Speaking truth to power means we are obliged to offer solutions. As the godfather of community organising, Saul Alinsky, said "the price of a successful attack is a constructive alternative".

So, picture this...
Poor neighbourhoods all over England are like a network of orchards laden with sweet fruit left to rot. Over the years the ground is spoiled by wasted lives, hard, bitter, fragile, sour, and eventually dangerous.
How could we - society - harvest these fruit, how can we reintroduce the skills and dedication of careful husbandry where each blossom is appreciated, each fruit cradled, the ground cleared and watered, the branches tended for the benefit of the whole? Not by us here in a conference hall but by us there out in our communities.
It’s not just negligence that leaves poor neighbourhoods to rot - they are surrounded by social and economic barbed wire.
Locked down by inflexible systems, the fear of risk, the playing out of power relations that busily remake the status quo even as everything changes.
What if...

we decided to cut the wire, to systematically unlock the resources: people, land and buildings, money?
That’s the idea behind self-renovating neighbourhoods.
My essay written for the Journal of Urban Regeneration & Renewal was published yesterday on Locality’s blog. I’d like to thank the people who came to the fringe meeting last night for their input, and I hope it’s the first of much more debate to come.

The old regeneration is dead, or should be. There was so much wrong with it. Done to, not by, local communities, it started from “where’s the money and how do we get it?”, rather than “what’s the opportunity and how do we make it happen?” It tended towards destruction - ‘clearing the decks’, both physically and socially. It was characterised by obsessive silos — divisions by ‘theme’ and ownership, and by the chasm between physical and social professionals. It failed to understand or value ‘the genius of place’ or the holistic nature of people’s real lives. Instead, people were caricatured as blocks of statistical need, requiring dilution or displacement. The human timeframes of right now and generational life-spans were ignored, in favour of electoral and profit-making timescales. Even the talk of civic engagement seemed to insist that citizens detach themselves from their natural soil, uproot in order to engage. Heavily resourced ‘capacity building’ taught people to work within the culture of the powerful, when what is needed instead is ‘consciousness raising’, to help people find their own agency.

The greatest failure of the old regeneration also offers the greatest opportunity
for the birth of the new: regeneration was financially compromised. Dependent on two teats — government ‘funny money’ (area-based initiatives) and the continual expansion of the housing bubble — both now withered and dried up, there is no longer a choice but that we think differently.
I believe that new regeneration will be driven by local people as agents of neighbourhood change, connected through solidarity networks, and with the state and market as enablers. It will focus on the fine grain of the lived neighbourhood, smashing down the silos and proactively weaving new fabrics of ownership and responsibility for the built and social environment. It will work within its means, finding new ways to conjure resources and capture value. The resources we need to achieve self-renovation do exist but they are locked up. The self-renovating neighbourhood is a call to action to unlock resources and create transformational local change – people, land and buildings and common bond equity finance to rebuild Britain from the ground up.
This approach taps into the great grassroots virtues of thrift, impatience and sociability. It works along the grain of real motivation, the desire lines carved out by love, anger, fear and hope. Fluent in all the languages of time, from meanwhile to long-term horizons, it takes inspiration from the past to address contemporary issues, and projects our heartfelt hopes and fears carefully into an uncertain future. The self-renovating neighbourhood is deeply rooted and realistic, but also unashamedly optimistic. It is collectivist, co-operative, collaborative – it’s something we will do together, linking the personal development of the individual with local action and wider society.
We have been looking at the whole issue of regeneration upside down. Policy has aimed to define the problem, throw money at it and measure the change. Instead policy should invest in relationships, ideas, leadership, and sustainable pipeline finance so that people themselves can make change on their own turf, in their own time, on their own terms.
I have three suggestions – each of them is simple; each of them is currently impossible because of the old-regeneration culture we have not yet overcome.
Taxpayers spend £200 billion a year on benefits. I believe that this is the core of the social contract and the very heart of what makes us civilised. The spend is concentrated in poor neighbourhoods. What if we used that spend as investment, not just a safety net but the platform for opportunity? So that skid row is not a dead end but a launching pad.
And while you're working your way away from dependency, the neighbourhood is benefiting from your efforts, becoming a better place, becoming a place that keeps you, even after you could leave.
• **Action Govt:** a new Neighbourhood Jobs Initiative allowing people on universal credit to work in step-up jobs that are good for the neighbourhood, to top up their income, build their networks and grow their own independent futures.

