



**Institute for
Community Studies**

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Discomfort, Dissatisfaction & Disconnect:

**Exploring local economic perceptions
through peer research**

ICS Working Paper 1 – Fixing Local Economies, May 2021

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Primary research undertaken by our Peer Research Network

About the Institute for Community Studies

The Institute for Community Studies is a new kind of research institute that brings people and their experiences into the heart of research practice. We believe the involvement of communities in policymaking leads to better decision making about the issues that most affect communities across the United Kingdom. Our community-driven research focuses on what matters to people and what's working for them, amplifying their lived experience and directing research towards their most urgent questions. We use this research to work with policymakers, business and those holding the power to positively change the experience of communities today and work towards a thriving society.

Community-led research is undergoing rapid expansion, with academia, civil society organisations and the public sector increasingly embracing more participatory ways of working. In recognition of the value of this kind of distributed but highly localised capacity, the Institute for Community Studies sees the value in building a national network of trained and accredited peer researchers; and the necessary mechanisms and training to engage and work with them.

If you are interested in joining this conversation, or our growing Peer Research Network, please contact peerresearch@youngfoundation.org

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Foreword

'There is something very empowering when people feel they are being heard...'

At first, the women I interviewed were rather stumped by the idea of engaging in conversations about the local economy. They didn't see themselves having much of an opinion on the matter. In fact, I think the word 'economy' just totally threw them. Some of the women I interviewed were older women of migrant backgrounds who have been housewives all their lives. Through our conversations, they grew to understand that they too had personal experience and opinions on the issues. It's when they began to feel their opinion had value that they realised they had a large contribution to make.

Well trained Peer Researchers have immense value to the field of research. They can access communities with a level of understanding and trust that an outsider researcher will never have. Being from Tower Hamlets - the community I was researching - there are a lot of spoken and unspoken cultural nuances that I implicitly understood. I know how to relate to the women I interviewed and how to give them the confidence to be interviewed about their perspectives. I was very much their daughter, who was there to learn from them and to share their wisdom with those who could and always should include them in conversation.

Peer research, as with any research methodology, has its advantages and challenges. But it is the process of navigating the complexities, uncertainties and messiness of this unique methodology that allows such authentic and necessary findings to emerge. It is the added knowledge of the communities - its culture, values, understanding. It is the knowledge of hidden and subtle context behind the subject that provides a richness only peer research can. I could never do what Fiona [another Peer Researcher] did in Scotland with the community she is a part of, and she could never do the interviews I did in London with the community I am a part of.

The women I spoke to felt so proud to be making a contribution to this research. To be asked for their opinion, to have it valued. I hope those that read this research take away something new from their lived experience, and it encourages decision-makers to always look for opportunities to ask their community for their opinion.

Noorjahan Rouf
London based Peer Researcher

Introduction

Why local economies?

Calls for greater local economic development have been the standard fare of national and local politicians for many decades. Indeed, the current government has put all its chips on the success of its 'levelling up' agenda. Yet the way people actually feel about their local economies is rarely discussed. In 2020, the Institute for Community Studies' (ICS) national communities agenda, *Safety in Numbers?* found strengthening local economies to be in the top five highest priorities for communities across the United Kingdom¹. Central to this was a frustration with the way certain local economies had been left to stagnate while others had been transformed out of all recognition, leaving local people feeling alienated from their own neighbourhoods.

In this report, we explore local economies from the perspectives of local communities, through over fifty interviews undertaken using peer research, giving a platform to these all-too-often forgotten voices. The report forms part of an ICS research series that explores questions raised from this agenda by exploring local economies from different angles.

Why peer research?

The use of peer research is closely tied to the aims of the ICS – bringing communities and their priorities to the forefront of the research process. As an approach that reaches those who might otherwise not take part in similar research studies, peer research allows community members themselves to gather a rich local perspective from other community members – undermining the power dynamics and uncertainty that emerge through traditional research methods, particularly when engaging in difficult conversations about the state of the economy.

Our research was undertaken in four locations across the UK – Ayrshire in Scotland; Cardiff in Wales; Sunderland in the North East; and London in South East – all with different histories and communities that impact on their local economy. The locations were chosen due to the diversity of types of local economy, typical to the UK, that they cover across the different case studies.

These four locations are not meant to be representative of their regions or of the UK as a whole. Instead, the use of local case studies and communities speaks to the aims of the ICS agenda, telling local stories and amplifying the voices of those rarely engaged in the research process. This approach bridges the chasm between how academic evidence typically talks about challenges and social issues and how 'ordinary' people reflect and articulate experiences in their own lives. This can have a profound impact on the usefulness, credibility and efficacy of research because it is about what is missed out, or seen as less important to decision makers, which goes to the heart of why policy interventions so often fail to actually address community concerns.

What did we find?

More than anything what this research has revealed is that the raw feelings and experiences of communities at the hard end of repeated and largely unsuccessful efforts to transform local economies have been overlooked – a finding brought into sharp relief by the recent effects of the Covid-19 pandemic that have often exacerbated existing trends of local economic decline (Magrini, 2021). In the four locations we investigated, the attempts at local economic development have not been pursued in ways which communities themselves would judge as success.

Key Findings

As explored in different chapters of this report, we take three lenses to this:

How do communities understand the concept of local economies?

We find that this isn't a conversation local people are used to having. Their discomfort with an unfamiliar topic is due largely to the exclusion of community voices in local economic decision-making over previous decades. Our work reveals the complex feelings communities hold towards the purpose of their local economy, and the critical question of purpose as they ask, 'who are local economies for?'

What are the common touchpoints between local communities and local economies?

Even if community members are unfamiliar with the language of local economic development, their conversations reveal that local people are in fact grappling with the choices of what should make up a local economy, founded on their knowledge and experience of what has and hasn't worked in their local areas.

How (and why) should we seize this moment to further engage local communities in conversations about local economies?

We reflect on the timely and practical steps needed to further involve local communities. What is the role for more open and participatory involvement with local communities? How can decision-makers recognise and respond to their understanding of the tensions and choices that need to be made in what is prioritised and how to balance growth with wellbeing, sustainability and inclusion?

Our locations

Ayrshire:

Ayrshire is a county in south-west Scotland and is sub-divided into three administrative council areas of North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and East Ayrshire, with GDPs per capita of £16,894, £20,753 and £15,481 respectively (2018). Coal mining, iron work and textile production were key industries in Ayrshire during the 20th century. By the late 20th century all three had declined across the region, replaced in part by engineering and electronics sectors (East Ayrshire Council, 2021; Scottish mining, 2021). The total area has a population of ~366,800 (2020). The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that there are high levels of multiple deprivation across Ayrshire and Arran (the combined NHS regional authority). Within Ayr there are significant disparities in socio-economic position and demographics. South Ayrshire is highest in Scotland for demographic vulnerability with North Ayrshire third highest (NSAA, 2020). North Ayrshire is an area with high levels of poverty and inequality and has one of the highest levels of child poverty of any local authority area in Scotland, with an estimated 27% of children living in poverty (The Poverty Alliance, 2020).

Cardiff:

Cardiff is the Welsh capital and was a thriving export town, exporting more coal than any other port in the first half of the 20th century. By the 1980s industry had rapidly declined leaving Cardiff Bay derelict and neglected, causing high levels of unemployment (Cardiff Bay, 2021). Cardiff is now an important industrial centre for food production, engineering and media (Cardiff Council, 2018). Cardiff is home to some of the most and least deprived wards in Wales, with a GDP per capita of £34,293 (2018). Almost a third of Cardiff residents experience material deprivation, with a high percentage of children living in workless and low income households (Cardiff Local Wellbeing Assessment, 2020). Despite Cardiff's economic growth during the last 30 years, the patterns of poverty and inequality that emerged a generation ago remain. There are dramatic disparities in deprivation between the Southern Arc of Cardiff and the rest of the city (Cardiff Council, 2020). In addition, ethnic minorities and those with a work-limiting disability are more vulnerable to long term unemployment (Cardiff Local Wellbeing Assessment, 2020). A significant proportion of community members included in this research in Cardiff identified as Black / Black British.

