

The Irresistible Rise of Community Wealth-Building A Working paper

by

Gerry Lavery, Jenifer Devlin & Barry Ewart



Leeds, Wakefield & York Branch

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Published by Unite Community Leeds, Wakefield & York Branch

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Leeds, Wakefield & York Branch of Unite Community for agreeing to support this publication. Our thanks go to the members of the branch's Communities First Working Group for their support and exchange of ideas. We'd also like to thank our branch member, Liz Thompson, for proof-reading the manuscript and David White, our branch's Digital Officer, for his help, especially with the more technical aspects of the pamphlet. However, despite our gratitude to the people we have acknowledged, we alone are responsible for what follows.

We are also deeply indebted to all the creative council leaders and their colleagues for having the imagination and commitment to build community wealth in the age of neoliberalism, albeit of a crisis-ridden kind. In the wake of all the damage caused by neoliberalism, may its demise be hastened!

Finally, the views expressed in this pamphlet do not necessarily represent formal policy positions held by Unite or Unite Community. The pamphlet, however, is an attempt to articulate an argument or set of ideas and suggestions for discussion and activity that might be taken up by other branches of Unite Community, other campaigners and organisations and, importantly, local authorities.

Introduction

The background to the idea of writing this pamphlet came from an awareness and concern from some members of our branch with the regional disparities in the UK in terms of economic activity, income and wealth. We were also concerned about the Red Wall phenomenon but noticed the fact that places such as Preston and Salford, both pursuing community wealth-building measures, remained unaffected by it. Community wealth-building was, therefore, something we felt compelled to look at in more detail.

Unite Community was established in late 2011 by Unite the union in response to austerity and the need to offer union membership to those not in waged work at a low subscription rate. A fair amount of Unite Community's energy has gone into national campaigns which are difficult to win outright. The campaign to retain the Universal Credit £20 uplift was a case in point, although we would argue that some concessions were gained as a result of our efforts and those of others. (Blakey & Lavery, 2022) Reflecting on this - and acknowledging the continuing importance of such campaigns - we also thought there are additional ways in which people's situations could be improved, especially, we thought, through community wealth-building.

The more we considered this, the more we felt that we, as a Unite Community branch, could have a role to play in encouraging our neighbouring local authorities, all of them Labour controlled, in adopting community wealth-building measures where they don't already exist. This, we reasoned, could take the form of encouraging them to adopt an overall strategy of community wealth-building, such as those undertaken in Preston and Salford, or by encouraging them to at least adopt one-off aspects of community wealth-building, such as the Real Living Wage, for instance. We envisaged that the

combination of the community unionism of our union and pushing community wealth-building could, ultimately, be a powerful way to begin to address some of the worst consequences of neoliberalism at a local level without waiting for a national economic and political transformation, a transformation we should, of course, continue to strive for, however. In fact, pursuing community wealth-building could contribute to the transformation over time if the ideas were taken up more widely.

Many of our discussions have taken place within a sub-group of our branch's Communities First Working Group. The result of all of the considerable exchanges we have had was, as a starting point, to produce a pamphlet. This, we thought, would allow us to understand what community wealth-building means, to state the case for it in a short and accessible form and, hopefully, encourage the adoption of the measures associated with it.

In what follows, then, we start by giving an outline of the basic ideas behind community wealth-building, as well as examples of it in action. The second section looks in more depth at each of the features most associated with community wealth-building, again giving examples. The third section gives an outline of some hopefully inspiring examples of community wealth-building being pursued in various parts of the country. The final section looks at and responds to some of the criticisms of community wealth-building, how the ideas might be taken forward by our union and others. We also consider its wider political significance. The next stage for us is the difficult task - as always - of marrying theory to practice. As they say, watch this space!

1. Introduction to Community wealth-building

The term ‘community wealth-building’ is becoming familiar to increasing numbers of people. It has generated excitement in many quarters, including on the left of the political spectrum. For example, Momentum (2022), the grouping within the Labour Party, see great merit in the idea. They have, for instance, produced an online resource entitled, *Community Wealth Building: A Toolkit for Local Councillors*, in collaboration with Democracy Collaborative, and have other relevant publications in the pipeline. The Liberal Democrats have expressed a critical interest in it to too (Martin, 2020) and, in one case we know of, actually participated in it. (CLES, 2020)

While Section 2 goes into greater detail about the elements that go to make up community wealth-building, it is useful at this stage to give a working definition of what is meant by it. See Box 1 below.

Box 1 What is community wealth building?

“Community wealth-building is a local economic development strategy focused on building collaborative, inclusive, sustainable, and democratically controlled local economies. Instead of traditional economic development through locational tax incentives, outsourcing, and public-private partnerships, which wastes billions to subsidise the extraction of profit, often by footloose multinational corporations with no loyalty to local communities, Community wealth-building supports democratic collective ownership of the local economy through a range of institutions and policies. These include worker cooperatives, community land trusts, community development financial institutions, so-called ‘anchor institution’ procurement strategies, municipal and local public enterprises, and public and community banking.” (Source: Guinan and O’Neill in Brown & Jones, 2021).

Preston and community wealth-building

Although Preston was not the first place in the world to develop a community wealth-building approach, the 'Preston Model' is certainly the best known within the UK. However, it is also instructive to consider why it embarked upon it in the first place. The idea of community wealth-building has a context, namely, the failed model that is neoliberalism. But what do we mean by neoliberalism?

