excitement among the families waiting in the shade outside the reproductive child health unit for an initial round of injections.

"Malaria has been a problem for my whole family already. My brother had it very seriously before and almost died," says Faustina Nyan, 22. Her son, seven-month-old Francis, gurgles away on her hip dressed in a vibrant orange outfit while waiting for his turn to be vaccinated. "If this can protect my boy from danger like that then I will be very happy."

Ghana is one of three African nations involved in the global pilot programme to roll out the vaccine to infants, along with Kenya, where it launched in September, and Malawi, where the first injections were delivered in April. In 2018, some 5.5m cases of malaria were reported in the west-African nation, and an estimated 20 per cent of children in Ghana have malaria parasites in their blood.

"Malaria is a very big problem for us, especially the under-fives," says Roseline Ennin, a nurse at the hospital. "They have fever, they vomit and have chills. If it's not treated, it can get very serious and some die. The whole of Ghana is happy about this vaccine and it will help us reduce malaria and mortality rates."

Globally, malaria kills more than 400,000 people per year, according to World Health Organization (WHO) figures, making it one of the world's biggest killers. The majority of its victims are children in Africa; the mosquito-borne disease has been a scourge of the continent for decades.

Despite major improvements in the last two decades – malaria deaths have roughly halved since 2000 – progress has stalled in recent years.

However, it appears as though the tide could be turning again. In addition to the new vaccine, which has been in development for more than 30 years, in September scientists at the Kenya Medical Research Institute announced another breakthrough. Ivermectin, a drug that's already commonly available for treating parasitic infections, was found to effectively kill the malaria parasite. Taking it regularly also made a patient's blood deadly to mosquitos. Human trials are now being planned and some hope a new treatment could be available within two years.

Meanwhile, the pilot programme of the new vaccine, which is known by its lab initials RTS,S, is set to immunise more than one million children across the three countries by 2023.

In Ghana, the focus is on six regions including the Volta and Central. Some 50,000 malaria cases could be averted and 1,000 children saved each year, according to Ghana's health ministry.

"It's been a long journey but it brings me great joy to finally arrive at the beginning of the end for malaria," says Dr Badu Sarkodie, the director of public health for Ghana's health service.

During a 15,000-person clinical trial, RTS,S was found to prevent up to 40 per cent of cases of malaria in infants – the best ever rate recorded. It also reduced the occurrence of severe anaemia – a complication that often kills children – by about 60 per cent.

The vaccine's total cost to date, more than US$700m (£561m), was funded by several global health bodies including the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, Unitaid and Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance.

But concerns remain. For the vaccine to be effective, four successive doses must be administered at six, seven, nine and 24 months – a timetable that will be a challenge for rural communities with poor access to clinics. The vaccine's success rate, even if it will save many thousands, is hardly perfect either.

"It's been a long journey but it brings me great joy to finally arrive at the beginning of the end for malaria"

Above: Faustina Nyan and her son, Francis, at the clinic in Cape Coast, Ghana

Malaria in Myanmar

A community-led approach to diagnosis and treatment is having significant success

Remote villages in Myanmar where healthcare workers are trained to offer a specialist malaria diagnosis and treatments have seen a rapid decline of the disease in recent years.

According to a study led by Oxford University-affiliated researchers and published in the journal BMC Medicine in October 2018, cases of malaria in remote villages with trained community health workers declined by around 70 per cent each year between 2011 and 2016.

The study demonstrates that providing effective malaria treatments at a community level is vital to eliminating the disease, said Sir Nicholas White, professor of tropical medicine at Oxford University and contributor to the study. "Training health workers to just screen for malaria is not sustainable. [They] must offer a package for common health problems," he said.

28% decrease in global malaria deaths since 2010

18% drop in incidence per 1,000 'at risk' population since 2010

$3.1bn invested in malaria control and elimination efforts in 2017

50% of the at-risk population sleeping under insecticide-treated mosquito nets – up from 29 per cent in 2010

46 countries reported fewer than 10,000 cases of malaria in 2017 – up from 37 in 2010

26 countries reported fewer than 100 cases of malaria in 2017 – up from 15 in 2010

Box-out statistics: World Health Organization World Malaria Report

Those behind RTS,S blame the unique challenges posed by malaria. "We'd all like a vaccine that is highly efficacious and that provides lifelong immunity with one shot, but the complexity of the organism – a parasite with multiple proteins, not a simple bacteria or virus – has made it so difficult to find weaknesses," says Dr David Schellenberg, science advisor for the WHO's Global Malaria Programme.

The general view among malaria experts is that there will be no straightforward solution for malaria and that the vaccine should be used in conjunction with other recommended prevention methods like insecticide-treated bed nets and indoor spraying with insecticides, as well as the timely use of malaria testing and treatment.

"It's quite a palaver, with four vaccinations required," says Brian Greenwood, a leading malaria expert and professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. "But of course on balance, the vaccine's benefits are better than the risks. We need to do everything: it would be very unwise to put all of your money in one solution."

Meanwhile, early next year, a clinical trial of another malaria vaccine, PfSPZ, is scheduled to begin. It too has limitations: it must be stored in liquid nitrogen and requires very high doses of parasites. But it could potentially be almost twice as efficient at preventing the disease.

"When it comes to life and death, you don't pick and choose"

Other challenges lie in wait. The climate crisis is extending the habitat of malaria-carrying mosquitoes, and 'anti-vaxxer' beliefs have gained a foothold in some communities. Resistance to the insecticides commonly used in prevention techniques, such as treated nets, is increasing.

Yet the recent groundbreaking creation of an Ebola vaccine using an experimental rapid development system has given encouragement to those working to curb malaria.

Back at the Ewim Polyclinic, mothers chat and gossip energetically as they wait for their child's turn. Meanwhile, waves roll in from the Atlantic and crash on the shoreline below. "Maybe the vaccine is not perfect," says Faustina Nyan. "But when it comes to life and death, you don't get to pick and choose. I'm so happy with this."

