

IF IT ISN'T ABOUT PEOPLE, WHAT IS IT ABOUT?

I've spent the last ten years working for Bolton at Home, provider of approximately 18,000 homes across the borough of Bolton, the largest provider of social housing in Bolton. I was born and bred in one of their homes and my mum, like many, still refers to her home as 'council houses'. I suppose that's a generational thing and families now raising their children will at some point look back and refer to it as it is currently termed 'social housing'. But whatever name they are given, they are still people's homes.

On its website, Bolton at Home states: *'our work goes far beyond the bricks and mortar'* and yet, whilst I had lived in one of their properties up to the age of 19, I had no idea that this was the case. I had been brought up in an era when my mum or dad would say to us: "if that's the rent man, tell him he'll have to come back next week". So, in my young mind – which didn't change until much later in life – the 'council' were rent collectors.

Ten years ago, I was a new-born in the world of social housing, and I have been educated every single day since, learning by doing to understand how diverse the offer of support is, rents to roofs, kitchens to food banks, education to employment, it was all happening. It was here that I discovered a real passion for the town I grew up in and am bringing my children up in, so it was a real joy to spend a day with Rita Evans, Leaders in GM Programme Director travelling around Bolton to meet people in the community and get to know more about the work they do and the impact it has.

The ethos of Leaders in GM is simple, its about people and inclusion, from the feet on the street to the Mayor in his chair, we all have a part to play in helping our communities connect and flourish. The five expectations help use to understand how as collective, we can come together. We squeezed four visits into our one day on the road and met some inspiring people who shared with us their stories, some happy, some sad, some devastating. And without intention or realising they also shared with us their pride and sense of community. To me, the people we met brought the Leaders in GM expectations to life. One of their strengths is that there is no pecking

order, they seem to have an unspoken mantra 'if you can help another person then why wouldn't you?'

So, I invite you to read on to find out what we saw and experienced during our visits and pick out which of the Leaders in GM expectations you can see embedded in their approaches.



First stop: UCAN

We arrived at the UCAN in Brightmet around 9.25am on a Thursday morning, at that time the weather was still making its mind up as to what mood it was in and I was thinking that perhaps I should have worn my wellies as our next stop was going to be a Men in Sheds scheme, which by its very nature was going to be outside.

Bolton has six UCAN's in total which I have visited many times. Although there is a loose structure of activities and events – for example on a Thursday it runs its job club – no two visits have ever been the same and this visit was no different. This is because one of the key strengths of the UCAN teams is that they recognise no two people are the same and no two neighbourhoods are the same.

As we enter, I notice that there are already two people logged onto the free-to-use computers, one was job-hunting and another was reading the local news online. It wasn't long before the door opened and in came a young man who was accompanied by a woman who began to show him how to log onto the computer. I wandered over to say hello and asked how often he used the UCAN: "I've never been before, my mum told me to come as I've recently found myself homeless and am sleeping on her sofa. She has been before, and she said that I should come along."

I asked him how he had found himself in this position and what type of support he was looking for. Having split from his partner, he had been living outside of Bolton and without his documentation. This meant he wasn't able to access various services, including registering for benefits and housing, so his only option was to sleep on his mum's sofa, which wasn't ideal as four of his siblings still lived at home. Sarah, one of the UCAN team, came along and they quickly settled into a conversation about what was important for him right now.



'It never goes away – its part of you and you are part of the centre' – UCAN customer feedback

More customers came in, so we joined UCAN manager Vanessa for a chat. Vanessa's passion for people is clear for everyone to see, hear and feel and it's contagious. Vanessa reeled off story after story of people who had come to UCAN looking for something, often not knowing what they were looking for themselves.

She shared with us a story of Sean who they had been working with for three years. When they first met Sean, he was clearly frustrated and often verbally aggressive, he was using a clean empty jam jar to help him read as he didn't have any reading glasses. The team at UCAN worked with Sean over a total of 53 interventions. Later, when we had a tour around the UCAN centre, we noticed a picture on the wall of a man wearing a work uniform, it turned out to be Sean who is now in full time permanent employment. Vanessa told us that Sean's story is just one of many that the team refer to as 'the Hollywood outcome'. His story has helped others understand that life can be different and that at UCAN, you are treated as a person rather than a case.

'It's humbling, invigorating and exasperating, but every day we hear inspiring stories of resilience and achievement. It's my ideal job.' – Vanessa, Brightmet
UCAN

If you want to read more about everyday life in the UCAN centres and their communities, take a look at [Len Grant's website](#). Len is an urban photographer, writer and sketcher who's tells stories around social issues, giving a voice to those who are frequently unheard. He was commissioned to capture life as it is on a number of Bolton projects such as [Rare as Rubies](#), stories from a Bolton housing estate and [Bolton at Work](#).



