

# **Deep Social Change**

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## The Grapevine Story

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### **Three Decades of Grapevine**

Founded in 1994, Grapevine strengthens people, sparks community and shifts power across Coventry and Warwickshire.

Its work illustrates how people and communities can meet one another's needs, claim power and take action on what matters to them – and transform services and systems along the way.

Grapevine has become a nationally acclaimed example of deep social change.

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## Introduction

In its first three decades, Grapevine has gone from being a small single-issue charity to an organisation at the centre of work to build power, build belonging and strengthen people in Coventry and Warwickshire.

In the process, it has grappled with many of the knottiest questions facing our communities and social systems and developed boundary-pushing responses.

In a time of growing anxiety about issues like loneliness, isolation, mental health, inequality and community cohesion, Grapevine is a beacon of hope and possibility.

This is its story.

To trace Grapevine's story is not just to follow the growth of a charity, but also to trace an enquiry that offers us new ways of seeing, thinking about and making deep social change.

Grapevine's work poses a big central question, which resonates far beyond their corner of the West Midlands. As the team put it:

“Although we're based in Coventry and Warwickshire we're not only interested in helping people create change in this area. We want to help every area of the UK answer the question ‘How do people thrive in these times?’”

The team have spent three decades exploring this simple-sounding question in the most grounded, practical way, developing an approach that can empower and equip individuals, communities and wider systems to thrive.

This might sound like a grand claim to make about a small place-based charity. But for David Robinson, founder of The Relationships Project, pioneering approaches to social change must come from the ground level. “If it doesn't come from there then it's always an abstraction,” he says. “Social progress has got to be grounded in reality.”

Grapevine's CEO Clare Wightman wonders why the voices of place-based charities do not carry further. “Small charities can do the thinking to move the country forward,” she says. “Place-based charities can be the holders of big ideas.”

Grapevine's deep work in one place has enabled it to be a “proving ground for innovation,” says Sue Bent, former CEO of the Central England Law Centre, and to “come up with radical, refreshing, unique perspectives.”

Underpinning everything Grapevine does is a belief that change – for individuals, communities or systems – is driven by good relationships. “Strengthening people through relationships - that's the story,” says Clare.

If this sounds warm and fuzzy, it's not. "Relationship-centred practice is a real skill," says Mel Smith, Deputy CEO. "It's not just the nice, lovely, bubbly things, it's also being willing to welcome tension, to agitate and face conflict head on."

In her book *Radical Help*, Hilary Cottam notes that "the role of relationships in sustaining change seems absurdly obvious, and yet relationships are never designed into any of our solutions." Grapevine shows us what can happen when they are.

There is growing recognition of how distinctive and innovative Grapevine's work is.

"Grapevine have this engine for creating conditions that enable people to take control of their lives," said Rich Wilson, co-founder of the Good Help Movement. "Grapevine operate in a different paradigm, a future paradigm," said Jess Cordingly, then Head of Innovation at the Lankelly Chase Foundation, now a Grapevine trustee. "Civil society holds the key to tackling some of society's most pressing problems," says Sue Tibballs, CEO of The Sheila McKechnie Foundation, "but we need to learn from and scale the very best approaches. Grapevine is the very best."

Grapevine is not perfect. In fact, part of its success derives from the team's willingness to make and learn from mistakes.

"Grapevine isn't the finished article and they know it," says former team leader John Toman. "They're always asking: What are we learning? How can we use it? How can we be better?"

Grapevine has evolved over the last three decades and will continue to do so. "I see Grapevine almost like a living organism," says Naomi Madden, Director of Projects, "something that is constantly producing new things and new ideas and learning all the time."

A few years ago, Clare Wightman said that she was "inspired by people who have really stuck at something for a long time, who've dug deep into a problem and stuck with it." Grapevine finds itself in that position now.

"This isn't an experiment or an account of a pilot," says David Robinson. "It's a sustained programme of activity over a long period of time. It's generational now and the learning that spins off from it is fundamental."

This is the story of three decades of deep social change. There is a huge amount to take and learn from Grapevine's work – not a model to drag and drop elsewhere, but an approach, an outlook, a set of insights and a wealth of practical guidance.

## The first decade: Strengthening People

### *The drop in centre*

**In October 1994, a new drop in centre for adults with learning disabilities opened in Spon End, Coventry.**

It was deliberately different from existing day centres for adults with learning disabilities. There were warm, equal relationships between staff and members. Members were involved in the centre's running and decision making. Staff didn't wear lanyards or keep 'files' on people. There was an open-door policy. The ethos, says Grapevine CEO Clare Wightman, "was really about being more human".

The drop in centre did not have an elaborate venue.

"First impressions?" says Clare, who joined as Manager in 1999. "My heart sank a bit. It looked like a scout hut. I thought, 'This looks like a place that nobody has spent much money on'. Which was true. It was a 1960s community centre for older people, with a parquet floor, a stage with a curtain, some speakers. Everything was old, a bit tattered. But in terms of the people, it felt much more radical than anything I'd seen before."

Heather Deslandes, an early Participation Worker, remembers the main space: "It was light and airy, very open with big windows. There were tables and chairs, a snooker table, parts cordoned off so people could have quiet space, space for people to do art. There was a little café, led by members on a rota.

"There was a big stage. Every day one of the members, Wayne, would be up on the stage popping some tunes. He loved ska, disco. Wayne took his DJ'ing very seriously. He would introduce each song and tell you when it came out, who wrote it, who played on it. There was a microphone and sometimes people would go up and sing. Another member, Sid, would always go up on a Friday afternoon and belt out Frank Sinatra's 'My Way'."

The music tested the limits of the open-door policy. "You'd be in the office," says Clare, "and there'd be a DJ blasting."

The drop in centre was open Monday to Friday. "Members would start turning up from half nine, different people, from very different walks of life," says Heather. "It was like a second home for many people. It was a place they could go and feel totally comfortable, totally safe, able to be themselves. It gave people a real sense of purpose."

## Places to hold people

**It's difficult to appreciate how special the drop in centre was without considering what else was on offer for adults with learning disabilities in the early 1990s.**

"It was very different then," says Carl Pearson, who was working as an economist at Coventry Council at the time. "Most people were shunted off to daycare centres. We forget now how, still, in the early 1990s, there was a tendency to see people with learning disabilities as needing to be parked somewhere." Clare agrees: day centres tended to be "places to hold people during the day before they went home".

Towards the end of 1993, Social Services at Coventry Council asked Carl to review the local provision. He discovered places where people with learning disabilities spent their days doing repetitive, low-skilled work, with little space for choice, variety or agency. "That kind of provision wasn't for the service users," Carl says. "It was for the parents and carers, essentially respite. People were fossilised, doing packing and not much else. It was obvious that they could do much more."

Heather visited a range of local day centres around the same time. "There were a lot of rules and regulations," she says. "People were restricted in what they could do, who they could be friends with. There was one place where everyone had to take sugar in their tea, because it was easier to make all the drinks with one sugar. I felt like they were treated like children and weren't listened to."

There was a growing awareness in the council, says Carl, that something had to change and people with learning disabilities "needed opportunities to plan their own lives." Catherine Nolan, a visionary Commissioner, drew on Carl's review to develop a vision for a drop in centre managed by and for people with a learning disability.

The new drop in centre began life as a project of the Co-operative Development Agency (CDA), although there was "always the intention that it would be hived off to be independent", says Cathy Allen, who works for the CDA and is also Grapevine's Finance Director.

In the early days of the drop in, a competition was held to choose a name. The winning entry, chosen by one of the members, was Grapevine. "Think about how a grapevine throws out its tendrils, stretches, connects, creates a fruitful web," says Clare Wightman. "I hope we have grown into the name she chose."



## A co-operative ethos

**As a member-led co-operative, the drop in centre had a management committee made up of members with learning disabilities.**

Members made decisions about how the centre would run and behave. Members were involved in interviewing new staff. “Everyone had a voice, had an opinion,” says Heather. “There were rules, but they were made by the members to make it a happy place that everybody wanted to be in.”

It was this ethos that attracted Clare Wightman when she applied to be Manager in 1999. “I liked the sound of it because it was describing itself as a co-operative run by and for people with learning disabilities,” she says. “I’d just spent a year regularly going into two day centres and setting up self-advocacy groups where people could have more of a say in what was happening: the things they wanted to change, the aspirations they had. The day centres ran in a very hierarchical way; people were treated on the level of children.”

Clare remembers being deeply affected by those visits. “I thought: these people aren’t *known*,” she says, “they’re medicalised, categorised, put in a special building and kept out of sight - as though they were embarrassing, as though there was shame attached to them.” She recalls “the subtle ways in which people were treated as less than human, the subtle day-to-day undermining of other people’s worth”.