Sunderland:

Sunderland is a port city in North East England with a population of ~342,427 (2021) and a GDP per capita of £28,188. Sunderland's economy was heavily dominated by coal mining, shipbuilding, the mechanical and electrical engineering trades closely associated with ship construction, and glass manufacture. In 1973, these industries combined to employ a third of the local population (Malcolm, 2009). Whilst the city has struggled to recover from the long-term effects of industrial decline, significant investment has been put into Sunderland in recent years. The city is currently home to the Nissan Car Factory, directly employing 6,000 people in Sunderland and supporting a further 27,000 UK automotive supply chain jobs (Nissan, 2021; Sunderland 2021, 2021), yet rumours remain over the long-term effects of Brexit on the industry. As of 2018 the city had an employment rate of 69.7% (Centre for Cities, 2021). The population is majority White British. The largest minority is the Asian population, 2.7% (Sunderland City Council, 2018). Both peer researchers were identified as Asian British along with the majority of community members this study spoke to in Sunderland.

London:

Our interviews primarily took place in East London and South London given those were the localities of peer researchers working on the project. Interview respondents lived in Tower Hamlets, Newham, Hackney, Waltham Forest, Barking & Dagenham, Westminster, Greenwich, Southwark and Lewisham, with GDPs per capita varying from £14,564 to £273,086 (2018). In 2019 Tower Hamlets was ranked as the most income-deprived borough in London with Barking and Dagenham and Hackney following closely behind. Southwark, Newham, Lewisham and Greenwich also ranked in the top 10 boroughs of highest median income deprivation (Trust for London, 2020). This research acknowledges the significant socio-economic disparities across the city and recognises this research did not speak to demographics that represent London as a whole, with interviews taking place in more economically deprived London boroughs. Whilst London is 67.7% White British (2011 census), the regions and communities from which peer researchers in London are a part of and thus recruited from were largely Asian and Black communities meaning ethnic minority groups are overrepresented as a proportion of London as a whole in this study.



Chapter 1: Local economy, “what’s that?”

“Probably it’s a bit predictable really because I would say that the local economy is struggling.” (Female, 55–64, Ayrshire)

“I think it’s declined a lot since quite a few large retailers have shut down, and some smaller shops have shut down. That they must have been replaced by takeaway shops giving less variety to people such as pensioners who don’t want to travel far” (Female, 55–64, East London)

“Well, it’s poor. Look [laughs] it’s because of the fact that we’ve got multiple chip shops. [...] Right, how would you describe the economy. It’s a deprived area.” (Female, 35–44, East London)

“I think the local economy is just getting by. Could be a lot better. Not much work, proper lack of industry” (Male, 65–74, Ayrshire)

A local understanding of economic decline

It is impossible to ignore the overarching sentiment of negativity that enveloped conversations surrounding the local economy across the peer research interviews.

Local economies refer to market and networking systems that are part of a specific community (El-Zeind, Jan 2021). Communities have been at the sharp end of the fragility and volatility of local economies for decades (Zymek & Jones, 2020). Imbalanced economies and what has been called local economic malaise (Bevington et al, 2019) reflects the experience of many parts of the UK that were once thriving industrial centres or busy high streets, albeit with many long-standing issues of local and structural inequality.

When asked to describe their local economy, ‘poor’ or ‘pretty poor’ was the most recurring phrase used by respondents. Positive sentiments still remained cautious with communities largely opting for phrases such as ‘it’s not bad’ and ‘it’s a mixed economy’. The sense of what was lacking or absent – in terms of diversity of and access to amenities, retail and hospitality; availability of work and presence of industries – was evident.

Our interview responses showed significant perceptions that many areas had been ‘left-behind’. This was prominent in rural and ex-industrial regions, where communities cited long-term economic decline and compared their economic situation to financial and industrial hubs in other parts of the UK. Socio-economic, geographic and political factors have compounded

what has been described as intractable trends of decline and loss at local level (JFR, 2020; ICS, 2020), which amongst their local effects, have resulted in the UK having one of the highest levels of regional and local authority-level inequality in income, wealth and health (IFS Deaton Review, 2020).

Whilst valuable research has been done into how to approach building the economic resilience of local places (Green, 2019), seeking to avoid cycles of growth and decline (Matin, 2012) and looking to address inequalities, vast differences remain in regional resilience. The ability of a place to ‘recover’, ‘absorb’ or ‘bounce back’ from economic shock (Hallgette, 2014; Martin, 2012) is significantly dependent on a complex web of local factors and interconnections (Healy, 2020).

Whilst the UK was vastly regionally imbalanced prior to Covid-19 (Houston, 2020; Kruger 2020) the pandemic has made the aims of the ‘levelling up’ agenda much harder. The unprecedented increase in the number of people claiming unemployment related benefits since March 2020 means that the number of people that now need to find or improve their job situation in order to ‘level up’ the North and Midlands has increased four-fold (Magrini, 2021).

The ‘long tail’ of low productivity and the local impact of austerity and recession on poverty and livelihood precarity has had grave implications for local communities in different ways (JRF, 2020; ICS 2020). Communities abandoned by industrial capital (Pietrykowski, 2015) have experienced decades of economic decline and questions have long been asked about why the continued effects of economic stagnancy not only remain so prominent in these regions but

have in fact worsened in the last three decades (Martin et al, 2015).

As the economy has become increasingly controlled and spatially focused around London, a new policy model is needed to boost innovation across other regions, reintroducing new forms of industry to post-industrial regions and rebalancing the spatialities of economic development (Martin et al, 2015)

“I think Wales has been economically deprived for a very long time. I think there are huge pockets of deprivation. I think that they have never been fully addressed since the coal mines closed down. I think Wales needs a huge amount of investment pumped in. I think that it’s always kind of looked down on compared to maybe some of the other areas of the country.” (Female, 35–44, Porthcawl)

Localism – but without local voice?

In an increasingly connected world, there is a need to maintain focus on how local communities and their residents are impacted, socially and economically, across different geographical scales (Wise, 2017). Local economic policies and political dynamics hold reach far beyond the economic sphere, dominating the creation and evolution of a sense of community, community development and grassroots development (Wise, 2017). Hence, the economy is experienced in place, work, infrastructure and investment and is intrinsically tied with peoples’ sense of local identity, belonging, and tradition (ICS, 2020).



This report responds by seeking to understand local communities' experience of the dynamics and shifts of their local economy and the questions it raises for how future local economic transformation can better serve community interests.

Despite an increasingly globalised world, a philosophical shift to localism has occurred since the early 2000s. Localism broadly refers to the process of bringing decision-making closer to citizens to enable them to more effectively take part in policy decisions and service outcomes that will affect their lives, yet the practical enactments of localism theory drastically differ (Hildreth, 2011). Following 2011 legislation, the Localism Act, brought in under the 2010 Coalition Government a 'new grammar of localism' has formed in UK policy (LGA, 2011; Bentley and Pugalís, 2013). Whilst there has been much literature on the effect of this, questions remain over the true difference this has made to strengthening and empowering communities, with critics suggesting this new policy shift has purely shifted responsibility rather than shifting perspectives to centre the views of local people (Bentley and Pugalís, 2013).

Whilst polling surveys often ask for local opinions on local economic issues, few of these approaches centre an understanding of how local people conceptualise their local economy, and the impact these perceptions have on local use and engagement with the local economy (Ansell and Casunar, March 2020). There is emerging consensus that the local economy is a highly influential force in political decision-making (Ansell and Casunar, March 2020), but mainstream literature so far has largely failed to grapple with the complex impact local economies have on notions of identity and belonging.

