

HAPPY TO HOUSE THE HOMELESS



Grant and Anne Kangley were initially dubious about putting homeless people up in their hotel but say the "vast majority have been very friendly"

Hoteliers speak of positive experience

Kangley couple make offer for the long-term

The owner of a Sheffield city centre hotel that has been accommodating homeless people through the lockdown says he would be willing to continue supporting them after the pandemic if he had the backing of the government and local authority.

At the end of March the government followed the lead of California by funding the accommodation of rough

sleepers in hotels and offices. Around 45,000 people, many vulnerable to Covid-19 because of respiratory and other health problems, were housed under the Everyone In policy.

24 hour deadline

Sheffield City Council asked Grant Kangley to accommodate rough sleepers at the 16-bedroom Dalbury and Palmer Hotel in Sheffield's Antiques Quarter.

Kangley, who bought the hotel five years ago to add to the two he and his wife Anne own in North Wales, said: "After meeting the council it

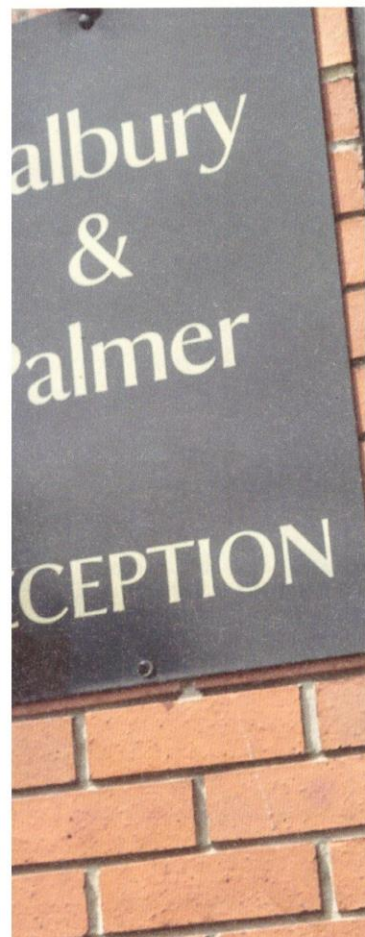
was decided after discussions with staff that because of the often chaotic nature of homeless people we should play safe, take just three people and see how it went. We were also concerned that some local residents would complain if all the hotel was used by homeless people."

But the council wanted to take over the entire hotel. People needed to be taken off the streets and safely housed within 24 hours. Family rooms at the hotel were converted within eight hours into single rooms. Almost before staff knew it homeless people were at the hotel.

"I must admit that the first week was slightly scary," said Zoe Burke, aged 27, who had just been appointed manager, with her partner Jordan also employed with responsibility for security. Having always worked in hospitality, she had been looking forward to priorities such as building up business in the new restaurant.

"We had been told only negative things about the people we were now hosting. I suppose the council has to highlight the problems that homeless people are facing, such as drug and alcohol abuse, but also there was a

HOMELESS



suspicion amongst people that we would police them and keep them permanently indoors."

In normal times, rooms at the boutique hotel – "each with its own story, with some nice finishing touches", according to Kangley – cost £85-£95 during weekdays and more at weekends, when it had generally been fully booked. But all visitors had cancelled reservations just before the lockdown.

Kangley and Burke admit they had never previously considered homeless people's needs but they soon began to understand their new guests,

some of whom were asylum seekers while others had been recently released from prison.

"A mutual respect was quickly established. I heard some difficult stories and soon realised many homeless people have just fallen, often very quickly, on hard times and can't recover without help," said Burke.

Begin living a better life

One of those who moved into the hotel was Nick, a trained chef who had become homeless after losing his job, becoming ill and then getting into difficulties with claiming benefits he was entitled to. As well as sleeping rough Nick had been staying with friends. They had to turn him away once the advice on how to tackle Covid-19 included telling people not to accommodate anyone outside their own families.

After the council agreed with Kangley's request for the hotel to provide everyone staying there with breakfast and an evening meal, Nick was asked to do some cooking. The council has since found Nick permanent accommodation and he hopes to find work again once as a chef.

Nick is grateful for his accommodation at the Dalbury and Palmer. "I hope anyone who needs it can be moved into the room I was using. Having a place to live, even temporarily, makes it easier for other agencies including the council to make contact and start helping homeless people to begin living a better life."

Ann Clarkson moved from Grimsby to Sheffield a year ago. She had worked full time for over three decades. Her last job, for 13 years, was a supervisor at Howden Kitchens. But she got breast cancer, which damaged her mental welfare, even though she overcame it. She loved her dog and, when it was stolen and the police refused her request to investigate the person she believed had taken it, she sought her own revenge and was arrested.

This first ever offence resulted in just over a month

in prison and she was living on the Sheffield streets when Framework, a street outreach project run by a local housing association, found her outside Sheffield Cathedral and gave her a bus ticket to get to the Dalbury and Palmer. She too helped make meals at the hotel, laughing that it kept her out of mischief. But she knows she would otherwise have been living in a squat or doorway this summer.

"Covid-19 might, if projects such as this can continue for a while, really help homeless people," said Clarkson. "But I am concerned that if people are moved on without ongoing help they won't be able to cope. The manager and staff here have helped create a community and people feel safe."

She wants to use her considerable work skills to set up a café as she likes cooking and has arranged to meet the Together Women Project after lockdown has ended to discuss how to take her ideas forward.

Like Clarkson, Burke fears for homeless people if this support is removed.

"This is the best thing I have ever done," she said. "I can get quite emotional about it and I have developed some great friendships. For some guests this experience will help greatly in the future but I worry about others who currently have support, including being able to discuss things that worry them."

Kangley added: "The vast majority of homeless people who have stayed at the hotel have been very friendly, kept the place clean and also done many spare jobs such as gardening. I'd be happy to continue doing this for a while but that is up to the government and the council. Whatever happens I intend taking a keen interest in tackling homelessness in the future."

Sheffield City Council did not respond to *Big Issue North's* request for comment.