What Clare witnessed inspired her to do something. She saw the advert for the new drop in centre and applied. “When I saw that it had a co-operative ethos, I thought: ‘Yes, *this* is treating people as equals.’”

One of the day centres Clare visited had both an inner and an outer wall, separating it from the world outside. This image stayed with her and the idea of “breaking down the walls of the institution” became foundational for Grapevine. “We were saying: ‘Expose, agitate, connect; stop being segregated; be known for what you are, not what you’ve been called; get out there and get your life back.’”

This was the ethos that led to an environment without lanyards, labels or diagnoses. “If people can see you as you really are, you can build relationships,” says Clare. “People have no chance of being known as human beings if there are two walls separating them from the world. Grapevine’s ‘connecting’ work really began with this realisation.”

## Flexibility, agency and fun

**The drop in centre's co-operative ethos manifested in high levels of flexibility, individual agency – and fun.**

“People with learning disabilities were using it as a day centre,” says Claire Nash, an early Project Worker, “but it wasn’t structured as a day centre. It was really just a base, people coming to the café, coming to do activities. It was really spontaneous and if people were having a bad day it was very responsive in that moment. Within the drop in there was a sense of freedom. No one said ‘It’s time for a cup of tea’ or ‘Let’s toilet everyone’. It was like: ‘There’s the kitchen, I can show you how to make a cup of tea.’ We used to have so much fun, it was wild. It was fish and chips on a Friday and the whole place would *stink*.”

This sense of freedom was accompanied by more relaxed boundaries between members and staff. “The humanity was there,” says Clare Wightman. “If someone fell over and started crying the Project Worker might go over and give them a hug. It wasn’t, ‘We can’t hug you because of safeguarding.’” Staff and members built relationships of friendship and trust. “I supported one member to come out,” says Heather, “a 49-year-old, who had never been able to tell his mother. I supported him with that and it was a huge thing for both of us.”

Cathy, working on the finances in the office, also fondly remembers the drop in centre's fluid boundaries. “There was a lad called Billy,” she says, “and he was on our trustees and he would often pop over to see me unannounced. There was never any thought that you might be busy; you’d be in the middle of a meeting and Billy would waltz in.”

## From Blackpool to Bruges

**Relationships were further enhanced by trips and holidays, taking staff and members from Blackpool to Bruges.**

“Members would choose what they wanted to do on the trips abroad,” says Heather. “And in Bruges they decided they wanted to go to a night club. It was difficult; we knew there’d be certain carers or parents that wouldn’t want that to happen. But all of the members on that trip were over forty. We talked about it, we found a place to go – and everybody was great. They had a couple of drinks and they really, really enjoyed it. I still remember their faces – just beaming, absolutely beaming.”

Heather shares a similar memory of the trip to Blackpool. “We were early for the coach,” she says, “so we stopped at the pub – because that’s what many people do in life. Not to get drunk and get silly, just to have a pint.”

Claire Nash recalls how unprepared certain places were for groups of people with disabilities. “I remember taking a group country dancing at the sports centre,” she says, “including a lady in a wheelchair. The instructor said, ‘What are we going to do here?’ And I was like: ‘Get that music on! We’ve got hats, we’ve got the works! I’ll take the class if I need to!’”

## Belonging in community

**When Clare Wightman became the manager of the drop in centre she loved the co-operative ethos, but she sensed that something was missing.**

“By the time I got there, some of that early fire had faded,” she recalls. “It felt a bit complacent, like ‘As long as we can put on some workshops and have a nice time that’s enough’. I thought, ‘We want to be more than a nice place to go; we’ve got to think about people’s lives and what goes on outside of the drop in centre.’”

The millennium was approaching and Clare decided to replicate the layout of the Millennium Dome inside the drop in centre. “The dome had certain zones”, she says. “A Brain Zone about education, a Heart Zone about loving relationships, a Hand Zone about work. We used it as a way to talk to members about their lives and find out what they really wanted. That created a bit of a plan for what we should do. Connections, relationships and love were the big message. Work was a big message. People wanted control of their lives. So there was a big push then on connecting people and getting them included, asking ‘How do we stop having day trips in community and start belonging in community?’”

Claire Nash remembers this moment of transition: “The drop in centre was a really safe space for a lot of people, but we were trying to move away from being a base, where people came and were contained, and help people think about getting out of the drop in.”

## Adding to the toolkit

**The drop in centre represented a big step forward. But it didn’t change the surrounding conditions for adults with learning disabilities or equip members to take control of their lives.**

Grapevine began to expand its toolkit, in line with its expanding ambitions. The first tool it reached for was advocacy: supporting people with learning disabilities to campaign for changes they wanted to see in their lives.

From 1997, Heather Deslandes coordinated a self-advocacy group for people with a learning disability from Black and Asian communities, the first of its kind in the

region. The group called itself the Culture Speak Out Group and advocated for respect for cultural practices inside day centres.

Self advocacy groups were set up in each of Coventry's day centres too, at around the same time, to shift the balance of power towards those who used them.

An early win came in 2000. "We helped people in council-run day centres campaign to be paid a minimum wage," says Clare. "They were working and they weren't getting paid." The campaign succeeded, although, says Clare, "If we had known then what we know now, we would have taken that as our first win, built on it and gone much further." Nevertheless, Grapevine's early campaigns were a mark of things to come. Campaigning and shifting power have been a thread through all of Grapevine's work, growing in strength and sophistication, and becoming increasingly community led.

Alongside a growing belief in the potential of advocacy, Grapevine picked up two other important tools: community building and person-centred planning. Clare invited Andy Smith and Pat Black of Diversity Matters to run training for the Grapevine team. "At first I didn't really understand what person-centred planning would mean for us," says Clare. "I thought, 'We've got so many people coming, how could we work in a person-centred way with each of them?' But it went hand in hand with how you build community around people. Without really understanding a person, you can't connect them to community."

Meanwhile, the drop in centre was still running. Wayne was still the resident DJ. Sid was still belting out 'My Way' each Friday afternoon. But the ambition for Grapevine had grown: to support members to take charge of their lives and become full parts of their community. The team began raising funds to hire more staff for the next phase of the work.

## *Solutions beyond services*

**Grapevine pressed ahead, embedding advocacy and person-centred planning into its approach. But it was difficult to bring about deep, sustained change in a person's life when the surrounding services, which held so much power in the lives of people with disabilities, were operating so differently and inflexibly.**

Health and care services, though often full of hard-working, well-intentioned professionals, gave people with learning disabilities little choice or control. They didn't look for people's strengths; they didn't seek to develop purpose, agency and relationships. Instead they segregated and problematised people with disabilities.

Grapevine advocated for its members and campaigned for changes to local services. Its advocacy was infused with its belief that people need supportive relationships to thrive. "We were trying to make advocacy much more about

connecting to relationships and community,” says Clare Wightman. “We made sure that the people we were working with were going back to a supportive environment where someone else would continue to help them to solve problems.”

An example of this was the Connecting Parents project, through which the team combined advocacy for parents of people with learning disabilities with work to develop a network of supportive relationships among them.

“We can bring someone back from the edge,” says Clare, “but we can’t stop them going back there if there’s no one around who cares about them.”

In 2003, Grapevine absorbed Coventry Community Advocacy, increasing the depth and reach of this side of its work. But the team also felt advocacy’s limitations. Advocacy, says Clare, can become “a service predicated on the failure of other services”, patching for their limitations. Instead of campaigning for the things that matter most in people’s lives, advocates campaign for people’s basic entitlements. Advocacy, instead of changing a system, can become part of it, another step in the process of accessing services.

Grapevine’s advocacy also extended to joining the boards of local services, but this too felt insufficient. The team built important relationships with local decision makers, but services still didn’t improve in the way people needed.

Even where services were working well, Grapevine was becoming increasingly aware of the limits of what it could offer. “Some of the most important things that people need to turn their lives around, like hope and love, can’t be delivered by services,” says Clare, “they can only be delivered by other people through relationships.”

Improving services would not, on its own, bring about lasting, life-changing impact for people with learning disabilities. The solutions must lie beyond services.

## *Connecting People*

**The drop in centre continued to thrive, but Grapevine’s work increasingly extended beyond its walls.**

Central to this was the launch of Connecting People in 2003, an approach to supporting people with learning disabilities through building networks of genuine relationships to strengthen and protect them.

“People with Learning Disabilities lacked genuine connections and relationships,” says Natalie Lowe, one of Grapevine’s first Connectors. “Most of the people in their lives were paid to be there.” This was concerning for many reasons. As Clare Wightman puts it: “The thing that really keeps us safe and living well is having

people who know us and care about us. Can lives that are only ever witnessed by paid staff really be safe or complete?"

