

Local heroes

When it comes to pressure groups, the energy and experience of age is most certainly an asset. **Moira Petty** looks at three campaigns where retirees dug themselves out of a hole – literally in one case...

PEOPLE POWER
Barry Forde and volunteers rolling out fibre-optic broadband across Lancashire



HIGH HOPES
Debbie Cosgrove leads the appeal to buy Blencathra as a community asset

Across the country, local groups are reviving local facilities, plugging gaps in services not supplied by commercial companies and protecting the natural landscape. And almost without exception, it's older generations spearheading this grassroots action. Some campaigners may be retired and have time to spare, but more important is the professional and life experience they bring to causes, along with self-assurance. Perhaps most significantly, they are inspired by the wish to make their mark: what could be better than improving life for everyone in their neighbourhood?

COMMUNITY MOUNTAIN

Debbie Cosgrove first visited the Lake District aged 11 on a school trip from London, in 1968. 'We climbed Blencathra. It was exhausting and I didn't understand what it was all about. Suddenly the sun came out from behind the clouds. It was like sitting on top of the world. I vowed there and then that I'd live near it one day.' A former Wren, she moved there in 1989 with her two children, five years after being widowed at only 27 when her husband, also in the Navy, suffered an accident. Blencathra became part of her life. 'It's made up of three fells and quite distinctive. So many people say it: when you see Blencathra, you know you're

home,' says Debbie, 58, who works in rural development for a local authority. 'People have scattered their loved ones' ashes there, they've been proposed to – it's part of their lives.' Last year, over the May Day weekend, she was shocked to hear that Blencathra, known also as Saddleback, had been put up for sale by Lord Lonsdale's estate to pay death duties. 'I'd assumed the mountains were owned by everyone. I made a throwaway remark on Facebook that if we all tossed in a tenner, we'd be able to buy it.' Within days, more than 2,000 people had signed up to the Friends of Blencathra group page she

opened. 'People were saying, "You're a project manager, so manage it". After a week we called a meeting at a village hall and had to repeat the presentation as so many people turned up. 'It snowballed and I went on the *Jeremy Vine* Radio 2 show and we did *The One Show* on BBC One, walking the same bit of the mountain over and over in pouring rain while they filmed us. The appeal snowballed – luckily I'd taken leave to paint my house. It still isn't painted.' Donations started rolling in, ranging from £3 to a six-figure sum from Berghaus, the outdoor clothing company. Debbie won't reveal the total so far (their

business plan states a target of at least £2.1 million), but any spare money will go into the charity for ongoing projects. Celebrity supporters include mountaineer Chris Bonington – who would like to see native woodland planted on the slopes – and Melvyn Bragg 'who can see the mountain from his cottage'. A hearing, which gave the mountain Community Asset status, was held last July, on the day Debbie had knee surgery. 'Two hours after the op, I signed myself out and attended on crutches. The next day I was on TV standing outside my house in pyjama trousers and a Blencathra top.' The group successfully fought off five rival buyers and hopes soon to announce ownership of the mountain, which comes with a manorial title. It is part of the Lake District National Park 'so no one is going to take it away a wheelbarrow at a time', explains Debbie. 'We didn't want it going to an absentee landlord. This is an opportunity to get



LIVE WIRES

They were first spotted in Lancashire's Quernmore Valley in the wet summer of 2012. Locals, armed with garden spades, carefully excavating trenches around the periphery of fields before uncoiling metres of fibre duct. When the heavens opened, this cheery group of mainly over-50s dug indefatigably on. Not rain, or the arrival of a curious sheep or two, nor the loss of a Wellington boot in the boggy channels could slow them down.

