

Empowering Places collective vision statement 2020

"Community spirit is everywhere. When it is properly resourced and organised, it becomes the key not just to tackling Covid-19 but also to unlocking better social outcomes and more resilient local economies in the future."

What is Empowering Places?

The [Empowering Places programme](#) is a unique collective of 11 organisations working to create and nurture community businesses that respond to social and economic challenges in communities across England. The partnership is formed of 6 locally rooted community anchor organisations, working in [Hartlepool](#), [Grimsby](#), [Bradford](#), [Leicester](#), [Plymouth](#) and [Wigan](#) and the 5 national bodies of [Power to Change](#), [Co-operatives UK](#), [New Economics Foundation](#), [Centre for Local Economic Strategies](#) and [Renaissi](#).

We have been working together since 2017. Whilst our primary activity is **centred in the creation and support of community businesses that respond to the need and aspirations of excluded communities throughout England**, our experiences and expertise span a range of activities centred in economic justice, community wealth building and supporting people to have power over their own lives. Our starting point within Empowering Places, **is working with local people is crucial** to understanding and developing the solutions to the socio-economic challenges present in the poorest parts of England, without this local insight we will be unable to build the thriving and resourceful communities that we all want to be part of.



Photo: [The Grove](#), a fitness focused community hub ran by B-Inspired after an asset transfer from Leicester City Council in Braunstone.

What have we learnt so far and during COVID?

We have been privileged not only to have had the financial resource to become a partnership but also blessed by the creativity, empathy and intelligence of everyone involved. In this extraordinary time we are living through we find ourselves in the position of having two more years of a well resourced and flexible programme, with a shared intention and a strong sense of community and family.

We want to use everything we are learning as a cohort, and how we are looking to the next period, to guide and feed into the on-going critically important conversation around community power and specifically, how it relates to the wider economy.

The community response to Covid-19 has been positive and speedy and so too public sector organisations and private sector businesses have moved quickly to adapt and support the people living in their neighbourhoods – reinforcing the truth that we have known all along - we are part **of a random collection of people, a local social network, a community, a neighbourhood, a place**. It has shown we are NOT a set of economic units and actors and shouldn't be reduced to such.

Whether we work in a privately owned business, a social enterprise, a community group or a public sector body we all work for organisations that are 'vehicles for action'; and whether we like it or not (and whether we call it surplus or profit) we all need to generate income to sustain

the action. People, and groups of people, form collectives or companies to do things – sometimes they are community groups, sometimes they are private businesses but very rarely is the sole purpose to make money – we all provide a service and **we all care about our community and customers.**

A Better Future

We are positive that we can build on this renewed recognition and realisation that, **regardless of whether we are public, private or community owned, we are striving for the same outcomes.** The post Covid-19 recovery should be built on the community networks and spirit seen during the lockdown period.

The local economy we create should be characterised by **five principles**

1. a lack of artificial barriers between sectors
2. new measurements of prosperity and success – that recognise when we are thriving not growing
3. a recognition that putting people in ‘boxes’ is not helpful – they are not patients, customers, volunteers... they do not have mental health needs, disabilities, dependency issues... they are all people, individuals with complex lives that are sometimes difficult, sometimes joyful
4. local knowledge at the heart of neighbourhood based networks that empowers local groups of people to build meaningful support and community-led services
5. kindness, connection and collaboration

What Can We Build On

As a partnership we are shining a light on the wider determinants of ‘business’ success with three key things necessary for any ‘vehicles of action’ to make this happen:

1. **Funding** which is necessary from conception, through to start up and development (with a good revenue/capital balance) - whether you are in a decent job, in an insecure position and/or on universal credit starting any business/initiative is a HUGE risk to your personal safety – income for shelter, food etc
2. **Wrap around ‘business’ support** from a coaching/enterprise/solutions focused approach which we already exemplify in different forms and are currently undertaking a short desk based and action piece of research about
3. **Access to land and buildings** without extortionate rents and with far more public and community ownership (and also the desire to hold assets within communities which also relates to other uses such as housing, – and supports the first point)