Interventions and services, "the things people see as help", says Naomi Madden, Grapevine's Director of Projects, "are time limited and assessment based. They're not there for the long story. Human connection is the thing that is there for the long story." Connecting People turned conventional logic on its head, prioritising the building of relationships above reactive attempts to fix people's problems.

But building a web of genuine, trusting relationships and connecting people to their community is easier said than done.

"A lot of the people we work with," says Naomi, "their lives have remained unchanged for many, many years. Their experience of relationships is one of rejection."

Connecting People, says Natalie, "wasn't just about getting people into the community. It wasn't just going bowling, going for a meal, doing something for the sake of doing it. It was about deepening our knowledge of that individual and making connections in the community based on their passions, their strengths, their gifts."

Instead of arriving with a laundry list of practical steps to address their challenges, Connectors ask people to share their dreams and start from there instead. "No laundry list is going to make a person feel brave enough to face their challenges," says Naomi. "We really cement the why – *why are we doing this?* It's that dream that gets them on board." Following a dream supports individuals to step into new spaces and find meaningful local relationships.

The role of a Connector, says Natalie Lowe, "is to really get to know the person, tune into their passions, then map the community around them – and through that community mapping, identify groups or individuals who could be a hook to the passion of that individual. Then the work could start to build those connections and those bridges."

Natalie gives the example of a young man called Stephen, who loved aeroplanes. "There's a Midlands Air Museum that wasn't too far away," she says. "We just started hanging out there. We'd go to the café and I sussed out who worked there and whether there were opportunities to deepen our visits." Natalie met Barry, who ran the museum, and found him as passionate about planes as Stephen. "Before we knew it, we were manoeuvring aeroplanes across fields," she says, "supporting with anything and everything to do with the running of the museum."

"It wasn't about the volunteering," she explains, "it was about the relationship between Barry and Stephen. What flourished was this genuine friendship built on this shared passion." Natalie supported Stephen to enter a community of

enthusiasts and build relationships that could nourish and support him in his everyday life.

People's passions don't need to be as clearly defined as Stephen's. "Maria didn't use words," says Natalie. "She could move her eyes and a bit of her hands. She was in a very big wheelchair moulded to her body, almost lying down. What Maria had was this amazing smile and this laugh that was so endearing and wild. And she *loved* to laugh. She *loved* slapstick. If anyone around her dropped a pen, she would be laughing."

Natalie spent time reflecting on how Maria's sense of humour could connect her to others. "I was thinking about exploring slapstick, panto, places where you get that laughter," she says. "I thought about the circus and clowns and we discovered a group from our community mapping. They were called Circus Palaver, a group who met weekly in a shared workspace to practise circle skills, from juggling, to card tricks, to stilt walking."

The connecting approach can lead down some unusual pathways. It is difficult to imagine a traditional service helping someone to make friends with an amateur clown troupe.

"We started to hang out with them," says Natalie, "and they were so grateful for Maria. She found them hilarious, making mistakes and dropping their juggling clubs. They were probably people society might deem a bit eccentric, but Maria's laughter spurred them on and gave them permission to be silly, to fall off the stilts and get back up. There were no words exchanged, but the laughter! The group really came to care about Maria. If we couldn't make it one night, there was a genuine concern. They genuinely missed her being part of their community."

"Being part of something, being part of a community," says Natalie, "is being missed when you're not there, knowing that someone notices when you're not there."

Connectors know what they are trying to achieve, but their work can look very different from one individual to the next. "I never had a plan," says Natalie. "It was about being in the places where we needed to be, where those people's passions lay."

This flexibility is a key way that Connecting People differs from traditional services. Claire Nash recalls the trial and error and persistence that connecting can involve. "If we couldn't go by route A, we'd create routes B, C, D, E, maybe even Z. In services, it would be like, 'That's not part of the path so we don't do it'. We had a really different way of looking at the problem."

Whether people's passion was slapstick, aeroplanes, steel pans or heavy metal, the Connector's ultimate aim was to weave people back into community and support

them to build enduring, mutually meaningful relationships. And not just because it's nice to have relationships – but because they strengthen and protect people. “If people have human connections and relationships,” says Naomi, “they are healthier, safer and less likely to fall into crisis. We know that works. Ordinary human relationships and connections, that grow with individuals as their lives grow, are better able to respond to individual human need than any system possibly could.”

Grapevine's connecting work, so different to mainstream approaches, had an impact on the surrounding system. “We were informing services,” says Naomi, “we were helping services shift their thinking.”

## Adding colour

**“When the connecting work began it was so distinctive,” says Clare Wightman. “In 2003, most people with learning disabilities were still hidden away in day centres. It's easy to forget that, looking from the perspective of now.”**

Grapevine's connecting work has continued since the early 2000s, supporting thousands of isolated individuals to build relationships, find natural networks of community support, and take charge of their lives.

Naomi Madden remembers her first encounter with a Connector, back when she was working in NHS nursing care, supporting people with acute health and learning needs. “Life was very stagnant for the people I worked with,” she says, “it was like Groundhog Day – and that was the norm, that was the culture of services. Then one morning a woman turns up to do a plan with someone and she's asking ‘What are their dreams?’ and ‘What's a great day for this person?’ And I was like, ‘What are you talking about? I thought this was an assessment’. But I was hooked and I thought: ‘I want to work for this organisation. This is what it should be like.’”

Naomi had stumbled across an example of Grapevine's person-centred planning – and soon she would be involved in it herself. “We would influence care plans through person-centred planning,” she says. “We would come in and find these very black and white care plans. We added colour. So instead of a plan that just says ‘They need help getting washed, getting dressed’, it says ‘They love shell suit material, they love getting out in the rain’. These things started to feed into people's care plans.”

Making a plan was a collective activity, gathering people who could bring that plan to life. “It could involve all sorts of people,” says Clare Wightman. “If someone was interested in photography, we'd make sure a local photographer came to the planning session. You need people in your corner, people who can give you a lead, an opportunity.”



“We’d get flip-chart paper, coloured pens, get everyone in a room and say: ‘Let’s all talk about this person’s dream and what we’re going to do to help them get there,’” says Clare. This warm, collective approach represented a deliberate contrast to a clinical assessment. Instead of acting like experts, the Grapevine team deliberately deprofessionalised their language and their approach.

“We knew that’s what we were doing,” says Clare, “and that’s still what we do. We were trying to simplify and make accessible some tools people need for a life to flourish. Person-centred planning is a power shift to ordinary people, it’s putting the power to shape your life into your hands.”

## *The power of the ordinary*

**Grapevine’s advocacy, community building and person-centred planning might look like separate activities. In reality, they were deeply interconnected ways of strengthening people and supporting them to take control of their own lives.**

“When you break down the walls of the institution,” says Clare, “you’re breaking down the power of the professionals over people’s lives, breaking down the notion that people need to be separated off and treated as patients.”

Grapevine was pioneering a radically different form of support for people with learning disabilities. Instead of hyper-medicalised, hyper-professionalised support systems, Grapevine believed in “the power of the ordinary, the power of everyday wisdom,” says Clare. “You say this person needs a clinical psychologist, we say they need friends. You say this person needs to go to a residential unit for people with challenging behaviour, we say they need a holiday.”

Surrounding systems underestimated the power of ordinary people, ordinary relationships, ordinary tools. In fact, they were moving in the opposite direction. By 2008, for example, advocacy was professionalising. “The professionalisation of advocacy cuts out the ordinary,” says Clare. “We were trying to protect the idea of advocacy as something that ordinary people do. We were connecting people to their neighbours who could continue to advocate when we weren’t there.”

Rather than power and agency being concentrated in the hands of professionals, Grapevine was “shifting the power into ordinary people’s hands through ordinary tools,” says Clare.

## *Navigating policy changes*

**As Grapevine approached the end of its first decade, national policy was moving towards more personalised support for people with learning disabilities. One**

**major change was the introduction of individual budgets, channelling payments directly to people with learning disabilities.**

Grapevine ran projects to increase understanding of personal budgets, including a bespoke programme for families from black and minority ethnic groups. This work, funded by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, built on over a decade of self-advocacy work with people with a learning disability from Black and Asian communities. Uptake of personal budgets was lower among these families - even though, says Clare Wightman, “they could really benefit, because they could arrange personalised care that was bespoke to their family and culture.”

But Grapevine could also see that these policy changes presented risks as well as opportunities.

“National policy was moving in a direction that looked good,” says Clare, “but we could see risks. In theory individual budgets are good, but in practice, if you don’t have relationships and a great plan, you’re just going to spend the money on what it would always have been spent on. What tended to happen was that people used it to fund a care worker to trail around town with them. Instead we asked, ‘What is the life that you’re trying to create with your budget?’”