Work stopped only with the arrival of tea and buns. A cuppa and cake was the fuel on which ran an extraordinary £3 million self-help project to bring one of the world's fastest broadband connections to a rural community. By the end of 2015, Broadband for the Rural North – B4RN – will have connected 5,000 properties in 35 outlying parishes where the take-up rate of the service is a phenomenal 65%. And it's all down to the local community banding together under the leadership of Barry Forde, 66, retired deputy director of computer services at Lancaster University. He is a calm, measured man, but the statistics dropping from his lips are astonishing. 'The broadband is spectacular with speeds of one gigabyte per second. The community loves that it is doing >

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◁ a world-class job. In years to come, we'll have a surplus of £750,000 to £1 million annually for community projects.'

Locals have done everything from funding the project to laying the cables and providing a voluntary help service when B4RN customers have computer or tablet problems. The signature note has been a spirit of neighbourliness fanning out across an area that, says Barry, is 'the size of Greater London out to the M25. Those from a parish due to start digging, help in one that is under way and later pass on the skills to the next parish.'

'B4RN is a community benefit society so spare cash, likely to be available in seven to nine years' time, will go to local causes. At first we'll be paying back loans, all from individuals, and shares, priced at £1 each (the average spend was £1,500), which can't be sold to a third party but we can buy them back.'

Around a decade ago Barry moved to Quernmore, just three miles east of Lancaster but a million light years away in terms of services, with septic tanks instead of mains drainage and some remote properties without piped water or electricity. He'd previously designed a network for schools so knew about the local 'grotspots' (slow broadband), and 'notspots' (no broadband), but the reality was a shock. 'I was still working – I retired at 60 – and as we live on a hill I set up a radio wireless link to the university with equipment at both ends. It wasn't cheap and thoroughly hacked off my neighbours, most of whom had no broadband.'

Barry worried that the lack of internet access would lead to depopulation and deter local recruitment, new start-ups and house buyers. He and a handful of 'plotters' were convinced they could do something. Initially they pursued rural development grants – stymied when the city council pulled out – and central funding, 'but we just ran into the sands of government bureaucracy. We finally pulled out of that in Easter 2014 after being messed around for two years. Things actually speeded up then as, hearing the news, loans came in from individuals.'

Most of the funding came from shares, which were sold from 2011 on. Barry and his coterie set up meetings in a series of

village halls. 'It was standing room only. Nobody had seen anything like it.' Originally hoping to sign up 750 properties in eight parishes, enough to cover running costs, B4RN was inundated with interest from wave after wave of villages.

'The big companies dig up roads, which is expensive, but we go cross-country, with most farmers giving free access.' In March 2012, they ordered hundreds of kilometres of duct tubes through which they were to blow the fibre-optic cable with high-pressure jets. The digging started in Quernmore, with Arkholme following soon after. Volunteers had to dig trenches 2ft deep to link fibre coming from a data centre in Manchester to their own equipment in nodes – big green cabinets that sit innocently outside such venues as bowls clubs, monitored by CCTV. They then continued digging to run the ducts containing the fibre-optic cable, which is about the diameter of a human hair, out to each property.

About 95% of volunteers are retired, ranging from 50-somethings to 90-year-olds – the latter on less backbreaking jobs such as smoothing out the ducts. And 30-50% are women. In some parishes contractors have supplemented the local participants. 'An awful lot can't be done using a digger, such as when you're crossing hedges or digging the spurs, the bits from the main duct to the individual houses,' says Barry. 'I reserve myself for cranial activities but I did dig the 120-metre bit into our houses with my neighbour, over a couple of days.'

As each parish has to fund labour and materials themselves – 'If they can't, it doesn't happen' – they must work together from the outset. The dig itself offers further opportunities for sociability. 'As you're digging past houses, people come out with refreshments. At times they're stopping for tea breaks every few yards. Every third picture on our Facebook page they're there with their tea and buns. I often think that what people really enjoy is not so much the broadband as the community spirit.'

Digging – still going on full pelt across the region – is invariably accompanied by much laughter. 'It's interesting the number

of people who've lost wellies in trenches and never managed to get them out. Then there are the sheep that come and look – and occasionally fall in.'