Neoliberalism

While liberalism is most often associated with individual freedom, privacy, autonomy and property, the classical liberalism of the nineteenth century was most identified with individual freedom, a minimal state and a market economy. The term 'neoliberalism' was first used in the 1930s by Hayek, its intellectual guru, as a reaction to the collectivism of social democracy. Since then, others, including right-wing think tanks, developed the ideas further. Heywood's definition of neoliberalism is a useful starting point for our purposes here:

Its central pillars are the market and the individual. The principal neo-liberal goal is to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' in the belief that unregulated market capitalism will deliver efficiency, growth and widespread prosperity. In this view the 'dead hand of the state' saps the initiative and discourages enterprise; government, however well intentioned, invariably has a damaging effect upon human affairs. This is reflected in a preference for privatisation, economic deregulation, low taxes and anti-welfarism. (Heywood, 2000, p. 68)

The economic crisis of the 1970s social democratic state provided the context for the development of neoliberal ideas when Thatcher entered Downing Street. Her version of neoliberalism was to set the broad political framework for the next 40 years. We should also add that workers' rights also suffered under Thatcherism, especially following the crushing of miners' strike of 1984-85. In short, she developed 'a strong state' in order to facilitate 'a free economy'. (Gamble, 1994)

In a review of neoliberalism, Monbiot (2016), points out that neoliberals redefined us as consumers rather than as citizens, with the market as the key organising principle and an opportunity for a minority to enrich themselves: 'freedom for the pike, not for the minnows', as he put it. As Monbiot has also pointed out, the consequences have been incredibly damaging, such as increased mental ill health, 'a pettifogging and stifling regime of assessment and monitoring in the name of competition' (especially in the public sector), the enrichment of private companies from privatisation, the transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich within financial services, austerity, and political crisis. Nor should we forget the contribution made to the climate emergency within the neoliberal period. I'm sure we could all add to the list, and perhaps it's no surprise, especially following the banking crisis of 2008 and the austerity that ensued, that neoliberalism is now in crisis.

Preston and neoliberalism

In order to understand the neoliberal context and its implications for local government, it is worth drawing on a recent book about the approach in Preston, *Paint Your Town Red* by Leader of Preston Council, Matthew Brown, and journalist, Rhian Jones (2022). Like other parts of the North, Preston was faced with several problems to overcome, especially deindustrialisation, lack of effective

investment, cuts to local government and austerity. The regeneration strategies of the new Labour years and the Coalition Government also failed to make any real impact. By 2002 Preston had the highest unemployment rate and lowest economic activity for over 15 years. And after the austerity following the banking crisis, there were feelings of powerlessness and despair that central government could ever act in the city's interests.

In this context, the regeneration of places like Preston were left to the hope that multi-national corporations or large retailer chains would offer investment, but this would often entail poor and insecure working conditions and, in the end, without 'any deep sustainable improvement'.

Nor was progress being made in terms of housing. As Brown and Jones also point out, developers offered very little in the way of affordable housing. Alarming, they also feared that close personal partnerships between councillors involved in planning and developers, who may have been party donors, also acted as a check on progress.

A symbolic and defining moment within the era of this hopeless model came when Preston's Tithebarn £700m shopping centre failed, as its developers withdrew in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008. Preston City Council eventually dropped the project in 2011 but feared a loss of credibility and this forced a rethink. That rethink turned towards using local resources more to restructure Preston's economy more in tune with the needs of the city.

Preston and community wealth-building

Inspired by the community wealth-building model being developed in Cleveland, Ohio in the USA and the work of the Mondragon

cooperative in the Basque region of Spain, a new approach to the development of the local economy began in Preston.



The work of Matthew Brown (left), the current leader of Preston City Council, has been hugely important in developing community wealth-building, although other figures have been important to it as well. The Centre for Economic Strategies (CLES) and the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) have also played crucial roles.

Preston’s community wealth-building approach ultimately began to deliver tangible results and real material improvements were made, so much so that in 2018 it was identified as the most rapidly improving urban area in the UK to live and work. See Box 1.1.

**Box 1.1 The impact of community wealth building:
the case of Preston**

“Once a poster child for economic deprivation and “left behind” places, Preston has already seen significant payoffs from its Community Wealth Building approach, having been named the UK’s most improved urban area by the professional services firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, in their annual report on Good Growth for Cities. The share of the public procurement budget spent in the City of Preston quadrupled between 2013 and 2017, representing a gain of £75m, while across Lancashire it more than doubled for a gain of £200m. Prior to COVID, unemployment has fallen, and Preston has seen better-than-average improvements in health, transport, work-life balance, and youth and adult skills acquisition.” (Source: Momentum, 2022).

Other examples of community wealth-building

Although Preston is held up as *the* model of community wealth-building, it is clear that it is becoming ‘irresistible’ to other areas too, as Box 1.2 below and the rest of this section suggests.

The local authorities committed to community wealth-building stretch beyond the above examples, however. CLES, champions of community wealth-building, cite other examples, such as Clackmannanshire in Scotland, which has recently developed a community wealth-building action plan. Islington and Lewes councils are also cited as further examples, and there are others.

In our view, community wealth-building is developing because of decades of neoliberalism and the lived experience of many councils that this has not delivered for local people in terms of the economy or their overall well-being.

Community wealth-building is an idea whose time has come and is being developed by creative local authority leaders to deliver practical solutions to the deep-seated problems they face in their areas. A focus on developing community wealth-building can allow activists and councillors to do something in the here and now to democratise local economies, in a way which helps address the climate emergency and promotes greater social equality. While there might be disagreements over the precise way to achieve these things, the broad way forward for increasing numbers of regional and city mayors and local authorities is in the direction of community wealth-building.

