

I was in despair at world news. Then I started a local campaign group.

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My impotence in the face of global events was depressing. But I found joy in joining with my neighbours to try to fix the smaller things together

I knew I had a problem when I realised that my days were bookended with despair. My blood would be boiling along with the kettle as I listened to the radio while
10 making my first cup of tea of the day, and I would go to bed either seething or feeling forlorn about everything that was going wrong in the world after watching late-night news shows.

It had all become too depressing and I felt useless. Environmental apocalypse, alternative facts, taking back control. I didn't want to hear about it any more, which
15 was a bit of a problem, given I was a reporter. Like a butcher who turns vegan or a podiatrist who goes off feet, it is hard to do your job as a journalist if you can no longer stomach the news.

The real problem, I realised after a while, was the feeling of impotence. I could do nothing to change gun laws in the US or to stop a bad Brexit. But, if I thought small,
20 maybe I could try to make things better.

I had not long moved out of Manchester to Romiley, on the edge of Stockport. It was my first taste of suburbia since I had left home at 18, drawn to the bright lights of various big cities. I didn't know anyone there, but I was determined that this time I would get to know my neighbours. I wanted the newsagent to remember my shopping
25 habits and for the people next door to trust me with a key.

Early last year I spotted an opportunity when I heard about a group of residents in Levenshulme, a suburb in south Manchester, who had won £2.5m of funding to make their area nicer and safer to walk and ride a bike. I knew that Andy Burnham, the mayor of Greater Manchester, had £160m to spend exclusively on walking and
30 cycling, and I thought my new neighbourhood should have a piece of the pie. I had already helped set up Walk Ride Greater Manchester, a regional lobbying group, but it was time to go hyperlocal.

Calling the first meeting of your new group is like organising a party when you don't know any of the invitees. I was nervous. I booked the tiny back room of the pub and
35 hoped someone other than my husband would turn up. Last March, to my enormous relief, about 30 people crammed in and I thought: OK, this might just work.

The premise behind Walk Ride Romiley was pretty simple: bid for some of that £160m and make our area better, particularly for children walking or cycling to school. The learning curve was steep. I entered the baffling world of transport
40 engineering, where lamp-posts are "lamp columns" and everyone insists on calling pavements "footways". I discovered that a pegasus crossing has an extra set of

45 buttons high up for equestrians, that toucan crossings also allow bicycles across and that the railings people think keep them safe mostly just encourage cars to drive fast. Thinking about dropped kerbs provided welcome respite from writing about flooding or investigating terrible crimes.

50 I had to learn to be diplomatic – not necessarily my strongest suit – when people on the local Facebook site responded to all of our news with: “Use the money to build a bypass instead.” I learned when to let things go: alas, the pavement, sorry, *footway* trampolines of Romiley did not get past Stockport’s highway department. But when I felt my patience faltering, I thought of Leslie Knope, the indefatigable heroine of Parks and Recreation, determined to build a park in an ugly pit. “What I hear when I’m being yelled at is people caring really loudly at me,” she says after a particularly fractious public meeting.

55 The best thing about campaigning is meeting people. One happy day last June we closed our street for a party, as a way to introduce the idea that roads don’t always have to be for cars. Children whizzed up and down on their bikes; the dog show was won by Marjorie, our street’s oldest resident, who, on her Zimmer, expertly guided her pooch through an assault course. In September, we all dressed as Mancunian worker bees when the Tour of Britain passed over a hill on the outskirts of the village.

60 Just before Christmas, the news came: Walk Ride Romiley’s bid had been successful. Stockport council will get £3.9m; we will coordinate with the council to spend it locally. In some ways, the hard work starts now. It is one thing dreaming big, another being told: all right then, here’s a huge wodge of public cash. But on days when the news feels too much, it feels good trying to make our little corner of the world better,
65 one toucan crossing at a time.