Above: a nurse holding vials of the world's first malaria vaccine, at the Ewim Polyclinic in Ghana

In good supply

Some 18 million people are employed in the electronics trade worldwide, and exploitation is rife. One mobile phone manufacturer is going to great lengths to make sure everyone in the supply chain is treated fairly

Words by Sonia Zhuravlyova

"You can take any issue – overtime, low wages, health issues, forced labour – and you will find this in the supply chain of electronics," says Dr Peter Pawlicki of industry watchdog Electronics Watch.

The electronics industry is now one of the largest and most lucrative in the world. Some 18 million workers toil to make gadgets that amount to 20 per cent of global imports and a $1.7tn (£1.4tn) annual trade – and it's a trade that is set to keep on growing.

"This industry is very cyclical; there are ups and downs driven by seasons and new launches so you have a need for a hugely flexible workforce," says Pawlicki, director of outreach and education at the independent watchdog. All this has led to excessive overtime, precarious employment, debt bondage, poor health and safety, and even child labour.

But brands such as Fairphone are working to prove there is an alternative way to build these intricate devices – one without the negative human impact. Starting as an awareness campaign in the Netherlands in 2013, founder Bas van Abel decided that in order to bring about change, he had to do it from within the industry.

So, the phone company began to integrate conflict-free minerals into the supply chain of its smartphones. "There are 40 to 60 minerals in a phone so we wanted to look at where we could have the most impact," explains Luke James, head of sales and partnerships at Fairphone.

Taking one component at a time, the Fairphone team has been working with charities and government bodies on the ground to verify that the minerals they source come from mines that operate safely and ethically. The company now buys its tantalum and tin – conflict-free – from the Democratic Republic of Congo and tungsten from Rwanda.

Fairphone also uses recycled plastic for the casing and Fairtrade gold, and the team is in the process of finding – and verifying – a source for conflict-free lithium and cobalt.

The company designs for longevity, easy repair, and modular upgrades. Its goal is to make phone hardware last as long as possible, and to provide the support to keep people's phone software up to date too.

Meanwhile, Fairphone's handsets – now in their third iteration – are made in a factory in China, to which the brand has gone directly to ask workers about their needs – responses included a better canteen. Then, Fairphone offered the factory a financial incentive if these needs are met.

"We asked the workforce what they wanted. It's not the most normal approach but, for us, we'll only be able to bring about improvements by talking to the people who we want to make improvements for," says James. Fairphone and the factory's owner, Arima, have now committed to investing $100,000 (£80,200) each year for three years on factory improvements based on employees' input.

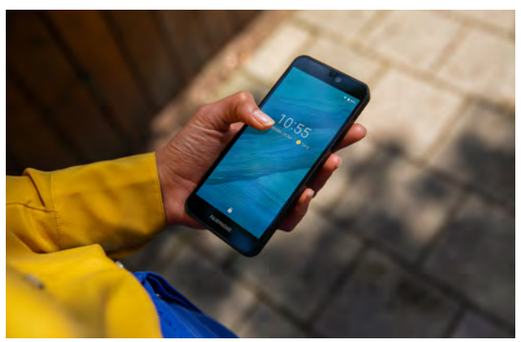
It is this dedication to workers' rights that makes Fairphone an obvious tech partner for ethical mobile network The Phone Co-op, which has partnered with Fairphone since the latter's launch. As the only telecoms co-operative in the UK, The Phone Co-op says it is committed to creating a business that works for everyone.

As more people wake up to the impact their consumer choices have, the better the chance of changing the status quo. "It's a step-by-step process. But as our brand and community grow, the more bargaining power we'll have in the industry and the more power to affect the conditions people work under," James says. "With a company like Fairphone, it's possible to have a positive impact and bring about change."

Positive.News Brands of inspiration | the phone coop

This article has been created by Positive News and is supported by The Phone Co-op. www.thephone.coop

"As our brand and community grow, the more bargaining power we'll have in the industry"



Tracing tea with technology

From a farmer in a field in Africa picking fresh tea leaves, to a florist in Aberdeen enjoying one of the 165m cuppas that Brits drink every day, the global supply chain for tea is vast.

An experiment with tea producers using blockchain technology has been hailed by those involved as a model for increasing the sustainability of global supply chains without driving up production costs.

Blockchain is a 'distributed ledger' – a reliable electronic record – which is shared between many parties. Concluding in August after an 18-month trial, set up by the University of Cambridge's Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL), the blockchain system, Trado, was used to record and trace information about tea farmers in Malawi.

CISL worked with a consortium including Unilever, Sainsbury's, banks and tech startups, to offer the farmers lower interest rates on loans to fund their production costs. In return, the farmers fed social or ecological data into the blockchain. This information was then used to make the tea, and the circumstances in which it was produced, more traceable.

Left: a miner working at a Fairtrade gold mine in Santa Filomena, Peru

Far left: the newly launched Fairphone 3

The accidental activist

Four national campaigns, millions raised in corporate funding and a charity that employs 30 people: not bad for four years' work. But as Natalie Fee will tell you, if she can do it, anyone can

Words by Martin Wright
Photography by Gareth Iwan Jones

OK, you want to save the world. You want to clean up the environment, and curb the plastic waste that's trashing our planet and our bodies.

You know that doing so means shifting a nation's ingrained habits, while also taking on some pretty powerful industry lobbies.

But you've just given up your job, you're a single mum, surviving on benefits. You'd be forgiven for thinking that, right now, this is probably someone else's task, right? Especially if all of your early efforts bomb?

Not if you're Natalie Fee, you won't.

Fuelled by righteous anger and a hefty dose of chutzpah, this one-woman dynamo from Bristol has launched a series of campaigns that aim to change everything, from the way we drink to what we stick in our ears – or flush down the loo.

And if you haven't heard of her yet, that says more about her than the scale of her achievements. Because she's quick to credit colleagues and supporters in City to Sea, the organisation she founded four years ago, for the seismic shifts it has triggered. Chief among these is the Refill campaign, which encourages people to eschew bottled water by using a tap instead. You can now do so at more than 15,000 'refill stations', including cafes, corner shops – even branches of Specsavers – all of which are shown on both a sticker in the establishment's window and on an app.