Naomi remembers supporting one woman, who was using her personal budget to attend a day centre at the weekend so her parents could have respite, to spend it instead on regular visits to a spa with her sister. “It looked like something that a woman of her age would do,” says Naomi, “but at the time it seemed groundbreaking.”

Grapevine supported people to navigate a shifting landscape. Vee Patel, whose son Prash got involved in Grapevine’s youth projects in his early teens, remembers the difference the support made to their family: “For parents of a child with special needs, it’s a jungle out there. It’s so hard finding the right information. Grapevine offers quite a unique, niche support that you wouldn’t get anywhere else. They fight for your cause, be it personal budgets or college places and, if they can’t, they find a way of connecting you with people who can.”

Vee and his family didn’t realise they were eligible for additional support before they encountered Grapevine. “Prash was twelve or thirteen before we got a personal budget,” he says. “Before that, we went without any support from outside. The team got us a social worker and dealt with the legal side of it. When we got the personal budget, Prash had independence, we had independence.”

Although it’s possible to talk about the aspects of Grapevine’s work separately, as Prash’s situation shows, it wasn’t experienced separately. “These weren’t separate projects,” says Clare Wightman, “they were what we overall were trying to offer as help. We would offer that whole array of help to the same person.”

## Finding fellow travellers

**By the end of Grapevine's first decade, the charity was deeply rooted in Coventry and Warwickshire and the key elements of its work were growing and spreading.**

"We were pushing for change through campaigning," says Clare Wightman, "and we were trying to stitch society together again through connecting people to relationships."

The team had a clear ambition for deep social change, but knew that they needed additional ideas and connections to make this a reality. "Grapevine's ambitions were present from the outset," says Mel Smith, Deputy CEO, "but, as an organisation, we needed to connect to expand the work. Just as we were supporting individuals to connect and their aspirations were rising, the same thing was happening to us as an organisation."

The team scanned for emerging practices in the UK and internationally, "finding fellow travellers", in Clare's words. A trip to Uttar Pradesh provided early insights into empowerment methods, and a trip to South Africa offered an early taste of community organising.

A key influence was Tom Kohler's work in Savannah, Georgia, on 'citizen advocacy', an approach that involves creating authentic relationships and networks of support between people with and without learning disabilities. Tom's work taught Grapevine some crucial lessons, which continue to animate it today:

- Understanding people is more important and meaningful than 'assessing' them.
- Relationships, not services, solve problems.
- There is no limit to what people will do for those they care about.
- Widening people's circles takes them beyond coping, to full, flourishing lives; this creates energy for more change.

The trip to Savannah had a big influence on Grapevine's nascent youth projects, inspiring their focus on building relationships between young people with and without learning disabilities, who would not otherwise have met. Rachel Perrin, who managed Grapevine's first youth projects, was on the trip and carried the insights directly back to her work.

Through these experiences and encounters, Grapevine continued to add to its repertoire, learning from existing practices, developing its own and equipping itself to bring about deep social change in Coventry and Warwickshire.

# The Second Decade: Sparking Community

## The first youth projects

A decade after the drop in centre opened, Grapevine began to develop its first youth projects. The aim was to work with people with learning disabilities earlier in their lives, supporting them to shape the life they want and build relationships they can carry with them into adulthood.

The first youth project focused on bringing together teenagers with and without learning disabilities. “The basic idea was to mix people together,” says Clare Wightman, “to mess with the chemistry, and see what is naturally produced from that.”

At that time there were few ways for teenagers with and without learning disabilities to get to know one another. “It’s different now,” says Clare. “There are more children with Education, Health and Care plans in mainstream schools. Then they wouldn’t come together and meet. We were trying to break the wall down.”

In 2010 Grapevine won Coventry’s first Community Cohesion award, celebrating its work to create friendships across the disability divide and tackle negative attitudes. This work was also featured in anti-bullying research from the University of Cambridge, as an example of good practice.

## Weathering Austerity

Following the financial crisis of 2008, the UK government introduced a severe programme of austerity, drastically cutting funds for local councils and frontline services. This put organisations offering reactive, needs-based provision under enormous pressure.

“I thought, ‘Well, for the last decade Grapevine has been talking about working from strengths, from what’s strong not what’s wrong,’” says Clare Wightman. “Now is when that’s put to the test; it’s easy to talk about that when times are good.”

For Grapevine, austerity confirmed the importance of working to unlock existing resources and capacity within communities and of thinking of needs as assets.

Seeing needs as assets might sound paradoxical, but it simply describes the fact that, in communities, every individual has things they need – whether material, emotional or spiritual – as well as things they can offer. The existence of different needs can catalyse processes of mutual exchange and connection. Thinking of

needs as assets is a way of inviting and activating people's inherent interdependence.

"Figuring out how people can meet each other's needs through two-way flows of support can potentially solve problems for good," says Clare. "People get more of what they really need that way – love, intimacy, purpose, friendship, hope."

"Looking back, I don't really think we changed around austerity," says Clare. "Our reaction was to double down our belief that the solutions lie in communities and relationships."

## *Fifteen Years In*

**In 2010, Grapevine had been active in Coventry for fifteen years, running the drop in centre and a range of projects for young people and adults with learning disabilities: advocacy, person-centred planning and community connecting.**

In the process, it had changed the lives of thousands of people who were previously lonely, isolated, angry, frustrated, vulnerable or stuck.

In their efforts to stitch society back together, the team had:

- Supported hundreds of people with learning disabilities to share their skills and talents with others, whether training health care staff, representing young people with learning disabilities on Coventry Youth Council, volunteering to lead a Brownie pack or DJ'ing on hospital radio.
- Connected hundreds of people to their communities, building relationships based on everything from football to dog walking to line dancing to comic books.
- Run youth projects supporting young people with learning disabilities to develop the skills, plans and friendships they needed for the transition to adulthood.
- Used community-powered advocacy, inspired by Tom Kohler's 'citizen advocacy' in Savannah, to support adults with learning disabilities to get the right help from services, to navigate home moves and legal proceedings, and to address financial and other types of abuse.
- Set up the H Team, in which people with learning disabilities support others to have better health, and the Quality Checking project, in which a team of people with learning disabilities inspect homes and day services and make recommendations to Council Commissioners.

And, after its first fifteen years of action and impact, Grapevine had crystallised some of the key ideas that underpin its work:

- Too many people with learning disabilities live a life dependent on others. When we are in charge of our lives, we are more likely to feel happy, be productive, and plan for a positive future.
- Often, paid professionals think they know what's best. But at Grapevine, we stand together with the people we support – we don't take over. We try to see the world through their eyes.
- Many people with learning disabilities don't have the support of strong networks. Grapevine supports people in building relationships and networks with individuals who aren't just paid to care.
- A good life is a life that grows and changes—it has memorable moments and some challenges. For too many people with learning disabilities, relationships and activities stay the same—often for decades.
- Everyone has something to offer. People have talents and abilities, and Grapevine can help them find others in communities who will welcome their contribution. Too often, people with learning disabilities are just seen as having needs.
- We need the chance to learn from our mistakes. Living through life's twists and turns makes us stronger. Most people with a learning disability are stopped from having interesting experiences because others worry about the risks.

These ideas reflect a set of shared values among the Grapevine team. “We weren't just thinking about what to *do*,” says Clare, “but also what we need to *be*.”

Sue Bent, former CEO of the Central England Law Centre, partnered with the Grapevine multiple times over many years and recalls how consistent its values have been. “Everything they do comes from a very strong value base,” says Sue Bent. “That holds them together.”

These shared values enable staff to try things and take positive risks. “If you trust people and they have the right values,” says Adam Hives, former Director of Operations, “they might get something slightly wrong, but they've probably done it for really good reasons.” Claire Nash remembers how powerful it was to feel trusted in her role. “Twists and turns weren't seen as failures,” she says. “Instead, we'd ask: ‘What have we learnt from this?’”

Carl Pearson believes one of the key lessons of Grapevine's work for other organisations is to "work out what your values are, then try and live your values". Doing so enables the Grapevine team to "attract the staff they want, positively connect with the people and communities they want to work with, and talk about what they do in a way that people outside can understand."

People who work at Grapevine, or who encounter the team, often remark on their distinctive culture. Emma Brodie of Coventry Building Society, long term funders and supporters, says that "There's a kind of magic with Grapevine. There's a warmth and a glow. More places need to be more Grapevine – it's human, it's warm, it's special – everyone's too far the other way."

## The drop in closes

**At this point in Grapevine's story, the team began to wind down the drop in centre.**

"We deliberately took a long time to run it down," says Clare Wightman. "First we closed it for two days a week, to do more connecting. We built up the other work and slowed down the drop in."