Box 1.2 Community wealth building elsewhere

Preston is not an isolated case in terms of its commitment to community wealth building. For example, in a recent Momentum video of a discussion on the approach, it not only featured Matthew Brown but also Joe Cullinane, the Labour Leader of North Ayrshire Council, Paul Dennett, the Labour Mayor of Salford, and Jeanette Williamson, the Labour Leader of Wirral Council. Each of them reported on interesting community wealth building developments in their own areas and spoke with obvious commitment and great enthusiasm. Their contributions reflected impressive community wealth building work through, for example, cooperation with other local institutions, the provision of more social and affordable housing, the use of council land for progressive purposes, measures to address climate change and more local employment opportunities and plans to develop a regional mutual bank. (Source: Momentum, 2021)

In our view, the rise of community wealth-building has much to offer, and we shall develop this argument in a later section. Now, however, we need to turn to look in more detail at the approaches to community wealth-building identified by Guinan and O'Neill and which we outlined earlier.

2. The main features of community wealth-building

In this section, we briefly sketch out what key elements seem to feature in approaches to community wealth-building. In identifying them, we are not necessarily arguing that they should operate together simultaneously. It may be, for example, that a local authority decides to focus on progressive procurement without necessarily developing the whole package straightaway. It may also be that community wealth-building focuses on a particular area as a one-off, such as housing.

What follows, then, is not meant to be prescriptive, although it remains our view that the more comprehensive an approach to community wealth-building is, the more likely it will have a positive impact on the lives of local people.

CLES has developed what have become known as ‘the five pillars’ of community wealth-building (Brown & Jones 2021), which are:

- plural ownership of the economy;
- making financial power work for local places;
- fair employment and just labour markets;
- progressive procurement for goods and services;
- socially productive use of land and property.

While we touch on all of these, we have chosen to cover them under the headings below. We thought it worth devoting a separate heading to anchor institutions as they are so pivotal to the idea of community wealth-building. We have also integrated the principles around employment and plural ownership of the economy under other headings. We’ve also added one other, which is that of community participation. Not to establish it as important principle

means there is a danger of community wealth-building appearing to be top-down.

In what follows, then, we sketch out the following aspects of community wealth-building:

- anchor institutions;
- progressive procurement;
- finance and financial support to the community;
- land and housing;
- community participation.

Anchor institutions

Community wealth-building involves an approach to the local economy which advocates more democratic control by local authorities working together with other local not for profit organisations, often referred to as ‘anchor institutions’. Such institutions provide a bedrock on which to rebuild a local economy through use of their own spending power. Anchor institutions usually

Box 2 Example of local anchor institutions: the Wirral

On the Wirral, the council committed itself to community wealth building and established a partnership board of anchor institutions consisting of the NHS locally, the care commissioning group, a local college, the local police and fire services and the chamber of commerce. Collectively, these institutions have a total spend of some £2bn and the more of this that is spent acquiring goods and services locally the more impact it will obviously have on the local economy. (Source: Momentum, 2021)

include large-scale not for profit organisations in the area, such as the NHS, the police, colleges and universities, as Box 2 above shows.

Anchor institutions can make a big impact on the amount of money spent locally on goods and services, thereby increasing employment, and contributing to the health of a local economy. See Box 2.1.

Box 2.1 Example of impact of anchor institutions working together in Preston

At one point, analysis showed that of the £750M spent on goods and services by anchor institutions only 5 per cent of it was spent within businesses based locally and 39 per cent elsewhere in Lancashire. The remaining 61 per cent or £458M was ‘leaking out’ and that needed to be addressed. After Preston’s original 6 anchor institutions were persuaded to spend locally on goods and services, spending there increased from £38M 2013 to £111M by 2017. In wider Lancashire over the same period spending increased from £292M to £486M. (Source: Brown & Jones, 2021)

Progressive procurement

To commit to purchasing more local goods and services by anchor institutions involves a procurement process and the way this is done matters greatly, especially where goods and services can’t be provided on an insourced basis within an anchor institution. If this is undertaken with a commitment to what has become known as ‘social value’ procurement, then it opens a pathway to more progressive possibilities.

As we saw with the section on anchor institutions, favouring local suppliers can enhance the amount of money going into a local economy but also specify progressive social ends. Such an approach could include, for instance, specifying commitments by suppliers to employment practices such as a commitment to the Real Living Wage, greater representation in their workforce from groups which tend to be under-represented, trade union rights and membership, and to low or carbon-free production practices. In other words, procurement is not just about low cost, but about environmental and social considerations too.

Progressive procurement is often described as ‘plural’, i.e., a number of different types of organisations providing goods and services to anchor institutions. This could, for example, include small medium enterprises, co-operatives and social enterprises. We will return to the question later and the role of insourcing versus outsourcing services. From a trade union perspective, this may not always be a straightforward choice.

There is also a variety of ways of encouraging local suppliers to bid for contracts, such as mentoring, streamlining and simplifying procurement documentation and procedures, encouraging the growth of local firms such as co-ops to expand the range of goods and services available at the local level. These kinds of approaches have been adopted to considerable effect in Preston. For example, co-ops have been encouraged and supported by the council and the local university.

The more widespread the practice of progressive procurement along these lines is, the more the wealth generated is likely to stay within a particular locality. The retention of wealth in an area means that local suppliers may offer more local employment opportunities in contrast to suppliers such as national firms or multi-national corporations,

who have little or no connection to an area yet happily extract wealth from it and move it elsewhere.

Box 2.2 Progressive procurement in Manchester

“Since 2008, Manchester City Council had been using its procurement power as a lever to ensure its spend generates as much economic, social and environmental benefit for the city as possible.

“Manchester City Council has adopted the social value policy and framework designed by the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities procurement hub. The Council recognises that social value considerations need to be considered at all stages of the procurement cycle. To facilitate this, the Council has set up a cross departmental procurement working group tasked with embedding social value throughout the process.