Local supporters' groups – now numbering 250 across the country – help populate the app by persuading more locations to sign up. It's an idea that's almost laughably simple, which doubtless explains why it's taken off, yet until Fee and friends came up with it, nothing of the sort existed.

Then there's the slew of campaigns against single-use plastic, many of them pre-dating the Blue Planet-inspired surge of concern. Take Switch the Stick: this targeted plastic cotton buds and, by persuading supermarkets to switch to paper ones, helped trigger the recent ban announced by the UK government. It also won City to Sea the Sheila McKechnie Award for Environmental Justice in 2017. Others followed: the Plastic-Free Periods campaign, for example, tackling a topic often avoided by green activists, and now being rolled out to schools across the country.

It's a campaigning record that many established NGOs would envy. But Fee's life to date followed anything but the conventional path of a career campaigner. After dropping out of university, she temped in an IT recruitment agency, ended up becoming a recruiter herself and, as she puts it, "having this weird, executive-by-day, hippy-by-night lifestyle". The hippy side triumphed and she went travelling in Asia, trained as a yoga teacher and – pregnant at 23 – washed up in Glastonbury where she combined the roles of single mum, life coach and 'sacred site tour guide'.

"But as a kid, I was always putting on shows, larking about and wanting to be on camera, and at 33 I thought 'Oh my God, that's what I'm supposed to be doing!'" She put herself through a crash course in TV presenting and found work with a few small production companies, eventually becoming the anchor on the evening show of a local cable station.

A fledgling media career was cut short, however, by a nagging sense of environmentalist fury – fuelled by an albatross on Facebook. Or rather, a group of albatross chicks, filmed "dying a horrible death in their nests with their bellies full of plastics. My reaction to that was visceral – I felt it in my body, so strongly that I couldn't ignore it", she says.

Overwhelming grief quickly turned to rage: "These creatures were innocent, and were being killed with plastics that could have been mine. I just knew I had to do something."

The obvious first step was to use her TV platform to spur action, but the station's managers preferred "entertainment and trashy stuff" to green awareness-raising. So Fee took the plunge and quit to be a full-time – albeit skint – activist. "I didn't have a clue where to begin, though, because I'm not a campaigner."

TENACITY AND EMPATHY

She is a musician, though, and decided to harness that by writing a song and crowdfunding a video. "Being naively optimistic, I fondly imagined it would go viral and have this huge impact." And did it? Fee laughs: "It bombed, because, funnily enough, I am not Beyoncé!"

Undeterred, she reached out to local ocean conservation groups – "to see if there was a role for me, or if I could align with them somehow" – but came up against closed doors every time.

So, she went it alone, setting up pub meetings, getting people talking, doing beach cleans locally and eventually forming City to Sea. "We decided to formalise it, though we didn't really know what it would become." With virtually no backing, they still managed to launch Switch the Stick.

"Then I wangled my way into water companies and asked them for some money; after all, the sticks were clogging up their sewage system, and it costs them millions every year to unblock it." After much badgering, they said yes – just about. "I'd hoped for £45,000, but ended up with just a third of that, because I was a nobody," Fee says.

And then, in her own words, "it just snowballed". The case against plastic was so powerful, and the alternatives so obvious (a paper stick is just as effective), that retailers started to come on board. This was just the start. "I went back to the water companies and said: 'There's more plastic than cotton buds going down the drain, now can you give me more money and we'll do more with it?'"

"These creatures were innocent and were being killed with plastics that could have been mine"

Right: Natalie Fee runs City to Sea from dockside offices in Bristol

“Despair won’t save the world. Beauty, on the other hand, might”

And, now she’d proved her case and was most definitely a somebody, they stepped up.

Having proved how effective it could be, City to Sea was on a roll. So when it came to launching the Refill campaign, Fee had little difficulty attracting grant funding and sponsorship, with water companies among its key supporters. No surprise, she points out, “as we’ve basically been marketing their product – tap water - for them!”

CHOOSING CARROT OVER STICK

Now its influence is spreading, with refill points being set up across the capital by the Mayor of London in partnership with Thames Water, and Network Rail installing water fountains at stations – all to be included on the Refill app.

But these campaigns are just the start: Fee’s sights are set on shifting consumer habits away from a single-use, throwaway culture, towards one where packaging is either reused – like the old glass bottles, redeemable for a deposit – or done away with altogether and where flush-away sanitary products are replaced by reusable ones.

She doesn’t underestimate the shift required. “We’re up against people locked into a convenience mindset and that will take time to change.” Attitudes towards hygiene have to shift too: “People flush away things like condoms, wipes or plasters because they think it’s somehow yukky just to put them in a bin.”

But she takes heart from examples such as Lush’s reusable packaging, Marks & Spencer’s plans for something similar and brands such as Häagen-Dazs considering deposit schemes. There is a slow but growing interest in a greener approach to personal hygiene, too.

Meanwhile, the accolades continue to flow. Fee was named as one of Nesta’s 50 New Radicals in 2018 and this year she won the £60,000 Sunday Times Volvo Visionaries Award, which she plans to put towards a new campaign extending Refill to food and household products, offering discounts to those who take along their own containers.

For someone who, by their own admission, “hadn’t got a clue” about campaigning a few years back, Fee has come a long way. In the eyes of green activist, writer and broadcaster Lucy Siegle, “her strength lies in the fact that she’s able to put herself in a lot of other people’s shoes. She matches empathy with pragmatic, evidence-based choices. That means the advice she provides is relevant, accessible and makes a difference. It’s also very difficult to argue with, which is why Natalie gets great results.”

Now Fee has pulled all that advice together in a book, How to Save the World for Free. This pretty much does what it says on the tin, with tips on everything from happy, healthy eating to cleaning your house without resorting to chemical warfare; from the joys of cycling (one of the lesser-known benefits of which, apparently, is to make you a better lover) to how to green your love life (and enjoy it more too). The accent throughout is very much on saving the world as a pleasure, rather than a pain in the neck – let alone the purse.

She’s quick to acknowledge that the little matter of healing the planet for us and all creatures cannot just be rosy, feel-good stuff. Faced with climate breakdown and pervasive pollution, it’s easy to despair.