Second stop: Men in Sheds

Now, when I said I was Bolton born and bred, to be exact I lived in Farnworth until I was 24 and most of my family live close by to Willow Hey. My Uncle Glen has been working alongside the Farnworth Men in Sheds group for around a year – a project that supports older men who want to get together, share and learn new skills – showing them traditional carpentry methods used throughout the ages to build roundhouses.

Willow Hey is a real hidden gem which can only be accessed through a ginnel at the side of an elderly persons' bungalow scheme which faces a small green. When you reach the end of the ginnel you are struck by an overwhelming sense of serenity. It took me back to my history lessons in school when we would look at images of small communities which seemed to show everything you needed in one picture, people getting on with cooking, building, singing, tending vegetable patches, feeding chickens, laughing, it was all happening and within the space of a few minutes the outside world felt like it didn't exist. I suppose that's part of the charm!

We were met by Dean, who has been part of this community for around 18 months, it soon becomes clear to us that he is an incredibly caring person who would bend

over backwards to help you if he could. on the day we visited he fed the chickens, dished out the lunch, brewed and washed up and dug up some spuds.



I had met Dean before on a previous visit and he told me coming here was a life saver for him and had it not been for the camaraderie and support of the other men there, he believes he may not be here today. I walked down to the far end of the sizeable plot, where you can find two round houses which had been designed and built by Glen and 'the gang' as Chris, the community development manager who oversees the project, fondly refers to them. They are amazing and have been built using mainly wood foraged locally and traditional methods, no power tools for this gang. They pride themselves on only using modern nails and screws where necessary, although Glen plans to change this in the future as they are looking into traditional blacksmith skills, so they are able to forge their own nails.

The aim of the group is to become self-sufficient and one of the ways they plan to do this is by manufacturing the traditional wheels that are needed to build a round house. They have already built a platform to create these wheels and Glen says that their craftsmanship is second-to-none, even though the design calls for accuracy and is incredibly intricate.

Inside, the round houses are remarkably comfortable, and you get a real sense of feeling grounded. As I wandered towards the 'Big Shed', I bumped into Bill, another long-standing member. Among many things, Bill is a poet and musician who started coming along when his wife's dementia was beginning to effect on his own wellbeing, and he felt isolated. He volunteers at a number of charities in Bolton and told me how he now supports other men to deal with the impacts of living with partners who have been diagnosed with dementia.

Bill also told me that for him, coming to Men in Sheds was far more effective than medicine could ever be and called for more awareness. Bill is what I would call a local historian and speaking to him describing Farnworth and its surrounding areas of old put me in mind of listening to my grandma and brought some of her stories to life. He had recently written a poem about the old poorhouse, which later turned into Townleys Hospital and then became Royal Bolton Hospital. Here's a clip of him and Chris rapping a poem he wrote about [Fred Dibnah](#)



Over in the 'Big Shed' it was time for lunch. Someone had made a stew and we were offered some along with cake, as luckily for us it was someone's birthday and one of the men used to be a chef and had baked some cakes. Reluctantly we needed to move on. It wasn't that we weren't looking forward to visiting Huddle Up at All Souls,

it was because we didn't want to leave what was beginning to feel like a craft camp and one I would book into if I had the chance!

The Men in Sheds have been busy making Christmas decorations which they have donated to various Christmas fairs to support Royal Bolton Hospital, Bolton Hospice and Urban Outreach. They also grow vegetables which they donate to the local food bank located at New Bury UCAN.

Three words to sum up what I saw are: belonging, contributing and happy. Seeing is believing, smelling is believing, feeling is believing. There is so much to see and learn from the Men in Sheds that I couldn't possibly do it justice here, so my advice is to get yourself down there or visit your local Men in Sheds. You can also see what 'The Gang' are up to, by following their Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/willowheycommunity/>



Third stop: Huddle Up at All Souls

All Souls is nestled in the heart of Astley Bridge in Bolton and is home to a number of community interest companies, including the one we went to visit. Huddle Up is run by founder Katie McNulty and is xxx. When you enter the building, which is a

restored church, you can't help but feel inspired. It is a perfect blend of old and new, which complements the many social groups that use the space.

Katie and the Huddle Up team have recently celebrated their first birthday, having opened for trading October 2018. The team have the biggest hearts and smiles you'll ever see, and you can feel their determination and hard work flow through all they do. Only one year old and already a welcomed and mature member of the Bolton family.