“The Council consistently use 20% social value weighting in their tendering process. They also hold regular “meet the buyer” events where they emphasise their priorities around reducing worklessness and raising aspiration. As a result of their approach to social value, through procurement activity the Council has in the last financial year created 1579 new jobs, 562 apprenticeships and 7730 employment opportunities for hard-to-reach groups, such as access to pre-employment training.”

(Source: CLES, n.d.)

Buying locally – the multiplier effect

Buying locally also has an impact on the local economy, as this discussion of the multiplier effect starkly highlights:

The estimate of the multiplier from buying local is eight. This means that if you buy from a large multinational corporation then that money leaves your community right away, heading straight to corporate headquarters or offshore, but if you buy from a local business it stays local and is spent a further eight times, circulating and recirculating, allowing local residents and businesses to “take in each other’s wash. (Momentum, 2022, p. 13)

So, any community wealth-building scheme worth its salt, needs to encourage a commitment to buying locally.

Insourcing

Procurement in a less progressive context meant an ideological drive to outsourcing local public services to the private sector. In local government, services began to be contracted out in the 1980s. In Box 2.3 we summarise what has been wrong with forms of outsourcing most associated with neoliberalism. Now there is evidence that councils of all political persuasions are bringing services back in-house, for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons.

According to Brown and Jones, taking those services back into council control has ‘become a central tenet of community wealth-building in order to democratise control of local economies.’ In Islington, for instance, contracts covering services like cleaning, housing repairs, refuse collection and education have been taken

back into council control. This, compared to outsourcing, has not only saved the council £14M, but improved pay for staff by way of the London Living Wage and subjected services to democratic control.

Box 2.3 What is wrong with 'neoliberal' outsourcing?

- Insourcing is cheaper
- The superior experience of the major private providers in negotiating contracts has left some local authorities with a flawed deal
- Outsourced contracts require an extra layer of in-house management, without which complaints about poor service delivery can become a problem.
- Outsourced staff can become less motivated.
- Outsourcing results in expensive duplication of administrative services or purchase of equipment, whereas insourcing allows economies through integration of services.
- Local government needs the flexibility to respond to constantly changing budgets and government priorities, in addition to external factors like the climate emergency and the covid pandemic. External contracts lock up resources.
- Local authorities are recognising the benefits to the local economy of keeping their spending local.

Finance and financial support to the community

In terms of finance, there are obviously limits to finance-raising powers of local authorities and the banking structure is not really designed to support regional investment and development. However, there are good examples of local authorities using their pension funds for investment purposes. In Preston, for instance, pension funds are being used to construct a £40m cinema and leisure

complex owned by the city and income from which will help fund council services.

There also cases where local authorities are disinvesting pension funds from fossil fuels such as Labour-controlled Waltham Forest. Indeed, our own union is part of a campaign to pressurise the West Yorkshire Pension fund located in Bradford to do the same.

There are also moves by councils in the North West of England to develop a regional community bank. Both Preston and Wirral councils are part of this scheme.

A further aspect is financial support for the community. Because of its commitment to the Real Living Wage, Preston has the lowest percentage of workers paid below that level. A commitment to progressive procurement can also bring more jobs to an area and include contract clauses about delivering employment to areas of low income and to under-represented groups.

Other financial elements within the Preston model include work against loan sharks by backing CLEVR money, (an ethical, not for profit financial co-operative which makes low-cost loans), voluntary sector funding to tackle financial exclusion and free home insulation.

Land and housing

Land and housing both feature within the models of community wealth-building as ways of easing access for local people to affordable property whether bought or rented. As part of the planning process, for example, developers are required to earmark 30 per cent of their properties on larger developments as affordable homes.

Preston Council has also made land they owned available for social housing. Preston's main provider of social housing, Community Gateway, also an anchor institution, purchased 59 properties on one recent development and used them as houses to let with affordable rents.

North Ayrshire, a council also committed to community wealth-building, made land available for solar panels, thus committing to greater environmental sustainability, a key feature of community wealth-building.

In their book on the Preston Model, Brown and Jones point to an example from Newham Council in London to highlight other approaches to the question of housing. We summarise some of these approaches in Box 2.4 below.

Newham is also trying to meet housing needs by using community land trusts. Community land trusts are also associated with community wealth-building. In relation to housing, Brown and Jones (2021) state that community land trusts and other forms of community-led housing share:

the common principle that the community is involved in key decisions around what, where and for whom the land is used and how housing is provided. It is presumed that the community group will take a long-term formal role in the ownership, stewardship or management of the homes, and that the benefits of the scheme to the local area and/or specified community group are clearly defined and legally protected in perpetuity.

Box 2.4 Community wealth building and housing in Newham

Half the homes in Newham are privately rented and rent rises have been steep within recent years there. In order to improve the standard of this housing, the council has enforced current laws and has been responsible for 57% of landlord prosecutions in London, with 1,306 landlords prosecuted and 28 banned. The council is also trying to ensure that landlords observe energy efficiency standards as a way of addressing fuel poverty.

Newham is committed to building more housing including 1,000 new council houses at affordable rents before 2022 is out. It has bought back former social housing stock and compulsory purchased empty houses. Measures such as these are consistent with community wealth-building as affordable rents allow for more disposable income to circulate in the economy and lead to less stress for renters.

(Source: Brown & Jones, 2021)

Community land trusts can also take other forms such as ‘taking control of a local pub to setting up a co-operative bakery, through to community energy generation and local farming initiatives.’

Community participation – the sixth pillar of community wealth-building?

While we should recognise that local councils involved in community wealth-building are pulling the necessary levers to facilitate greater economic democracy and improvement in people’s lives, an overarching principle should be that of community participation. Not only is this good practice so that the community needs are met more

precisely, but it is also important in embedding the community wealth-building approach within local communities.