But as Fee points out, “despair in itself won’t save the world. Beauty, on the other hand, might. If we’re not enjoying ourselves by making those changes, then we’re not going to be very good champions of them.”

And the best way to persuade the unconverted, she adds, “is to show them that we’re having a lot more fun than they are!”

How to Save the World for Free is published by Laurence King Publishing on 22 October 2019.

Under the influence

Social media isn’t only a place of rampant consumerism – some ‘influencers’ use their presence online to promote greener ways of living

Wasteland Rebel

When Cologne-based Shia Su started her blog in 2015, hardly anyone in Germany had heard of the zero-waste movement. “There were only two newly opened zero-waste bulk stores in all of Germany, Austria and Switzerland – now there are more than 100,” she tells Positive News.

Via Wasteland Rebel, Su’s aim is to help everyone create a little less waste by making it seem as simple as possible. The blog features guides on everything from DIY washing powder, to making your own nut milks and butters, to zero-waste contraception, and her book, Zero waste: simple hacks to drastically reduce your trash, was published last year. “Zero-waste stories are now talked about as positives to learn from,” she says.

Huw’s Nursery

Huw Richards’ YouTube channel is a good starting point for anyone looking to lower their food miles. The 20-year-old gardener aims to help his viewers “grow an abundance of food no matter what size garden you have”, and prove that growing vegetables doesn’t need to be complicated or pricey.

Every detail is covered, from mulches and compost (there is a whole video playlist on healthy soil) to growing greens from seed and pruning apple trees. He’s also great on quick tricks to get started – like sowing seedlings in toilet roll tubes or making a raised bed from a single wooden pallet. His first book, Veg in One Bed, was released earlier this year and the follow-up is due to land in the spring.

Ethical Unicorn

As well as offering tips on shopping for sustainable fashion and beauty products, Francesca Willow likes to get the readers of her blog thinking. The platform, which she started in 2016, features thoughtful articles and practical advice to on how to make difference – from mammoth challenges (like putting pressure on Amazon to treat its workers fairly) to more manageable ones, like switching to reusable packaging.

A recent post about ghost fishing delves into the problem of ocean plastic and why hype around plastic straws – which make up around 0.03 per cent of total plastic waste – takes the focus off the real contributors. She also focuses on social justice, covering subjects such as the importance of supporting unions and how to make personal action count.

Images: Shia Su: Wasteland Rebel; Huw Richards: DK; Francesca Willow: Ethical Unicorn

Mark Boyle

Ok, he’s not on social media. He can’t be found on Instagram or YouTube, but Mark Boyle is perhaps among the ultimate sustainability influencers for abiding by his principles – regardless of the personal sacrifice. In 2008, Boyle embarked on a mission to live without money and prove that an alternative economy based on gifting and trading was possible. “If we grew our own food, we wouldn’t waste a third of it as we do today. If we made our own tables and chairs, we wouldn’t throw them out the moment we changed the interior decor,” he wrote in a 2009 column for the Guardian.

More recently, he shunned technology altogether to live without running water, electricity, or anything it powers. His latest book, The Way Home, describes his life in which he forages for food, cooks and warms himself by open fire and collects his water from a nearby spring.

Armed intervention

El Salvador has the highest rate of gun-related deaths in the world. Now, firearms seized on the streets are being given an unlikely new lease of life – raising funds for victims of gun crime in the process

Words by Gavin Haines

From bloody conflict can come peaceful transformation. That is the message behind Humanium Metal, a new material made from melted down firearms, and it is a message that Amilcar Durán knows the truth of first-hand.

Two years after being told he would never walk again, Durán became an international athlete. He started out competing in wheelchair marathons – flying the flag for his native El Salvador in a dozen or so races – before taking part in adapted tennis and basketball tournaments, which took him across the Americas to Argentina, Brazil and the US.

Such a sequence of events was impossible for Durán to imagine in the dark days that followed 31 May 1997, when he and a friend were shot during an armed robbery. Durán took a bullet to the spine and lost the use of his legs. His friend died.

"The bad news caused my life to break apart," recalls Durán, who had played professional football and enjoyed dancing before the shooting. "I fell into depression. I isolated myself and began to reject my family, my partner and my friendships."

It was then that Durán received a visit from another patient – a kind young man called Vicente, who was also in a wheelchair. Vicente persuaded Durán to accompany him on visits to the hospital garden, where he was introduced to other patients with disabilities. "I was supported by this group and in a few days, I had accepted my new physical condition," he says.

Having come to terms with his injuries, Durán, now 49, joined an adaptive sports programme and went on to compete in dozens of international tournaments. He also began offering peer support to other victims of gun violence.

There are many such victims in El Salvador, where a potent cocktail of poverty, corruption, gang culture, poor law enforcement and a profusion of illegal weapons has allowed extreme violence to flourish.

InSight Crime, which records homicides in Latin America and the Caribbean, claims El Salvador's murder rate was 51 per 100,000 people in 2018, making it one of the deadliest places on Earth. The global average, by way of contrast, is 6.2 per 100,000, according to the UN's most recent figures. When it comes to gun crime in particular, it is estimated that one person is shot and killed every minute around the world.

In El Salvador, these statistics are "the tip of the iceberg", claim those at Individuell Människohjälp (IM), a Swedish development organisation that started working in the country during its bitter civil war (1979-1992). "The number of people who survive an armed attack, but are bedridden or in wheelchairs is not recorded in El Salvador," explains Pedro Martín García, an IM project coordinator. "There are no statistics on these cases."

There's also a lack of support for people with disabilities, notes Durán. Attempting to address this is a local charity called Red de Sobrevivientes (Survivors' Network), which Durán joined as executive director in 2015. As well as offering emotional support to help people accept their disability, it provides them with equipment such as wheelchairs, and helps them to find work.

Survivors Network is one of the organisations supported by IM, and benefits from its novel form of fundraising. It melts illegal firearms confiscated in El Salvador into a 'new' material, called Humanium Metal, which it refines and sells, for example to artists and designers.