Whilst local economic policy is widely discussed in political spheres, our research found a serious lack of work in economic research that engages with lived experience, and that the user experience and perspective was often not centred in findings (Local Trust, 2019). Academic literature indicates the way policies are produced often "matters as much, if not more, to people than the policies themselves"

(McKay, 2019: 2). This follows 'perceived responsiveness' theory (Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2001), highlighting the perceived effect local people feel they have and their capacity to engage in local economic conversations fundamentally affects their local perceptions and their feelings of identity, belonging and community strength, meaning "decisions have real stakes for the local area" (McKay, 2019 :2). Applying this theory to practice, the public participation charity *Involve* (March 2012) found "different communities need to be allowed to decide in a participative manner what are the most relevant options for their area" and that public engagement in local economic policy helps "build trust, buy-in and if sufficiently open, can bring new ideas and innovation, improve equality [and] promote longer-term outcomes" (2012, p.2).

Discomfort and uncertainty

Whilst this work aimed to fill this gap and put people at the centre of conversations surrounding local economic change, we were initially struck by the barriers to communities' feeling able to engage on the topic.

The process of conducting peer-to-peer interviews on the local economy highlighted a discomfort and uncertainty with the topic. One respondent emphasised - *"I've never really talked about this before, as in like, talk[ed] about economics"* (Female, 35-44, South London) and after lengthy answers the phrase "is that the kind of thing you are looking for?" was added by many. Researchers who had sent the interview guide to participants in advance reported interviewees were much more confident and comfortable than those who had not been sent the guide, indicating many participants felt a need to research and prepare, fact-checking their immediate perceptions of economic systems.

Peer researchers later identified they felt many individuals were worried about making overtly political statements, particularly when these were based on feeling rather than evidenced through statistical knowledge. Interviewees opened with disclaimers partially undermining or minimising the strength of their viewpoint as exemplified by,

"This is only a personal opinion because I'm not speaking factually or statistically, but I do think that in England, this is just a quick aside, but in England, everything happens in London. In Scotland, everything seems to happen round about Edinburgh." (Female, 65-74, Ayrshire).

Whilst peer researchers reassured all opinions were valid, and the research was simply aiming to understand lived experience in relation to local economies, many still struggled with their response, maintaining attempts at neutrality. This was particularly noticeable in response to a question on regional differences in economic resources and treatment. Communities were acutely aware of the disparities in regional investment:

"the likes of Glasgow and everything will get more financial support than the rest of the country because they are the hub obviously" (Male, 18-24, Ayrshire)

"We've had no amount of financial backing or anything like that so they've managed to keep going but on a shoestring" (Male, 64-75, Ayrshire)"

"from my experiences of living in a city area compared to my parents who live in a rural area I feel that there is more investment in the area that I'm part of." (Female, 35-44, South London)

Yet the discomfort surrounding conversations on differing regional resources was surprising. Many community members gave significantly shorter responses than to other questions and answers were frequently tempered with uncertain openings like, *"to be honest, I wouldn't know because I'm not there", "I don't know" and "I have no personal experience of that"*. The politicisation of regional inequality can largely account for this awkwardness. Whilst communities are by no means unaware of or indifferent to the structural reasons for their hardships, there is an extent to which communities have internalised personal blame for their situation (Abrams & Vasiljevic, 2013). Uncertainty and a degree of isolation have led many communities suffering long-term economic stagnancy to adopt mechanisms of coping, often feeding into a focus on the

personal / family and risk aversion (Abrams & Vasiljevic, 2013) potentially heightening the challenge of discussing structural inequalities. Local Trust (2019) further found communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, have had negative experiences of engagement with local development projects. Having previously promised economic improvements with little follow-through, the study found many have become both "disillusioned and sceptical" (Local Trust, 2019).

It is not that communities were truly disinterested or lacked care about their economic situation, but rather that this discomfort really stemmed from feelings of powerlessness – lacking the agency to effect local change. Symptoms of long-term economic malaise and decline often translated into a perceived apathy or lack of knowledge, yet truly stemmed from perceptions that engaging in conversations surrounding the local economy would not lead to real or substantial change. Whilst acutely aware of their local economic circumstances, the personal disconnection from macro-economic changes has overtime served to isolate many individuals from local economic changes – creating a culture of caution and discomfort over engagement with the topic. For so long, local people have not been treated as the experts of their area and so they too have begun to believe this.

Defining local economy by what's personal

Local economic understanding is often defined by an individual's personal and familial situations – drawing what is known about the reach and capacity of the local economy from daily routines, livelihood opportunities and community life.

Our research findings build on past research which highlights 'local' is a complex term to define, and one "that is more slippery than it first appears" (Our Economy, 2020). Whilst the term conjures up images of a particular area, the term local economy is also often used as a shorthand for deep-rooted connections to a place that go beyond mere location (Our Economy, 2020).

Defining the scope of the local economy proved a key point of contention and variation across the interviews. Answers varied in scope and specificity often encompassing wider changes, impacts and challenges pertaining to the local community not just the local economy. This was particularly poignant in relation to Covid-19 where the effects of mutual aid, community spirit, economic decline and the necessity of local shops merged into peoples' understanding of a local economy.

Throughout all the interviews, variation in scope was intrinsically linked to the participant's personal circumstances.

Touchpoints of the local economy, such as awareness of job opportunities, focus on industry and high street perceptions were largely defined by reference to jobs of family members, personal work history or with reference to change observed over their lifetime. Responses differed depending on length of residency in the area as well as based on ethnic background and cultural perceptions of a strong economy and good opportunities. Economic change and success were frequently discussed in relation to "over there they are doing [...]", making local comparison a fundamental marker of regional success.

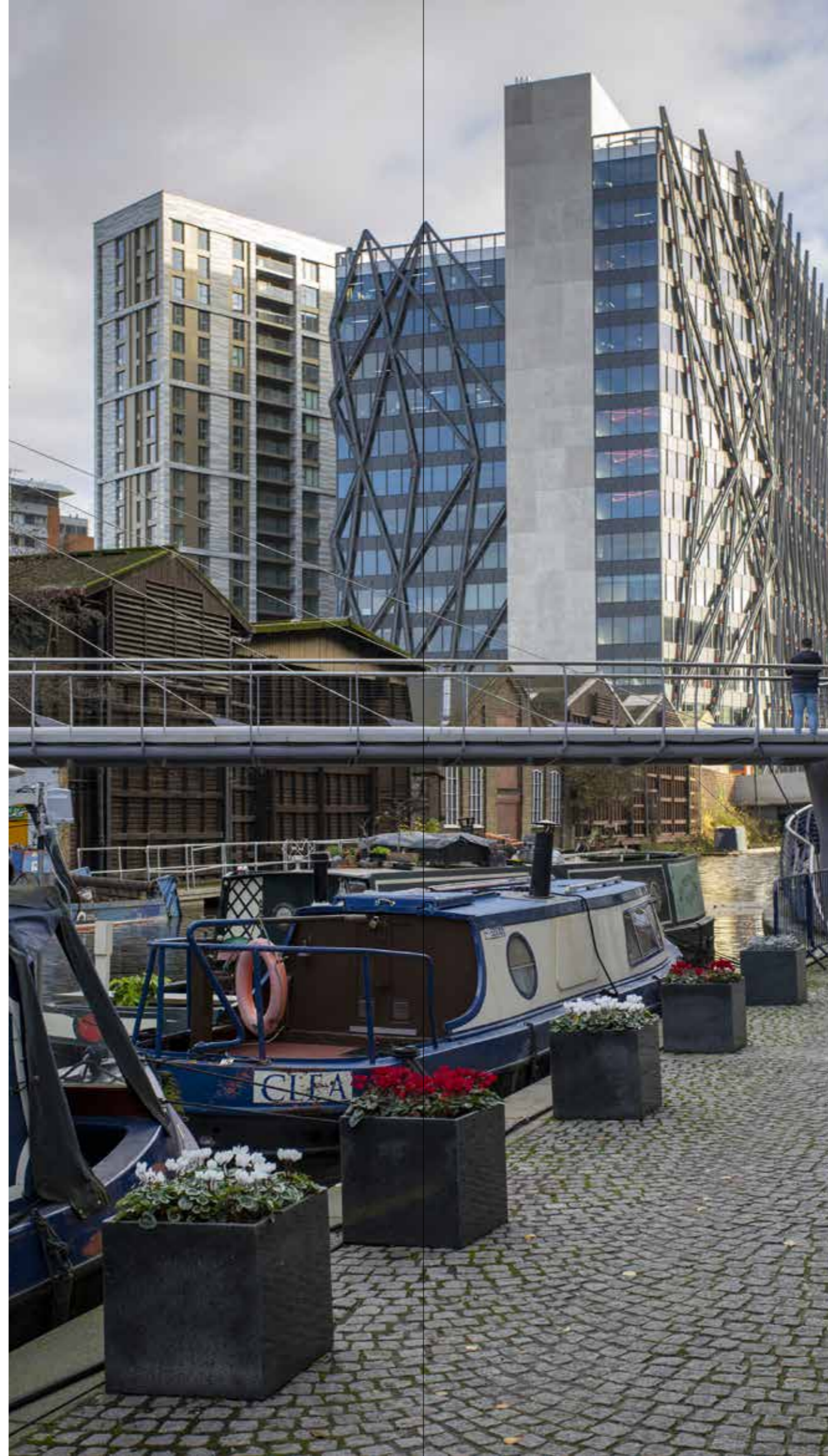
"The town of Ayr and the amount of just derelict shops, things that are left abandoned, in comparison to if you were to go to Kilmarnock or Irvine, I feel it's much worse in Ayr than it is in those two" (Female, 35-44, Ayrshire)