MARK METCALF

NEWS IN BRIEF

PLAY ON

Children's play areas and playgrounds in Leeds have begun to open. The reopening programme is being done gradually to ensure the 200 play areas meet cleaning and social distancing guidelines. Signage regarding usage has been installed but the playgrounds and equipment will not be supervised, said Leeds City Council, "and will rely on people acting responsibly".

INVESTMENT RISKS

Councils have exposed themselves to commercial investments that risk cuts in local services and a big bill for local taxpayers, according to the Commons Public Accounts Committee. Financial pressure on local authorities has seen risky investments in commercial property "balloon" 14-fold in three years, said the committee, warning that the government was "blind" to the risks.

CONFERENCE CALL

Joe Anderson, Liverpool's mayor, has urged the government to allow conferences and business events to resume because of their importance to the city's economy. In a letter to the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, Anderson said business events can be held safely in the same way regulations are allowing Parliament, shopping centres, cinemas and retailers to operate.

HULL HOUSE BUILDING

More than 1,000 new homes have been created in the city in the past 12 months against an annual target of 620 homes, according to Hull City Council – figures that put it in the top 20 UK local authorities for the delivery of new homes. The council said it had exceeded its target for the fifth year in a row.

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ACCESS TO SPORT UNDER THREAT

Fewer facilities and rising costs are blocks

BAME and working-class kids hit hardest

For 150 years being paid to play football has given working-class young men such as Fergus Suter, the star of Julian Fellowes drama *The English Game*, and Marcus Rashford the chance to lead rewarding lives. Now experts are warning these chances are diminishing because of fewer facilities and the rising costs of playing sport.

At 23 years of age Macauley Musgrave from Penrith wants to make football his career. After undertaking FA coaching courses, he trained local sides and also teams at the Cumbria Football Academy. While he works part time at a supermarket, he is aiming for qualifications that will allow him to coach young people up to 16 and become an assistant coach at professional clubs. But until he began coaching, Musgrave was "unaware of how few decent facilities there are", he said.

Double booked

"At my first session the pitch was double booked. The council owns Frenchfield Sports Centre, which has grass pitches. For young people, few of whom live near grass areas, getting there means a mile walk as it is outside Penrith. Large demand means you can't just turn up and play with mates. There are no floodlights, ruling out playing on dark nights.

"Penrith Rugby Union Club has floodlights for its artificial pitch but it costs £75 an hour for a quarter of a pitch. Unless junior football clubs find alternative income sources, and that is difficult, then many children from poorer backgrounds are from my experience missing out as they cannot afford the fees the clubs must charge to

recoup their costs from hiring pitches."

Across the Pennines in Halifax some local junior clubs have been reporting difficulties in finding publicly owned pitches to play on. "We have hired a private grass pitch this season," said Ian, coach of St Columba's under 13 team, which plays on Sunday mornings.

"For many years we used a council pitch facility but last season it was not getting cut or marked up before games and one of the goalposts was dangerous and needed replacing."

As well as a shortage of facilities, others say young people do not get enough time to play sport.

Tony Gavin a retired headteacher at a specialist sports school in Guisborough, North Yorkshire, believes former education secretary Michael Gove's decision to scrap the Schools Sports Partnership (SSP), which guaranteed three hours of quality and varied sports, had reduced young people's chances to learn activities that could keep them fit into adulthood. In 2018, the Youth Sports Trust reported that 38 per cent of English secondary schools had cut timetabled physical education for 14-16 years since 2012. Gavin contends that as a result fewer state schools now have football teams in competitive leagues.

"Schools are judged on results," said Gavin. "Young people in years 10 and 11 rarely get two hours sport each week because PE lessons get dropped to facilitate additional mathematics and English."

With most facilities out of bounds lockdown has currently slashed young people's opportunities to play sport. Yet according to official statistics physical activity had been rising among young people.

Government guidelines recommend that young people



Marcus Rashford is a role model to working-class kids. (Paul Ellis/AP)

should get one hour, equally split between in and out of school, of daily physical activity and Sport England reported that "active children are happier, more resilient and more trusting of others".

Sport England statistics suggest that for 2018-19 57.2 per cent of children were doing 30 minutes or more physical activity outside school, up 4.6 percentage points on 2017-18. There had also been a 3.9 per cent drop in the total number doing under 30 minutes daily physical activity.

Asian and black children are those most likely to do less than 30 minutes activity daily.

Roy Massey who played football professionally for Rotherham United, Leyton Orient and Colchester United, went on to be assistant head coach at the Arsenal Academy, where he helped bring through big stars such as Jack Wilshere and Alex Iwobi. He said youngsters from poorer backgrounds still faced problems even after getting signed up to a professional football academy.

"I became aware of the additional problems faced by working-class youngsters to make the grade in professional football," said Massey.

"Marcus Rashford is clearly one of a number of role models but you do wonder

how many prospective good players from poorer backgrounds don't make it.

"It is a big commitment as there is a lot of travelling and some families don't have cars or time, often due to work commitments, to transport them to and from training."

The government claims Sport England will have invested over £190 million in physical activity for young people in 2017-2021, including the £40 million Families Fund, which encourages low-income families with children to do physical activity together. It says it is supporting grassroots football, investing £18 million a year in facilities. Its partnership with the Football Association and the Premier League brings a combined £70 million for new facilities delivered by the Football Foundation.

A Department for Education spokesperson said: "We want every child to get an active start in life... Ofsted has made clear that PE is part of a broad and balanced curriculum for all pupils. PE is the only foundation subject on the national curriculum at all 4 key stages. It is up to schools to decide what opportunities to offer to pupils to be active, including team sports."

MARK METCALF

Calls for National Food Service to feed three million hungry

Sheffield Foodhall seeks collaboration

Sheffield's Foodhall Project is aiming to connect with similar initiatives nationally to create a National Food Service.

With an estimated three million people now going hungry in the UK the organisation believes everyone should have their basic needs met whatever their immigration status, social status or wealth.

Sheffield Foodhall Project (SFP) began in 2015 after architecture graduate Louis Koseda, who has a strong historical understanding of the politics of food production, distribution and consumption, created an app with his friends as they sought to identify the city's food needs.

This led to bring-a-dish evenings that filled stomachs and encouraged discussions and donations that made it possible to open premises in Eyre Street, a city centre location.