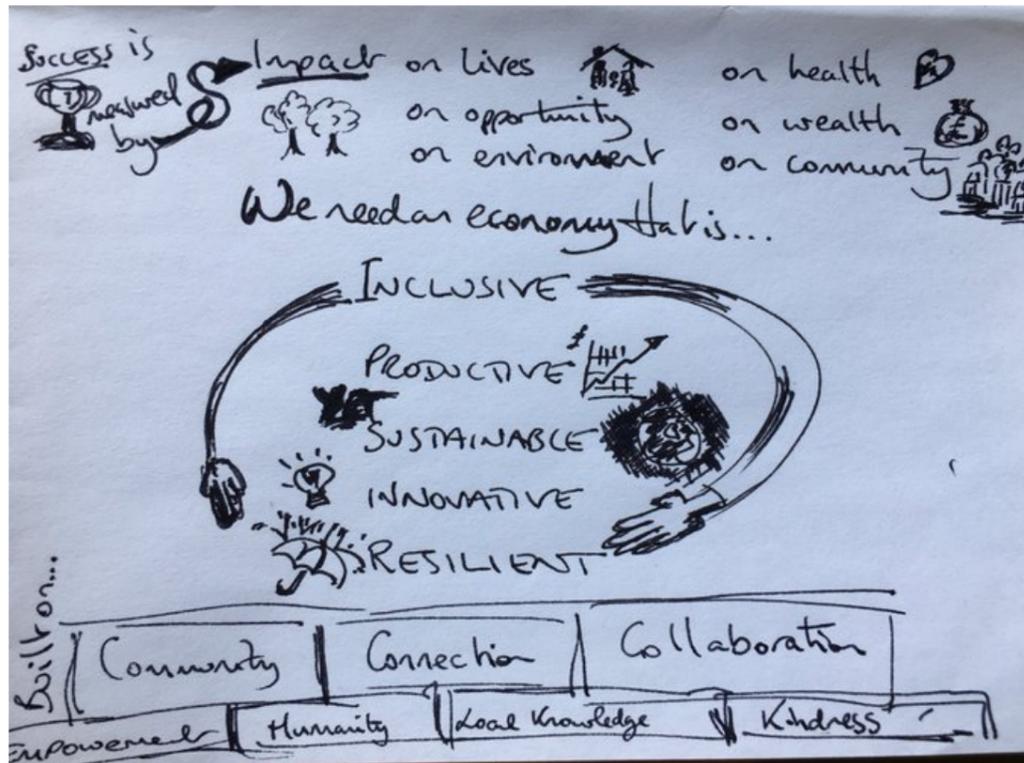
Photo: The Clipper, what was an abandoned pub on Union Street in Plymouth which is now ran by [Nudge Community Builders](#).

During lockdown, as a group we remotely met and discussed the questions below.

We have provided a summary of our insights and ideas. These are separated as the barriers that are blocking our progress and what would support our work to thrive and be amplified in the medium and long term.

What can we do to ensure the recovery phase, not only directly supports the people in our neighbourhoods, but also contributes to shifting and how economic development is conceived of in the future?

How can we ensure new systems reflect and meet what we need and value as interconnected humans in a big and fast changing world?



Credit: Paul Gutherson, Programme Manager, Centre 4 in Grimsby.

Red: What are the shared barriers experienced in England currently blocking community led progress?

- **Lack of clarity in terms of direction of travel and central government leadership**
 - a) The centralisation of power during the initial phases of the pandemic were appropriate and effective
 - b) This has now given way to a lack of coherent messaging and information which is open to local interpretation
 - c) Combined with the lack of resource within local authorities this means communities lack power and resources to make the changes they need to protect each other and rebuild their economies
- **The role of the local state has been critical in the rescue phase of the crisis, but will this role be sustained into the recovery phase**
 - a. There are significant and well founded fears about further cuts to Local Authority funding in the wake of the crisis
 - b. This will lead to even less time from Officers and Councillors for work directly with their communities
 - c. This will lead to even more parcelling of duties into big contracts and outsourcing as a default
 - d. This will lead to the firesale of even more publicly owned buildings and land
 - e. The incredible mobilisation within communities of mutual aid will give councils the reason to not engage with their communities as they are seen as 'resilient' in the longer term rather than this being viewed as a non sustainable emergency response
- **The urge to return back to 'normal' and a resistance to any reform**
 - a) The default model of economic development which relies heavily on inward investment ignores the wealth of resource and experience in the place - effectively throwing the baby out with the bathwater
 - b) In LEP's, Combined Authorities and Local Authorities this is ingrained in the culture and so very difficult to change
 - c) The pre existing lack of knowledge about how much the 'community' sector contributes to the local economy
 - d) This is often accompanied (and arguably influenced by) a lack of respect for community actors as 'amateurs' and 'volunteers'
 - e) The 'new normal' should offer the opportunity not to default back to this way of working
 - f) Many people involved in these institutions rely on the old normal for their sense of self and often income and so will try to block any rebalancing towards internal as well as inward investment
- **Return of an exploitive Big Society model that requires the community sector to do less with less, weakening the role of the local state, reinforcing austerity and a shrinking of the state**
 - a) This is a dangerous narrative that suggest the community sector doesn't need to work in partnership with the state to thrive
 - b) There will always be services that should be delivered holistically by state institutions in response to citizen need
 - c) There will always be the need for taxpayers money to be distributed at each geographical levels and tiers to meet differing needs
 - d) There is a huge risk here that the sector is starved of the resources it needs to thrive if they are not able to work with the state and pool their resources