We also recognise that community participation is integral to some of the practices within community wealth-building. The discussion in the section above on community land trusts is a very good example of this. However, our concern is to ensure that at every available turn, community participation is considered as a possibility. This could, for example, be with communities of locality or communities of interest, whether BAME communities, disabled people, women or those on low income. Is there space for people beyond the council chamber and those employed by a local authority to have an input?

Among community wealth-building councils, North Ayrshire has made a conscious approach to integrate this aspect into its practice. For example, in the wake of the Grenfell fire, the council consulted tenants in tower blocks ‘as part of an ambitious proposal for new and better-quality council housing, ensuring that ideas of regeneration were driven by those directly impacted rather than top-down’. (Brown & Jones, 2021)

North Ayrshire has also experimented with participatory budgeting, a process whereby local communities are involved in the way funds are used. The most famous case of this is Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989 whereby the poorest parts of the city were involved in ensuring they received adequate funding, as well having a say in how their needs were met. In North Ayrshire, the council has involved local people, along with council’s grounds workforce, in considering how the grounds maintenance plan operates. Thus, there is real scope to develop such approaches further within the practices of community wealth-building.

In this brief overview of the main features of community wealth-building, it's clear to us that they have real progressive potential, whether operated together or separately. They represent the potential for more democratic control and revival of local economies and to deliver real material improvements for local people. In the next section we explore some further examples of community wealth-building practice in the hope that it generates more ideas around what is possible within this field.

3. Community wealth-building ideas

While we have already cited examples of community wealth-building practice, we present some further ideas in this section. We have done this on the basis that we find the ideas interesting and inspiring and offer those interested in community wealth-building further food for thought. In what follows, therefore, we consider the impressive work undertaken in Salford and the ideas being developed by the North of Tyne Combined Authority. We then consider some grassroots housing initiatives in our own area of Leeds and supported by the city council in various ways. We also outline the community wealth-building measures on climate change outlined by CLES and being pursued by Lewes District Council.

Salford and North of Tyne as examples of community wealth-building

Salford is probably a less well-known example of community wealth-building - or what it's City Mayor, Paul Dennett, calls 'sensible socialism' - yet its achievements over recent years have been significant, for example, helping to develop clean energy and high tech digital future, a growth in jobs, the building of council homes, the development of green spaces and the arts and culture, insourcing and improved wages for staff. Please see Box 3 below for further details.

Jamie Driscoll at North of Tyne Combined Authority is a relative newcomer to his mayoralty by comparison but no less ambitious than Salford. For example, his manifesto made a general commitment to community wealth-building, including progressive procurement, with the emphasis on employment and decent wages, a community bank and addressing climate change in various ways. Jamie Driscoll's approach is outlined in Box 3.1 below.

Housing and community wealth-building

The need for social housing is obviously crucial today and community wealth-building has a role to play in this area too. Here we focus on the role that can be played by local housing projects with the support of the local authority.

For over a decade now, governments have starved councils of money for local social housing. This is at a time when many homes have remained empty. According to one report, 10,000 homes in Leeds were said to be lying empty and that Leeds was 'The third worst city in the UK for empty homes.' Leeds City Council also estimates that 1.3% of its 54,000 council homes were empty up until April of this year.

So, while we would argue that more money is needed for councils to be build social housing, an immediate focus could be on refurbishing empty properties. The advantage of focusing on such houses is that they are already available so there is no need to search for new development sites.

In Box 3.1, we give examples from our own area of Leeds to show how empty and derelict properties are being developed by innovative housing projects and which depend on the council's help. Despite a lack of funding and cuts, Leeds City Council has managed to support some grassroots housing initiatives such as *Canopy Housing, Burley, LS6, LATCH (Leeds Action to Create Homes) Chapeltown* and *Leeds LS7*, and there have also recently been some interesting eco co-housing projects in the city, such as *LILAC, Bramley, LS13, ChaCo, Chapeltown and Leeds LS7*. There is no space to cover them all here, but we highlight some of them in Box 3.2 below. They are all examples, we would argue, of community wealth-building in the here

and now, while also recognising the deep need to campaign for better social housing provision nationally.

Community wealth-building and climate change

An important aim of community wealth-building is not only to aim for greater social justice and equality, but also to try and address the climate emergency. In considering this question, we have drawn on the work of CLES and the toolkit they have developed on community wealth-building and energy transition. CLES propose an interesting list of ideas and some of which are based in current community wealth-building practice. The ideas they raise are of crucial importance, whether that's the use of local renewable energy supplies, sources of finance for green initiatives, a suitably trained workforce, decarbonisation or retrofitting. See Box 3.3 for more detail.

Against the background of CLES's work on energy transition, in Box 3.4 we outline the inspiring work being undertaken in Lewes. Although in its early stages, it's interesting because the District Council there is run by a cross-party alliance. Their work also features insourcing, building energy-efficient council houses and the offer of decent work to those without it. Further community wealth-building measures are planned for the future.

Box 3 The Salford Model or ‘sensible socialism’

- Via capital programme, Salford Council has borrowed billions on a commercial basis, to help protect jobs and services at a time of cuts and austerity, resulting in a boost to the economy, clean energy and a high-tech digital future, such as the council’s investment in Media City.
- Seven per cent growth rate in jobs in recent years.
- Building of 3,000 council homes via council-owned company, Derive.
- Since 2010, Salford has invested in green spaces and infrastructure, increasing cycle and walking routes, creating new parks from wasteland and access to peat bog land.
- Supported and facilitated the growth of arts and cultural sector and invested in growth of artistic communities by providing areas of secure, low rent, such as Islington Mill.
- Invested in the delivery of ‘Port Salford’, the reopening of the Manchester-Liverpool ship canal to shipping and freight.
- Income from council tax, business rates, proceeds from development and public and private investment have allowed the council to offset some austerity cuts.
- Insourcing programme: e.g., road maintenance, highways, and building control have now been brought back in-house.
- Council nurseries have been retained and 7 new libraries have been opened.
- Improved wages for carers and staved off some of the worst effects of staff losses following the loss of 50% of staff.