Most problematic are mice, which enjoy chewing on the duct, made of high-density polyurethane. 'That was in the early days when we hadn't sealed off the ends of the tubes where they come into an access chamber. Now we protect them with wire wool. It also happens in people's houses where they bring the duct into a cupboard that has mice.'

Barry's role as CEO, unpaid until recently, is full-time. 'My wife Maureen keeps saying: "Explain this retirement to me again". If I was much younger I wouldn't have had the experience or gravitas to drive this. A few grey hairs improves credibility. The 50-plus age group is the one with the willingness and interest to do something for the community.'

Once B4RN's surplus cash comes onstream, members of the cooperative will have the rewarding task of putting it to good local causes. At the current rate of growth, there will be money to re-roof every village hall, kit out every junior football team, and supply every parish with a minibus for communal jaunts.

For updates, see b4rn.org.uk

How does B4RN's broadband download speed compare with the rest of the world?

- (1) 'B4RN', Lancashire, UK** 1,000 Mbps (1 gigabyte!)
- 1. SINGAPORE** 121.75 Mbps
- 2. SAINT PIERRE AND MIQUELON** 101.17 Mbps
- 3. HONG KONG** 101.15 Mbps
- 4. JAPAN** 80.30 Mbps
- 5. ROMANIA** 70.70 Mbps
- 6. SOUTH KOREA** 60.13 Mbps
- 7. SWEDEN** 58.45 Mbps
- 8. MACAU** 51.55 Mbps
- 9. TAIWAN** 50.51 Mbps
- 10. NETHERLANDS** 50.46 Mbps
- 26. USA** 35.89 Mbps
- 30. UK** 30.57 Mbps

(Mbps = Megabytes per second)
Source: netindex.com



◁ THE LOCALS' LOCAL

When the George & Dragon pub in Hudswell, overlooking the glorious Swale Valley in the Yorkshire Dales, closed its doors in 2008, villagers waited expectantly for a buyer. Time passed and the pub quiz moved to the village hall, where locals began debating the notion of buying it themselves.

This was an opportunity not only to revive the pub, but to include a shop, which the village hadn't had for 30 years, a small lending library, free internet access and allotments. Resident Martin Booth, 62, who works in business development for a community centre, helped organise a meeting of locals – who number around 350 – in 2009.

'We realised our project was viable. We set up a community cooperative and then issued shares, with a minimum investment of £550. The pub was on the market for £210,000 and we needed £50,000 to structurally refurbish it. North

'The shop has become a place for people to meet and gossip. It's open seven days a week'

Yorkshire County Council gave us a community enterprises grant of £65,000.

'It was finally ours in February 2010 and we wandered around it in the freezing cold making our plans. A working party cleared the land ready for allotments and planted an orchard – the idea is that fruit from the trees will be sold in the shop.'

Meanwhile other volunteers assisted a local builder, electrician and plumber in the complete revamp. Kitchen equipment was obtained from other pubs that had closed down.

In June 2010, the then Richmond MP William Hague officially opened the pub,



ONE-STOP SHOP
Martin Booth outside the community pub that is also a library and a shop

sampling one of a selection of locally brewed real ales offered in addition to an expanded menu.

'Our tenants, Stuart and Melissa, run the pub, which now attracts families and women. It's not just darts and dominoes. For example, a book club meets at the pub and you can borrow books in a room off the snug, just by writing your name in a logbook.

'The shop pays for itself and has become a place for people to meet and gossip. It's open seven days a week, run by 25 volunteers, and even when it's closed you can get the key from behind the bar,

go in and leave the money on the counter. The majority of our helpers are over 50. If you've had a successful career, you have the confidence and skills to take this on. It's drawn everyone closer and newcomers are absorbed more easily into the village. It's been so rewarding. I look at the people chatting in the pub and shop, and it makes me smile.'



Want to start your own community group? For advice and information, visit saga.co.uk/junemag