Amber: What would amplify and support community led regeneration in the medium term?

1. An active, enabling and collaborative local state and local infrastructure providing opportunities for the community development sector as we emerge from the first stage of the crisis.

What would this look like?

- An active local state which convenes those with agency and power to maximise the use of their influence and power for local social, environmental and economic benefit.
- Local and national advocacy to #Buildbackbetter
- A review and openness of supply chains allowing small businesses to be key suppliers to public sector bodies, ensuring wealth is maintained locally.
- Opening up of **access to public sector assets** to support local SMEs and social businesses (More information in Locality's 'We were made for this' [paper](#))
- Advocacy at Local Authority to support community organisations as key facilitators and key actors in local economies.

2. A campaign on reform and resilience with accessible messaging

What would this look like?

- Opportunities for community organisations to feed in to local and regional #buildbackbetter initiatives with legitimacy and with ease they deserve. The COVID rebuild offers a unique opportunity to reform the economy so that it is fairer and greener, with clear plans for addressing unemployment and the destitution experienced in neighbourhoods throughout England.
- Promotion of 'Buy Local Campaigns' anchored in local economies that support SMEs who are thriving lifeblood of our country. We have seen a shift in consumer awareness towards local businesses and supply chains- it is no longer theoretical idea that **buying more locally** is better for communities

3. Business infrastructure that focuses on decent livelihoods and fair access to assets

What would this look like?

- Future entrepreneurs rely on formal and informal **mentoring, coaching or advising** about their business options - regardless of whether their model is community focused or a private model. Ensuring there is this level of enterprise coaching throughout communities supports individual's development, coaching them to realise the skills and opportunities they have.
- Landlord-tenant relationships:** ensuring that in impending economic recession, local businesses don't lose their premise and are therefore unable to provide the virtual services evident during lockdown.
- Quality jobs that demonstrate commitment to people over profit:** we have already seen the public outrage at businesses who treat their staff as disposable, most notably [Boohoo](#). Local businesses provide employment and volunteering opportunities that give people power and agency over their lives, rather than being at the behest of absent shareholders
- An **increase in investment into the community business and charity sector** is required with more imaginative ways that provide a sustainable mix of funding



Green: How to build a better future in the long-term

1. **Mass mobilisation of our communities** which links and feeds up into decision making. This involves **new forms of citizen democracy** through devolution and greater community ownership models
2. **A local and national economy designed for people and place** in its pursuit of social, economic and environmental justice. Including **changing the measurements of prosperity and success**, replacing GDP for metrics centred in well-being and good quality jobs.
3. **Opening up of assets and land** to communities when earmarked for development, centred in trust of communities and an openness to economic, social and environmental value.
4. An acknowledgement of the distinctive but supportive roles different sectors- **private, public and community-** play in building and supporting the resilience of places. **An equal seat at the table for community organisations as key economic actors in their local area** and a better balance of power between community and local government sector, with recognition that officers are local people who care about their community
5. **An elevation and replication of bright spots and good examples** of where things are working, including concentrated funding and accelerator programmes but also an openness to sharing and learning

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Empowering Places programme is a unique collection of organisations who have experience of building community businesses and resilience in communities of high deprivation. We have a wealth of experiences and positive examples of how businesses and communities can be built around people and place, responding to the needs of the local community.

We hope that you take the time to consider our recommendations as part of Britain's opportunity to rebuild after COVID-19 and we would welcome further opportunities to engage and work with you in the future.

