

Speech: Charities and the power of place: the Commission's new strategy and what it means for community foundations.

I am delighted to be here, and I would like to thank UK Community Foundations for inviting me to say a few words.

The theme of today's symposium, as you know, is "the power of place".

I welcome this. My own sense of place means a lot to me personally. It has shaped me, informed my attitude and outlook – including how I feel about the world of charity in which I'm now so closely involved.

And, as I will come onto: community, locality, place: these concepts are absolutely central to the way many people relate to charity and charitable endeavour.

And it is, I believe, vital that we understand what this means, and why it matters.

Here's my story:

I grew up in a place called Beeston Rylands, near Nottingham. It is small, and literally contained: bordered on one side by a railway line, and on the other by a river.

When I was growing up, Beeston Rylands was, in part because of its topography, a tight community.

People – people like my parents – took responsibility for our patch of earth. And for each other. There was a sense of civic pride.

I probably first recognised this fully – as is often the case – once I had left. As a very young woman, I moved from Beeston to begin my career in London. I came to miss my community and the solidarity and support I had felt growing up.

But moving away also granted me a new perspective on the place I thought I knew so well.

One episode best demonstrates this: Two years ago, I was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Nottingham. I was very proud to receive it, as were my parents who attended the ceremony.

It took place in a grand hall at the University campus. That campus is

located in Beeston, and has been for many decades – since the early 20th century. And yet my parents and I had never, until that day, passed through its gates. Nor had many of the people I knew growing up in Beeston.

The university was there, we knew it was, but we didn't acknowledge it. Nor it us. It wasn't part of our world.

And when I think back on the people I grew up with – their potential, so often unmet; their intelligence and drive – so often ignored, I feel frustrated.

Beeston was a great place for me to grow up in, it gave me so much. I credit my family and the spirit of my Rylands community with instilling in me the attitudes and determination I've relied on to succeed since I left.

What saddens me is the lack of wide-spread recognition among highly-qualified policy-makers and power-brokers that sharing and demonstrating those attitudes – regardless of status or qualifications – is the main ingredient for achieving and extending all forms of success.

There's a rich, untapped human-resource in local communities that has the potential to do great things given the power and the opportunity.

I've now lived in London for many years and I have seen other cases of parallel universes coexisting within small areas – different, divided worlds on one street, or within one small area.

I've learnt over the years that community, connection and identity do not always arise spontaneously from place, to transcend differences of class, wealth, education, religion, and outlook.

That is even truer now, as many of us communicate more with strangers online than with the people who live alongside us, who walk the streets we walk, and breathe the air we breathe.

Community of place requires conscious effort, and hard work.

And charitable behaviour and endeavour has a crucial potential, and a crucial responsibility here. Charitable endeavour such as that nurtured by you, by community foundations.

As you will know first-hand, when charity fulfills its potential, its benefits extend beyond the people in formal receipt of a charity's services. Profound though the difference is that charities can make in improving, transforming, enriching individual lives.

But at its best, charity does much more: it acts as a glue of goodwill that helps us do selfless, difficult things, and that enables us to see the good in others. Including sometimes in individuals or groups we may otherwise have little in common with.

Charity helps forge and sustain communities.

I have mentioned that a sense of place is profoundly important to many people's relationship with charity.

We know this because of extensive work the Commission undertook over the summer to research and analyse public attitudes to charity, as we developed our new strategy.

We wanted to know how people relate to charity – what it is they associate with charity, and what that means for their expectations of charitable organisations.

And we found that many people – a large segment of the public – see the value of charity precisely in its ability to enable community. To enhance, organise, maximise the things that they already do and that they value in others: modest acts of personal decency and kindness that make for a good neighbour, a good citizen, a good person.

They see charity as being primarily about place, about locality, and about voluntary effort:

- Helping a neighbour who is in need
- Taking responsibility for improving the area you live in
- Participating in collective endeavours, in community projects
- Generally volunteering for the greater good.

Their perspective on charities as organisations is shaped by that.

They expect charity to make a difference they can see, and to be driven in every respect by the altruism, selflessness and kindness that motivates them when they support others.

This is what leads them to believe that charities must be held to a higher standard of conduct and attitude than other kinds of organisation.

Because charities are supposed to be the expression of the best in us, they are expected to behave as we behave when we're at our best.

Incidentally, this expectation of good behaviour is shared by the public across the board. It's not limited to those who see charity primarily in terms of local action.

But different groups of people arrive at that conclusion for different reasons, with different attitudes and perceptions.

And I think it is profoundly important for charities to understand this. To listen to people – the people they exist to support and those on whose support they rely.

My worry is that, at the moment, charities collectively are not reaching their potential in our society and our communities, because they are not always meeting shared public expectations. Precisely because they don't understand where those expectations come from.

Too often, charity leaders think of public trust in terms of a PR exercise: if we tell the public enough about how great we are, they'll trust us, and if they don't trust us, it's because the public don't get us – and so we need to talk more.

I believe that those in positions of power – and that absolutely includes you in this room – have a crucial responsibility to listen to people and to act on what you hear.

When it comes to charity, we know that public expectations are not complicated, they are not unreasonable.

