

C & G interviewing Anne Daw about Sheffield's Harcourt Road

Interview Date: 17th November, 2024

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Summary Keywords:

Harcourt Road, community cohesion, university houses, housing bubble, planning applications, local protests, student rentals, family community, development pressure, planning policy, local government, community engagement, retail transformation, pedestrian routes, policy enforcement

Clara (C): Today is the 17th of November, 2024. It's a Sunday, and it's very lovely that Anne is here with Gum and Clara. We would like to interview you and to talk about your experience, and memory about the BBEST¹ plan, but then also, maybe later on, also we can talk a bit more about how the Harcourt Road community came together in your experience. Can we first of all ask about how you got involved, or how your neighbours here on Harcourt Road got involved in this BBEST plan. Because the BBEST plan does not only involve Harcourt Road, but a bigger...

Anne (A): Sure. And I think the two questions, the two topics you've touched on are not separable. It is because we were a community fighting a very strong development directive from the city that we came together, that we were already together, and we're, let me start at the beginning. So the reason that there's a big community, a cohesive community, on Harcourt Road, is because the university used to own a lot of houses on the road, and at some point they decided that they wanted to change their development plan. The original development plan was -- quite far back -- was to demolish a lot of these houses and expand their campus in this direction, and that was given up because of quite a lot of local protests before we moved here. And they kind of held on to the properties and let students live in the houses, so kind of halls of residence in the neighbourhood. And so there was this one house that had a laundry in it for the whole street, and it was very much treated as a single sort of university entity. So Harcourt Road went from being a very working class immigrant community, which you probably have picked up from interviews with others on the street who've lived here longer than I have, to being a very student community. The university's expansion direction then changed, and they decided to sell houses on Harcourt Road and some further up towards Crookes. And there was a lot of pressure from community groups before I lived here to...

Gum (G): When did you move...

A: I moved here in 2009 so right at the beginning of that crash, and I think most people on the road came the year before, so we were one of the later people to join the road. And there's only two or three who lived here before that. So before we all... before the university sold the houses, and there were about 15 or so houses on the road that were sold, and they were sold with a covenant to prevent them from being used as student houses, which meant the landlords were not interested.

And at that time, there had been a big housing bubble which had crashed, and that's why we had the crash in 2009... There had been a big housing bubble, and developers were buying up all houses and

¹ BBEST stands for Broomhill, Broomfield, Endcliffe, Summerfield and Tapton.

using them for student rentals. People were investing heavily in buying extra properties to rent out to students, and that meant there was no way for individuals to compete because they had cash. They didn't need to get a mortgage, they didn't need to organize any financing. They could just overbid whatever they needed and secure the house, whereas if you're an individual, you'd have to go back to the bank. And you know, it was not a fair fight, really, so having the covenants put on the houses meant all of these new families could move in. And there was a lot of people who wanted to move in, to close, be closer to town, and be more sustainable and couldn't, because there weren't any properties here. So it was a great thing that the previous generation of Harcourt Road's, whereas, plus a lot of other people in Broomhill and around in Crookesmoor had set up this system for the university to give these covenant properties to families.

But that meant we all moved in, and we all had these properties that were in the same state of disrepair and funny things that the university had done. So we all had the same doors. They were all bright red on all the internal rooms. They all had a number. They all had locks on them. They all had a sink and a mirror and a bookshelf in each room. And we all had... so you could tell when somebody moved in... You could count the number of weeks before seven sinks would end up on the street, you know, for a pickup and the skip and all of that stuff. So it was crazy. We're all doing the same thing in renovating these properties. And so we began to share a lot of ideas about how to change the internal arrangements, how to renovate properties. So we got to be very good friends.

At the same time that development pressure was still there, because people had been making a lot of money. Now there was the crash, and the people who had money, still had money. So there was a lot of people still buying properties on Harcourt Road in the hope of making them student rentals, because this was known as a student street, and we had the need to turn the whole community's understanding of what Harcourt Road was around and change it, because we were now a family group of a lot of young children that moved in, and lots of, you know, families who probably wouldn't be able to afford to live in this area normally, but the houses were in poor condition, and so we could get in here and fix them up.