Thought to be the world's first supply chain of metal made from destroyed illegal firearms, Humanium Metal has so far been used to make watches, earphones and a limited edition series of sculptures based on the famous Knotted Gun statue, which sits outside the UN building in New York.

Top: the Dalai Lama holds a miniature sculpture made from Humanium Metal
Bottom: a gun amnesty in El Salvador

The original, titled Non-Violence, was created by the late Swedish artist Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, as a tribute to John Lennon, who was fatally shot in the city in 1980.

To date IM has melted 4,500 illegal firearms, many of which are likely to have been used in violent crime. The organisation raised £128,000 by selling Humanium Metal in 2018 and predicts it is on course to double that this year thanks to growing interest in the material.

Ludvig Scheja, creative director at the Swedish watch brand Triwa, is one designer who bought into Humanium. He incorporated the metal into a line of watches called Time for Peace. It's a good bit of marketing for the company, but also, he claims, the anti-gun movement. "People who wear them become ambassadors for the cause," says Scheja, who gives 15 per cent of the profits from each watch to IM.

That money goes towards IM's own work in El Salvador, where it helps communities create "safe spaces" in the capital city, San Salvador, where gang violence currently undermines everything from the local economy to children's education (many parents are afraid to send their kids to school for fear of them being shot).

"The safe spaces are communal spaces like gardens and play fields that are neutral, meaning no gang claims them as territory," explains Jacqueline Duerre, Humanium Metal project manager at IM. "We then try to increase community ownership of these spaces, which are used for violence-prevention programmes."

IM is also engaged in advocacy work and lobbies governments around the world, including El Salvador's, to address the root causes of gun violence, such as poor gun control and poverty. It does this with the help of other human rights groups.

Duerre admits that tackling gun violence can seem an overwhelming challenge at times. "Sometimes it feels like firefighting," she tells Positive News. However, El Salvador's murder rate has fallen steadily since 2016, when the Humanium project began. IM is keen to downplay any links, claiming more time is needed to measure its impact.

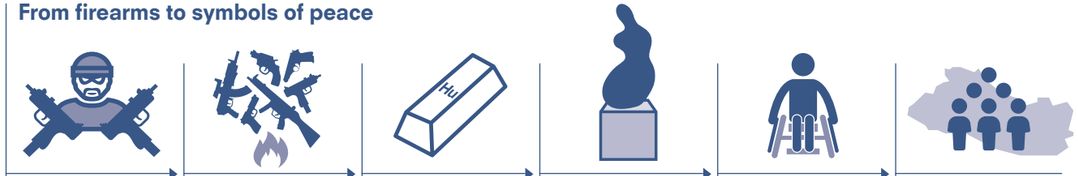
Nevertheless, the organisation is keen to start producing Humanium Metal in other countries affected by gun violence. It won't hurt that the Dalai Lama has endorsed the project, which he succinctly summed up as "a laudable effort at making this world more peaceful". P

Images: Dalai Lama and gun amnesty: Individuell Människohjälp; watch: Triwa

Below: Swedish watch brand Triwa created a range of timepieces that include Humanium Metal

"Individuell Människohjälp has so far melted 4,500 illegal firearms and raised £128,000 by selling Humanium in 2018"

From firearms to symbols of peace



Police confiscate illegal firearms from criminals in El Salvador. Many of the weapons are likely to have been used in violent crime

Supervised by the authorities, the Swedish development charity, Individuell Människohjälp (IM), melts down the weapons

The resulting material, called Humanium Metal, is refined and then made available for use in a wide range of projects

Artists and designers, drawn to Humanium Metal's symbolic value, buy the material to make sculptures and fashion items

Proceeds from the sales support the work of Survivors Network, an El Salvadorian charity supporting disabled survivors of gun crime there

Profits also fund IM's own work in El Salvador, where it helps communities create "safe spaces" away from gang-controlled areas

This summer, festival organisers across Europe took steps to tackle their waste problem. We zoom in on events that are getting greener – and pioneering solutions to much bigger challenges

GREEN PARTY

Words by Lucy Douglas and Laura-Louise Mahler

The clean-up of Glastonbury festival this year began in the early hours of Monday 1 July. The team faced a familiar array of discarded camping gear, costumes, empty cans and cigarette butts, but there were some notable absences: plastic water bottles – now banned from the event – and the number of abandoned tents were at record lows thanks to measures brought in for 2019.

Worthy Farm was not alone in upping its environmental efforts this summer. "This year it feels like interest and activity in relation to making events more sustainable has really gone up a gear," says Claire O'Neill, co-founder of A Greener Festival, a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping festivals around the world up their sustainability game.

Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion activists have helped to bring environmental issues to the mainstream consciousness, O'Neill says: "That's all creating a very tangible awareness of issues that have been there for a long time. Everybody is starting to ask questions."

But the magnitude of the challenge is hard to overstate. From diesel generators and chemical toilets to the heaps of rubbish accumulated by tens of thousands of people partying together in a field, the environmental impact of festivals can be enormous. Reducing it requires a complex mix of new infrastructure, innovative technology and changing people's behaviour on a mass scale.

And, festivals don't operate in bubbles, of course. If the majority of an event's emissions come from people driving to and from it, to take one example, the widespread rollout of electric vehicles will hugely boost its green credentials.

"There could be huge leaps of progress made based on what happens, for example, with our regulations for food or agriculture," notes O'Neill.

On the other hand, these pop-up cities can serve as testbeds for new technologies and circular systems. "If [a new idea] doesn't work, it's not that big of a deal," says Ingrid Møller, environment manager at Øya festival in Oslo, Norway. The event has received A Greener Festival's highest rating for its sustainability initiatives for the last nine years.

Nonetheless, it's a challenge festival organisers are taking on with enthusiasm. Read on for just some of the initiatives being rolled out to make festivals greener. →

Left: Boomtown Fair in Hampshire, known for its vibrant costumes, launched several green initiatives in 2019, including a zero-waste campsite

Serveware

Some festivals, such as Paradise City in Belgium and Øya in Oslo, have switched to entirely compostable plates and cutlery for on-site catering, removing the challenge of multiple waste streams.