(Source: Dennett, P. 2021)

Box 3.1 Community wealth building in North of Tyne Combined Authority

North of Tyne Combined Authority covers Newcastle, Northumberland and North Tyneside authorities and was set up at the end of 2018.

The focus of the Mayor is community wealth building, addressing climate change, setting up community hubs, building affordable homes, setting up a community bank and providing meaningful adult education.

His manifesto promised:

- to enable small businesses to win public sector work by breaking down contracts;
- to use a Procurement Framework to prioritise firms who pay the Real Living Wage, train local workers, have secure employment practices and sustainable employment plans;
- to build a network of anchor institutions;
- to set up a people's bank to invest in local business;
- to support small and worker-owned businesses;
- to create a community owned green energy company by accessing capital grants and low-cost borrowing;
- to work to gain bus franchising powers;
- to build co-operative social housing that can't be privatised-
to set up a new company to manufacture modular eco-homes.

(Source: Driscoll, 2019)

Box 3.2 Community wealth building and housing in Leeds

- **Canopy Housing**, a charity, was founded in 1998 and renovates longstanding empty and derelict houses and transforms them into homes. It is a self-help housing opportunity for homeless people, which has developed partnerships with local housing providers and the council. It is also a registered society under the Co-operative and Community Benefit Societies Act. (Canopy Housing Website)
- **LATCH** is a housing association in Leeds which refurbishes derelict and run-down houses in Chapeltown, and where “most of the work is done by its staff and volunteers.” It purchases empty homes to create good quality housing and started by leasing 2 properties from the council in 1990. It has had some government grants and a contract with the council and won the Empty Homes Award in 2016. In 2021 it launched a Community Share Issue and raised £550,000 to buy new properties, and by 2022 LATCH had completed its 100th home in the city. (Latch Website)
- **ChaCo** is a new cohousing development in Chapeltown helping residents to live sustainably. Its core values are diversity, community and sustainability. From project planning to delivery took 12 years and all 33 houses were contracted to a family or individual. Leeds City Council gave the project land and planning permission. 8 houses became available as rented housing, and 21 as shared ownership, where residents own 25% to 99% with any balance paid as rent to the Cooperative. It’s a fully mutual Housing Co-operative funded through a mixture of shared ownership sales, loan stock from supporters, grant funding from Homes England and finance provided by Ecology and Leeds City Council. (Whistance, 2022; ChaCo Website).

Box 3.3 CLES Toolkit for Community Wealth Building Energy Transition

Identifies creative ways in which local authorities can address climate change, for example:

- using progressive procurement to buy energy from renewable sources to support the development of local supply chains;
- using land to support local authority or community-owned businesses to set up solar fields, such as Oldham Community Power, and using council property to mount solar panels and generate energy through roof leasing;
- leveraging finance through government grants, borrowing, community share initiatives, green finance and investment of local pension funds to finance community and municipal energy and retrofitting projects;
- building the local skills base with local colleges to retrofit council owned property and ensure a pipeline of local talent ready to move into new green jobs;
- hardwiring carbon emission reduction into local policy for the local authority and the anchor institutions
- encouraging existing and new local businesses into retrofitting via contracts and support for training;
- prioritising procurement from businesses with high social and environmental values;
- investment in community energy by LEPs and Growth Hubs
- supporting the development of a local supply chain of SMEs with diverse ownership models to deliver and install local retrofit schemes, as at Nottingham and Lewes councils;
- use of local authority licensing of landlords to require retrofitting to high thermal performance.

(Source: CLES, 2021)

Box 3.4 Community wealth-building in Lewes

- Despite the prosperity of Lewes in East Sussex in general, pockets of deprivation exist in some of its coastal towns and rural areas.
- Lewes District Council (LDC) is run, unusually, by an alliance of Green, Lib Dem, Labour and Independent councillors.
- Also affected by the climate emergency (coastal erosion and flooding), the Council has embarked on a strategy of green community wealth building
- Experiments in insourcing were introduced as a means of saving money and improving services.
- So far, most of the community wealth building focus has been on ‘eco-friendly social housing’.
- This is also a way of delivering ‘good green jobs’ to those in need of ‘decent work’.
- In building new council houses, LDC has worked with Boutique Modern, a modular housing construction company, which builds energy efficient homes, and collaborates with the local job centre to recruit those who have struggled to find work.
- Two house-building projects are underway and another planned, which will build 200 homes, using various companies.
- LDC is also part of a project with other surrounding councils to decarbonise its council houses.
- LDC are also considering other ideas, ‘from investment in local renewable energy schemes to the creation of a community bank.’

(Source: CLES, 2020)

We hope the ideas in this section give a further indication of the range of possibilities within community wealth-building and will prove a useful resource. In considering some of these ideas, the question for us is why wouldn't a local authority go down the route of community wealth-building? Having asked this question, we recognise that some remain unconvinced, sceptical, or reluctant about this approach. In the next section, therefore, we discuss some of these reservations, as well as the prospects and wider implications of community wealth-building.

4. Objections, wider significance and prospects

The limits of community wealth-building under capitalism

In one review of *Paint Your Town Red*, Adam Goulcher (2021) argues from a particular left perspective that experiments in community wealth-building like the Preston Model are doomed to fail.

First, if one considers history, such as Robert Owen's New Lanark experiment, he argues, then such experiments will not succeed because they have to compete in a wider capitalist market. We're not sure the analogy here quite works as anchor institutions within the Preston Model are not for profit organisations, as well as the steer and support given to local suppliers, which we highlighted earlier in this pamphlet. Nor, given the social value aims of progressive procurement, are we convinced some firms would wish to operate on that basis. We're not sure, then, that Goulcher is comparing like with like.