And so also that we're all the same kind of mindset, people who have a very positive outlook and say, I can do this. Nothing is too big, and this is great for my long term future, right? So we're that kind of people, that pioneering kind of mentality. So we just hit it all off. And lots of us had connections to the university, so there were connections outside of the street as well. So it was a strong community on Harcourt Road, but not really outside of Harcourt Road. And this development pressure wasn't just happening to our road, it was happening to all of the surrounding roads where the landlords kept buying properties.

When I moved on to the road, I had a little bit of experience of planning applications, so we started to fight these planning applications on Harcourt Road to try to maintain our street community. And there is a tipping point. I think it's important to know we're not against students. We never were. We wouldn't have moved here in the first place if that had been the case. But there's a tipping point when you get too many: there's a balance. And communities need people of all ages and all types of jobs and all sorts to balance everything so that you have a happy community. Otherwise, you get sort of a tyranny of majority, you get students having parties all the time and making it very uncomfortable for the rest of the people who live here, etc, you wouldn't want it the other way either, you wouldn't want all old people, because then the students would be really bored. So it's a nice balance, right?

So after about five years of fighting these planning applications, we had started to get some success, and we started to understand the planning system a little bit better. At the same time the Tory government put in an ability for local communities to make their own planning policy. And we were sick and tired of having to just wait until a developer decided to throw a bomb at our street, and we had to try to prevent this bomb from falling. And the local government was not very helpful. The national government policy was not very helpful.

So there was a group in Broomhill, which was called BANG, which was Broomhill Action Neighbourhood Group, which had a lot of influence before we really moved on the street, they had given way to what was called the Broomhill Forum. And so during the early, early years here, BANG sort of merged to Broomhill forum, and that was a new approach, where they were supposed to be partnering with the city and the city would really listen to neighbours and be advocates of communities. What it turned out to be was the local government pretending to listen and not doing anything.

So there was a lot of frustration that the forum was not getting anywhere, particularly with the university, because whatever the university wanted to do, the local government just said, you can't stop them. That's them. Whereas we felt that the local government should be representing the local community, not just one of the big employers, and it needed to be a balance. The local council did not feel the same way. So there was a strong leadership form of government, and the local Labour Council ruled everything. So we started getting a lot of resistance in the Broomhill Forum at the same time as we were fighting planning applications, so going to a lot of meetings there, trying to represent Harcourt Road.

In that forum, I met someone from the Moor Oaks triangle, which is the little three little streets next to Harcourt Road towards Broomhill. And he and I thought this is an opportunity to make our own planning policy, which is from the people, to say to developers, what we do want in the development around here, instead of fighting and letting them put whatever they wanted to throw at us on the table, we could say, no, if you're developing in this area, this is how we want you to develop. And that way we would not have so many fights, and we could relax and be happy communities and know that the development that was going to happen here would be appropriate and support the community. So we thought this would be a three year job. Now I can't quite remember what year we started it, but it was very early after I moved here, we were still doing..

C: 2014, maybe or something?

A: It was earlier, okay, so I think we started in 2013 if that's the case, it was about the year before we were officially recognised, and the council realised that this was a power that communities had not had before, and it undermined their strong leadership position. And the university decided that we might make up policies that were against the University, which was not really the case, not the intention, but rather than engage with us and and go as a partner and have us all be friends in the room, finding what works best for everyone, they went on the offensive, and they hired a planning consultant to fight our official designation as a planning forum.

C: From the very beginning?

A: From the very beginning, so that took us at least a year to just get designated as a planning forum. And there was a lot of ignorance about the national policy, which was new, was fairly new, and no

support from the council whatsoever for what we were doing. Again, the strong leadership model meant they wanted all the power in their hands, and they wanted to be able to make deals with the university and do what they wanted. So it was a threat to them, which is unfortunate, because we just felt that with the forum and we had meetings with them, I think it was monthly. I mean, we were meeting with them regularly. So we thought this would be an easy thing to transition to. Not so much. So we did finally get designation, and then we ran a very wide community engagement process. We organised...