Grapevine ensured that Adult Social Care did assessments of all the people who were losing the drop in centre, especially a core group who relied on it, but it was a difficult transition. "We would see people in cafes, or the Mind drop in centre, or at church groups," says Clare. "Some people melted into their homes. It's not a good thought really for some of them."

Looking back on the closure of the drop in centre, Cathy Allen says "There was a sense of 'What happens now?' But it was the spirit of Grapevine to evolve and change. It couldn't be the drop in centre forever."

## Help & Connect

**From the closure of the drop in centre, emerged the Help & Connect programme, also funded by the City Council, which built on their Connecting People approach and is still a core part of Grapevine's work today.**

"Suddenly we don't have a place where people come to us," says Clare Wightman, "we have a service people are referred into - or we go looking for them."

The aim of Help & Connect is to enable autistic and learning disabled people in Coventry to make a plan, get connections, find work, stay healthy and stay safe. It's a programme of intensive, one-to-one support, helping with the most pressing needs first, then equipping people with the skills, knowledge, support networks and readiness to thrive independently.

Many of the people supported by Help & Connect, says Naomi, “have lived outside of society for a long time, have never been included, and don’t necessarily know how to start a conversation, or what to do in a new space with new people.”

The Help & Connect approach is holistic and back-to-basics. “It’s not like, ‘Here you go, here’s a group you can go to,’” says Connector Michelle Reid. “I literally think about the whole person and their whole life.” This is a stark contrast to services that function “like a bandaid, but don’t unpick what the actual issues are.”

“This work is hard because you’re changing lives,” says Naomi. “You’re not coming in and filling out a form for somebody. You’re coming in and you’re trying to help them change their life and switch the path.”

That’s not to say that Connectors solve people’s problems for them. “We’re not firefighters,” says Michelle, “we’re not about rescuing people. We’re about empowering people, helping them to realise they can be independent, to realise they have options and can advocate for themselves.”

The purpose of Help & Connect is not to reduce pressure on services – although that tends to be a significant side-effect. The approach is preventative, connecting people to a support network and making them less dependent on professional interventions. “People use the people around them,” says Michelle, “and advocate for themselves.”

Michelle describes how one person she supported was constantly calling her GP, dialling 101 and visiting A&E when they first met. “Once Joanne<sup>1</sup> was listened to, the calls and the trips to A&E stopped. Instead of that cry for help, she could talk through her issues and anxieties with friends and get advice from them.”

Another side-effect of Help & Connect is the impact on people around the person receiving support. “The impact isn’t just with them, it spreads out; it could be their relatives, their children,” says Michelle.

The preventative benefits of Grapevine’s work “keep people away from the door of social care”, says Clare, and enable them to live a life beyond services.

## *Expanding the focus*

In 2010, as the effects of austerity intensified, Grapevine’s work became increasingly challenging. “People’s problems became even more complex – there was more anxiety, mental ill health,” says Clare. “There were more people without care packages. The kinds of people who had been getting state help two years

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed



**earlier seemed no longer eligible. Services raised their thresholds and needs built up outside the system.”**

Faced with this shifting external context, Grapevine decided to expand the scope of its work, reflecting that its approach to supporting adults with learning disabilities could make a difference to anyone experiencing marginalisation. Strong relationships, a supportive community, and a sense of belonging, agency and purpose are important for anyone facing difficult times.

“It was the same philosophy but with a new dimension to it,” says Carl Pearson. “Grapevine expanded its focus because it wanted to work with other people who were isolated or communities who were struggling.”

One effect of this was a more intense focus on questions of power. Grapevine began to consider issues like isolation and marginalisation systemically, noticing the power structures that cause them and that make people vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

“Both our organisations focus on people who are marginalised,” says Sue Bent, former CEO of Central England Law Centre. “Many of those people are marginalised because their interactions with bigger organisations and the state don’t go well. And part of the reason they don’t go well are fixed mindsets and rules and a lack of capacity to take time with people. The people Grapevine and the Law Centre seek to help are used to things going wrong for them, they almost expect it. They don’t necessarily operate well in a one-size-fits-all space.”

As Grapevine expanded the scope of its work, Central England Law Centre became an important partner in addressing systemic issues.

## Young Migrants' Rights

**An early example of how Grapevine broadened its work was a project in 2011, in collaboration with Central England Law Centre, on Young Migrants' Rights.**

“There are over 200,000 young people in the UK who don’t have status,” says Sue Bent. “This is still the case. Many of them won’t even be aware that they don’t have status, because they can go to school, they can participate in life in the UK – but they don’t have status because their parents don’t have status. For many young people, this only becomes a reality when they reach eighteen. If they want to go to college or university they’ll be treated as a foreign student. They can’t get a passport. They could be threatened with deportation to a country they’ve never been to.”

The Law Centre knew it was far simpler to address this issue before young people turn eighteen. But they also knew it would be difficult to reach these young people

and that their families might be fearful of coming forward, “even though,” says Sue, “if the children get citizenship, it enhances their parents’ ability to get status.”

Grapevine’s role in the collaboration was to use its community connecting approach to reach these young people and build trust with their families. Once the young people had been given legal status, Grapevine would also support them to plan what came next.

Sue remembers how natural and complementary the collaboration felt. “At the Law Centre, we were trying to make sure society’s legal protections were available to everyone. And Grapevine was highlighting that legal rights can’t be the entirety of how you get support in life: you need people around you, and you need the confidence and skills to interact with people and make sure your rights are upheld.”

“It was a difficult project,” says Claire Nash, “grassroots connecting, getting to know where people were hanging out. I found out that lots of these families were involved with the big car wash gangs. I got my car washed at every car wash in the city on a regular basis; it was the cleanest car in Coventry. While I was waiting I would be saying, ‘Are you aware you can go to the Law Centre?’ I had this slip of paper and, eventually, people were like, ‘Have you got that number?’ Barber shops were the other place. I don’t know how I didn’t get thrown out; it got to the point where people would say, ‘Ah hi Claire, would you like a drink?’”

“The Grapevine team used their creativity, and their understanding of how communities work, to help us find those young people,” says Sue. “Still the first year was tough. It took a long time to get them to trust us.”

The project supported around a hundred young people in Coventry to secure legal status. Although this was a great success, Sue recalls that “for some young people, getting status took them into a crisis. Some had already mapped out their life based on their constrained situation; when that was opened up, they didn’t know what to do. Again, Grapevine’s skills came in, because the team helped them, where possible, to start on a different pathway.”

The Law Centre went on to expand this work nationally in partnership with five other community law centres, applying the same approach and supporting many more undocumented young people to gain legal status in the UK.

In 2012, Grapevine and the Central England Law Centre embarked on a second collaboration, this time working with families with entrenched and complex needs in the Willenhall area of Coventry, taking legal advice out into homes and streets, building legal capability and blending it with Grapevine’s community development approaches.

The aim was to build trust with families through addressing immediate needs for welfare and legal advice and then, from there, to grow individual strengths and assets and mobilise community support networks.

The project helped families and professionals alike to think differently about where to find solutions and to shift away from the idea that public services are the only resources in a person's life when something goes wrong.

By the end of its second decade, Grapevine had expanded its footprint in Coventry and Warwickshire, demonstrating the power of its approach for supporting anyone experiencing marginalisation.

## The Third Decade: Shifting Power

### Twenty-years-old

At twenty, Grapevine was working across Coventry and Warwickshire to help people experiencing isolation, poverty and disadvantage.

Its advocacy continued, although increasingly focused on shifting power and changing systems.

Help & Connect continued to support individuals to follow their passions into new spaces and find meaningful local relationships.

Its youth project, Teenvine, continued to support young people with a learning disability to create lasting friendships and navigate their journey into adulthood.

Warwickshire's Empowerment Service, now called the Experts By Experience project, supported people with learning disabilities and autism to co-produce services and influence decision-making.

A dedicated employment programme, Accelerate, was helping disabled people into work.

The H Team, a group of adults with learning disabilities, continued to use their stories and experiences to support others to improve their health and to inform and train health professionals.

Threaded through all of its work was Grapevine's belief that good relationships can and do resolve intractable-seeming social issues.

### Connecting at scale

A pivotal moment at the start of Grapevine's third decade was a trip to New York, funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation and Unbound Philanthropy, to learn about Community Organising from an organisation called Make the Road New York.

"That was the lightbulb moment, the Eureka," says Clare. "I thought: 'Why are we running projects? We'll only ever connect a certain number of people a year; what if we were to mobilise a movement for connection?'"

In Community Organising, Clare saw an approach that could unlock resource and effort far beyond the capacity of the Grapevine team. It was in the spirit of their existing work, but it could operate on a completely different scale. "My eyes were opened to a way we could work with hundreds of people," says Clare, "and ignite

hundreds of people in communities to do things that create belonging and connection.”