Until 2018, volunteers ran the daily community kitchen and public dining space. On popular days 70 people paid what they could afford for a meat-free hot meal. Food parcels could be collected.

Growing movement

The National Lottery made a £200,000 grant last year to enable nine part-time staff, including Koseda, to be employed over the following three years. This has led to evening events including bike workshops and successful Friday music events that have showcased over 70 new artists.

The success of these initiatives inspired like-minded people across the country to imitate the work. There are now 15 similar groups including ones in Bristol and London.



As well as being a community kitchen Sheffield Foodhall hosts events

In September 2019, SFP, along with the Real Junk Food Project Network and campaigners in Nottingham's Super Kitchen Network, organised in Sheffield a National Food Service (NFS) discussion week. Speakers included Robin Dunbar, whose Baking Bread report contends that regularly eating alone is the biggest single factor for unhappiness beside existing mental illness, and Bryce Evans, from Liverpool University, an expert in wartime social eating spaces and national kitchens.

National network

They discussed an NFS based on the idea of social cooking and eating spaces.

"National food kitchens fed people during the Second World War but were unpopular with Sir Winston Churchill as he feared they were becoming political organising centres," said Koseda.

When Sheffield was plunged into lockdown the SFP community kitchen closed. Eyre Street visitors could collect food parcels but most were housebound so SFP delivered 15,000 food parcels.

After receiving some government funding – with the help of Sheffield Hallam MP Olivia Blake – and further food donations, SFP's outside spaces have now reopened.

"We have already built a network that connects groups nationally but there are thousands of other local groups that can be reached out to, including social eating groups and food banks, which are doing much more than what is being written about them in the media," said Koseda, who was brought up by his mother on a rundown estate in Dagenham, London. "It is about building free social eating space across regions."

"Rebuilding the welfare state"

"Our great-grandparents built co-operative food societies that kept decent food affordable. Eating together would ensure everyone getting sufficient to eat – three million are currently not – plus it would also build friendships."

"The NFS would deliver food parcels to isolated individuals, no matter how well off, as this will help persuade such individuals to take more active roles in society. Food has been a major political topic during the lockdown and it has encouraged more organisations to discuss with us a NFS. There is no formal governance as yet but it is encouraging what is happening and I feel we can develop something that can play a part in rebuilding the welfare state."

MARK METCALF

NEWS IN BRIEF

FRACKING VICTORY

Energy minister Kwasi Kwarteng has told anti-fracking MPs to "accept victory" on the debate. He said the government has no plans to review the moratorium on the gas extraction process and that "the world has moved on". Rotherham MP Alexander Stafford said the moratorium has not stopped energy firm Ineos "circling around its sites at Harthill and Woodsetts like vultures" however.

TOWNS FUND

Over 30 towns across the North West and Yorkshire are to receive £500,000 -£1m in government funding in the first wave of its Towns Fund. 101 towns are sharing an £80m pot to boost regeneration through projects such as green spaces, pop-up business areas, pedestrianising streets and creating of community hubs to support those living alone.

MANCHESTER ACCENTS

Manchester Metropolitan University is asking people from the region to record audio clips of themselves reading certain words. They will be used to analyse accents and dialects and how we and others perceive them. Part of a wider project called Manchester Voices, it will culminate in a permanent resource at Manchester Central Library. Take part at manchestervoices.org.

LIVERPOOL EDUCATION

The University of Liverpool is offering opportunities for the public to continue their education via short courses, seminars, and workshops for the coming academic year. Courses on offer cover a wide range of subjects including creative writing, music, science, history, computing and more. Visit liverpool.ac.uk/ continuing-education for more information and to book.

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Thai-British language firm teaches its pupils 'nonsense'

Recruits do not need teaching qualifications

An Ormskirk man employed as a basic high school English teacher in Thailand has accused the British-Thai company that employed him of providing poor-quality education and withholding his pay.

David Sheekey said Sine Education Service, a Bangkok company that provides English teachers for Thai schools, recruits unqualified teachers whose lessons go "well over students' heads."

Sheekey moved to Thailand from Uganda, where he had been living with his wife but had been unable to find work and access vital medication. Joining family in Thailand in 2015, he began working for Sine Education Service, whose website says it "provides English conversation courses for government schools all over Thailand. We focus on tackling the challenges that come with delivering English language programs – notably to large classes – through our specially designed courses, delivered by our Sine trained teachers."

Training 'insufficient'

The company claims it is in partnership with 40 Thai schools.

Sine employees are not required to be qualified teachers or to possess a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) certificate but they must be "native English speakers from the UK, USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Ireland or South Africa" and have a degree.

Sheekey, who has a social studies BA, a higher education diploma and a TEFL qualification, said he was only given three days training before he was put in front of a class. Sine teachers are meant to



David Sheekey: pay was withheld when he fell ill and could not work

provide high school students with between one and four hours English schooling each week.

"My training was insufficient," said Sheekey. "The young people are receiving poor quality education. Everything was done on Powerpoint programmes where the language is in technical terms that UK students of similar ages would not understand. It went over the Thai students' heads."

Some of the curriculum that Sheekey, who worked at a government high school in Khon Kaen, was expected to teach left him scratching his head. "Students were informed that in Britain there was a culture of movie watching and not much reading of books. There was other such nonsense presented as facts by the teaching programmes."

Sheekey also said the company, which is partly run by British people, was excluding qualified teachers from a number of countries in Africa and Asia where the

official language is English because of its recruitment policy.

UK return

When he had to take time off work after contracting chicken pox, Sheekey had most of his wages docked. He has not been paid the money he is owed. He left the company and returned to the UK to live in Chester earlier this year.

Sheekey met his Ugandan wife Sarah in Wigan, where she was seeking asylum. Evidence showed she had been tortured by the Ugandan authorities, but she was nevertheless deported. Sheekey is again looking to find work in Uganda, possibly with his younger daughter who is a lawyer.

Big Issue North sent questions to the Thai Embassy in London, Sine Education and two members of the British-Thailand Parliamentary Group, Sir Graham Brady and John Spellar, but did not receive any response.