"Surprisingly, I think they are [doing okay], because they're just had-- You know when you see like in Kilmarnock and them a lot of businesses shut down, Superdrugs shutting down, Peacocks shutting down and all the rest, but Stewarton seems to have managed to hang on to its wee shops, you know." (Female, 45-54, Ayrshire)

This wider point of reference, as encompassed through our peer researcher interviews, highlights community perceptions of the local economy can often not be separated from community life itself, and success in a local economy is materially linked to local identity.

Who are local economies for?

Interspersed amongst narratives of decline were serious questions about who the local economy is operating for. In the rare cases where interviewees highlighted economic improvement or aspects of growth, this was quickly followed by a narrative of inclusion and exclusion, as individuals noted



either they, or their local community, were excluded from the opportunities offered within their area's economic prosperity.

"The economy's quite a poor economy despite the fact that we're right next to Canary Wharf" (Female, 35-44, East London)

This was most significant in relation to the disjuncture noted by communities between availability of work in their local economy and the type of work they either desired to do or were able to access.

An example of this is the balance between convenience and compatibility, between a local high street that meets needs but is not a place local people desire to work - *"We have the high street, yes it's meeting my needs for the time being, but it's not somewhere where I would like to work. I wouldn't work there. [...] In terms of young people, it's not a lot of opportunities" (Female, 35-44, East London)*. She later went onto note that even though her and her family lived within close proximity to offices offering skilled labour in Paddington, they were not the target demographic for employment from those companies.

"Now that my nephews and them lot are growing up and they're older now, in terms of opportunities for them, there isn't that great opportunities in the local area where they can go into. Even though I mention Paddington has all these offices, I don't think these offices or these companies are open to the local people or local young people to have any experience in them or anything as such. They are quite closed" (Female, 35-44, East London)

Gentrification was a central theme within conversations surrounding community inclusion and exclusion, and one that many communities felt exemplified the disconnect between who local economies are serving and who they are working for. Whilst some community members in London and parts of Sunderland acknowledged new local businesses were 'thriving', bringing new economic capital and industry to the area, the point of conflict and tensions between community needs and economic growth was central.

"There's lots of different businesses that are connected with Bow Arts because they rent a space from Bow Arts which is right opposite me, where my café is. They're thriving. All of those people are thriving, they're doing well" (Male, 55-64, East London)

Ranging from types of cafés to cycle lanes to housing, participants' points of reference emphasised that the fabric local economies are composed of vastly influences feelings of



community and belonging. In the four parts of the UK where we conducted interviews, we found that the make-up of local economies largely did not work to include the communities we spoke to.

Many interviews emphasised that when local economies change and gain capital, much is also lost in terms of community spirit and identity - not only shifting regional demographics but feelings of local identity and the sense of community belonging:

“The pockets of places where yuppies are moving in ... it almost feels like everything’s being done to accommodate them and not the local people. For example, the cycle lanes.” (Female, 35-44, East London).

This disjuncture was not only associated with jobs and services, but was also prominent in relation to local amenities such as shops, restaurants and cafés. One London resident noted *“I guess it’s not a place that you identify with. Those posh cafés [...] they’re set for a certain type of people. They’re for young, hipster, artist, affluent, professional. If you’re talking about local people they don’t really connect with that kind of stuff” (Female, 35-44, East London).*

Another said *“you do have one part of the borough where I live, you get an increase in high-charging small shops, which are only for those who can afford to pay stupid prices, for example, for a muffin or for anything else, which prices out the ordinary people who don’t have that sort of money” (Female, 55-64, East London) .*

Wider than just opportunities and amenities, many community residents felt the infrastructure of the

area was fundamentally shifting away from what accommodated them and their needs, to systems drawing in another demographic.

“We need our shops back where we can go to a fruit market, a veg market. Instead of putting up more flats, bring back our little local businesses that we had that were affordable to go into. Instead, we’re losing our greenery to be putting up more-- It’s not even houses, it’s flats. You’re blocking all the views. We’ve got not many places that we can actually take our children to go and play.” (Female, 35-44, East London)

Particularly interesting questions arose during co-analysis workshops surrounding who is a part of a local community. One peer researcher reflected *“Clearly there is a target market for these cafés because they are doing well, maybe I was talking to the wrong people? Maybe I was only talking to just one part of the community?” (East London PR).*

During an interview a London community member qualified her answers with the statement – *“It depends on what you consider local people though because is it people that are born here or is it people that have moved here, to Tower Hamlets? The City of London is a bit of bubble where one, you have this very massive population that’s super trendy. They’re in and out. They work there for a few, they leave, they move on. Then you have people that were born here.” (Female, 25-34, London)*

Whether through lack of job opportunities, or shops and amenities not catering to them, our research found local people do not feel a sense of ownership over their local economy. Communities feel a sense of exclusion from their local economy, perceiving it as a system that is not working to serve them or their needs.

Covid-19: a roadmap already taken?

Covid-19 came up directly and indirectly throughout all the interviews conducted. All participants mentioned the economic impacts of Covid-19, with one peer researcher commenting the topic “was impossible to get away from”.

Whilst a few interviews referenced economic challenges caused solely by the effects of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdown, most community members saw Covid-19 as the most recent crisis in a series of local economic challenges – with the pandemic consolidating existing themes of decline. Particularly in Ayr one community member explained *“the High Street’s been depleted even well before Covid-19 raised its head.” (Female, 65-74, Ayrshire)* and stated *“Ayr [...] it’s basically always been in steady decline [...] but Covid-19 no, no, it’s not been good. It’s not been good. It’s definitely affected there. It’s affected the world, yes” (Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)*

Some interviewees referenced the 2008 financial crisis, as well as the long-term effects of Brexit and political decisions such as austerity, indicating Covid-19 as the most recent factor in a chain of structural challenges. Many expressed significant concerns over the compounded effects, worrying their local economy would take a very long time to recover, if ever.

