

**PEOPLE'S NEWSROOM**

# **POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

**WRITTEN BY LAURA MOCHAN**



# The group used only their voices, their passion and determination to fight for what they believed was right.

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As the group of six smiled triumphantly at the large screen in the small pub basement in Merthyr Tydfil, they celebrated with the clink of glasses and excited chatter watching the council meeting close. It brought about a realisation that the little people really do have power, too.

The 'little people'. That's us. Our voices often lost in the melee of elitism; our desires and intentions and triumphs rarely known. But when we pool our resources, we can become a veritable storm of power, creativity, inspiration and solution. That is exactly what happened to the 'Greenie Group'.

Rumours began to circulate on social media regarding a planned loss of green space to enable the local council and partnered developers to build a new 21st century Catholic school (a modernised technologically advanced educational setting). The targeted green space consisted of the Greenie field and Buttercup Field (the Greenie being a large, well-used area – and the most important – and the Buttercup Field being the smaller and lesser used).

While the local authority followed due process, it often does as it intends to without much scrutiny from the people it serves. Unfortunately, there is a seam of apathy that nowadays runs strong through our once rebellious, industrial town. This protest may well have changed that. Six residents found it too much to blindly accept and got together to form the group in order to save the field and in turn ensure democracy.

## “more members of the community have become aware of the fact that they do have real power in their voices”

Gareth Mochan, Kelly Jones, Steve Davies, Nicola Craze, Racheal Webber and Mark Morris, all of Merthyr Tydfil, were relative strangers (only known to one another via local social media). They met quickly and devised the plans of protest. The then Council Leader, Lisa Mytton and three other Councillors had already voted in favour of the plan after a poorly advertised consultation; only a small minority of residents knew anything about it. The Greenie Group devised a survey and went door to door to discuss the venture and seek signatures against it. The group also created a Facebook group and a page which they used to provide relevant and up to date information on the ongoing proposal, council meetings and protests (environmental studies, the traffic management information, information from the local council meetings, public opinion etc).

There is already a large Catholic secondary school and three Catholic primaries in the area. The objective is to combine all of the years from age 3 to 16 in one setting. The primaries will be closed and demolished, as will the secondary school (all of them are in need of repair and it is the general consensus that it will be cheaper in the long run to combine the schools). The important green space has been utilised for decades by families, naturalists, children, sports organisations and dog walkers. After the group brought attention to it, it quickly became clear that many in the area local to the field in Galon Uchaf, Gurnos and Penydarren and further afield (5,000+ residents) were unhappy with the prospect of losing

the space, the disruption it would entail, the extra traffic it would involve, their concerns about the impact upon the environment, the safety of the children and the loss of the field which accommodates so many.

The first consultation included just two options: to build the school with its sports pitches on the Greenie, or to build the school on the Greenie with an offer of substitute some land on the current school site. The group protested it and the pressure applied by the group and a growing number of residents saw the council create another two consultations. Meanwhile, several Councillors who had stepped forward to speak up in support of the Greenie Group and its attempts to improve the democratic process were suddenly sacked for 'poor performance' and another Councillor as removed from his voluntary role as Chair of Governors at BHHS without proper explanation.

After physical protest at the field and much in the way of discussion and argument via social media and at several meetings, the final consultation was issued. Although it was not entirely what the group had hoped for, it was indeed a win as they were more than willing to accept the compromise seeing the school built on the current school site (the council had initially stated it was 'too small') and a sports pitch on the Buttercup field. It was ultimately a huge u-turn by the council that the residents were pleased with.

**“Unfortunately, there is a seam of apathy that nowadays runs strong through our once rebellious, industrial town. This protest may well have changed that.”**

The group used only their voices, their passion and determination to fight for what they believe is right. They were never approached by any media outlet (the council were and their side of the story printed), they had no funding and they received no outside help. They tell me the process would certainly have been easier had they received some guidance as they didn't know for sure if they were able to fight the decision on any legal basis.

The protest was a game changer. A number of independent Councillors formed a whole new group as a result of it after having lost their cabinet positions, consultations will now be better advertised and more members of the community have become aware of the fact that they do have real power in their voices. When I asked Lisa Mytton (the then Council Leader) whether or not any lessons had been learned, she said, 'Yes - to ensure that from now on consultations are robust and accessible to all and ensuring that simple assumptions in local press and social media doesn't suffice.'

I have found that the group more or less followed guidance from the Future Generations Act (Wales) unbeknownst to them at the time. The framework set out by the FGA states that people are able to ask relevant bodies questions based on the '5 ways of working': involvement (importance of involving people), long-term (balancing short term needs with long term needs), prevention (acting to prevent issues or to not worsen them), integration (the impact on the economy, society, environment, well being and biodiversity) and collaboration (acting in collaboration with others in the body itself).

This group's deserved success gives hope to other communities. People united will not be defeated!

<https://www.futuregenerations.wales/about-us/future-generations-act/>

<https://www.facebook.com/SaveOurGreenspace/>



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