Second, Goulcher argues, the Preston Model entails a (delusional?) strategy identical to that of capitalist parties, i.e., that better economic growth leads to better living standards. This criticism does overlook the fact that while we do indeed live in a capitalist society, there are different forms of capitalism. For example, we see a big difference between living in the UK, which, in terms of income, is the most unequal country in Europe bar Bulgaria, compared to living in a Scandinavian country such as Denmark, which has high welfare standards and is one of the most equal European countries. (OECD, 2022) Strategies such as progressive procurement can also allow for the specification of decent pay and conditions and trade union rights. Thus, it is possible to maximise benefits for workers but at the same time to argue for a different kind of society in the longer term.

Thirdly, Goulcher argues that the Preston Model amounts to localism, so, while it protects workers in Preston, workers elsewhere lose out.

While there is an absence of evidence on this point in terms of the totality of the UK economy, it is also the case that community wealth-building extends beyond Preston and is growing. Notwithstanding that, is the money that would leak out of Preston to wealth extracting multinational banks and corporations and profits ending up in offshore islands an outcome that we would wish to sustain? Furthermore, we need to think about the economic imbalance between regions of the UK and, for example, how well the South East is doing in comparison to the North. The case of community wealth-building is also reinforced by the way recent Conservative governments have cash-starved local authorities, in some cases halving their income (Dennett, 2021)

Fourthly, Goulcher argues that ultimately the answer is that the unity of the working class needs to be achieved in order to end austerity and overthrow capitalism. While socialists see this as a desirable outcome, the consciousness of the working class does not appear currently to be ready for such a historic mission, to say nothing of the absence of any real mobilisation against the cuts in recent years.

Community wealth-building might also have an educative function in highlighting the value of the progressive measures that it entails, such as greater democratic control of the local economy, and how this could prefigure a different approach to the kind of society we currently live in. As Momentum argues:

And yet, when national government is pursuing destructive economic policies, action at the local level can be an obvious form of protection. More than that, local economic policy can often be a way of creating plans and models that prefigure the changes we need at the national level—in fact, this is exactly what happened with the creation of our National Health Service. (Momentum, 2022, p. 11)

Goulcher's review has been worth considering in a little detail because it is a model example of such objections and queries. However, his position is, we feel, in grave danger of throwing out the community wealth-building baby with the capitalist bath water.

What if there is a change of political control?

The point has been made that community wealth-building initiatives are all very well but what happens if there's a change of political control and a Labour council committed to the approach is thrown out and the Tories come in and reverse all the council's work?

While this is an obvious danger, it is worth responding to by saying that the Preston Model, for example, has improved Labour's political position in the city and that it hasn't suffered the same fate as other Northern places that fell in the Red Wall collapse of the 2019 election.

We might also note that the work in Salford seems to have paid political dividends. Its Labour Mayor, Paul Dennett, a pioneering community wealth builder, was re-elected in the 2021 for a second time. During that election, he received 59% of first preference votes in the first round. It seems, then, there is something protective politically about a community wealth-building approach, especially if it is done effectively and has buy-in from local people.

Community wealth-building and trade unions

An important question here is the issue of outsourcing, which, of course, is generally opposed by trade unions operating in the public sector. As we saw earlier, there are very good reasons why this should be the case. Despite the attractions of progressive procurement, the fear is that jobs are still outsourced to the private or not for profit sector, with the risk of poorer pay and conditions. As outsourcing also takes place away from local authorities, then there arises the question of a lack of democratic accountability. For instance, there is no real means of redress if users of a service are failed by an

outsourced service provider, to say nothing of the other problems we identified with 'neoliberal' outsourcing in Section 2 of the pamphlet.

Our own union, Unite, given the experience of outsourcing, has argued for 'a clear commitment to insourcing services first and foremost and a strong public provision policy. When it means this, community wealth-building should be enthusiastically supported.' (Unite, 2019) When first set up, this position was also supported by the Labour Party's Community Wealth Building Unit, and it's one we as Unite members would support too.

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However, trade unions would also want us to be aware of situations where their members are being transferred from outsourced

companies to insourced local authority services and where rates of pay are better within an outsourced company. In these circumstances, which may not occur that often, trade unions will rightly want to respect their workers' wishes and protect their interests. In cases such as these and when insourcing does occur, then outsourced workers transferring in have had their rates of pay protected by a process known as 'red circling', at least until such time as other insourced workers have caught up.

As we pointed out earlier, insourcing can be prioritised within community wealth-building, whether that's by local authorities or associated public body anchor institutions. In terms of local authorities, our example of Islington discussed in Section 2 is an important one here, and there is nothing intrinsic to the model which prevents insourcing, in fact, it advocates it. So, there is no reason why insourcing can't be prioritised as part of a community wealth-building approach. Having said that, some of the principles of progressive procurement should also apply to insourcing. For example, are under-represented groups reflected in selection for any available apprenticeships and within the workforce of local authorities when it comes recruitment. Does the local council pay the Real Living Wage? And so on.

Where services are outsourced, for instance, especially where public bodies may have the ability or capacity to offer all goods and services, it is important to remember that decent pay and conditions are integral to that, and the enshrinement of trade union rights and the encouragement of trade union membership should also feature as part of a *progressive* procurement strategy.