“Basically, a picture of decline from even before 2008 and I think that’s going to be very much exacerbated by Covid-19.” (Male, 65-74, Ayrshire)

“I think Covid-19’s kind of exacerbated what was already going on, and I would take it back to those government cuts. There’s so many people that are really struggling on benefits, having their disability benefits taken away” (Female, 35-44, East London)

“I think as well the austerity measures before that weren’t helping. A lot of people were already being forced into poverty. Even before Covid-19, there has been a big demand on the food banks, and a lot of people really struggling.” (Female, 35-44, Porthcawl)

“I think the town centres are already in a downturn anyway so [Covid-19] is just speeding it all up I think to be honest.” (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire)

Community members highlighted the differential regional responses to Covid-19 were simply part of this wider picture of structural inequality. One interviewee noted differences in levels of support saying *“more affluent areas they’re probably getting more support. In a way it’s designed to—Covid-19 won’t impact them as much as it would do a community like ours. For example, in somewhere like Kensington, Chelsea, everybody probably is online so they can order different things from different places and get good deals, but people here won’t necessarily have wi-fi- [...] and doing everyday things is going to be much more difficult.” (Female, 35-44, East London)*

Whilst another community member noted the impact of Covid-19 would be to create *“a bigger gap between the people that have and the people that don’t have, because I think there’ll be a lot more people who are unemployed, and I think it’s going to take a long time to be able to create more jobs with all the job losses.” (Female, 35 – 44, South London)*



Sentiments expressed by communities reflect a wider academic understanding in relation to Britain's levelling up agenda (Kruger 2019). Whilst there is growing consensus that the pandemic has created a new challenge in the south (Partington, 2021) and is leading to an overall 'levelling down' across the UK (Onward, 2020; UK2070, 2020) with London and the South-East disproportionately hit by job losses during the crisis (Hope & Orenella, 2020). Places that were already in serious need of 'levelling up' will now face a "double whammy" (Magrini, 2021) of both levelling up and severe Covid-19 challenges. A 2021 Centre for Cities Report (Magrini, Jan 2021) set out the four stages of regional challenges that will be faced post pandemic. It found significant regional differences across places such as Blackpool and Birmingham which will now face two-levelled challenges. Regions such as Middleborough have been less affected by Covid-19 yet were already in need of levelling up. More prosperous regions such as London were found to now face large challenges due to Covid-19 whilst areas such as Reading and Cambridge, that previously exhibited strong economies and have only been impacted in a limited way by the pandemic, were seen to face the lowest need for recovery support.

The impact of the pandemic as an intervenor and exacerbator for local economic development was acutely felt. Communities regularly mentioned the impact of the closure of the hospitality and retail industries on economies that were developing, with one member stating, *"if it wasn't for Covid-19, then obviously it would be like, the business would be expanding more, but it has had an impact on everything."* (Female, 25-34, Sunderland)

The immediate references to hospitality and retail supports the extent to which local economies have largely been reliant on sectors that have 'gone into hibernation' during lockdown (Dosad, 2020). Given every city has at least one in five jobs classified as either vulnerable or very vulnerable due to the impact of lockdown restrictions on local services (Enenkel, April 2020), the scale at which community members discussed the personal and communal economic challenges Covid-19 would bring was inevitable.

Many community members referenced their own personal economic struggles - *"My business as a makeup artist, I don't have a business just now because I've never had a date when I'll be able to go back to work."*(Female, 35-44, Ayrshire) or those of their friends and family *"A lot of the people that I trained in therapy with, are no longer working as therapists because they can't see a future in it. They've had to find other ways of working, other things to do. I think it has impacted those sorts of professions hugely."* (Female, 35-44, Porthcawl)

Many noted the effects would be long-term, *"Definitely, the economy is impacted. It will be impacted for a few good years. We'll be recovering."* (Female, 35-44, East London) and that local businesses in particular were struggling to survive. Many acknowledged Covid-19 was already forcing some businesses to shut down. One interviewee emphasised, *"hospitality has been absolutely muddled there. No business, and they just keep closing. Same with pubs, all the wee local pubs, they'll be closed and lose their business"* (Male, 25-34, East London)

A report by the business insurance provider *Simply Business* found an estimated 234,400 UK small businesses closed permanently after the first lockdown, with an additional 41% fearful of their personal risk of closure (*Simply Business*, Sept 2020). At the time of the survey, one fifth of businesses believed they would not survive a second lockdown (*Simply Business*, Sept 2020). This highlights the masked effects on local businesses in the story of (re)opening-up, and one potentially masked at present by the furlough scheme. Despite the scale of the *Simply Business* survey this fails to account for closure of more informally run businesses and for career changes amongst self-employed business owners. Particularly amongst the self-employed and owner managed businesses, the true effects of the pandemic on businesses closing their doors forever may never truly be known.



Dividing experience

Whilst some interviewees, particularly in large scale urban hubs such as London, were confident the economy would “bounce back” and that “Covid was the problem”, most locations saw longer term implications on the survival of their local economy.

The issue of local economic recovery for many places was seen as social as well as economic or financial, recognising the long-term challenges particularly related to consumer confidence and the gradual build back of trust (GLA Economics, Dec 2020).

*“Even when the pandemic is over people are going to keep remembering how it was. Maybe people will be a bit too scared. They’ll want to do more online shopping.”
(Male, 18-24, Ayrshire)*

This raises the question of how strategies to rebuild trust and support communities back into local high streets, subsequently reinvigorating local engagement and footfall, can be built and negotiated with communities.

Intertwining these wider political understandings with the feelings of communities on the ground, it is clear that many are aware the recovery from Covid-19 will not be easy. Sentiments reflect the significant challenge ahead and the regional and social disparities that are expected to grow throughout the recovery process.

*“...areas where the economy wasn’t at the best of times in a good condition or-- that’s not the right way of saying it-- will suffer even more, and the impact will be even bigger, to the extent that we won’t be able to recover.”
(Female, 35-44, Ayrshire)*



In Summary: Understanding local economies

The term local economy conjures up complex and extensive feelings for communities.

Our research found an evident discomfort and uncertainty surrounding engagement in conversations on the local economy, highlighting the fundamental dislocation between people and place. As a policy topic in which local communities’ voices are rarely centred or valued, decades of economic marginalisation has led many communities to avoid engaging due to the preconceived notion that raising their views will have no tangible impact. Discomfort, uncertainty and a perceived apathy appeared as evident symptoms of the long-term challenges local people faced, masking a sense of exclusion from, and a lack of agency in, affecting local economic change.

As many regions have suffered decades of economic malaise and decline, communities feel stuck in never-changing patterns of economic stagnancy. Communities

highlighted the continual effects of economic policy noting austerity, Brexit and now Covid-19 as the most recent in a long-line of structural challenges affecting their local economy. Communities raised their extensive worries over compounded effects of structural challenges both on their local economy and on their individual economic situation.

