

ORAL HISTORY INDEX AND SUMMARY

Interview with: David Acton

Date: 26/1/16

Location: Manchester

Total duration: 47:36 mins

Interview by Pam Dawes and summary by Kelly Bücher:

The interview plays as two recordings.

1.	Start time	Finish time	Approximate duration	Brief description
	00:00	47:36	47:36	Cllr David Acton talks about being leader of Trafford Council which received Kosovar refugees in 1999, the response of his community, and his own role in ensuring the Kosovars would be received well. He talks about the political climate at the time and Tony Blair's leadership in the NATO response. He describes what motivates him, his involvement in the creation of the Imperial War Museum North, his leadership in Fire and Rescue, and his belief in his community.
<p>Pen sketch</p> <p>Summary of interview content</p>	<p><i>David Acton lives in Urmston and was Labour Leader of Trafford MBC for 17 years from 1997 until 20015 representing his own community, Urmston, and, more recently, Gorse Hill. As Leader of Trafford Council he was heavily involved in the evacuation and resettlement programme which included meeting the medical, housing and educational needs of the refugees. David worked closely with Beverley Hughes MP under Tony Blair's leadership as Prime Minister. He successfully led the campaign for the creation of the Imperial War Museum North in Trafford. He currently chairs Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority and is Vice Chair Stretford and Urmston Constituency Labour Party.</i></p> <p>(00:00) David talks about being Leader of Trafford MBC in 1999 when Kosovar refugees came to live in Manchester. After 17 years he says that he is still a councillor in Trafford although no longer in leadership in the council. He is now Chair of Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Authority.</p> <p>He talks about his memories of the council planning and the decision making process regarding the support programme. He says that he was approached to see if they could support refugees from Kosovo and to look at a program of how that could be done. He says that it was very much community led and he merely helped to cut through bureaucracy</p> <p>David talks about how the campaign to transport food and clothing and other requirements into Kosovo and the camps was quite mammoth. He says that the community was highly committed and organised with people donating clothes, bedding, coats and other items to send as part of an aid convoy. He says that all he really did was lend support, as a councillor.</p> <p>(3:47) He says that it was five men talking in the pub, having a drink, seeing</p>			

awful images on the TV, who decided to do something about it and organise aid and try to help as much as they could. They got full support from the community and as Kosovo is in Europe, it perhaps seemed easier for people to help than some places further afield, in Syria or Iraq, for instance.

(05:04) David talks about Tony Blair and the Labour government really bringing N.A.T.O. together to take action in Kosovo and thinks he deserves credit for that.

David talks about how Manchester rose to the challenge and how the Greater Manchester Council association (representing the 2.8 million people living in Greater Manchester) made up of ten borough leaders met to discuss who could do what in terms of accommodation and education, etc.

David talks about how things worked very quickly at the time so there was no sort of grand plan. He says that it potentially sounds a bit messy but that sometimes these things are messy and you've just got to get on and do it. That is his philosophy in times of crisis.

He says that people were being evacuated on a daily basis as they were fleeing war. The situation was constantly changing.

(10:20) David talks about resources and says that local government paid for most things but did receive some help from central government, although they tended to request this after just going ahead and helping and providing services such as schooling.

(11:50) He says that he thinks that crisis can bring out the best of the public sector as a whole. He thinks that the public sector sometimes get a bad name but when there's a crisis you see them at their best. It is also when a community comes together. He says you see people's values such as fairness and protecting each other at times such as these.

(13:29) He talks a little about Ray Bowker who was the ceremonial mayor at the time. He says this is a different type of role to that of a mayor in Kosovo or America, for example, where people are elected.

(15:00) He talks about the housing situation in Trafford, including Meadow Court where many Kosovar families were to live when they first arrived in Manchester. He says there were one or two other places as well that were utilised. He says he instructed people to use all of the spaces that were available.

David talks about how the Chief Exec at the time was very supportive of what they were doing so she organised a team of support staff for the refugees.

