THIS WAS
TOMORROW

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In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Calder Valley CLT, Upper Calder Valley, West Yorkshire
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and where are we?

I'm Paul Brannigan. I have the posh title of Executive Manager of Calder Valley Community Land Trust - but to give you some context, there's only one employee. Posh title, only one of us. We're in the Upper Calder Valley, which covers Todmorden, through Hebden Bridge, out through Luddenden Foot and Sowerby Bridge.

02 What does the Land Trust do?

Very simply: at our heart, we're here to create affordable rented housing and give people secure tenancies, so they have the peace of mind to plan for the future. We also act as custodians of community land and community buildings. And the other key thing about us is a focus on sustainability. Whatever we get involved in, sustainability is always on the shopping list, and high up in the budget.

03 How did you come to do this job?

I'm completely unqualified for it. I get jobs I've got no experience in and I'm unqualified for, and I don't know how that happens. But I've worked in social enterprise since 2003, so I suppose it's those general skills: being entrepreneurial, being caring, finding ways of making money from a social business where the money does some good.

04 What's easy about the job, and what's hard?

What's easy is looking at the resources available in the community and working out what you can create from them. Someone comes along and says, I've got X, and you go: great, what can I do with X? Will it help us deliver

affordable homes? So piecing the jigsaw together comes quite easily. You take it as far as you can, and either you haven't got enough pieces, or you make it work and create a home.

05 How does the Land Trust work?

We have twelve trustees and an advisory panel of about ten people with particular skills we can call on. The trustees are responsible for governance, and they're all hands-on to different degrees. My post was initially lottery-funded for three years. I think the trustees thought, great, an employee will take some of the pressure off us. What actually happened is that, because there was someone there to pick up opportunities, we found more and more of them - and they work harder than ever now. This autumn all our live projects should be finished, and we'll take a step back in the last quarter of the year to reflect, because we've never had time to. Decide where we go and how we do things. That'll be a nice opportunity.

06 What does the future look like?

Hopefully Todd Works will be built, with its 23 offices, and we'll hit our letting target and make an operating surplus. With a guaranteed income we'll be able to plan better. At the moment my post is robbing Peter to pay Paul - taking this from there - it really is a jigsaw, like everything we do. Having that security will transform how we think. The future is hopefully more homes. It's hard to say, because we tend to react to what comes along. We're always listening for what's happening, and people come to us with ideas, often a community building. The first two things we ask: do you have a business plan for your building? And is there any opportunity to bring housing into it - a top floor that isn't used, a bit of land? We're always looking to link in the housing.

07 What's special about this part of the world?

I'd bring it down to the Upper Calder Valley, because it very much has its own identity. There are a lot of people who think about the valley and what it needs and are prepared to put the work in to make it happen. And there's a strong sense of supporting each other. We just passed Northern Powerhouse Boxing, which you said you hadn't seen before. Josie, whose idea that was, came to the Land Trust - nothing to do with us - and said, I'm applying for this massive grant and you've done that application, can I borrow yours? And I said yes, and we sat down and worked through it. I've had the same help from other people. Then Northern Powerhouse Boxing get their money, and there's a new thing in the community. People generally just want help.

08 What would you tell people who want to do what you're doing?

In my experience, it starts with individuals. Andrew, whose idea the Land Trust was, is a creator. He just has ideas. He stayed with the Land Trust until it was established, then had another idea: he set up a campervan co-operative, and an urban trail race that ran through Halifax Minster and the town hall. In Todmorden there's someone who took on the Golden Lion and made it what it is. Around those individuals, other people get inspired and get ideas, and they see it'll be easier to succeed because something's already working there. So another café, a willow-weaving shop, a craft place - they all spring up and it becomes an area. But it starts with an individual.

People might have the idea that they could do something. But a conversation with people who've actually done it gives them the confidence to say, okay, I can do this - it's been done, it's not just theory. And a mentor, a bit of support - not just technical, but emotional support, because it absolutely kills you trying to create anything.

09 What's needed more of?

We've shown that if you just give us money, we make things happen. Look at the Todmorden Town Deal: £17.5 million comes into the town, and uniquely in the whole country, most of the projects are delivered by the community, not the local authority. All but one have succeeded immensely. Give us the money and we'll do it. And we do it properly, because we know it has to be sustainable. The people who run these things are very knowledgeable, governance is key and really strong, and the structure means we don't waste money.

10 Some places struggle to see themselves as a community. If a place were lacking community, how would you help?

I grew up in Wallsend, a shipyard community. A massive workforce, but a self-policing society: if you got up to anything you shouldn't as a child, somebody's dad who knew your dad was around. It's at the end of Hadrian's Wall - Wallsend, that's the name - and it had a massive shipyard industry, which was destroyed. We won't go into that. I'd rather be positive. What they had was immense pride. The shipyards were at the end of rows of terraces. You'd come out of your front door, look along the street, look up at the sky, and there was a massive ship being built at the end of it. Then the Queen comes along, launches the ship, off it goes, and you're on to the next one. That's amazing - a massive sense of pride when you can actually see your work. So we had community through that. And then it was destroyed when the shipyards were forced to shut, and you saw all those men not knowing what to do. My dad was one of them. That was really tough.