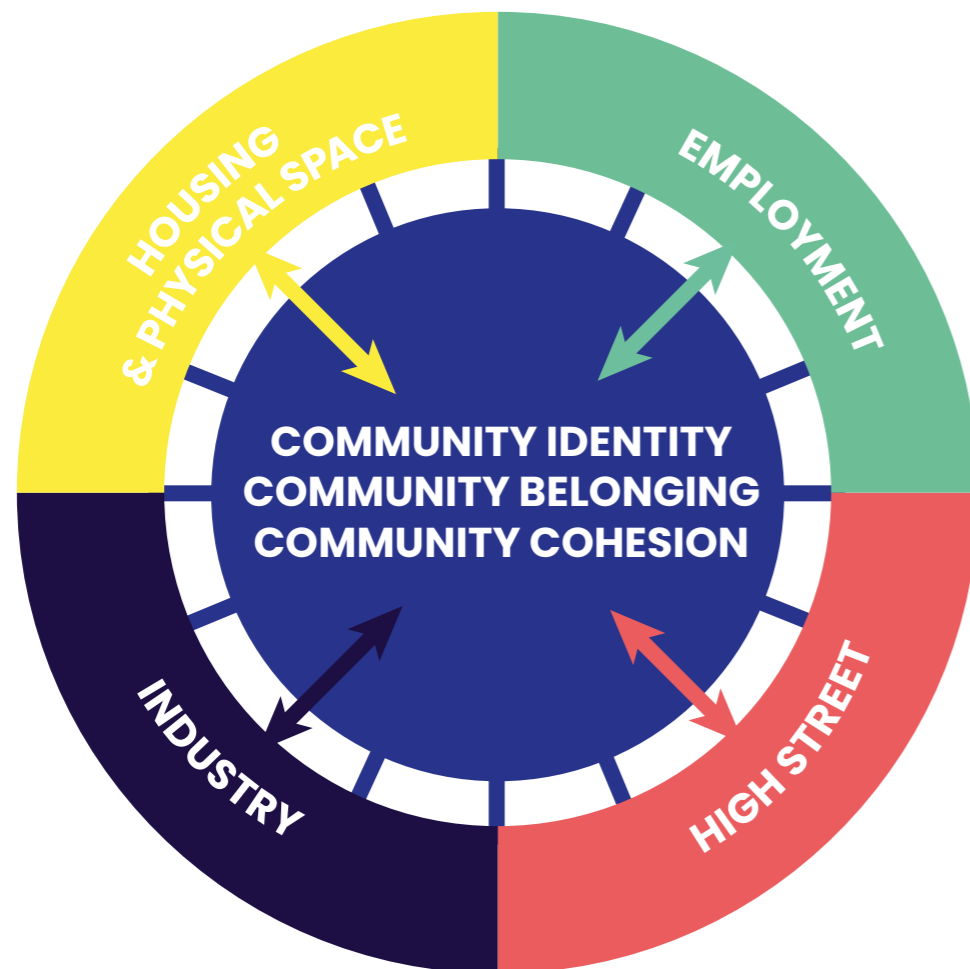
Struggling to find a shared definition of the ‘local economy’, communities grappled with points of inclusion and exclusion using personal routes into a topic from which they largely felt excluded. A sense of exclusion from perceived economic growth taking place ‘over there’ was noticeable as communities highlighted local economies were not operating to serve them or their needs, and often felt that where economic growth was taking place it was not serving, benefiting or including them.

Communities are acutely aware of the structural and local challenges they are facing and, with the economy battered by the effects of the pandemic, are hyper aware of the exacerbating challenges they will face in the ‘scramble to get the economy back on its feet’ (CLES, 2020).

Chapter 2: Mapping the local economy through community views

Local Economy Map of Community Views

This diagram shows the four touchstones of a local economy that need to be harmonised and balanced for the local economy to work for communities. 'Working for' describes a dialectical - two way - relationship by which community identity, belonging and cohesion are both shaped by, and actively shape the success of, the four local economic touchstones.



Whilst the scope of reference for interviews about the local economy during our research process was broad, many touchpoints reappeared continually as cornerstones of the local economy. These factors demonstrate aspects of the local economy that local people perceive to be most important or which define their local economic experience.

The findings speak to the challenges within local economies, and the experience of ongoing economic decline. Even though communities did not always use the terminology and were less familiar with the language of local economies, their conversations revealed that they too are grappling with the core tensions and choices of what needs to be in local areas to support a strong economy.

To piece together these recurring themes and unpick the significance of reference points we have put together a Local Economy Map of Community Views. This draws together many of the emerging conversations in chapter one to produce a framework that demonstrates the conflicting tensions, priorities and specific areas of importance for local people in understanding the purpose of the local economy, who it should serve and how it should function. This balancing set of tensions is underpinned by community spirit and local identity, with each of the four factors feeding into and reciprocally defined by the wider notions of community, identity and belonging.

Key Findings

Touchpoint 1: Employment and the dilemma of work

- The quality and sustainability of local employment opportunities largely defines how local people perceive local economic success.
- Communities are increasingly worried about the availability of local jobs, particularly those appropriate to their skill level.
- The sector and location in which local people are employed is intrinsically linked to feelings of community spirit, local identity and cohesion.

Touchpoint 2: High Street and the 'Debenhams Effect'

- The local high street acts as a 'litmus paper' for the state of the local economy, denoting visible evidence of economic downturns.
- The make-up of the local high street is crucial as different types of businesses serve different local functions.
- The high street is an experience in itself, not solely about economic value but instead can also provide unique social and community value.

Touchpoint 3: Housing and physical space

- The quality and affordability of housing are crucial factors in people's sense of belonging, their perception of local economic strength and their sense of attachment to local places.
- Communities see housing availability and work as two significantly interlinked factors that often define their relationship to place.
- The provision of appropriate housing is often perceived to conflict with other local needs, particularly the need for green space.

Touchpoint 4: Industry and the continued effects of industrial decline

- Industrial histories continue to have a significant effect on local communities, particularly notions of identity, purpose and regional status.
- In many ex-industrial communities the transition to new models of economy has not been easy – nor well managed from communities' perspective.
- Communities see the capacity and resource of their local area, holding important ideas on how local industries can grow to support the community in the future.

Touchpoint 1: Employment and the dilemma of work

Employment was a crucial and recurring factor in what communities looked to a local economy for. Job opportunities featured in all interviews, with many highlighting the lack of sustainable local opportunities. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the TUC found the average UK commute was 59 minutes, with those in London and the South East having the longest travel times (TUC, 2019). The need to travel out of the local area to gain sustainable employment of an appropriate skill level was a recurring challenge across the UK. Many mentioned this issue was particularly pertinent amongst young people emphasising the need to move away for work after returning from university. This was particularly prominent in rural areas such as Ayrshire, where job opportunities were compared to large cities such as Glasgow and Edinburgh.

"It's a nice place to grow up. Then we move on to somewhere else. Somewhere where there's jobs and life. [chuckles]"
(Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)

"There could be more job opportunities available in Ayrshire. I think Ayrshire is a great place to live, but there perhaps are more opportunities in cities like Glasgow or neighbouring Edinburgh" (Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)

"Young people, I think especially can feel quite downhearted [...] There is a lack of employment for young people, I would say, coming out of school and college, so I think that's had an effect on-- I'd say I think young people are suffering more than others." (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire)

Many acknowledged the disparate effect the lack of appropriate job opportunities then had on communities as the job market was also linked to feelings of community spirit, local identity and cohesion. It was discussed that those who lived in the region but worked elsewhere had *"no other stake in the local community"* (Male, 64-75, Ayrshire), solely using a few local amenities and driving up house prices whilst rarely supporting local businesses. In urban regions, some spoke of the lack of local job opportunities as favouring one community over another, indicative of a lack of belonging and marking the perceived exclusion from the participation in the local economy. In rural areas, the conversations focused on a general lack of skilled opportunities combined with lower housing prices, forcing a culture of living in and working out.



The effects of living and working locally are significant. In relation to health, shorter commutes reduce stress particularly if people are able to walk or cycle to work. An additional tie to a local area, such as living and working in a region, also enhances sense of belonging and community, encouraging daily interactions and meaning communities are far more likely to trust each other (Richards, 2019; Emery & Thrift, 2021).

In Sunderland, the damaging effects on local reinvestment caused by living in and working out were discussed. *"There's certainly no professional jobs now [...] people have to travel out of the city and take that little bit of economy that would normally bring back into a city away from us."* (Male, 55-64, Sunderland) This brings into question the types of work and the type of workforce we want to build within local areas. Local areas need a deeper understanding of the scope and profile of their available workforce not only to enable the targeting of recruitment but also to understand forms of employment required within the local area (CLES, 2020).