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Can we make that happen?
Did you think you were going to get a Jess Steele presentation without a picture of Hastings Pier?! We’re waiting to hear next week whether HLF will help us save the People’s Pier...

Meanwhile... exactly - I believe that 'meanwhile' is one of the biggest concepts to emerge from the times we're going through. Just like the link between welfare and neighbourhoods, this is not a new idea, nor is it only relevant in the age of austerity, but it is nevertheless a creature of the zeitgeist. There have always been pauses in the property process, but it is genuine uncertainty that makes meanwhile most meaningful.
I always say that just because something is temporary doesn't mean it's not powerful - think lightning...
blossom
...a festival.

I have wanted to see 'meanwhile' embedded - so a landlord says to an agent "well then, get me a meanwhile tenant", a planner asks the developer "what's your meanwhile plan?", and maybe we begin to see "meanwhile... it's not over" services - such as active housing for those who might otherwise spend a long, lonely time waiting to die.
Action Govt: **commit to the wise use of built assets of all kinds to achieve social and economic good, right now and long term.**

You might say it’s already happening, and certainly we have come a long way since the Quirk Review found “there is no substantive impediment” to asset transfer. But... if we are to go beyond the handing over of ‘community assets’ in an environment laden with bureaucracy and the transfer of risk to those least able to bear it... if we are to move from individual buildings to make an impact on the fine-grain of neighbourhoods... if we are truly going to unlock the embedded value in our built environment... then the ‘programmes’ and ‘grant/loan funds’ that we invent will need to be a great deal more flexible than they are at the moment.
[This is a treasure chest held by Warwick Town Council – five locks, five different people held the keys and had to come together to use any resources.]

So how to unlock the money at neighbourhood level? We have to stop waiting for someone else to do it, someone else to plan it, someone else to pay for it. How can self-renovating neighbourhoods create and capture value?
I think we need The Neighbourhood Grid - a download/upload arrangement like the electricity grid - use what you need, make what you can, put it back. A series of agreements to create and capture value for the local social good.
• **Action Govt**: encourage the development of a National Grid for Neighbourhoods. Show leadership, support to proof of concept, use every lever to pump-prime the Grid, commit to it.
At the heart of the ‘new moral world’ that will make neighbourhood self-renovation possible are trust, respect and relationships – a commitment to each other and to the future. “The welfare of the people is the ultimate law”. For me power is the currency that allows us to shape policy. And policy should aim to facilitate, nurture and reward collaboration, participation, common ownership and responsibility. It should work for social justice through the perpetual redistribution of agency and the means to make a difference.
This is a BIG PICTURE, inherited CULTURE, entrenched MINDSET,
but in the end it’s about the FINE GRAIN, the NEAR FIELD, the VERY VERY LOCAL. That’s why this is Locality’s business.
We run good programmes...

This is not a programme

This is a revolution

But I need to be clear. We run very good programmes, one of them I’m particularly proud of (!). But this is not a programme. This is a revolution!

Well, at least I’m trying to reframe the terms of debate, to understand how we do things differently in a traumatised society. I feel uncomfortable if we reach straight to turn it into a programme of pilots and pathfinders when what we need to do is challenge the powerful, and ourselves, to the very core.
“On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will only be an initial act.

One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s history.”

On this day when... we have seen America choose hope above fear, inclusion above division, compassion above contempt, and re-elect one of my favourite men in the world...

I want to end with Martin Luther King, because if anything gives meaning to the concept of localism and community rights, it’s his 1963 speech ‘A Time to Break Silence’
‘On the one hand we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will only be an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s history.”

It is resourceful, collective local action that will transform the Jericho Road, not just the run-down Jericho Road Community Centre but the whole neighbourhood – the Joshua Arms, Palm Tree Park, Cleopatra’s High School, Herod’s nursery and the Dead Sea Shopping Centre!
We have spoken about what government might do, but I’d also lay down a challenge for all of us.

*Imagine...*
*What if...?*
*Let’s do it!*
*Now!*

Thank you.