(19:00) David talks about the education side of things. He says that Head Teachers and Governors looked at how they could support the children in their education. He says that there was a Head Teacher group who met on a regular basis to discuss education anywhere in Trafford which helped.

He talks about the language issues as the children arrived without any English. David says that meant they need to have language teachers and interpreters.

He talks about his admiration for the volunteers in Manchester Aid to Kosovo who were involved in collecting aid for the convoy and those who helped out such as organisers and the forty drivers.

David talks about central government policy regarding whether people had to go back to Kosovo. He says that he was not involved in any of those decisions or policies. He talks about it being a complex situation and there still being

instability in the region. For quite some time the U.N. were saying to the countries who received refugees, "Don't send them back because there's nothing here."

(25:20) David talks about his working relationship with Beverley Hughes, M.P. for the Trafford area, also in the Labour party, who went on to become Minister for Immigration. He says that she was leader in 1995 and he was deputy leader until 1997. She became an M.P. and got a Ministerial Post at that time. They worked very closely together on this because Beverley was very close to this situation. He says that she played a central role. He believes that Tony Blair as the Prime Minister and Beverley Hughes working closely with him, probably helped the situation as he knew that he had support of central government in his local government decisions.

(28:01) Pam Dawes conveys to David the immense sense of gratitude expressed by the Kosovar community in Manchester and tells David how well many of the children - now young adults - are doing in the UK.

(30:24) David says that he thinks everybody deserves opportunities and life chances. He was given life chances, he had a good upbringing, and he loves his family and his community.

(33:35) David thinks recording oral history is a valuable project. He thinks that this particular time in history was really difficult and if we don't record those difficulties experienced in the world we will not learn lessons from them.

He says that ethnic cleansing is one of the worst things could ever happen to anybody and he does not want to live in any society that carries it out. He comments on how it keeps happening time after time when some people thought the holocaust would end all ethnic cleansing.

(35:05) He talks about his involvement in the War Museum in Trafford. He says that when he was the deputy leader of the council, they were approached by the Imperial War Museum in London as they wanted to build an Imperial War Museum in the north of England. He says that Beverley Hughes and he decided that it should be built in Manchester so sought to make that happen. He says that he and Beverley Hughes agreed that it should be in Trafford, on the banks of Manchester Ship Canal opposite the Lowry.

They had to get Peel Holdings to agree to allow that site to be used for that, which they did.

(36:55) He says the design for the building by Daniel Libeskind was just outstanding. And, when he saw it, he said, "That has to be built here in Trafford."

He talks about trying to raise the money to build it. They got £8,000,000 from European funding but nothing else. They were hoping to get some from the Lottery but the Imperial War Museum London were unable to secure it. Peel Holdings helped them by giving them the land and supported them in funding and the council had to put in £2,000,000 themselves. He says that he was driven by the belief that it was educationally important to tell the story of war and conflict.

He says Daniel Libeskind's thought process around the design was the world has been in conflict in the air, in the sea and on the ground and the shards that stick out are the rebuilding of the world. The shattered globe.

He talks about how the Imperial War Museum North has a lot of children visiting and how it is important to educate people when they are young to get the

message through. David talks a little about Daniel Libeskind, how although he is German, he lives in America. He describes him as being a fantastic person, a character.

He says that he is now involved in Fire and Rescue in Trafford as chair.

He discussed his opinion on Angela Merkel's response to the humanitarian crisis in Syria. He comments on how much he respects her surprising actions and wishes that other countries, including the U.K. had followed suit. He believes we are able to help more, although he acknowledges that some people think we are already over-crowded as a nation; he disagrees with that viewpoint especially in times of crisis.

He quotes John Lennon: "Life is what happens whilst you're making plans." He says that you've just got to get on with life and do the best you can. He says that he likes to get on with things instead of merely making plans

He talks about how he opened up the local fire stations for access by the community, who after all, fund them.

He says that you build a stronger community if you open everything up - including schools - which actually do belong to the community. David concludes that you will get trust. If you give trust to people, you'll get trust back.