One of the big issues for us was that there was a planning policy that said, if you there is more than 30% HMO. Which is high multiple occupancy houses in the area that you couldn't create new ones -- if there's more than 30% in a certain area. And it was like a 250 meter radius. So right there, 250 meter radius doesn't really make sense when you live on a hill, because people don't go up. You know, either it is a retaining wall between me and the people behind me of about four meters, four or five meters. So I don't really know anybody that lives behind me, but I know everybody that lives on my street. So that was one issue, the other issue was that there were no records in the Council of where the HMOs were because they hadn't officially been enforcing it. So there were a lot of unofficial HMOs, and when the policy had been enacted, they never went around to check. So one of the things we did quite early on was to go house to house to try to get evidence about where the HMOs were, but also to tell people what we were doing.

C: Can I interrupt a bit? So this policy about HMO, is it local policy or national? Or is there any difference here?

A: It's local policy.

C: So it's enforced by the local council?

A: Yes, it was probably brought about by Broomhill action neighbourhood group, but I'm not 100% sure about that. It was on the books when we started opposing planning policy. It was fairly new at the time, as I remember, but I'm not sure of the history of it. And it just was impossible to win any planning policy arguments about it, because even though I knew there were five student houses around this property that was being looked at to transform to an HMO, they had no records of it. So they would just say, well, with no records, it passes. So we were still seeing a drain of of housing stock in the community, hands into landlord hands and we actually got a group of maybe 10 or 12 people that rotated in and out, and quite a lot of them were from Harcourt Road, who went house to house in the BBEST area.

I didn't tell you why we defined the BBEST area the way we did, but it's basically that hill issue means it's a bit longer and narrower than a circle because of the topography of the area. And the second thing was, it's basically a 10 or 15 minute walk in both directions from the centre of Broomhill. And we already had a community of people who had been working on these things through BANG and through the Broomhill forum for many years, and they had done some work before we came on the scene to define the Broomhill community. Harcourt Road was an addition to that, because we didn't feel part of either community strongly of Crookesmoor or Broomhill, we felt a part of both. We did look early on trying to join with Crookesmoor. They had such a low population of permanent residents that there was not a sufficient number of people to make any impact. And so we decided, as a community, to join with the Broomhill group and create this wider BBEST area. And it really started to make sense, because a lot of the children went to Broomhill Infant School. And, you know, we go up to Broomhill for restaurants and all sorts. So it does really make sense, but at the time, we were not considered part of that area

because we're not in the conservation area for Broomhill, and that was another issue. So there are three conservation areas within the BBEST area. And there's also two different local voting areas, wards. Our boundaries don't align with a ward. It's part in one and part in another, and it's not the full ward in either place. So that created complications later, but I'll put that to one side, because that's another story. So we engaged in creating this house to house survey and getting all the data. And that was at the same time we got a grant from the National Government to create the local forum, neighbourhood forum, so once we were designated as a neighbourhood forum, we could get a grant, and that paid for a little bit of time to put together a website and to get all of that data put into a database.

C: So to get to that destination, did you need many people to sign some sort of petition or to endorse this idea against or versus the other entity created by the university.

A: We had to submit, no, I can't quite remember the part, the detail, I don't think we had to go to a referendum vote. We did have to go to a referendum vote on the final plan, but it was like a planning application, so we had to submit it for consultation, for formal consultation, and that's when the university hired their big guns to oppose it, and we had to deal with a lot of legal people from the council who were opposing it. And it was very difficult to even get them to agree that this was a neighbourhood in that way.

C: Okay, so that even from that beginning...

A: But a lot of the work that had gone before, from the Broomhill forum laid the groundwork for that. So we felt like we had a good start. There was only one other neighbourhood forum, and that was created in Dore at the time, and they had been working on it for several years. We met with them early on, and we said, you know, how's it going? And they basically told us, you'll never get past the council. Just forget it. We're really struggling. And we said, well, the personality types were a bit awkward in some of the group, and maybe that's it, I don't know, but we can do this.

C: Wow, great.