What the public expect is that charity means something, amounts to something more than just a laudable aim.

The public do not accept that charitable purposes justify uncharitable behaviour. People expect a charity to behave charitably. They expect charitable behaviour, attitude and ethos to run through everything a charity does and says.

And when they see behaviour and attitudes that are at odds with charity, they feel betrayed.

I'm not just talking about the big scandals in big charities here. This is not just about exploitation and abuse in aid organisations, or unethical behaviour by those involved in large scale fundraising.

All charities, including those operating at the micro level have a responsibility to uphold the concept of charity and demonstrate the behaviour that people associate with charity.

Selflessness, probity, and an indefatigable commitment to the purpose you exist to promote.

Now, it is not by coincidence that my first significant speaking engagement since launching the Commission's new strategy a few weeks ago is here with you, with the family of community foundations.

Our new strategy sets a clear, positive purpose for the Commission: under my leadership, the Commission will work to ensure charity can thrive and inspire trust so that people can improve lives and strengthen society.

We will continue to fulfil our statutory functions. Registering charities, investigating them, providing legal permissions. And so on.

But everything we do from now on will be informed by our purpose – to help charity thrive.

I know that I am among a group of people here who dedicate their working lives, not just to a charitable cause, but to the very flourishing of charity in the geographical areas you serve.

To building and maintaining the sort of environment, the sort of community

that I benefited from.

And to breaking down the barriers that, even in a place like Beeston, have in the past divided people by background, education and outlook.

Community foundations and the Commission already work together on a project designed to maximise the benefit of charity in society.

Supported by a grant from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, we are working with UKCF to help release and revitalise between £10m and £20m a year in dormant and underused charitable funds over the next two years.

We are working to help ensure that funds already available to the charitable sector, already within the charitable pot, are used to best effect around the country.

It is not acceptable to me, and I know will feel like sacrilege to you, that there are charities sitting on monies they are unable, for whatever reason, to put to effective use.

So this project is about helping encourage trustees of charities that are spending too small a proportion of their income on charitable activities, to work with us, and with you, to pass those funds to community foundations, in whatever way they are comfortable with.

The work is not easy, or straightforward. It's complicated legally, and achieving our aims will require patience, sweat, and persistence.

I am confident that it will be worth it in the end. Not least because it will be a real, tangible demonstration of what we can achieve, the Commission and charities together, when we each fulfill our responsibilities for ensuring charity can thrive.

As the Commission has made clear in our new strategy document – we believe all charities share in a responsibility to ensure charity inspires trust, and can thrive.

And I say that community foundations carry an especially important responsibility, precisely because of your reach into communities, and into the lives of people who so rely on the support and help of others.

If places are powerful, as the theme of this symposium suggests, then you are leaders and drivers of that power, of that potential.

Your power arises in part from your proximity at once to the most vulnerable in your communities, and to those within them most able to address those needs. Notably because of their financial means.

So you can – and I hope in many cases already do – play a role in holding the projects and people you work with to the highest standards.

To help ensure that those involved in causes you support behave in ways that

prove to the wider community that charity does reflect the best in us.

I have taken great joy in looking into the work that your charities do, and at the successes you have had.

The facts and figures alone tell of your reach: £77 million in grants made across the network in a year. Over four and a half million people touched by the work of community foundations. And a total distribution across community foundations of a staggering £1 billion.

But it's the individual stories that best illustrate to me the role that community foundations can play in the lives of people and in communities.

For example the story of Celia, a mother, whose home was devastated in the floods that affected part of Cumbria in 2016. The community foundation for Cumbria provided emergency relief to those affected by the storms, and that included Celia and her family.

You can hear her story in a video published on the UKCF website. In that interview, she reflects on the help she received and what it meant for her at the time. And makes clear just how important it was that decisions about how to spend the monies available, about what to do, were made locally, and with the involvement of local people.

She clearly feels that she, and people like her were heard. Their needs were taken seriously, and responded to by those with power. More to the point, all this made her feel that the power to decide what was best for her local area, was shared with people like her.

I was struck by this, because it demonstrates that listening to people, learning from them and responding to their needs is not just a nice thing to do. It makes for better, more effective, more impactful charity.

So I hope that, when you and the projects you support disburse the funds made available through our joint project, you keep in mind the power of charities to build bridges.

To provide much needed power and control to communities to make decisions which affect them directly.

That you recognise the power of charities in how they operate can bring about the kind of change and make the difference that is currently lacking and people need to see and feel.

I want charity – I want your charities – to succeed.

Precisely because the divides in our society and our communities that I have spoken about won't dissolve of their own accord.

If charities like yours don't continue to have the support and the ability to build and sustain strong communities of place in society, it's not just

individuals like Celia whose lives will be affected. Or neighbourhoods like the one I grew up in that will suffer.

I believe that the very strength of our society, and indeed of our democracy, depends on people from different walks of life having the opportunity to come together, talk to each other, take each other seriously, and work together towards shared aims.

That's why I will measure my success as Chair of the Charity Commission against the purpose we have set – ensuring charity can thrive and inspire trust so that people can improve lives and strengthen society.

And I hope all of you will support me in this endeavour.

Thank you