So if an area hasn't got community, I'd start by bringing them to us. I've had a few social enterprises, and I always said: sceptics walk in, converts walk out. One was a kerbside recycling service, here in the valley, from Luddenden Foot through Todmorden - we grew it to 25,000 households on a fortnightly

collection. People were sceptical: you've got volunteers, people with learning disabilities, ex-offenders - are you just using them as free labour? Come in and have a look. And you'd see lives transform, because people were given the chance to be productive, to be part of something, to work as a team.

Pretty much all our employed recycling staff were single men - I don't know why. We had a link with the young people's service to help young people make the step into employment, and those men who weren't fathers became like fathers to those young people. It just evolved naturally, and it was amazing to see. With our learning-disabled staff, it was tough to find the money, but once we were established we wanted to create proper paid work within the "permitted earnings" rules, so they wouldn't risk their benefits. We got to the point where we paid them for a few hours a week, cash in a brown envelope. They'd come up to the office, take it, and go home to their families with a pay packet. It transformed how they were seen at home, and probably how they saw themselves. One lad never spoke to me at all until he did his first work - then he was straight up to my office asking for his pay. The first time he'd spoken to me. He just needed a chance.

11 How did that carry into what you do now?

It's about financial sustainability. You want to run a business, not rely on grants. Grants should be the icing on the cake; the cake should be delivering a service. We're not there yet as a land trust, but if Todd Works comes off as we hope, then we've made the cake, and the grants become the icing. And just seeing people transform is inspiring. You want to do more of it. We've just sat and talked to Danielle - she's got a house and it's changed her life. At Jerusalem Farm, the family living there now had been in an absolutely derelict farmhouse a couple of hundred yards away. We took a lease on the property, did it all up, looked for tenants - and now they've got a lovely house, warm and dry.

12 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

I'm on a mission with the Land Trust, and alongside the trustees, when autumn comes, I'll be asking: what's my mission? At the minute I'm living my work dream, and what we decide then will shape what I do. Do I need a new challenge? I'm open-minded. It sounds a bit crass, but you create your dream every day. Break it down that small: what can I do today? Am I DJing tonight? Am I going to a gig? Have I done a good day's work, or have I disappointed myself? Because you have those days. […] Little dreams and big dreams, I suppose.

13 What makes you really happy?

Running. People ask how long I've been running and I say, I ran out of the womb. Committing to something physical lets the mind wander, unrestricted by my consciousness. Running and music - those are my two big things. Music is a huge part of every day. And family. My four children are in their thirties and all doing good stuff - making things happen, not just for themselves, but in ways that help the community too.

14 What would you like to say to the nation?

It's pretty simple. I think fear has been used as a tool against us, and it makes us weaker. We've accepted that the authorities will keep us safe. I sound like an old person, but when I was a kid we went out to play, and that was it. Now an eleven-year-old walks to school and texts home to say they've arrived safely. That's not teaching a child any independence or freedom. We need to move on from that - be more empowered, less fearful, more entrepreneurial. The best lessons are when you get it wrong. Something bad might happen, you might break a leg, but you'll learn from it.

15 It feels harder and harder to enable people to take their own decisions.

There's such a focus on risk. I hate that saying from Covid, "stay safe". The last thing I want is to stay safe. You want to stretch yourself, be a bit out of your comfort zone, because that's the only way things happen. Risk-aversion is embedded in our authorities. Sustainability is massive for the Land Trust; risk seems to be massive in local government. A lot of people in there want to do things as individuals, but they're in a what-happens-if, what-can-go-wrong mindset. There's nothing wrong with a sensible assessment of risk, but when it drives your decisions, it stops things happening. That's the difference with the community sector: we'll have a go.

[…] The bad experiences are the things that help you move up a level and progress as a person. You're a work in progress, and if you stay safe, you'll stay where you are. Years ago I read about a man who said he was in a state of perpetual practice: once he'd mastered something, he moved on to the next thing, always a bit on edge. There are techniques for dealing with that. If it immobilises you, obviously it's not good. But if you've got some control over it, it can fuel you.

There's a song by Bonnie "Prince" Billy called "Black" that was life-changing for me. To me, he's in a cabin in the woods, and the black dog is knocking at the door, and instead of fighting it he opens the door and says, come in, sit down. Do your worst. I know you'll go at some point. Rather than it spiralling into, oh, it's coming. […]

16 Do you think the different parts of life are really separate chapters?

Everything's connected. I do think "everything is connected" is something to keep in mind at all times. Everything you do has an impact, and everything other people do has an impact. If you're aware of that, it has less power to

overpower you.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
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