Øya also trialled a new system for cups this year. "We did a life cycle analysis of different types of cups," explains Ingrid Møller. Her team found that switching to reusable cups would reduce CO_2 emissions by 94 per cent – so long as customers didn't take them away at the end of the festival.

They worked out it was more carbon-efficient for the bars to own the cups than for Øya to own them. "It would take too long for them to be more efficient than the single-use cups," Møller explains. So they devised a model for the brewery running the bars to rent cups to visitors, and helped them implement it.

"Now, since investing in those reusable cups, they're going use them at all their events," she says. Møller has also been in discussions with the local government in Oslo. The body is now set to add a requirement to use only reusable cups to licensing agreements for businesses selling drinks at events or in public spaces.

What's next?

"The ultimate solution is for everyone to bring their own cup, plate and cutlery," says Matt Gilford, marketing manager at Womad festival. Womad has taken steps to make this more practical by installing cleaning stations. The bigger challenge, Gilford notes, is getting punters in the habit of bringing their own items.

Food

Shambala festival went meat- and fish-free in 2016. More than 90 per cent of the beer sold there comes from local breweries, and this year it also cut out cow's milk. Meanwhile, festivals including Boomtown Fair have been running EighthPlate, an initiative by A Greener Festival in partnership with The Nationwide Caterers Association, which salvages the food waste from festival caterers and sends it on to charitable organisations such as homeless shelters.

Amsterdam's DGTL festival has run a 'circular' food court since 2018, composting all waste on site within 24 hours, thanks to a hi-tech composting bin. This year it went a step further, creating a festival menu using waste food from local suppliers. "They use food that would have otherwise gone in the bin, so already they're having a positive impact," explains O'Neill.

A new initiative from A Greener Festival and music agency Paradigm has DJs putting pressure on festivals, too. The 'green artist rider' – the requests musicians send to event organisers for extras like food and drink – requires festivals to provide acts with locally sourced meals or no single-use plastics.

What's next?

More festivals going meat-free: Boomtown is rumoured to be planning it for 2020 and Møller says the team at Øya is working to make the festival more plant-based – currently half of the food served is vegan or vegetarian.

Toilets & sanitation

It may not be glamorous, but a good supply of loos and the means to keep them clean are among the most important elements of festival logistics.

Events such as Boom in Portugal and Falls Festival in Tasmania, Australia, have switched entirely to compost toilets, and keep the 'humanure' on site, ultimately returning it to the soil as a fertiliser.

Loowatt has created a flush-toilet system that generates electricity from the waste without the need for water. Waste is sealed in biodegradable bags – airlocked to keep the loos reportedly odour-free – and then processed at specialised anaerobic digesters.

As well as working with festivals such as Wilderness and Port Eliot in Cornwall, Loowatt supplies homes in parts of the world that have poor sanitation; it is currently working in Madagascar.

For the last two years, Paradise City in Belgium has joined forces with Eco Z, whose system mimics natural water purification processes using plants, to clean the grey water from its showers.

"They come with a truck with plants in it, and that clears the water on site so after the festival we can throw the water back on the site," explains green policy manager Pauline Lavagna.

What's next?

Winding down use of the portable toilet in favour of innovative technologies that use no water or chemicals – or going natural with compost toilets and creating fertiliser for the soil.

Above: swapping in reusable cups is one small step toward tackling a throwaway culture
Right: DGTL in Amsterdam composts its waste food on site

Images: man dancing (opening page) and crowds (final page): Scott Salt/Boomtown; reusable cup: Rob Lipsius/DGTL Amsterdam; food sign: Tim van Cappellen/DGTL Amsterdam; windmill: Green Gathering

"It feels like interest in and activity around sustainability at events has really gone up a gear this year"

Transport

Transport remains one of the biggest sustainability challenges for festival organisers – particularly for events in spots that are poorly served by public transport.

This year, Womad was among a number of festivals – along with Boomtown, Shambala and Wilderness – that partnered with cycling company Red Fox Cycling to encourage its visitors to travel to the festival by bike.

Two-wheeled convoys departed from London and Bristol, taking customers on a guided route to the festival site. "They pick up your bags as well, and then deliver you home at the end of the festival," adds Womad's Gilford. He reckons around 20 people used the service this year – "small, but it was the first time".

What's next?

O'Neill, from A Greener Festival, hopes to see subsidised train travel, making sustainable transport more financially appealing for festival-goers. And as electric vehicles become more mainstream, this should help green festival transport.

Above: Boomtown's Radical Citizens initiative asks attendees to minimise their environmental impact
Right: a windmill at Green Gathering

Power

As the cost of temporary solar and wind installations has dropped, their presence at UK festivals has jumped: from being at around 1 per cent in 2011 to half of all festivals in 2018. However, those initiatives still contribute comparatively little to the events' overall power consumption and require lots of equipment to be transported in.

Øya has been hooked up to the grid since 2009. "That's probably the single biggest thing we've done – we invested in the infrastructure to connect the festival to the grid and we run by renewable electricity," Møller says.

Womad is gearing up to do something similar. After this year running a crowdfunding campaign, which organisers promised to match pound for pound, the team plans to get the campsite hooked up to the grid in time for 2020. "We have a license for the next 12 years for that site, so we know we're staying there for a while," says Gilford. "We'd like to start by powering the campsite and then – as and when we can – push that across the entire festival."

What's next?

"There's also been quite a lot of investment and research into hydrogen fuel cells and their potential application in temporary energy," explains O'Neill. "That's really important, because we need to make sure we're not just replacing one problem with another problem."

Cigarettes

For the last two years, Paradise City has recycled its cigarette butts, working with a Belgian company that collects them from the festival site. They are taken to a facility in France, where they are turned into a plastic-like material and furniture and smaller items like ashtrays or pen pots are created from them. "We have a lot of ashtrays on site – big tubes made out of recycled cardboard tents," explains Lavagna. "We have notices telling visitors that their cigarette butts will be recycled and we distribute pocket ashtrays."

What's next?