A: So we did get, we did get designated as a forum, but there was a clear implication that we wouldn't get any further, from Dore, because that's as far as they had gone. They'd been working on it for two years at the time, and they knew they had had no support, whereas in other cities, Leeds is a good example, there was a lot of support from the local council and neighbourhood forums popped up in a lot of areas and did a lot of great things and have really brought the community together. Wasn't the case here. So getting all that data allowed us to really have the information to fight planning applications, but we still wanted to get policy. So we did run a lot of events. We ran a lot of festivals.

There was a Broomhill festival at the time. It's kind of died out. Don't know if you remember it, Broomhill festival every June, which had music and cultural events and food and kind of a brass band picnic at the end. And so we did a lot of events tied with that, got a really wide group of people input into this. We had meetings regularly. It was really great. And we got all the policy ideas that we wanted, that the community wanted to put in place. And then we hired, with the last bit of our grant, a planning advisor to help us write the policies. We wrote the policies, and we then ran into these sort of legal hurdles of getting all of these passed and didn't realise the strength of opposition that the council was going to put up, and they picked apart every single policy with legal objections from lawyers. And of course, our

money ran out very quickly, our planning advice was not there. We're just normal citizens. So not even a citizen, but just normal people trying to live our lives and do this between kid pickups and, you know, after school clubs and work crises, and they had full time lawyers on this.

Well, it took, I think, two years of arguing, and they were basically, it was a war of attrition, and we had to accept a lot of watering down of the policies in the end. And we had then an outside -- you have to have an outside auditor at the end who came in and was swayed by a lot of the council's arguments where they weren't in other places. So we had based a lot of our policies on policies that had been enacted in other places around the country, so that they were not something very risky. They were something that had been proven, and it works. It wasn't enough to do that. We finally got them to allow us to go to a vote, and it was something like 94% or 98% approved, huge numbers of approval from the community, because we had done that huge outreach. We had a newsletter, we kept everyone informed about what was going on. And I think the council was quite shocked, but we were also quite... I think, and our expectations had been lowered so much that we felt a little bit like we had wasted a lot of time on this process. And I think if it hadn't been for the community bonds that we developed, I think we might still be left with that bad taste. Shortly after our vote, it was a year or something, the council, Labour Council was changed, after the trees fiasco, where they cut all the trees down and arrested all the pensioners. You probably were here for that.

C: We heard of that.

A: But were you not here when they happened?

C: Probably not yet, yeah, but we heard some other people talking about it, yeah.

A: So that, interestingly, did not affect Harcourt Road as much, because we had those inroads from BBEST, with the council, we had, and also Simon Ogden had helped us get to the right... because a lot of it's about knowing the right person to talk to more than anything. He helped us find the right person to talk to, so that we were able to say -- there weren't a lot of big trees on our road, but they were medium sized trees -- and we were able to say: Well, if you're going to take that one out, can we have one over there instead? Because there's no trees over there, for example. So we kind of worked with them to make a balanced approach for Harcourt Road. And they did. Harcourt Road was one of the very first waves of development, of cutting down trees. When they got to Moor Oaks, I mean, Marlborough Road, they just cut all the huge, beautiful trees down. And it was heartbreaking to see that happen in the BBEST area, because we had surveyed all the trees. We had a tree policy, which they had gutted and all of these things, it was just ignored, completely ignored, and because the policies had not formally been approved at that point, they ignored everything and just...

C: So, you mean, the vote happened after they...

A: Well, that's where I'm not sure, 100% when they cut those trees down, but it was before the policies had been officially approved, okay, but they had also watered down the policy so much, there was very little left of it.

C: Okay, so before the plan, or the policy devised by the community, got to the point for referendum, for the vote, so there is a process to go through some some councils officials, so they have to, sort of help to you, to revise so that it will fit in the system, so that it can be voted on?

