



There and Back Again

From the Valleys to London and back – 35 years in the making

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I grew up in the Welsh valleys. And after three and a half decades, through London & The City, through government, through council chambers and boardrooms, through consultancy and charity - I find myself still in Wales. Not because I ran out of road, but because I understood what I was always trying to do.

This is not a career retrospective. It is an attempt to make sense of a journey, to pull out the threads that connect a boy from the valleys to corporate banking, to thirty years of public service, to a growing conviction that leadership, at its best, is fundamentally a moral act.

The lessons I carry aren't from textbooks, though there have been plenty of those. They are from the rooms I've sat in, the decisions I've witnessed, the people I've had the privilege of working alongside - and the things that maybe haven't worked as well as hoped, personal and institutional, that taught me more than any success ever did.

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Where it Starts: The Valleys and the Weight of Place



There is something the valleys give you that is hard to name but impossible to shake. It is a particular relationship with community - an understanding, absorbed before you can articulate it, that people's lives are connected. That what happens in one street ripples into the next. That systems - economic, political, social - are not abstract. They land on real people in real places.

Growing up there in the 1970s and 80s, I watched those systems at work. The deindustrialisation of south Wales wasn't an economic story in the newspapers. It was people out of work, communities losing their anchor, young people uncertain about their futures. I didn't have language for it then. But it shaped everything I subsequently cared about.

My mother, Gillian Stevens, was one of the first women from the valleys to attend Imperial College. She went on to do doctoral work that contributed to the discovery of the T-cell - research that decades later would feed into the science behind the Covid vaccines. She went from Kew Gardens to Venice, studying decaying timber. To the Mary Rose. Driven entirely by curiosity, by the belief that understanding the world more deeply mattered.

My father, Ken Huish, was the first person from the UK to work in Cern, working on the first proton accelerator, and spent time working across the world in the field of nuclear physics.

I may not have inherited their scientific minds. But I inherited their conviction that following what genuinely matters - wherever it takes you - is not indulgence. It is integrity.

London: Goldman Sachs and the Grammar of Power

I arrived in London to study at LSE, and then to work in the City and beyond in the world of Corporate Finance, in the early 1990s. It was, in many ways, a different world - fast, brilliant, relentlessly

focused on returns.

I learned a great deal. I learned how to think analytically under pressure. I learned the language of risk and return, of investment and incentive. I learned that organisations run not on their stated values but on their actual incentive structures - a lesson I have found equally true in every sector I've worked in since.

But I also learned, fairly quickly, that this wasn't where my values pointed. The work was technically absorbing. The context felt increasingly hollow. I was not built for a world where the primary question was always based around the financial return.

Leaving felt like a risk at the time. In retrospect, it was the most important values-based decision I ever made. And it established a pattern I've returned to throughout my career - when your values and your context stop aligning, something has to give. It is always worth letting it be the context.

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Politics and Public Life: The Council, the Valleys, and What Power is Actually For

I returned to Wales. I stood for the council. I was elected, and over seventeen years served in leadership and opposition in Rhondda Cynon Taf.

It was an extraordinary education. Politics, at its best, is one of the hardest versions of leadership there is.. You are navigating competing interests, constrained resources, and relentless scrutiny. You have to build coalitions around ideas rather than authority. And you have to make decisions that affect people's lives - real people, in real streets in real communities - often with little information and no good options.

But what I remember most isn't the programmes or the budgets. It is the moments when it became clear that how you lead matters as much as what you decide. That trust, once lost, is extraordinarily hard to rebuild. That the communities you serve can always tell the difference between a leader who is genuinely present and one who is performing presence.

This is where I developed my deepest conviction about governance. Governance isn't just process. It isn't simply rules or compliance. It is the visible expression of a leadership culture - the way an organisation's values either show up in its decisions, or don't. Every decision, every scheme, every board agenda, every meeting, either reinforces or quietly erodes the culture you're trying to build.

The Middle Years: Consulting, Transformation, and the Limits of Expertise

Over the following two decades, I worked across an extraordinary range of contexts. As a National Lead Peer for the Improvement and Development Agency, sponsored by No. 10, I was part of the team that supported some of the most at-risk councils in the country through transformation. As a Senior Advisor at CIPFA and at PA Consulting, I worked across government and public sector reform, economic regeneration, devolution and city deals. Through other agencies, I supported governance development at ministerial level in Ghana, Kenya, Singapore and Dubai.

I facilitated the Party Leaders Forum in Belfast during some of the most sensitive periods of post-Agreement politics — negotiating agreement on decisions like the Titanic Quarter and Housing Strategy, working on the governance strand of the Northern Ireland Review of Public Administration. I worked with councils across the UK through periods of genuine organisational difficulty.