Given the significant effects of Covid-19 on employment, with predications that the unemployment rate will rise to four or five times the pre-pandemic level (CLES, 2020), communities are increasingly worried about the availability not just of local employment but of sustainable, stable and quality local jobs.

In this sense, the role of community-wealth building is increasingly important with a strong need for economic anchor institutions to encourage progressive employment and labour market activities across the local economy (CLES, 2019). Many communities critiqued the rise of zero-hour contracts with one woman in Ayr saying, *"I think there's only really a minority of people that the zero-hour contract could potentially work for. I think for the majority of people that's all they can get, and it's not great"* (Female, 45-54, Ayrshire). Another woman noted, *"one thing I think to help people and to have job satisfaction would be to have perhaps a more formalized contract, not zero hours. People need to know when they're working and where. Well, most people, I would imagine, when they're working and how much money they've got coming in."* (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire). This illustrates the perception of zero-hour contracts or other forms of 'flexible' employment as a last resort, not a first choice.

Touchpoint 2: High Street and the 'Debenhams Effect'

The local high street was frequently the first point of reference for explanations of the state of the local economy.

In line with Wrigley and Lambirir's (2014) notion that the local high street denotes visible and graphic evidence of the scale of economic downturn, communities spoke of their local high street as an indicator of local economic change.

"I think of my time and Ayr and Ayrshire, again I go back to the High Street in Ayr and it's been kind of a litmus paper almost, in terms of reflecting the economy" (Male, 65-74, Ayrshire) before going on to say *"The Ayr High Street was probably one of the places that's really quoted most often as representing the deterioration of the economy, because a while there, the number of charity shops almost outweighed the number of open commercial premises. Even now, the charity shops I don't think have been able to get enough grants to keep them going either, so they're disappearing too."* (Male, 65-74, Ayrshire).

Many community members illustrated local decline and economic transition through referencing boarded-up shop fronts and vacant spaces, as well as through the prevalence of charity shops and budget stores. In this sense the types of businesses on the high street were deemed a marker of economic success. Whilst the number of empty shopping locations hit its highest level in over five years during the first half of 2019 (Butler, 2019; LDC, 2019), this number has now risen even further as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic with almost 12% of high street properties vacant (Hammond & Hancock, 2021).

Although conversations surrounding sustainable local economies have emphasised the importance of small local businesses to ensure a circular economy (Brett & Alakeson, 2019; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), our interviews highlighted the particular importance of certain chain companies as landmarks of a flourishing high street, with many citing stores such as Debenhams, Wilko and John Lewis. The importance of chain stores was widely acknowledged, drawing in higher footfall, attracting not only local residents to the high street but also consumers and communities from further afield, as well as acting as a large local source of employment. This presents a subject of tension for the future of the high street: with communities emphasising a conflict between the importance of locally run stores and the need for larger, more established chains who were able to employ more residents, as a traditional model of local employment that had not been easily replaced.



Our research interviews took place both before and after the announcement that Debenhams was going into administration, and illustrate a close personal relationship to this brand and its identity as a hallmark of the British high street. Some early interviews expressed concern that it would be the next large store to close, whilst later interviews expressed shock at its closure and concern over the impact on local jobs and the future attraction of the local high street. Given the closure of both Debenhams and the Arcadia brand means almost 15 million square feet of space on local high streets will now be freed up, there is no doubt the impact on our high streets will be vast (Hammond & Hancock, 2021). In line with the shock expressed following the closure of all high street Topshop stores, communities emphasised that Debenhams had been a pillar of their youth and a constant marker of the local high street's success.

"Luckily Debenhams and among their kiosks have stayed open, but they're teetering on the edge I think. Those people are clinging to those jobs because they've got families down here and they don't want to have to do the commute or the travel to Glasgow, so people don't give up their jobs." (Female, 35-44, Ayrshire)

"The BHS collapsed. A lot of people in Ayrshire just loved BHS. There was one in Kilmarnock and there was one in Ayr, and that would bring people into the town. Debenhams is still there in Ayr, but it's always under threat, as is Primark, and M&S." (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire)

"Like Debenhams, it's such a massive store. It's been there since I was a child. [...] I can't believe it's closed [...] Debenhams has everything." (Male, 25-34, Sunderland)

Many also noted the lack of appropriate, locally available shops and services on the high street, leading to a more disparate community. One woman expressed concern over the fact that *"if somebody decides to go shopping, probably they would travel either to Glasgow or somewhere else or Silverburn or somewhere else [...] it doesn't keep the community together, [...] it does change to community feel"* (Female, 35-44, Ayrshire), explaining that lack of proximate services caused by local high decline has impacted by drawing apart local people, removing the shared meeting points of cohesion and commonality and preventing a continued cycle of local investment.

"[When my brother used to work there] it was struggling. I don't know how they're doing now but, I'm talking about Debenhams because if that Debenhams in the High Street was to close along with the H&M that has just closed. That

[shopping] complex, I don't see surviving. If that complex does not survive, there really isn't a town in Ayr anymore." (Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)

Beyond a place to buy necessities the high street was referred to as an experience in itself that was not solely about economic value but provided a social and community value.

"People are paying for something that isn't necessarily a tangible product but they're going for that experience, for that feeling. That intangible experience has a value," (Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)

The notion of the high street as an 'intangible experience' particularly arose in relation to the post Covid-19 recovery. Some respondents spoke of the high street journey and unique experience as the way to attract people back to high street. This was seen as particularly important in combating the shift to online purchasing (Swinney & Sivaev, 2013) that many believed the Covid-19 pandemic had exacerbated. Some spoke of cheaper prices online compared to local shops, whilst others noted the ease of purchasing online especially whilst they continued to have concerns over the safety of in-person shopping due to the risks of catching Covid-19.

In contrast to the closure of keynote chains such as Debenhams and Topshop, just 1% of community businesses shut permanently as a result of the pandemic, with 89% of those still operating adapting their business activity or delivery in response to the pandemic (Power to Change, 2020)

"I think we need a lot more support to bring back little businesses. Then we support them and they support us. It works both ways. If we're supporting them in a sense of going to their shops and buying, they're supporting us by keeping the prices low." (Female, 35-44, London)

In reference to the Covid-19 recovery, communities spoke of the wider role of the high street particularly mentioning there should be a focus on hospitality as opposed to retail. The concept of the high street as a daily experience encompassing retail and hospitality to keep residents there for the whole day,

rather than a place to pop in and out of when you need something, was proposed. The difficulties the hospitality sector has encountered during the pandemic and the reliance of local economies on this sector, as discussed in Chapter 1, does pose questions about the resilience of this model if the experience economy is the sole market for a local area.

This idea of the high street as a journey leans into more holistic perceptions of the purpose of the high street, positioning it as a social space for communal meeting and one that represents and serves the local community. This re-emphasises the findings from the 2013 Portas Review that centres which were more service than retail orientated have often fared relatively better, reinforcing the 'beyond retail' trajectory of UK town centres and high streets (Deloitte, 2013; Beyond Retail Taskforce, 2020). Hence Covid-19 has solidified many pre-existing challenges and has forced a more rapid shift to repurposing the development of local high streets (Beyond Retail Taskforce, 2020).

Balancing these mixed purposes and needs was seen as particularly important in the development of a local economy. Links between high street, identity, jobs and purpose of visit continually arose across the interviews, highlighting that the high street served as a central point and economic indicator for many people. Understanding how local people perceive and understand the purpose of local economic infrastructures, such as the local high street, is key in creating and building economic development policies that best fit local needs and deliver community outcomes. Particularly in post-Covid economic recovery understanding and building of community perceptions and needs will be essential to building back consumer confidence and supporting the successful reinvigoration of town centres.