Mel remembers Clare’s excitement on her return from New York. “It was like she was bringing some treasure to the organisation,” Mel says.

## *The power of stories*

**Around this time, Grapevine won a grant from Public Health in Coventry to take a mobilising approach to getting people physically active. The project was accompanied by support from a consultant, who introduced Grapevine to the work of Marshall Ganz on community mobilisation and public narrative.**

“Public narrative taught us how to tell stories that call others to action and create change,” says Clare. Grapevine had always appreciated the power and importance of stories in the work of social change; Ganz’s work offered a clear structure for telling stories to mobilise communities. It has become central to Grapevine’s approach.

“Public narrative,” Ganz writes, “is woven from three elements: a story of why I have been called, a story of self; a story of why we have been called, a story of us; and a story of the urgent challenge on which we are called to act, a story of now.”

Grapevine drew on the insights from its New York trip, and its introduction to community mobilising and public narrative, to develop Good to Go, a programme of activity to get people physically active, which would also mobilise community connection and support at scale.

## *Good to Go*

**Good to Go mobilised people in Coventry and Warwickshire to develop their own initiatives to promote physical activity. Grapevine used public narrative to gather people and support them to do that.**

Grapevine began running Ideas Factories: spaces for community members to gather and co-create solutions to shared problems. The sessions were warm and relaxed, often held in a cafe opposite the council’s offices, and led to a set of nine initiatives that would bring together disabled and non-disabled people as equals, promoting physical activity and tackling loneliness and isolation.

One of these initiatives was the Feel Good Community, an idea proposed by Melissa Smith, who had been diagnosed with a rare spinal condition and found herself “stuck on the sofa”, in her words, having had to give up work and having come adrift from her main sources of friendship and connection. Melissa proposed

a mutual support group for people with long term conditions. The idea resonated and grew into a 500-strong group of people, coming together to create activities that help them stay well.

“Those five hundred people were not gathered by us,” says Clare. “They were gathered by someone with a chronic health condition. We just helped her to know how to do it and how to keep growing her ‘movement’ using the tools of Community Organising.”

Good to Go’s initiatives created pockets of community that had an impact far beyond getting people physically active. Once people had formed relationships, they began to help each other and to create new, resilient support networks.

The other initiatives included:

- Slow Roll, a regular community bike ride, undertaken at a leisurely pace to a musical soundtrack, with adapted trikes for those who needed them. Across the 2016 meet-ups, the average Slow Roll attendee cycled 80 miles.
- Wave Rave, an after-hours disco in the Coventry Leisure Centre swimming pool, “for people who don’t like swimming in straight lines”, says Mel Smith. Held from 7-9pm, with a young person as the DJ, Wave Rave was free and open to a hundred people each time. It included a musical Aquacise class and an underwater spin class and was rounded off with tea and cake.
- Swim & Tonic, which aimed to foster a love of open water swimming and provided the ‘tonic’ of eating and socialising together afterwards. Swim & Tonic attracted a diverse group of adults and young people with varying needs; 235 people took part, including 147 people with a disability.
- CovMindtheGap, a walk and talk that brought together service providers and users in Coventry, closing the gap between those who provide services and the needs and dreams of those who use them.

In total, one and a half thousand people participated in Good to Go across 2016-17, with many local organisations providing facilities for people to self-organise and run events. Four of Good to Go’s nine initiatives became self-sustaining. A report by Re:valuation in 2017 found that Good to Go created “wildly more impact than expected” on loneliness, isolation and physical health and created “deep networked relationships [...] that naturally regenerate in the face of challenge”.

Through Good to Go, and the work of Marshall Ganz, the Grapevine team “developed a process where we were creating really supportive pockets of community at some scale,” says Clare. “We used the methods used to create social movements to spark community action.”

## Community organising

Drawing on the experience of Good to Go, Grapevine stepped wholeheartedly into Community Organising. “One of the weaknesses of the community mobilisation in Good to Go was that it didn’t develop leadership capacity,” says Clare. Community Organising had the potential to address this, says Mel Smith, “and create distributed, local leadership”.

Community Organising is one of the most significant tools that Grapevine has added to its kit over the years. It involves, “helping communities to identify changes they want to make and empowering them to make those changes,” in the words of Grapevine community organiser Edwin Lukong.

For Naomi Madden, Community Organising marked a shift for Grapevine. “It was a first step into wider Coventry,” she says. “We’d always worked with specific groups, specific communities; Community Organising was Grapevine taking a bold step into the wider community.”

The move shifted perceptions of Grapevine. “All of a sudden we had a whole new footprint,” says Naomi. “It was like: ‘We’re not just about disability, we’re about the people of Coventry.’” The shift was felt internally too. “There were all these new job titles; we brought in staff without any background in SEND or learning disability. All of a sudden we had all these fresh eyes.”

The essence of Community Organising, says Edwin, is “believing that people are specialists in their own problems” and “helping them see the power they have in themselves.” Community organisers, Mel adds, “see potential leadership and develop strategies that help people come together to make change.”

Power is a central concept. “We organise with people who are segregated, pushed out and not believed in by powerful systems and institutions,” says Mel. “Like all organisers, we want to change these relations of power.”

Community Organising infuses a lot of Grapevine’s work, but its organisers also work intensively in particular communities. It is “slow deep work”, says Mel. “We don’t shy away from what it really takes and how long it really takes. It lies in the development of relationships, in the hundreds of one to ones, in the building of trust and in an unwavering belief in people.”

As well as working with communities on the ground, the team have been through a process of “deep learning”, says Mel, immersing themselves in “the academia and methodology behind organising, really learning how communities can be leaders in their own right and fight for the things that they want.”

Community Organising is more than just one tool among many for Grapevine. For Clare, “it’s the missing piece in urban planning and regeneration. If we want to

create better places we need to work on the agency, capacity, and leadership of the people who live there so they can form solutions, hold others to account and advocate for their needs and aspirations.” She sees it as a fundamental capacity for any community – and all the more so for those experiencing marginalisation, poverty or disadvantage. “How do we build community leadership into the walls and corridors of future community centres?” asks Mel, “And make it a fundamental part of their structure, values and heart?”

## Ignite

**Over its first two decades, Grapevine tried to influence other services and the wider system by joining advisory boards and working groups. In 2016, frustrated by the limits to this approach, the team stepped away from all boards and looked for alternative approaches.**

The most substantial attempt to do this was Ignite, a multi-year experiment aimed at supporting public services to prioritise early action over reactive crisis management. Grapevine teamed up again with Central England Law Centre and two other partners: Coventry City Council Children’s Services and Whitefriars (now Citizen) Housing.

Ignite gave Grapevine and the Law Centre the opportunity to get in the building with the teams delivering services and work right alongside them. It was an intense immersion into how the systems intended to support people work in practice, what needs to change, and how that change might be achieved.

The rationale for offering early help is waterproof: it can build resilience, address issues before they become crises and reduce demand on services. “The idea is to pay for fences at the top of the cliff, instead of ambulances at the bottom,” says John Toman, Grapevine’s team leader for Ignite. In practice, though, services often struggle to prioritise and resource this kind of work.

To create the space and capacity for early action, Grapevine blended its community development expertise with the Law Centre’s expertise in giving practical legal advice. Together they aimed to:

- Increase the everyday law-related knowledge, confidence, and skills of the people who interact with services the most – those with entrenched needs and recurring crises.
- Build a strong web of individual, family, and community relationships that enables people to move into stable futures.

The effect would be lower dependence on services, fewer crises and greater thriving.



“We were trying to create bottom up change inside the public sector,” says Sue Bent. “And we felt that the way to do it wasn’t to encourage people to write different policies, but to change mindsets and give people the skills to do things differently.”

Coventry Children’s Services and Whitefriars Housing joined the partnership because they wanted to work out how, amid the day-to-day pressure, to act earlier, prevent problems, and build on the strengths and assets within their communities. Whitefriars Housing were aware that many of the evictions, tenancy abandonments and rent arrears they dealt with would have been avoidable with earlier help. Children’s Services identified that a lack of trust between families and staff was obstructing preventative help, as were staff anxieties about blame.

Grapevine and the Law Centre hired three staff each for the five-year project. John Toman, the Grapevine team leader, grew up in the neighbourhood where they were working. “It was a bit of a change of direction for Grapevine,” he says, “a move towards systems change, but with that Grapevine ethos and way of working. It was all about testing and learning, trying things out.”