MARK METCALF

NEWS IN BRIEF

SLAVERY DAYS

The first 20 street names in Liverpool to be considered for plaques explaining their links to slavery have been revealed. Liverpool City Council passed a motion in January committing to the plaques and other public notices. The next step is to identify a suitable location can be found for a plaque in each street. See liverpoolexpress.co.uk.

NEW HOMES DROP IN

Four new modular homes, built in a factory, were lifted into place in Sheffield last week – part of the council's plan to build 3,100 additional new council homes by 2029. The four-bedroomed houses, with a light gauge steel frame, were installed in Knutton Crescent, Parson Cross. The modular homes are said to be quicker to build and have better quality assurance and environmental performance.

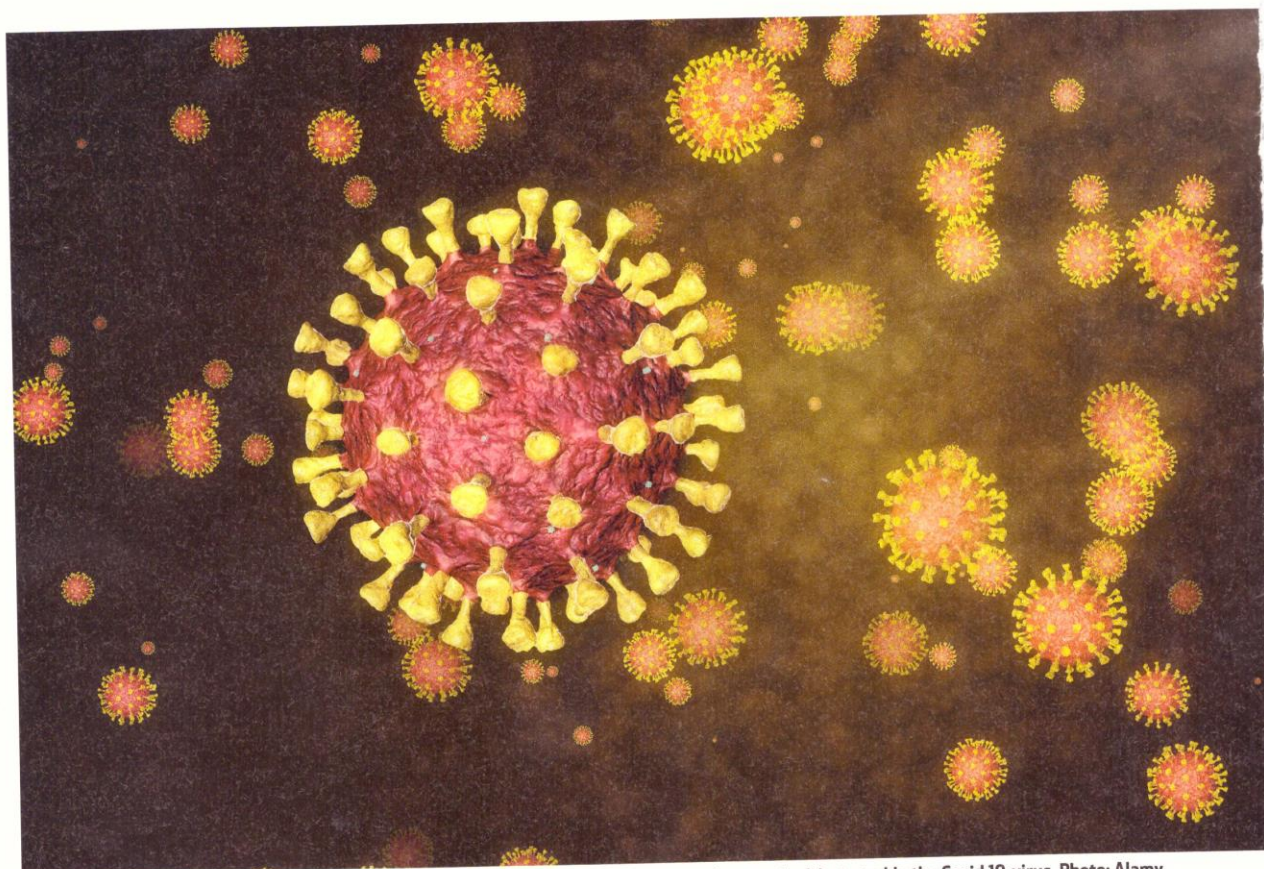
CHILDREN IN CHAINS

Young people in Leeds are being encouraged to cast their vote in the election to decide the city's next children's mayor. Now in its 18th year, the scheme allows young people to learn about voting and democracy, and recommend improvements in their areas. Voters aged under 18 can choose from a shortlist of 12 put together by a judging panel at bit.ly/VoteLCM.

IT MAKES SENSE

Three-quarters of families in the UK caring for disabled adults at home during the pandemic had their support reduced without warning, according to a survey by disability charity Sense. One in three is still waiting for it to be reinstated. Sense is calling on the government to provide more resources for local authorities to help disabled adults cared for by their families.

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Public health experts believe they can draw on past experience with other outbreaks, such as meningitis, to tackle the Covid 19-virus. Photo: Alamy

COMMUNITY CONTACT

Sheffield group set up for track and trace

Frustration with the government's inaction

Medical professionals and health campaigners in Sheffield have set up a coronavirus track and trace scheme because of their frustration at government inaction.

Paul Redgrave, a former South Yorkshire director of public health, and Andrew Jackson, who runs regeneration charity the Heeley Development Trust, have established Sheffield Community Contact Tracers (SCCT), which has trained six volunteers to speak to people

who have tested positive for Covid-19 and find out who else they may have been in contact with.

Abandoned proposals

In its pilot scheme, SCCT has taken referrals from local GPs, although attempts to persuade people have met with mixed results. However, the founders believe community-led track and trace can be effective, and have urged the establishment of similar groups across the country.

Redgrave became concerned when the government abandoned proposals for contact tracing in March, even though the World Health Organisation had said testing, isolation and tracing new Covid-19 cases should be the

"backbone of the response in every country".