“Our vision is for social exclusion and loneliness to be a thing of the past and for everyone to feel a sense of belonging” – Huddle Up

Cake aside, we had worked up a real appetite so without further ado we ordered lunch. I could go onto describe how perfect it was, but I'd much prefer you visit and sample for yourselves with my recommendation of course. It was just gone lunchtime and already there had been a men's group, craft group and an English language class. The space is incredibly well used, with areas for anyone and everyone to come and join a group or have a cuppa.

On the next table I noticed an elderly couple just finishing their lunch and later Katie told me that the gentleman was the bell ringer for the church and also ran bell ringing classes to help keep the tradition alive. That's now on my bucket list! Talking about

tradition, the next day was All Souls Day and he had also shared a recipe for some traditional soul cakes. Dating back to the Middle Ages, these cakes were given out to the 'soulers', children and the poor and each cake eaten would represent a soul being freed from purgatory. Needless to say, we bought some and they were delicious.

Last year, Katie and a number of volunteers opened the doors of All Souls and Huddle Up to invite anyone who would be spending Christmas Day alone to come and join them for a free Christmas dinner and company. As I said earlier, their mission is alive and well.

Find out more about [Huddle Up](#) and [All Souls](#).



Final stop: Working Wardrobe

When we arrived at Working Wardrobe, we were greeted by Dawn who was specially recruited to bring her manager Tony's vision of providing an end-to-end employment offer to life. Like everyone we had met that day Dawn was warm and friendly, sharing with us her 'warts and all' story of how, since opening in June 2018, they have had more than 80 unemployed people walk through their door looking for support with appropriate clothing for an interview and coaching support. Over 40 of these individuals received an offer of employment after their interview. Dawn said:

“There’s no other employment support service out there that offers support with the final barrier of looking the part and that’s what we do”.

Listening to the story of how the offer has evolved, it’s clear that Working Wardrobe has struck the hearts and minds of many. Dawn shared with us the support that they have received from all sectors which comes in many guises. To name a few, Johnsons dry clean every single item of clothing that is donated and makes it to the shop floor and stock room, staff from Turton High School held a clothing rally, Boo Consulting provides career and confidence coaching, local barbers the Gentlemen’s Emporium has provided free haircuts to men and a mobile hairdresser has cut and coloured a lady’s hair to give her that added confidence.

After a look around the shop, consultation and fitting rooms – which had all been designed to give the feel of exclusivity to anyone who comes for their appointment – we made our way upstairs to the insight training room which is used on a regular basis to run a variety of courses aimed at supporting people into work.

Dawn is part of the employment and enterprise team at Bolton at Home, whose ethos is built around relationships and supporting people to be their best self. Initially they had planned to do an appointment only system, taking referrals from multiple agencies once a job seeker had received their invitation to interview. Dawn laughed when she told us that soon changed. Dawn and the team had seen five people in that day alone, three of which had only contacted them that morning: “The problem is, people are being offered interviews for the following day and we can’t turn them away knowing the outfit could make a difference.”



The team have all attended personal dresser training and Dawn shared that if you've got the right stock, making people feel a million dollars is easy. What the team find challenging is not knowing the needs of the person until they are in the shop, and sometimes have needed to discreetly send one of the team on a local shopping trip whilst the person is in a coaching session.

On the surface, the shop provides an outfit and interview tips and techniques to build confidence. Beneath that, though, the team are dealing with a number of challenges that people need support with on a daily basis daily that haven't been picked up along the way. These include addiction, mental health, personal hygiene, the challenges seemed endless. Dawn shared that earlier that day she had dealt with a safeguarding issue which she had picked up during a conversation with the person and needed to act swiftly, to avoid someone who was vulnerable themselves taking a position looking after another vulnerable person: "It's not something we can turn a blind eye to."

Andy Burnham Mayor of Greater Manchester and Matt Ainsworth portfolio holder for employment in GM had recently visited the shop and are now exploring with the team how this can be replicated in other parts of Greater Manchester, which is a testament to the fantastic work that the team does.

If you want to find out more about how you refer to this service or how you can support this project have a look at their [website](#) and [Twitter](#) page.

“Look after the pennies and the pounds will look after themselves” – my grandma, Margaret McFarlane

“Look after the people and the pounds will look after themselves” – Paula Whyllie

Congratulations you stuck with it and reached the end! I took a lot from the people I met on our visits, but these are some learnings that stood out for me:

- If you care, you share!
- Where there's a will there's always a way
- Simplicity is what will see us through, overcomplication has got us to where we are today, but it won't take us forward.

Why not take some time to get out and about where you live, work or play and see who or what you can learn from to help you bring the Leaders in GM expectations to life?