As smoking continue to slide in popularity – the proportion of UK adults who smoke went from 19 per cent in 2014 to 14.7 per cent in 2018 – cigarette litter will decline. P

Mongolian activist Bayarjargal Agvaantseren created the world's first sanctuary for snow leopards. Her campaign included persuading the country's government to cancel 37 mining licences

A force of nature

Words by Veronique Mistiaen

Portrait by Will Parrinello

In this remote, unforgiving corner of the world, herders call them "mountain ghosts". Snow leopards, which roam the steep mountains and narrow ravines of Mongolia, are so elusive that even Bayarjargal Agvaantseren, who has dedicated her life to researching and protecting them, has yet to see one. "These cats are so mysterious. They have a remarkable ability to camouflage themselves," she says.

The teacher-turned-conservationist helped to create the Tost Tosonbumba nature reserve in the South Gobi desert, the world's first officially protected area specifically dedicated to snow leopards. It is also a model for a reserve that is co-managed by local people, conservationists and the government.

Listed as vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, these rare cats are victims of poaching for pelts, retribution killing for livestock depredation and habitat loss – and their number has declined drastically over the past 15 years. Today, only 4,000 to 7,000 snow leopards remain in the wild, with nearly 1,000 of those living in Mongolia.

Agvaantseren grew up in a family of teachers in a small northern Mongolian village, but used to spend time in the desert, helping her grandmother tend to her horses, goats and sheep. In the 1980s, while working as a language teacher, she spent time translating for a biologist who was studying snow leopards.

"As part of his study, we interviewed local herders, who told us how snow leopards killing their animals was affecting their livelihood," she explains.

"They are so isolated, their lives depend on selling their livestock, so we discussed how to protect both snow leopards and the herders' way of life. For me, that was the starting point to engage in conservation."

Agvaantseren worked for many years on education and conservation projects with herder communities, before creating the Snow Leopard Conservation Foundation in 2007. The foundation runs research projects and has developed a programme in which local women sell wool handicrafts to provide them with a steady income, as well as a community-driven livestock insurance programme – an innovative way to mitigate animal killing by snow leopards. "The communities manage these programmes themselves, so they can be sustainable," says Agvaantseren. "Once communities understood better about snow leopards, they stopped seeing them as the enemy, but instead as an integral part of their identity."

But retaliatory killings were not the only threat to the species. Mongolia's mining industry is booming: minerals make up more than 80 per cent of the country's exports and the South Gobi desert – the heart of snow leopard territory – has attracted Russian, Mongolian and Chinese companies mining for coal, uranium, copper, gold, oil and gas.

In 2009, researchers from the foundation discovered that the entire Tost mountain range had been given away to mining. "The Tost community understood how mining was not just threatening the snow leopard, but their entire way of life," Agvaantseren says.

Representing the community, she met with government officials to advocate that Tost become a federally protected area. She also collaborated with environmental journalists on a mass public outreach drive.

In April 2016, the campaign resulted in the formal designation of the 1.8 million-acre Tost Tosonbumba nature reserve. The reserve now protects a core breeding population of snow leopards and, by connecting two national parks, brings the total snow leopard safe habitat to 20 million acres in the South Gobi desert.

The designation was a major victory, but while monitoring the mining licences' expiry dates, Agvaantseren's team realised that new licences seemed to be popping up. "The companies were illegally selling their expiring licences to each other, which automatically extended their validity. This showed us that the nature reserve status was not enough to save Tost."

Undaunted, they broadened their collaboration with conservation specialists, government officials and lawyers, and, in 2018, secured the government's unprecedented cancellation of 37 existing mining licences. There are now no active mines within the reserve.

Today, Agvaantseren works with local people and local government authorities to set up the nature reserve as a model protected area for snow leopards, and to make it sustainable, as there is no government funding to maintain the reserve. It is co-managed by local people, conservationists and the government. Agvaantseren was awarded the 2019 Goldman Environmental Prize for Asia in recognition of her success.

It amounts to an extraordinary victory for snow leopards, but also "an example of what local communities can achieve if given the tools," she says. "Their voices can be heard." P

Below: Agvaantseren has worked for years with far-flung herder communities

Bottom: thousands of snow leopards once roamed the soaring peaks of Asia

"Communities stopped seeing snow leopards as the enemy, but instead as an integral part of their identity"

The rebirth of a village

High in the Eagle mountains of the Czech Republic is a village with a difference: 80 per cent of its residents have a disability. A charismatic priest turned the once-abandoned spot into a community for some of country's most marginalised citizens

Words by Stephanie Ross

"After the revolution there was a lot of euphoria, joy and freedom. The feeling that we will fix everything," says Father Josef Suchar. "My mission was simple: to bring life back to Neratov village."

Forthright and convivial, Father Josef is perhaps not like most priests. His dog collar is slightly askew, and brick dust flecks his greying hair. Bringing life back to the village meant rolling up his sleeves and doing it himself. When news comes of a car stuck in the mud in the nearby mountains, the 61-year-old jumps in his digger and chugs off to help with clear-eyed delight. Not every priest is such a demon with a JCB.

Once a lively weekend bolthole for city-dwelling Czechs, Neratov was decimated by war and the communist rule of the mid-20th century. Its baroque church, a site of historic pilgrimage, was destroyed by a missile fired by a drunken soldier. By the end of communism in 1989, the village had a population of just two people.

"No matter how ruined everything was, I knew it was special. There was something mystical about this place," says Father Josef. When he first came across the near-abandoned town in 1987, he says, he stood in the desolate church and prayed. "I asked: 'Dear God, is anything ever going to change with this country?' I promised that I would do anything to be able to hold mass here again some day."

Shortly after the fall of communism two years later, Father Josef was assigned a new parish. It contained the ruined Neratov. "Our God is a big joker and we have to be careful what we tell him," he laughs. "But promises have to be kept."

There was another element to Father Josef's vision for Neratov: that it would become a place of safety and community for people with disabilities. "We promised that we would not just talk about helping those most in need – we would do something about it," he says.

During the 42 years of communist rule, the castles of the Eagle mountains became places where disabled Czechs were locked away, condemned by the state as dangerous, mad or destructive. Thousands were removed from their families, and propaganda spread that disability was infectious. Many people didn't survive.