According to UK testing chief Professor John Newton, fears that over a million cases would be uncovered, overwhelming any capacity for track and trace, led to the proposals being ditched. Britain's attempt to create a track and trace app has also met with little success.

Frustrated

At the same time, a friend of Redgrave's, whose partner was a GP, contracted Covid-19 and was frustrated in her attempts to get healthcare, despite her knowledge of the medical system. Redgrave, who had worked on tracking meningitis outbreaks in his career, decided to act.

"The press were reporting how many people were dying within 24 hours of entering hospital," he said. "People were waiting too long to ask for help."

He sought support from former colleagues and SCCT was the result. Heeley Development Trust's Andrew Jackson calls its role "structural back-up". HDT, which was already supporting people by delivering medicines and food supplies to coronavirus patients, has been particularly helpful in helping SCCT make contact with hard-to-reach Yemeni and Kashmiri communities.

"The national system does not appear to be functioning well," said Jackson. "I already knew the people



who approached me from the good works they had done to improve public health.

"SCCT is educating people to alter their behaviours. This will help reduce the spread of the virus.

"The group is also making contact with people who have the virus and actively looking to find and advise and help those they have been in contact with.

"Crucially, they are sharing their expertise and learning from doing."

Redgrave admits SCCT's initial 13 cases are a "tiny number" and that it does not have the statutory powers environmental health officers had when he was investigating meningitis cases.

"Ten were happy to work with us but three refused to engage after becoming unhappy at being asked to isolate," he said.

Those 10 passed on details of 58 people they had contact

with. Of those, only 19 were prepared to engage.

Redgrave said: "Not good, but amongst those we discovered one new case and we supported everyone, including the original 10 people, for the two weeks – or longer if they remained unwell – with a daily call. We also offered specific needs like collecting medicines or food supplies or dog walking. People really appreciated our help."

Of the remaining 38 people, Redgrave said: "An 88-year-old woman broke her hip and was in hospital. When she got home she came down with the virus. She identified 10 carers who she had been in close contact with. She only knew them via the supplying care agency, who told us they could not afford to lose so many staff. There was not anything we could do."

'Local angle'

He also referred to a staff nurse with the virus who had passed on details of five work colleagues. SCCT's initial call was welcomed by all five but their attitudes later hardened after they had been told by senior management not to respond to the organisation.

Redgrave said: "The assessment shows contact tracing is complex, a local angle can strengthen neighbourhoods to become self supporting, that we need official and potentially legal back-up from environmental health officers, and that local volunteers can be trained and can support people to make the system work, as has been the case in other countries."

SCCT has written to the government calling for more support for community-led Covid-19 responses. Its research and details of how to establish similar groups is online. This has encouraged the establishment in the Upper Calder Valley of a Covid-19 contact tracing and support association, whose members are Covid-19 Mutual Aid volunteers and others with clinical or public health experience.

"We have got support from many different local groups,"

said the association's Jenny Shepherd, who is worried that those fearing they have contracted coronavirus have been directed towards contacting 111 rather than their local GP.

"Covid-19 is a notifiable disease and the process for notifying such diseases is through GPs who have been cut out of the process. It is crazy. GPs have people's trust and should have been central to tackling Covid-19."

Shepherd praised SCCT. "New groups can be set up much more easily and on our own new website we have also added our experiences to the already accumulated information," she said.

Tight deadlines

Big Issue North asked the Department for Health and Social Care why it had chosen not to immediately follow WHO's advice to test, trace and isolate new Covid-19 cases, had marginalised GPs and given itself little time to develop an effective app when it is known that large software projects with tight deadlines have historically had a high failure rate.

In response, a department spokesperson said: "This is an unprecedented global pandemic and we have been guided by the best scientific advice at all times.

"NHS Test and Trace has already helped to stop more than 100,000 people from unknowingly spreading the virus and we have been working closely with our local partners to provide them with the resources and tools they need to take swift action to deal with any new local spikes in infections."

The spokesperson said an improved version of the app was being worked on with Google, Apple and others.

Public Health England did not respond to questions about whether it would be contacting groups such as SCCT to share experiences and about why the government has been unwilling to use environmental health officers during the pandemic.

MARK METCALF

NEWS IN BRIEF

BOO TO EXPLOITATION

Manchester fast fashion firm Boohoo has announced a review of its UK supply chain after a *Sunday Times* investigation into worker exploitation at one of its Leicester-based manufacturers. Boohoo's value has plummeted by £1.5bn since the revelations of pay as little as £3.50 an hour and poor social distancing at Jaswal Fashions. Boohoo insisted it does not condone mistreatment.

VALLEY VIEWS

Manchester City Council is calling for responses to its new consultation on the river valleys of the Irk, Medlock and Mersey, which include many of the city's green spaces. "We need your help to develop a long-term vision and actions which will re-energise them," said the council about its Our Rivers, Our city strategy. See groundwork.org.uk or email OurRivers@tep.uk.com.

SIX LEGS BETTER

Reversing the Decline of Insects is a new Wildlife Trusts report showcasing projects helping insects across the UK – on farms, in gardens and neighbourhoods and on roadside verges. Wildlife Trusts is calling on the government to introduce a pesticide reduction target at least as good as the EU's target of a 50 per cent reduction by 2030.

SCREEN TIMES

Screen Yorkshire has launched a region-wide crew and facilities service, offering a platform for productions filming in Yorkshire to source experienced local crews and supply-chain companies. It will run alongside the Film Office's locations service, offering a one-stop-shop for producers, and counter the effects of Covid-19 on freelancers, who have been badly hit by the slowdown in production.

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SCHOOL ACCOUNTS INVESTIGATION

Unspent funding at Whitehaven school

Cumbria police pass probe to fraud squad

A police investigation into alleged fraud at one of the worst run academies in the country remains ongoing.

Founded by venture capitalist Michael Dwan, Bright Tribe Trust, a 16 school multi-academy trust, took over the running of Whitehaven Academy in 2014, only to withdraw four years later.

In 2016, Julie Rayson, herself a former pupil at Whitehaven whose son was studying there, founded the Whitehaven Academy Action Group (WAAG). Members were concerned about the quality of children's education and why public funds totalling £321,774 had been obtained for building work, lighting and fire safety improvements that remained unfinished or had never started.