A: Yeah, so the first pass was to create all of the policies with the council, because it had to. It couldn't contradict existing policy, it had to be extra or enhancement of any of a policy or a new policy, so they had to review all of their policies and agree that what we were proposing was not contradictory. After that, we also then had to have an external auditor to look at that in terms of local policy, but also national policy, and agree that it was going to work and be enforceable. The main problem now is the enforcement, because they don't enforce anything and the local planning officers don't look at our policies, so we have been trying for two years now to get them to a meeting with us about how they're enforcing these policies and how they're using them, whether they're using them correctly, whether there are any problems with them that we might need to adapt them over time, because things do change. And yeah, it's been two years and nothing yet. So we're hoping that -- they've promised us a meeting in December. They promised meetings before, so we'll see.

C: So which personnel would be involved, like the planning department from the Council or the community, and how about the council from these, these wards of Be Best?

A: Yeah. So in the whole time as a planning forum, we had a councillor on the planning forum, and initially we had two, one from -- because the two, as I said, we crossed in rewards, and they were two different parties. So we had one from Lib Dem and we had one from Labour. Sorry, Green. We had one from Green because our area is Green, but the council is Labour. This was part of the problem, because the Labour council didn't want to have anything to do with Green or Lib Dem. They didn't want them to have any wins, and because of the strong leadership model, they had no voice. So the Green Party and the Lib Dems had absolutely no voice, because the strong leadership model meant only the people sitting on the cabinet, only the 12 people in the Cabinet who were appointed by the ruling party, so they were all in the ruling party, were the only people who could really vote on anything in the council and advise things and have committees or any of that. So the trees fiasco changed that, and we now have some local area committees. They're not turning out to be very effective because of the way they're run and the lack of money and investment in them. It was almost a token gesture, I think, rather than an actual commitment to change. But because there's a coalition government in Sheffield, it's been a bit better, and we are seeing things becoming more focused on local community needs, rather than what a specific party wants to enact. It's so important. It's the reason why Labour doesn't win in this area, because they've never backed local needs in this area, and then they cut all the trees down.

C: I remember seeing that in the news. So if the meeting in December would take place, what would be the chief major agenda that you would like to see discussed?

A: We'd like to understand enforcement, planning enforcement of the policies. So when policies are enacted and they have an impact on the planning application, that applicant needs to follow those requirements. When they don't, there seems to be no impact. The council does not follow up to enforce and say, actually you need to do that over, or you need to take that down, or whatever it is. And I think a lot of those issues are in the Broomhill centre, mostly around the retail. We had a lot of policies around the retail. We had a really big retail group at the time that was working together with us to say what they wanted, how we could change, transform that area to be better for pedestrians, better for the environment, and better for the retail, shops and restaurants. There is a website that came out of that with a lot of the retailers in the area. I think it's called Broomhill online, but I'm not sure. I'd have to look it up.

C: Can you tell us some examples to help improve...

A: So one of the things that came out of that was the green wall. You see that on one of the buildings at the corner across from The York, there's a building that used to be pretty ugly, and now it's covered with a green wall. And it has changed. The businesses in that building are now much better, much more prosperous, and it's changed the feel of that corner that came from. They won a grant because of the Be Best work that had been done to look at how that was transformed. The other part is the way they filled in the parking spaces outside the shops which are not parking spaces anymore. They're just accessible disabled spaces and a place to turn around, drop off people, basically, and widen the pavement. So our proposal was probably a more expensive and more...

C: Pedestrian friendly?

A: Pedestrian friendly, yeah, too. But we were, you know, advocating that the whole street became a shared space, so similar to some of the places you see in town centre, and that the parking was eliminated, as they've done, and they weren't going to do that. They physically, violently opposed that, not physically, but they were violently opposed to that concept until COVID, and they had to widen the pavements during COVID for whatever reason. And everybody liked it, so they kept it. And suddenly it was like, oh yeah, this is what Be Best wanted. Kind of. We would have done it a lot better and in a lot more visually pleasing way with more planting. We were looking for something to tie this into the town center and create that walking route from the student halls of residences to the university, which connects the university, connects all the way down to the train station with a walking route. So we wanted to create better walking routes and pedestrian friendly spaces. We had a lot of meetings with the council about this, a lot of agreement from them, until it came to a policy, and then they opposed it.