"Disabled people in our society, they had been used and abandoned, just like this church and this village. If we were going to repair the village, we must also repair the people."

At first Father Josef had the support of just a few volunteers, clearing the burnt-out church by hand. Over the years, more volunteers gravitated towards the project, bringing JCBs, architects, plans and dreams with them. More people moved in and more businesses opened.

Now, 30 years later, the village is unrecognisable. The imposing church has been resurrected and, in 2007, received a glass roof to symbolise the years it stood open to the elements.

A microbrewery opened in 2018, and there is now a pub serving Czech specialties such as pork and dumplings. There is a shop, a school, a playground, a restaurant, a market garden and an orchard. Handsome alpine cottages with neat gardens of lavender and geraniums are dotted about, and woodpiles already stacked for winter.

Today, 80 per cent of Neratov's residents are people living with mental or physical disabilities and are employed by its various businesses. The community-based Neratov Association that Josef set up to run village affairs now employs 250 people, placing it among the country's three largest employers of people with disabilities.

David Havlíček (pictured right), who has learning disabilities, works in the microbrewery, helping produce beer that's sold all over the Czech Republic. He moved to the village four years ago at the age of 26, having lived in institutions or psychiatric wards since he was eight. He's passionate about his job. "I'm learning new skills so that I can lead an independent life," he says. "My future is Neratov. I definitely don't want to leave."

Jana Němcová, 64, laughs as she describes the first time she met Father Josef. "When he first told us his vision, we thought everyone would just shake their heads and leave him to it," she says.

"But his passion was something else. Within a year, our family moved here to help with rebuilding. It allowed us to follow our own dream of offering our home to children no one else wanted."

Němcová fostered six children with disabilities over the next 30 years, encouraged by the space and philosophy of the village that the priest was building.

Tourists who flock to the area for hiking and cycling are encouraged to visit Neratov, bringing in vital income.

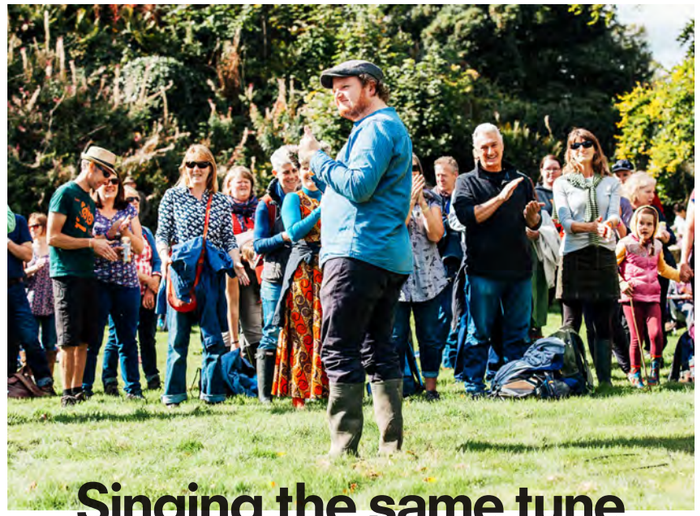
Father Josef (pictured far right), remains modest about his achievements. "I want to make clear this place is not about me," he says. "It is about the people who live and work here. People with disabilities are the ones who get together and decide the direction of this village, not me. Everything you see here, it is because of them. That's the real reason Neratov has come back to life."

"No matter how ruined everything was, I knew it was special. There was something mystical about this place"

Top: Neratov's church was a site of pilgrimage before it was destroyed by fire

With that, he jumps into his little electric car and zooms off up the hill to the church. The car was a 60th birthday present from Neratov villagers, who clubbed together to raise the money to buy it. The place might not be only about Father Josef any more, but it still wants to say thank you for bringing it back to life.

Images: Neratov Association



In fine voice: James Sills at The Good Life Experience festival in Wales in 2017, leading more than 300 people in song

Singing the same tune

Positive News subscriber James Sills explains why the magazine resonates with him, and how his work in community singing has similarly positive reverberations

Interview by Lucy Purdy Photography by Paul Williamson

"I started following Positive News on Twitter last year and then came across the print version by chance at the airport last summer. I immediately loved it: the writing, the format, the photography, the ethos. I'm now a subscriber and look forward to the magazine dropping through my letterbox every few months. My daughter, who's two, is also a big fan!

I'm a natural optimist. Much of the mainstream media seems to be locked in a vicious circle of negativity, fear and sensationalist clickbait that leaves people feeling helpless and hopeless. By contrast, I always feel empowered and more hopeful for humanity after reading Positive News, which actually creates a virtuous circle. I also really appreciate the way that it gives a voice and a platform to those often ignored (and vilified) in the mainstream press.

I'm a freelance vocal leader with a passion for bringing people together to sing. I run regular choirs and workshops across the UK for community groups, organisations and businesses. My most recent project is Wrexham One Love Choir, Wales' first homeless choir. Everything I do is open access, meaning that people don't have to audition or be able to read music to participate. I believe in the power of singing together and its multiple benefits, such as community-building and improvement to people's wellbeing.

I set up my blog, www.everydaysinging.com, to share inspiring content from across the singing world. I want to inform, encourage and empower more people to sing together. Every week, I add articles, videos, podcasts, talks, quotes and poems. The ethos is very much the same as Positive News': it's a positive corner of the internet where people can learn, be inspired by the actions of others and hopefully take action themselves!

Singing together is a fundamental part of being human. Like dancing and laughing, it's best when shared with other people. Singing in groups, whether it's on the football terraces, in a choir, in a pub or at a festival, makes us feel better and more connected. I think we know this intuitively, but it's supported by lots of recent research.

However, I realise that a lot of people feel inhibited to sing in public for fear of shame or worries about being 'tone deaf'. This is why I've written my book, Do Sing. Reclaim Your Voice. Find Your Singing Tribe, to alleviate fears and encourage more people to go out into the world and sing.

As well as bringing us together, singing also connects us to ourselves: to our breathing, to our posture, to our emotions. In a busy world, where our minds are often in a thousand places at once, singing in a group gives us the opportunity to stop, focus and be fully present. I think it's magic!"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