Request dismissed

Two-thirds of the Whitehaven site was closed in 2017, which is when Rayson first raised her concerns with Cumbria Constabulary. Rayson had a year earlier asked to discuss parents' worries with the Department for Education's (DfE) Regional Schools Commissioner for Whitehaven Academy. But her request was dismissed "with a response that the DfE were in ongoing discussion with the trust", said Rayson, who began taking her concerns to town council meetings and then won a seat on the council.

In 2018 a *Panorama* programme alleged Bright Tribe Trust (BTT) had received hundreds of thousands of pounds in grants for improvement works at its schools that were never completed. Bright Tribe also received £1 million in 2015 to establish a "northern hub" of schools. Academies minister



Parent Julie Rayson first raised concerns about Bright Tribe Trust in 2015

Lord Agnew revealed that the majority had been spent by the end of 2016 on hiring senior staff.

Another BTT school, Manchester UTC, which closed in September 2017 three years after opening, left behind a £526,000 deficit that had to be paid off by the government.

In 2018, BTT announced it was withdrawing from running schools, all of which have been transferred to new sponsors.

BTT accounts for the year ended 31 August 2018, published in June 2019, show that £212,032 of the £321,774 grant for works at Whitehaven had been repaid. Some £1.5 million was put aside for any potential claims for improper use of these grants from the DfE, which said it would not take any action to claw back any money until 27 December 2019.

"Clearly the need to pay back over two-thirds of a £321,774 grant indicates it was handed out generously without robust checks to ensure it would be spent

on genuine projects," said Rayson.

"Where was the £1.5 million from? Most academy trust funds are accumulated from DfE government funding anyway, so are the DfE actually paying themselves back?"

Formal investigation

Rayson also suggested £35,000 BTT reclaimed in VAT for paying a contractor for work not completed at Whitehaven should be investigated by HM Revenue and Customs.

Cumbria Constabulary has passed on its investigation to the City of London fraud squad, whose spokesperson said that as it had begun a formal investigation it could not comment at this stage. The DfE was also unable to comment on the investigation but did state: "The £212,000 is a repayment of Conditional Improvement Funding, which is public money."

In November 2018 Rayson was a key witness at a Commons Public Accounts Committee inquiry into academy schools accounts

and performance. Its report said that Whitehaven was one of the worst run academies in the country and that academies needed to be more accountable about spending.

Following BTT's collapse, Whitehaven Academy was re-brokered to be run by the Cumbria Multi-Academy Education Trust. Rayson and other parents had wanted other options explored, including a return to local authority control.

Liabilities

Rayson said she was pleased a police inquiry was underway and is encouraged by the school's progress.

"There's been a turning point in the learning environment for the students, with some interim repairs to the current buildings also already completed. This can only lead to a better quality of education and ultimately improved exam results.

"It might be too late for those children educated under the sponsorship of Bright Tribe but the future is looking positive."

Parents are also happy that the DfE has provided funds for a new-build school that should be opened by next year.

BTT was placed under interim leadership in spring 2018 and is now in the process of liquidation. A BTT spokesperson told *Big Issue North* it could not comment on the police investigation into "historic matters" while the £1.5 million set aside to meet liabilities has yet to be reclaimed by the DfE.

The spokesperson claimed that by working with the DfE "the interim leaders have done an outstanding job to ensure the BTT's schools, including the Whitehaven Academy, were swiftly transferred to strong new academy trusts, providing children with a first-class education, and so that creditors were paid."

MARK METCALF

NURTURE LOCAL FOOD, NOT EXPORTS



Incredible Edible Todmorden is typical of the local foodgrowing schemes that should be given more government support, says Charlie Clutterbuck

Cameron cuts red tape to boost food exports

Critics say UK should grow more of its own

The government has defended its decision to prioritise food exports after a former agricultural policy adviser urged it to switch attention towards home production. Charlie Clutterbuck said doing so would reduce Britain's reliance on overseas produce and boost the trade balance.

Clutterbuck, a Lancashire soil scientist, spoke to *Big Issue North* after David Cameron announced plans for fewer farm inspections, an increase in the number of Protected Food Names from 63 to 200 and the creation of a Food Innovation Network to give small to medium enterprises access to new science and technology. The

prime minister claimed this would "help British farmers grow and sell more food by liberating them from red tape and opening up new multi-million pound export markets".

Downing Street predicted the changes would boost annual food and farming exports by £7 billion, which is just over a third of the current total of £19 billion, a quarter of which is accounted for by Scotch whisky. Britain has a £21 billion annual food deficit.

Clutterbuck, who was a former special adviser to the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Select Committee in 2008-10, has often spoken about his fears that Britain is too reliant on imports for its food, with 40 per cent of what we consume coming from abroad. Thirty years ago the figure was 25 per cent.

Many small, local, projects

aimed at boosting food production are supported by Clutterbuck. These include the Incredible Edible Farm at Todmorden, where he is a board member. He has also mapped out the Ribble and Calder Valleys in Lancashire and Yorkshire to highlight how the land there could be used to grow more fruit and vegetables.

"Repeating mistakes"

"The prime minister is repeating the mistakes of the past by bowing down to the markets on food production," Clutterbuck told *Big Issue North*.

"The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) currently accounts for 40 per cent of the entire EU budget, yet much of the £50 billion spent annually produces no food as it goes to large landowners. I want to see much of the £15 billion available under CAP in England over the next seven

years going to local producers who are setting up local food chains to ensure people eat fresher, locally produced, food, which is much better for them. Numerous projects such as Sustainable Food for Lancashire show this can be done."

Clutterbuck also supports food policy professor Tim Lang of City University London, who contends that much of Britain's current exports is processed food that has "caused premature mortality here and which will merely export the causes of health service stress to other countries". Lang wants to see investment in horticulture as part of a plan to place fruit and vegetables at the heart of the food system. Britain produces just 12 per cent of its fresh fruit and 58 per cent of its vegetables. Combined imports of both are £8 billion annually.