The team from Grapevine embedded themselves in the community. “People want to see your face around for a while before they’ll talk to you,” says John. “We did loads of things: litter picking, cleaning people’s gardens, walking round the car boot sale every week, hanging round the library. We did takeaway nights. We did a raffle. We looked for local people who were organising things and supported them. It wasn’t just about giving people a good time or just about changing things – it was both. It all gave us the opportunity to build rapport and relationships.”

The team were particularly focused on supporting those who were most isolated to connect with their community. “If people have got family they’re usually okay,” says John. “But if they’ve got no one, who do they call? We were helping people build that family.”

This deep work in community ignited a range of initiatives led by local people, including a school uniform swap shop, a weekly grub club, a Wednesday walking group, a women’s support group, and a homework club run by a local teenager.

A challenge for Ignite was its open-ended nature. “There were no clear KPIs, no ‘ten percent of families will do X,’” says John, “so there were moments when it would lose its way. There were times of thinking, ‘Is this a real job? What are we doing here?’”

Sue Bent mentions similar difficulties. “One of the challenges we faced,” she says, “was that the senior staff kept changing. We’d build a relationship, then we had another person to work with.” Sue also notes that the deep cuts to local authority funding led to the distinct challenge of shifting the mindsets of staff “whose role

has shifted from help to gatekeeping.” She observed Local Authorities “using their frontline staff to curtail the amount of money that they need to spend, so they don’t really have a mindset to try and build relationships with clients.”

A mindset shift was visible in the housing association. “They found that if they worked with their new tenants in the lead up to the tenancy and when they first moved in,” says Sue, “they were much more likely to get a sustainable long term tenancy, which is what they wanted.”

The evaluation of Ignite found that it shifted Children’s Services towards earlier action and earlier help and informed Coventry’s new blueprint for family hubs. “We helped a lot of people,” says John Toman, “but I’m probably more proud that we changed workers’ views and the ways some services were run.”

At the end of Ignite’s five-year span, Clare Wightman and Sue Bent reflected that “perhaps our ambitions that a third sector organisation could catalyse or give an ‘evangelical jolt’ to create whole system change were a bit naïve. Nevertheless, our positioning helped us to really gain a sense of how system change ‘looks and feels,’ and the values, attitudes, and behaviours needed across a range of partners to achieve real early help.”

The Ignite evaluation highlighted some key messages that have gone on to inform Grapevine’s work:

- There is always something you can do at a very practical level. Ignite challenged the notion that, when poverty is pervasive and entrenched, professionals can do little more than tackle the symptoms.
- It is all about relationships. Early help starts with building trust, developing relationships at a personal level through honesty, empathy, and availability.
- The ability to be alongside and work relationally with people is a crucial skill. The words used and how people speak all impact the willingness of a person to accept help.
- Connecting people to community-based support can address problems before they escalate.
- Creating partnerships is essential for early action to succeed.
- Commitment at a senior level is important, but it is no guarantee of success; it’s worth asking, ‘Who are the best people to make change happen?’

The experience of Ignite - both positive and challenging - confirmed to Grapevine, says Clare, that “what we really want to do is build the power of community, rather than work with the powers that be to do something differently through the power of persuasion and example.”

## Connecting for Good

**At the same time as Grapevine was experimenting with bottom-up systems change in Ignite, it was drawing on its growing expertise in Community Organising to help communities to lead social movements.**

Good to Go had given Grapevine a flavour of what becomes possible when people mobilise to solve problems, build relationships and meet one another's needs. "We found people who cared about something and wanted more of it – cycling or swimming or just being out more with other people," says Clare Wightman, "and then we showed them how to get other people to join them. We helped them form a bonded community around the thing they cared about so that they could take action together. As they did that, mutual support and help blossomed – and with it ambition and aspiration."

Out of this experience, Grapevine began making a more concerted effort to spark movements for change and build community power. What emerged was Connecting for Good, a movement working to address isolation and marginalisation and shift power to give people greater collective influence.

Through Connecting for Good, people who have experienced marginalisation come together and act on their aspirations. Change is led by people with lived experience.

At the heart of Connecting for Good are community-led initiatives responding to specific local needs. A lot of these initiatives begin life at a monthly 'Collaboration Station', where people gather, share their stories, develop ideas and join groups that feel important to them. These events bring together those who are marginalised and those who aren't – including people working for local services and businesses. Everyone listens and shares as equals.

Sometimes the outcome of these conversations is a new space or activity, other times it's a campaign with a clear objective. Some ideas focus on geographical areas, and others on issues or shared experiences.

Over a series of monthly gatherings, different ideas gather momentum. Core groups collaborate on their ideas, allocate roles and work on a strategy. Working with Grapevine's community organisers, they build their initiative's infrastructure.

Grapevine also provides training in Community Organising and movement building techniques, and further coaching and training as needed, equipping teams with the confidence and skills to take their initiatives forward.

Connecting for Good has sparked initiatives like Coventry Urban Eden, which designs and develops green spaces in Coventry that are accessible to all, and Creative Kindness, a network of a dozen groups that meet in local libraries to offer

crafting opportunities to anyone experiencing isolation or marginalisation. It has sparked campaigns like OutSpoke, which is working to strengthen the city's LGBTQ+ community, and Need the Loo, which campaigns for clean, hygienic, accessible toilet facilities in the city centre. Other initiatives have worked with venues to put on disability-friendly events, created more resting spaces to make the city centre more accessible, and campaigned on the rights for trans people in Coventry.

As the groups grow and gather strength, their influence expands. Coventry Urban Eden negotiated with the council to steward two pieces of land and are working to influence the city's climate strategy.

Need the Loo is advising a major property developer on where toilet facilities should go, based on local people's needs. Their campaign is also informing a set of national 'Bog Standards' for businesses and planners.

Leaders of the initiatives feel the sense of their combined power. "We sat down with the council," says one community leader, "and there was a noticeable shift in power towards us."

Connecting for Good disrupts ideas of how people get help, how problems get solved, and where solutions come from. Rather than co-production processes led by services at their pace, Connecting for Good hands power and control to local people, while training them to wield it and offering them the support and scaffolding they need to bring their ideas to life.

The process of developing solutions to isolation and marginalisation becomes, itself, part of the solution. By gathering to take collective action, people who have experienced marginalisation feel purpose and belonging, feel known and cared about, and give and receive support.

People who never saw themselves as a leader, can find themselves in a leadership role in their community. "I've developed a lot more self confidence through OutSpoke," says their leader Jack. "It gave me something to focus on and made me realise that people look up to me and that I can be the leader that I want to be."

In this way, Grapevine's movement-building is not separate from its intensive work with individuals: Connectors do not just want people to feel included by a community; they want them to feel they can change and improve it. "We go beyond being inclusive", Naomi says. "We want people to feel purpose and leadership. The roles that make up our community, we want them to be part of that."

This emphasis on developing purpose and leadership, rather than swooping in to solve people's problems, reflects Grapevine's view of their work as 'building community power'.

A 2024 evaluation of Connecting for Good found that it:

- Had a significant impact on people’s sense of their power to make change collectively. “CfG members (79%) are three times more likely than the national average (27%) to think they have the power to influence local decisions.”
- Strengthened community connections. “Members of the Connecting for Good programme have very strong social support networks for people to turn to for help (98%) or socialising (95%), despite many having traits that make them more at risk of being isolated and marginalised.”
- Increased local leadership capacity. “Over two thirds of CfG members reported increases in their ability to lead.”

By the end of 2027, Grapevine expects CfG to have become a powerful ecosystem of community-led initiatives, taking action on systemic injustice and inequity in their community.

Those involved with Connecting for Good describe its power in their own lives. “My involvement made me feel encouraged, connected and empowered to be an initiator in our city,” said one Core Group Member. “I was a stranger to the city trying to find connection,” said another. “Now I can point out stories, connections, actions on every corner.”

Local people see the power in their community. “The people power is out there,” said another Core Group Member. “The tools are there to organise and unite.”

## A new strategy

**In 2019, the year of its twenty-fifth anniversary, Grapevine created a new strategy that incorporated the lessons from Ignite, Connecting for Good and its other experiences and experiments.**

Prior to this, there hadn’t been an explicit emphasis on shifting power and systems, although this had often been an important dimension of Grapevine’s work. Nor was it clear how the different aspects of the work intersected.

To bring clarity and coherence, the team clustered their work under three strands:

**Strengthening People:** Planning, connecting and advocacy to help multiply disadvantaged young people and adults turn their lives around and build new connections and opportunities.

**Sparking Community:** Creating a movement across the city of people who take collective action and lead a powerful ecosystem of community-led initiatives.

Shifting Power: Equipping local people to influence services and change the systems they live in.

Making sense of the work in this way “was massive”, says Mel. “We put things into containers and we knew what each one did, how they worked together and why they worked together.”