We looked at a lot of ways to absorb the pollution because there are several hot spots of pollution in Sheffield and Broomhill is one of them, believe it or not, it's because there's so much traffic in the mornings, and it's a lot of lights, traffic lights, and lots of buses. So combine that with a huge number of walking pedestrians and cyclists. It's a bad combination for health and safety and everything else. So we were really pushing to prove the pedestrian routes there. We had some interesting ideas about the type of trees that would be planted to absorb pollution, about materials that buildings could be made of, maybe even signage could be made of things that could absorb particulates, this kind of thing all along that corridor. And there was a lot of really great design work.

We had some students, this was the saddest thing we had, we got involved with the Architecture and Landscape department at the University, and they were very excited, because the students could work on a on a project that was live and with real people, and could get that sort of experience of having a client and understanding a brief and creating and design, and we would get the benefit of having some boost to our design work, because we did have a few architects and a few landscape designers in the group, but we're all working so it wasn't like we could put in a huge amount of time, and they did some great projects for us, one of which was the Broomhill centre and and coming up with the idea of the green wall there, and all sorts of interesting concepts for Broomhill centre. And when the University found out that they were helping us, they shut them down and said they could not work with us anymore. So even though it was great for the students, the professors loved it, they didn't allow them to continue to work with us. That was the level of pettiness that went on in the process of getting that policy passed. That's a lot to take in. I'm sure.

C: If I'm not mistaken, then the students, they basically have classes really close by on campus or that Crookesmoor building? That would make a lot of sense, because they are involved in the area.

A: Exactly. They only live here. They walk through here all the time. We were looking at things that would benefit the students to put into the policies, and the university pulled their support.

C: Interesting.

A: There's a lot of backroom deals like that happening all the time, just to trip us up the whole way through. That was a really good example. There were others that happened along the way. Just can't think of them at the moment. So it's been a long journey. We are still feeling like the Council could have done a whole lot more to support us, as they have done in other places, and we could have really improved the city. There was a lot of goodwill to start out with. It was a lot of people spending professional time on their personal time to make this area really great, and it was opposed by the city because the university wanted free rein on what they develop in this area. And that's where it came down to. The head of estates has moved on now, and perhaps this is why we're having a meeting with planners. University estates has moved on. Or perhaps this is coincidence...

C: If you can live here long enough, longer than them?

A: There's just generally, everything changes and people move on. So it's something that has to be multi-generational. It can't, you know, the people that came before Be Best were really instrumental in Be Best's success. Our success was instrumental in whoever is coming after us. You can't really look at it as 'what can I accomplish in my lifetime?' It is with community change. I think it is a long term process. I think that's something that's very interesting to think about in all types of political dialog, that it's maintaining the stories, maintaining the history, and passing it on to the next generation, which is very important.

C: Absolutely agree. Thank you. Perfect. Thanks for sharing. So from you know, like from the very beginning, 2013, 2014 until now, it's 2024...

A: That three years went up to 10. It was about nine. It was about eight or nine. When did we get it passed? Was it two years ago?

C: 2021? I think it's 21 but it was already consolidated among the community before then. And so it took some time to go through the council, but the vote took place in 2021.

A: So since then, we have not had a meeting with the police on how they are enforcing the policy and using the policy, and, whether it's going as planned or there needs to be any changes. And we're supposed to be custodians of the policy for a five year period, right? So we are nearing that end point.

C: What do you mean by this five year period?

A: So the legislation states that after the policy is passed, that the forum needs to be maintained for a five year period to adjust anything that may be not having the outcome that it was intended. And we're nearing that point, but we still haven't had a proper meeting with them about that.

C: Well, I hope that meeting will happen in December and something positive would come out of that.

A: I mean, I don't want to make it sound like they're absolutely evil or anything. The councils have been attacked by the central government. They've not had any funding for ages. They have a lot going on in their own development of the town centre. So a lot of it is just the thin on the ground, but they could have... it's a missed opportunity, I think, because they could have had all of these great people working on another part of the city for free, and they could have capitalised on that and didn't. And I feel like that is such a missed opportunity, and they were just looking at their own support from the university, you know, they didn't want to jeopardise that. I don't think the university is planning to move. I don't think that's a big threat really.

C: Thank you very much.