"When I was a child there

were apples from right across the UK – not now,” said Clutterbuck. “Most of our fruit and vegetables can be grown here, why not do so through local initiatives that can then be linked to local food banks? Tinned products, currently distributed there, can be replaced with vouchers for fresh fruit and vegetables to be redeemed in local shops.

“The government should provide greater assistance to local foodgrowing initiatives. They could co-ordinate and advertise a national list while also providing business expertise and scientists who can help with soil measurements and pest control. We can increase employment through growing healthier food, the sales of which will reduce our imports and cut our food trade deficit.”

Local shops

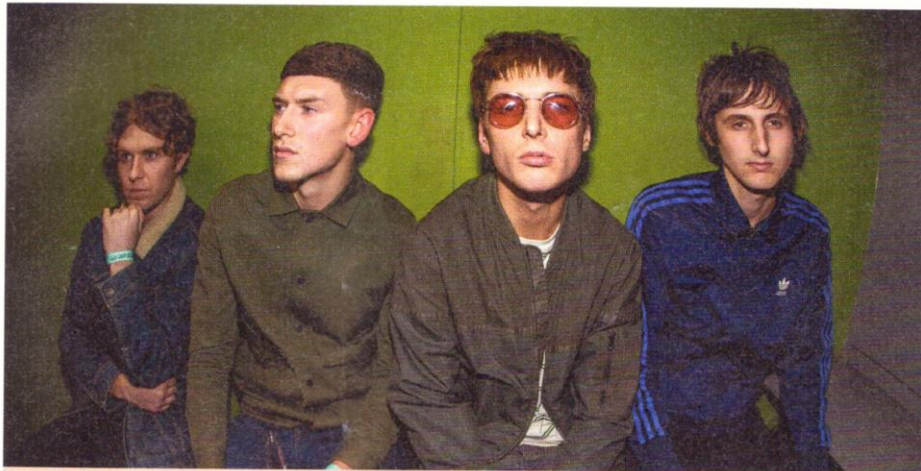
Lang and Clutterbuck's concerns were put to Defra in a series of questions. They asked if the government should be doing more to shorten the links between consumers and producers of food, including considering a national food bank voucher system redeemable in local shops for fruit and vegetables. They also asked whether Britain is over-reliant on food imports and requested the research papers that justified Cameron's claim that the new plans will boost exports by over a third. No research papers were sent.

Big Issue North approached Defra, whose spokesperson largely repeated Cameron's original points. “We are creating a stronger brand for British food and drink to promote our produce abroad.... the UK is a world-leader in agri-tech and the government has invested millions in research to ensure we can meet future demand for food,” said the spokesperson.

Clutterbuck said he is disappointed by “what appears to be a lack of vision by the government over food production, distribution and consumption”.

MARK METCALF

2015



Wheel turns again unexpectedly

Manchester rockers Twisted Wheel (pictured) are playing a hometown headlining gig next week – and supporting Big Issue North Trust in the process.

Ten years since they last headlined the Ritz and one year since an unlikely comeback, the band, led by Jonny Brown, return on 15 November. They're asking guest list people to make donations to Big Issue North Trust, which will also receive a percentage of the ticket price for their after-party. And trust staff will be at the gig for additional fundraising.

Twisted Wheel's relationship with *Big Issue North* is a poignant one. In 2008 their song *Big Issue* touched on the subject of homelessness, becoming a fan favourite. But amid addiction problems, singer

Brown went on to find himself homeless on several occasions, before the band split up in 2014.

When they got back together again last year, Brown pledged to give back as much as possible to the people who helped him.

The band now plan a new album for next year and have support slots with Liam Gallagher confirmed.

Big Issue North Trust is the charitable arm of *Big Issue North*. Money raised by the charity supports the magazine's vendors, through help in accessing support services, including assistance with obtaining ID and enrolment on educational courses.

For tickets to the gig see bit.ly/2PCuM3p. For after-party tickets, bit.ly/2prCLFK.

"When RBH advertise online two bedroom flats it is not unusual to see over 70 bids being made for them," said Slater. "What will happen when hundreds more are added to the list?"

Slater claimed older people will be dispersed and the subsequent lack of support networks would mean they would become isolated and lonely. He wants all seven blocks refurbished.

RBH estimates this would cost £10 million per block, equivalent to around £110,000 per property. It says it does not have "any prospect of accessing this level of investment for all seven tower blocks".

Asked by *Big Issue North* to clarify how much funding it would need for its plans, RBH provided no figures. It is in discussion with government

about investment but would not say how much it was looking for.

RBH, which has committed over £25 million of its resources to College Bank and Loer Falinge, has however indicated that its plans will require private sector investment.

According to Slater: "The flats are iconic and it is clear from examples in Salford and Manchester that people want to live in well-maintained tower blocks. Why not here in Rochdale? RBH is ignoring the views of local people on the estate and should revisit their plans."

The College Bank Support Group is working with a group of architects to draw up alternative plans. RBH has said it will consider them if they are "feasible and sustainable, as well as safe

and genuinely affordable for tenants and residents".

With both sides in the dispute holding divergent views, local MP Tony Lloyd is seeking more information from RBH. He said: "I can't yet see the big picture as to what we get at the end of this process. Considerable numbers of constituents have approached me on this matter and proper answers are required to some big questions to reassure everyone concerned."

RBH, whose top five executives were criticised last week when it emerged they are to receive considerable pay increases over the next three years, said it was "pleased to have an ongoing and constructive dialogue" with the MP.

MARK METCALF

TEST CRISIS AT CARE HOME



Sharon Reed, Danmor Lodge manager: toll on care staff is "relentless"

Manager struggles to get swabs for staff

Testing kits for home's residents also scarce

An experienced care home manager has attacked the government for what she believes is a systematic, ongoing failure to develop a coronavirus testing system for care home staff and residents.

Sharon Reed of Weymouth's Danmor Lodge private care home also feels Matt Hancock and Helen Whately, health and social care ministers, do not understand how care homes operate and have failed to defend those working in them.

Deeply frustrating

Danmor, which won the 2019 Dorset Echo care home award, provides accommodation for up to 25 residents. In 2016 its end of life care won it one of only 15 quality awards from the National Gold Standards Framework Centre.