Each strand reinforces and underpins the others. Strengthening people equips them to shift power and take collective action; sparking community generates action that strengthens people and shifts power; shifting power removes barriers to strengthening people and amplifies community action.

The focus on power was important; without shifting power it is difficult to challenge and change underlying systems and structures. “It wasn’t new; Grapevine had done work around campaigning from the start,” says Mel, “it was just more.”

The three strands tell Grapevine’s story in miniature: beginning with a focus on strengthening people, expanding to a wider focus on community action, then realising the need to build and shift power to get to the root of the most difficult problems.

Grapevine’s work attracted increasing attention in this period. They won the Small Charities Big Impact Award and were visited by New Philanthropy Capital, Nesta, Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Baroness Barran.

## The Pandemic

**When the pandemic hit in 2020, the Grapevine team weren’t initially clear on their role.**

“We weren’t in the emergency space,” says Clare Wightman. “We weren’t about food, medicine, advice, and I did worry that the organisations that seemed to matter were the ones going into that space.”

The team paused to consider how to respond – and soon saw where they could make the biggest difference. “We had a whole movement around addressing isolation and loneliness,” says Clare. “We made sure everything we’d already built was strong and safe, then thought about how we could use the pandemic experience to create positive change.”

For Grapevine the pandemic, when everyone was experiencing isolation, was an important moment “to shine a light on the isolation that’s always there for some people and to accelerate our mission against isolation and marginalisation.”

Within three weeks of the spring 2020 lockdown, Grapevine had moved its Collaboration Station online. Thirty people attended the first. By early summer over fifty people were attending the monthly sessions, developing ideas for collective action.

“Grapevine were quick to pivot to supporting and building connection online,” says Joe Roberson, who has worked freelance with Grapevine since 2013. “They were finding ways to make Zoom calls more suitable for neurodivergent people. They didn’t see it as any particular kind of practice – it was just, ‘Of course, we need to do this this way’ – but I’ve not come across anyone else thinking in as much depth about how you make that an equitable space for people who are neurodivergent.”

Seth Reynolds, Principal for Systems Change at NPC, remarked on the distinct atmosphere of Grapevine’s online Collaboration Stations. “I’ve never experienced such participation and energy in a Zoom session of any kind,” he said. “You can feel the community, connection, hope, empowerment, and, dare I say, love...”

During the pandemic, Grapevine held a series of three summits, attended by over a hundred local people each time, the first about how to turn the community spirit stimulated by the pandemic into sustained community power, the second about how the public sector could hold on to some of the new, more flexible, ways of working with communities and the voluntary sector that had emerged through the pandemic, and the third with businesses and trade bodies about how, when they reopened in April 2021, they could lean into their role as places of belonging and connection and combat the threat to their existence posed by online commerce.

The business summit led Grapevine to set up the Cov Cares Awards for businesses supporting their community and playing an important role in the social fabric of the city.

The summits also enabled Grapevine to reflect on its “convening role”, says Mel, “and think more about how to convene people around situations or ideas.”

Carl Pearson, who was Chair of Trustees at the time, remembers Covid being “a major disruptor” given that so much of their work is “in person, in community”. Aspects of Grapevine’s work didn’t translate online, but in other ways, Carl says, “Covid enabled Grapevine to be even more flexible and develop new ways of working.”

## *Shifting power, changing systems*

Over the last five years, Grapevine’s work has taken on increasing clarity and coherence. The explicit focus on shifting power and changing systems infuses the way they strengthen people and spark community action. Their work involves and impacts more and more people across Coventry.

They have also developed relational ways to influence the wider system and services, using their projects as “a form of experiential learning for people working in that system” says Mel. “We're trying to take people who aren't used to relational working on a journey where they are side by side with the people they serve, making this space look and feel more equal: no lanyards, no job titles.” This includes “getting people out of the boardroom to walk alongside local people.” On Grapevine’s Walk and Talks, people working in local services go for a walk around the city with some of the people they’re serving, hearing their stories and calls to action along the way.

Community-led activism is becoming an increasingly important and visible dimension of the work, with campaigns that, themselves, build community power and strengthen the people involved in them. Recent highlights include the youth-led activism of Coventry Youth Activists and Act Up!

Alongside this, the scope of the Strengthening People work continues to expand, now encompassing people experiencing homelessness. “We’re always asking, who is on the margins now and how do we bring them in?” says Naomi. “And asking, is what we do fit for purpose with this new group of people?”

Grapevine’s work has grown and deepened. “I don’t want to say the work’s got more serious,” says Mel. “Maybe it’s got bigger because of the potential of it to change communities. Before we were very much about helping individuals grow their lives by being immersed in a community. Maybe this is that on acid.”

## *Where next?*

**As Grapevine enters its fourth decade, the depth and breadth of the challenges to be addressed can feel overwhelming: strained public services, widening inequality, growing polarisation and deep structural injustices.**

“There’s a polycrisis, from the individual level right through to the systems level,” says Sarah Cutler, who worked with Grapevine as a Fund Manager at Paul Hamlyn Foundation and continues to support their work. “Things are pretty broken. People are looking for different ways of doing things.”

In the midst of this, Grapevine has demonstrated the value of its approach and become a place-based pioneer for change. It has grown into an organisation that equips individuals and communities to open up their capabilities, push their boundaries, and uncover their power. It creates space for meaningful relationships, both as a good in themselves and because they enable other good outcomes.



“It has been an amazing 30 years,” says Mel Smith, “but it's not time to sit back. We need to push forward and continue to learn what community power is, how it's developed, the value it creates and what limits it. And we need to agitate and challenge approaches to growing community power that further marginalise the marginalised.”

Grapevine does not offer a model to pick up and copy. In fact, their work challenges the logic of this approach to scaling success. “It's not about implementing a model,” says Clare. “Models are free of context, free of time. It's fidelity to context that works, along with a belief in community and its power. The question is: ‘What's going to work in *this* place, in *this* time?’”

Grapevine's story is full of insights for leaders and teams open to working differently and prepared to adapt ideas for their specific context.

“We have all these big words: systems change, shifting power”, says strategist and campaigner Iona Lawrence. “But what does systems change look like? What is it to shift power to communities? People crave examples of these big ideas”.

Grapevine evolved enormously across its first three decades and will continue to do so. “For the first thirty years, we held true to certain truths and ideas and were willing to follow them where they took us,” says Mel Smith. “There was never a blueprint or a linear plan; we had guiding principles.”

In this period of rapid and unpredictable change, Grapevine's emergent, values-led approach feels more relevant and prescient than ever.

In its next decade, Grapevine will continue, as Naomi Madden puts it, “to believe in the power of people to tackle society's biggest challenges”. Its work will have an even more intense focus on shifting power, changing systems and shaping a different future.

“It can't all be about staying in, and working with, the world as it is,” says Clare. “We have to have a vision of a future to fight for, not just a present to fight against. And for that we need imagination, hopes and dreams in our kit bag as well as strategy, tactics and relationships.”

“Communities have faced years of marginalisation,” says Mel, “and hope has dwindled to an all time low. By working alongside communities. Grapevine wants to grow the way they think about their own leadership, and support them to build and wield power, so they can deal with the issues they are facing, right now and in the future.”

It can be done. It is being done. There are examples in Coventry.

Go and see it. Join in with it. Research it. Fund it. Learn from it. Take it back to your community. Connect your work to Grapevine's and build change together.

Grapevine would love to hear from you.

## What is Grapevine?

Founded in Coventry in 1994, the work of Grapevine has become a nationally acclaimed example of deep social change.

Its work illustrates how people and communities can meet one another's needs, claim power and take action on what matters to them – and transform services and systems along the way.

The team blend Community Organising techniques, and learning from social movements, with their community building and person-centred planning heritage.

*Their work has three strands:*

1. **Strengthening People:** Working with multiply disadvantaged young people and adults; planning, connecting and advocacy to help people turn their lives around and build new relationships and opportunities.
2. **Sparkling Community:** Creating a movement across the city of people who take collective action and lead a powerful ecosystem of community-led initiatives.
3. **Shifting Power:** Equipping local people to influence services and change the systems they live in.

*Everything they do embodies three key principles:*

**Bottom Up:** People should be in the lead of improving their lives and communities. Grapevine uses deep listening that tunes into people's real needs, strengths, capacity and hopes, then they work in support of what they say.

**Connecting:** Services can't always be there, but other people can. Grapevine helps people develop relationship networks that strengthen and protect, and help them convene as communities, providing them with the skills and motivation to take action together. Everyone has something to contribute, and no one gets left out.

**Dreams and Assets:** The Grapevine team recognize and trust in people's strengths and aspirations. When people draw on their dreams and assets, they can realize their potential, seize opportunities, and meet their personal challenges.