Across all of this, the same pattern repeated. The organisations that struggled weren't usually lacking strategy or structure. They were lacking clarity about who they were and what they stood for, and how best to work together to achieve shared outcomes for the communities they serve. The ones that transformed did so not because they found the right process, but because they found, or rediscovered, the right leadership culture.

I also learned the limits of the consultant's role. External advisors can challenge, catalyse, offer perspective. But we cannot do the hard work for the people who have to live inside the organisation. The space was to help leaders find their own clarity, never to impose mine.

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Housing, Homelessness, and the System That Too Often Fails

My role as Chair of Trivallis Housing Association was one of the most formative of my career. I joined during regulatory intervention - at a point of genuine turbulence. What followed was three years of rebuilding - governance structures, senior leadership, culture, and strategic direction.

We moved out of regulatory intervention within six months. We rebuilt the board, developed new governance frameworks, and worked to ensure that our 20,000+ tenants — including some of Wales's most vulnerable communities — were genuinely at the centre of our decision-making, not just our mission statements.



I served simultaneously as Chair of the group of all Housing Association Chairs in Wales - working with Community Housing Cymru and the Welsh Government Regulator, piloting new regulatory approaches, and helping navigate the sector through Covid.

What the housing sector taught me is the gap - sometimes vast - between what systems say they're for and what they actually deliver. Good governance in housing isn't just about technical compliance with the regulatory framework. It is about whether, when a family is facing eviction or a person is sleeping rough, the system bends toward them or away from them.

Trinity Housing - which I have the privilege of co-founding - is born of that conviction. Homelessness is not an inevitability. It is a systems failure. And systems failures are amenable to leadership.

Mind Cymru and the Charity Sector: Values at the Sharpest End

My role as Chair of Pwyllgor for Mind Cymru, and as a trustee of Mind UK, has brought me into the charity sector in a way that feels like a homecoming of sorts. Mental health advocacy is exactly the kind of work that sits at the intersection of values, systems and lived experience.

Mind is an organisation that knows what it stands for. That clarity of purpose is both its greatest strength and its greatest responsibility. Because when you exist to serve people at their most vulnerable, the gap between stated values and actual behaviour is not just an organisational problem. It is a human one.

Governance in values-led organisations carries a particular weight. The board of a mental health charity isn't just a stewardship mechanism. It is, in a very real sense, a guardian of the organisation's integrity, of its commitment to show up for people even when it's difficult, even when it's expensive, even when the system is pushing back.

Avanti and Trinity: Building What you Believe

Avanti was founded in 2021. It grew from a simple conviction - that the most important work in leadership development isn't technical. It is human. It is about helping leaders find clarity about who they are, what they stand for, and how they want to show up.

Over the years since, working with over 140 public sector organisations, the same things keep proving true. Culture eats strategy. Values, when they are genuine, are the most powerful leadership tools available. And governance - real governance, not compliance theatre - is the mechanism through which those values either become structural or remain aspirational.

My co-founder, Dr Amanda Milliner, embodies this. I have watched her work - with councils, with charities, with people experiencing homelessness and crisis - and what strikes me every time is the consistency of her presence. She doesn't lead differently when things are hard. She leads the same way. That is character. That is values-led leadership in practice.

Trinity Housing is the newest chapter. It brings together everything I have learned - the importance of systems thinking, the centrality of dignity, the belief that homelessness is a solvable problem if we are willing to build the right structures around the right values.

What 35 Years Teaches You

I am reluctant to offer lists of lessons. Leadership isn't a checklist. But there are things I believe now that I couldn't have articulated when I started out.

Values are not aspirational. They show up - or they don't - in every decision, every meeting, every moment of pressure. An organisation's real values are legible in its behaviour, not its mission statement.

Governance is culture made visible. The structures, the processes, the schemes of delegation - these matter. But they are only as strong as the leadership culture that sits behind them. Governance failure is almost always culture failure first.

The people closest to the problem are closest to the solution. I have sat in enough boardrooms to know that the best strategic thinking rarely originates there. It comes from the people who are living inside the challenge. The job of leadership is to create the conditions in which that knowledge can surface and be acted on.

Complexity is not an excuse for avoiding clarity. The most effective leaders I have worked with — in politics, in housing, in health, in the third sector — are not the ones who have the most sophisticated models. They are the ones who can hold complexity without losing sight of purpose.

And finally: coming back matters. Not geographically — though in my case that has been literal. But coming back to what you care about, to the communities and causes that shaped you, to the questions that were always there underneath the career. That return is not nostalgia. It is integrity.

The valleys gave me my first understanding of what community means, what systems do to people, and what it feels like when those systems fail. Everything since has been an attempt - imperfect, ongoing - to do something about that.

That's what I've been doing. That's what I'm still doing.