The wider significance of community wealth-building

We have already noted that community wealth-building has to a degree the capacity to revitalise and democratise local economies, especially in the wake of the havoc wreaked by over 40 years of

neoliberalism in many deindustrialised areas. Secondly, we have noted its potential in seeking greater social equality and climate sustainable practices via progressive procurement. Thirdly, we have also commented on the actual and potential political support for community wealth-building measures by local councils. Fourthly, we have also argued the pursuit of community wealth-building should not be regarded as a merely top-down initiative; it is also important that meaningful community participation accompanies it.

In relation to the third point about political support, there are lessons here for the Labour Party. Firstly, Labour nationally could be more explicitly supportive of local community wealth-building developments and take on board Momentum's point about their prefigurative potential. Labour could, for example, start by reviving the Labour's Community Wealth Building Unit established in 2019. Such an approach would support and encourage Labour councils to take up community wealth-building ideas.

Secondly, if Labour did commit more to community wealth-building, this could also pay dividends politically. As we've already suggested, it is significant that Preston and Salford, both impressive examples of what community wealth-building can achieve, have remained unaffected by the Red Wall phenomenon within both local and constituency-wide elections. As Brown and Jones (2021) argue, the Preston Model has not only helped to improve the local economy, but has also restored a sense of community confidence in the city. Think of the impact if the Labour Party actively supported community wealth-building and the political dividends that could potentially repay in Red Wall seats.

Prospects

Labour local authorities

The prospects for community wealth-building appear to be good, as think tanks and consultancies keep it on the agenda, activists press for it and the more local authorities and their creative leaders are prepared to give it a go. As the cost of living crisis bites and regional disparities persist, the more community wealth-building may seem attractive in offering a degree of protection to localities. This would stand in sharp contrast to the poor impact of the Tories 'levelling up' agenda.

A factor in the Red Wall phenomenon was the way some Labour controlled authorities were blamed for austerity cuts! Indeed, this featured as a reason for some people switching their votes from Labour to Conservative in the 2019 General Election. (Mattison, 2020) We have also seen Labour lose overall control of councils like Durham County. The impact of community wealth-building, especially progressive procurement, has the potential to offset such perceptions given, as we've already argued, the political success of councils adopting it.

In Box 4 on the next page, we have suggested some resources that should be of help to local authorities interested in pursuing community-wealth building approaches.

Trade unions

Although we noted earlier the reluctance of some trade unionists to commit to community wealth-building because of the issue of outsourcing, the prospects for insourcing have never been better, as we noted earlier, and as others have observed too. (Bawden, 2019) It is also up to trade unions to have input where community wealth-

building measures are being considered and for local authorities to consult with them.

Box 4 Resources on community wealth-building for local authorities

In recent times, some good resources have become available for local authorities interested in pursuing community wealth-building. The Momentum toolkit for councillors is detailed, comprehensive and full of useful resources and examples (Momentum, 2022). The book about Preston, *Paint Your Town Red*, (Brown and Jones, 2021), not only tells the story of the Preston Model, but is full of practical ‘how to’ advice. Other resources include the pioneering work of Centre for Local Economic Strategies (<https://cles.org.uk/>), and the US based Democracy Collaborative (<https://democracycollaborative.org/>). Further details of these resources – and others – can be found in the references section at the end of the pamphlet.

Community wealth-building cannot be seen separately from other activities. In fact, the core interest of trade unionists, defending and extending people’s rights and interests at work are, it could be argued, par excellence, the ultimate community wealth-building activities. This is especially the case as prices, profits and inflation soar, wages are cut and the costs of the pandemic are imposed on workers. Trade unions, along with other organisations, also have a vital role to play in the emerging movement against the cost of living crisis and the renewed fundamentalist neoliberalism of the Truss regime.

Unite Community

Within our branch of Unite Community we are beginning to engage with the issue of community wealth-building locally, as well as campaigning on the cost-of-living crisis. The publication of this pamphlet is a first act in that direction. At the time of writing, we have set up a meeting with one local authority to discuss the ideas in the pamphlet further. We're also looking for opportunities to highlight the need for individual wealth-building measures, whether that be the Real Living Wage, fighting for the public control of buses, good employer schemes, and adopting strategies to ensure that under-represented groups are fairly represented in the workforces of local councils. Supporting our industrial colleagues in struggle has also been an important part of our activities.

It strikes us that there are real prospects for Unite Community branches to engage in these kinds of activities with some prospect of success. For example, our own branch was a key part of the struggle in the campaign to successfully press West Yorkshire's Mayor to commit to the first stages of the public control of buses, and played a central role in defending young disabled people's rights to school transport in the face of cuts. (DEAL & Unite Community, 2019). This is in marked contrast to the exclusive pursuit of national campaigns which are less likely to end in total success. However, we are not arguing about our engagement in those campaigns; far from it.

It is also our intention to engage with the local trade union movement to discuss community wealth-building, promote it and hopefully garner support. We also need to engage with local Labour parties and more councils, as well as a range of other groups and organisations within civil society.

However, we should not forget that as well as industrial struggle, community unionism of the kind promoted by Unite is also a potential

strategy for rebuilding the organic links between communities and the labour and trade union movement. The manifesto of Unite's recently elected General Secretary, Sharon Graham, has plenty of interesting things to say about engagement with communities and the building up of a progressive force within them. (Graham, 2021). Of course, such an approach needs to be undertaken by the labour and trade union movement more generally and at scale for it to be truly effective. The combination of community unionism and community wealth-building has, we believe, considerable potential. We hope, therefore, they prove 'irresistible' to increasing numbers of trade unionists, activists, councillors and others.

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FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT UNITE COMMUNITY

Membership of Unite Community is open to those who are unwaged including people who are unemployed, retired, carers, students and volunteers.

If you would like further details of Unite Community, please go to:
<https://www.unitetheunion.org/why-join/membership-types/community-membership/>

If you would like to join Unite Community, you can do so online here:
<https://www.unitetheunion.org/join-unite/>