As a manager since 2013, Reed administers a staff of 40.

She estimates around 60 per cent have contracted Covid-19, while the figure among residents, one of whom has died of the virus, is higher.

"Some staff self-isolated once the crisis started because of family concerns," said Reed. "Some with Covid-19 were absent for three weeks, others longer. Some returned too early and exhaustion forced them to take additional time off to recover. Everyone has given their all."

Testing staff for Covid-19 helps Reed know whether they are safe to work, thus helping prevent the virus spreading to patients. She has been left deeply frustrated at the government testing systems she has tried to access.

"I am into the sixth system for staff," she said. "The new DHSC online portal system does not seem to be any better than the previous five. I asked on 12 May for swabs to undertake staff and resident tests. I am still waiting."

She described how earlier test systems expected unwell staff to drive 100 miles to

Bristol. Venues were later switched to Poole, then Weymouth, which was overwhelmed by demand. A mobile testing centre also collapsed within hours and a one set up by the local clinical commissioning group failed to last 24 hours.

Reed said she had consistently sought to get swab tests for her residents, with mixed success, and wants all of them to be regularly tested until she can be sure no one at the care home has the virus.

Ring of steel

Earlier during the pandemic, she asked for a testing kit and received only five swabs. She sent back two, which both gave positive results, but was not allowed to use the remaining three because a second courier was not available. On another occasion, she said, she only received tests for residents when she threatened to go to the press.

"I must inform Public Health England when we are virus free. Regular testing will be required but is this part of any long-term plan by the government?" said Reed, who believes government ministers do not understand the sector she works in and remains angry that the government initially allowed people who had not been tested for coronavirus to be transferred into care homes.

According to the Office for National Statistics there had been 8,312 Covid-19 recorded deaths – around a quarter of all deaths associated with the virus – in England and Wales care homes up to 1 May. The number rises to 12,526 when care home residents who died elsewhere – mainly in hospital – are included.

In the week ending 1 May there were 6,409 deaths recorded in care homes more than the 6,397 deaths in hospitals in the same week.

"Matt Hancock and Helen Whately should have thrown a

ring of steel round care homes and explained to the public our role," said Reed. "They have done neither."

"Consequently, the toll on care staff nationally, who are all trained, is relentless. It is dispiriting to see comments on Facebook and in letters columns that residents, many of whom have multiple medical problems, are being stopped from going to hospital for oxygen and being pressurised into completing do-not-resuscitate forms. In fact many complete these before entering a care home."

"Doctors and district nurses support all our work, which should be explained to those who don't know how we work."

Frontline

In response to Reed's comments a Department for Health and Social Care spokesperson said: it had built the biggest diagnostic testing design industry in British history.

"Supporting the social care sector has been a priority throughout this unprecedented pandemic and we recently announced a further £600 million for care homes to tackle the spread of Covid-19," added the spokesperson.

"We are testing all care workers and residents, regardless of symptoms or not, and, since the start of the outbreak, nearly 125,000 workers in care settings and over 118,000 care home residents have been tested."

The spokesperson highlighted the 11 May establishment of an online portal for care homes to register for tests, and Whately's comments on 15 April when the social care minister said: "Care workers are on the frontline going into work day in day out. It includes looking after people with Covid-19 and I am hugely grateful."

MARK METCALF

SISTERS' HIGH RISE AND FALL



Mark Slater lives in one of the Rochdale blocks due to escape demolition but campaigns for other residents

Housing body plans to demolish tower blocks

Tenant group denies misleading residents

Plans by Rochdale Borough Housing to demolish four of the Seven Sisters high rise flats on the College Bank estate are polarising opinions.

Two years ago, Rochdale Borough Housing (RBH), which took control of the local council's housing stock seven years ago, announced a 20-year regeneration project for College Bank and the nearby Lower Falinge Estate and began to draw up proposals, including demolition.

RBH intends that its proposals will unlock "further major investment, which will regenerate both neighbourhoods with a wider mix of high-quality homes and more green spaces".

RBH said any displaced tenants would be guaranteed somewhere "like for like" to live, close to the town centre, if they wished.

'Social cleansing'

RBH intends modernising the remaining three College Bank blocks. It claims its proposals could lead to 500 new homes on the land, some of which is lying empty.

Within weeks of the demolition plans being announced a petition of

544 College Bank residents' signatures was presented to Rochdale Borough Council. Councillor Neil Emmott, cabinet member for housing, claimed the plans "smacked of social cleansing".

Rochdale Council and residents opposed to its plans publicly disputed each other's claims to speak on behalf of those living at College Bank. There were widely different claims about exactly how many residents' opinions had been gathered by RBH.

Although it was never disputed that most Lower Falinge residents backed demolition, former tenants representatives claimed this was because RBH had run down the estate. According

to RBH it has supported 62 tenant households between July 2018 and May 2019 to move from Lower Falinge, with over half staying in the town centre area, "including families who moved from flats into our brand new family houses".

In May 2019, RBH accused a "small number of individuals on social media of inaccurate and misleading comments" and of personal attacks on its employees. RBH later publicly attacked the College Bank Support Group, claiming a number of residents had been unduly harassed by the group and that it had also "posted incorrect and deliberately misleading information, which appears designed to create unnecessary concerns and paint an inaccurate picture of RBH's work in central Rochdale".

Private sector investment

Mark Slater returned in 2014 to live for the third time on College Bank. His one-bedroom flat on the Mardyke block – consisting of 15 storeys with six flats on each level – costs £90 a week rent and is not due to be demolished. It is warm inside and soundproof. Slater enjoys a wonderful view, stretching high up on to the nearby countryside. He can look down on familiar sites in a town he was born in.

Self-employed, Slater helps out at a local soup kitchen. "I know many people who used to need the kitchen and whose lives have been rebuilt thanks to getting accommodation in Seven Sisters flats," he said. "But they remain vulnerable and they have told me so."

Slater himself desperately needed accommodation in 2014 as he was sleeping on a sofa at his dad's house after his marriage collapsed. He has been active for over 18 months in the College Bank Support Group, which disputes RBH's claims that it will be able to relocate any displaced tenants in like-for-like property.