Whilst the negative effects of Covid-19 on local communities have been severe, many of those interviewed emphasised one positive impact of the restrictions had been that the local high street had become more of a community hub during lockdown, with takeaways and local food stores in particular doing well - a juxtaposition

between economic losses and gains across varying business types featured across the country. This supports early evidence (Ramuni, 2020) that indicated the increasingly localised way of living forced by the pandemic has partially rejuvenated local high streets as people choose to avoid public transport and crowded shopping centres, sticking to their locality as advised by the Covid-19 rules (Ibbetson, 2020).

"Speaking to the people that work in Spar, over the summer they were saying there were mobs. They had days when it was just non-stop. I think generally that was because people didn't really want to go into Ayr. That Spar was just getting used all the time." (Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)

Whilst some stated they and the people they knew were actively choosing to shop local to support local businesses, others stated it was through convenience or a fear of travelling into town due to higher Covid-19 risks.

Regardless of the initial motivation, most community members interviewed expressed their aim to continue shopping locally, with many seeing local businesses as a central space for the community to come together. Local post offices, off-licences and even supermarkets were referenced as cornerstones of the local community, adapting their methods and opening hours to provide necessary supplies with a personal face. Over 25% of local businesses reported adapting to provide online services, with 21% reporting attracting new customers over the course of the first lockdown (Simply Business, 2020).

One local community member in Porthcawl, Wales praised the local corner shop saying - "the local corner shop has been absolutely amazing. The ones that were already operating very long hours, family-run businesses I guess I'm talking about, not the big corporations, have absolutely stepped up. A lot of them have started delivering. A lot of them spontaneously started asking if there were vulnerable members of the community who needed them to deliver food out to them. There was an amazing community response in this particular area." (Female, 35-44, Porthcawl)

Another noted "the best things that are coming out of [the pandemic] is that people are recognizing shop local. People are appreciating shop local. They're giving money to businesses that they never did before. I think that's really good. I think that instead of supermarkets they're giving it, like fruit and veg, getting deliveries of that and people are realizing that's great quality. It's worth the money and hopefully they'll continue that on post-covid." (Ayrshire, 225)

With small businesses accounting for 33% of jobs there is a strong need to nurture this innovation and support local businesses to sustain and remain open. This section highlights the complexity and multi-purposed nature of the local high street. Conversations must be held with local people to understand their needs, requirements and ways of interacting with the local high street in order to provide adequate and appropriate services whilst also supporting local innovation and small business development.



Touchpoint 3: Housing and physical space

Interlinked with many elements of the need for appropriate work is the need for quality housing in close proximity to that work. Although mentioned far less than the other three local economic touchpoints, housing and the role of accessible space was a key theme referenced by local people. Communities highlighted the need for affordable housing within close proximity to appropriate employment. As discussed in the Employment Touchpoint section a sense of community was sustained by the presence of employment and affordable, secure and quality housing. *The quality, quantity and affordability of housing are crucial factors in people's place attachment to their homes, their sense of belonging, and their sense of attachment to local places* (Foresight, 2013).

Housing affordability varies dramatically across cities and is most unaffordable in cities with successful economies (Breach, 2019). In Brighton, the average



house costs fourteen times the average annual income whilst in Doncaster it is just five times the amount (Breach, 2019). Living even thirty minutes outside Glasgow and commuting in can save 13% on house prices, whilst living outside Edinburgh saves 26% on housing costs (S1 Homes, 2018), forcing commuter culture due to lack of viable alternative.

In line with the concept of 20-minute neighbourhoods², an integrated mix of housing tenures and types that reflect local housing need and support people at all stages of life is required (Emery & Thrift, 2021), allowing cohesive mixing and integration of different demographics.

Housing was the most common reference point to signpost gentrification. Many participants mentioned new housing developments which were bringing in new demographics and failed to encompass affordable housing needs for the local community.

"They broke that down to develop private houses and that are owned by housing associations as well, so really local people wouldn't have benefited. Probably, maybe 5 houses out of the 60 houses that they'll be making are going to the local people." (Female, 35-44, East London)

Types of housing and local infrastructure were recognised by communities as a marker of economic strength or weakness. One woman living in London noted – *"the economy's quite a poor economy [...] you know, local housing, people live in rented accommodation. Although my estate does have quite a few homeowners, but the majority are people who are in social housing."* Another explained the demographic shift in the area through the development of private housing highlighting the ripple effect on the local area that the supposed economic growth of developments led to: *"Recently with the housing developments, lots of Caucasian people also living in there as well. You can tell because there's a private nursery, there's pre-schools that are open from seven to seven, there's a lot of working people moving into the area. People living [here have] changed, but then I also know a lot of people who I grew up with, they've moved out of this area to somewhere far rural."* (Female, 35-44, East London)



Many spoke of the shift in amenities away from those that served their community to housing developments that catered to bringing in a new client with economic resources. These spaces influence the cultural identity of an area, are part of its unique character and provide a sense of place for local communities. Changes to the built environment can therefore be expected to have both positive and negative impacts on place identities and wellbeing (Foresight, 2013).

Conflicts particularly emerged in relation to the tension between new housing and green space. One woman critiqued the development of new housing as it blocked green spaces for local children to play:

"We're losing our greenery to be putting up more-- It's not even houses, it's flats. You're blocking all the views. We've got not many places that we can actually take our children to go and play." (Female, 35-44, London)

Again in line with the theory of 20-minute neighbourhoods, the need for land for new homes must be balanced with the need for high-quality green infrastructure (such as parks, gardens, allotments, nature recovery networks, etc.), which is vital for healthy communities (Emery & Thrift, 2021).

Relating to the community relationship with green spaces and the green economy, some interesting factors emerged. One woman in London referenced cycle lanes as a symbol of gentrification, suggesting steps taken to make cycling more accessible in London were pushing out a certain community and catering to a new demographic being encouraged into the area.

"For example, the cycle lanes. I really can't see a Bangladeshi lady who's got four kids trying to cycle [chuckles] with all four on a cycle, and take them to the flower market [chuckles] and to the Victoria Park on that pushbike. She probably can't afford that pushbike or has never ridden or cycled on a bike before. She probably would be using a car but all the cycle lanes have stopped car parking provision." (Female, 35-44, East London)

This brings up wider questions around the link between environmentalism and culture. Linking into wider debates that have seen anger targeted at cyclists and bike lanes as proxies for gentrification (Goeghegan, 2016), the question of how we unpick these tensions and re-structure demographic associations of certain amenities and infrastructures will be key, as policies surrounding the green economy are developed further.

² The 20 minute neighbourhood concept describes a complete, compact and connected neighbourhood, where people can meet their everyday needs within a short walk or cycle. The idea presents multiple benefits including boosting local economies, improving people's health and wellbeing, increasing social connections in communities, and tackling climate change. (Emery & Thrift, 2021)

Touchpoint 4: Industry and the continued effects of industrial decline

Although the long-term devastation of industrial decline has been widely researched, it would be impossible to leave out the continued effects on economic perceptions and dynamics today.

"There's not a lot of work about. There's a proper lack of industry. I think that's it [...] I think that they could do with sharing out the industry a wee bit better than what they do. There is a lot of that, because it tends to be, say Edinburgh runs everything, everything revolves around Edinburgh, and it gradually gets fed out a wee bit. There's even Dumfries, Dumfries, something comes into Dumfries, Dumfries gets it first. [...] Aye, aye. They tend to be the centres of where the economy's run from, tend to grab everything that comes in. The ones out with get the dregs. That tends to be how it works." (Male, 65-74, Ayrshire)

"What are the employment prospects with industry closing down?" (Male, 45-54, Wales)

Particularly in Sunderland and Ayrshire communities reminiscence about the past state of the economy, remembering the "good old days" (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire).

These were characterised for communities by a sense of personal relationship to industry, explaining family relations who had worked in certain factories or sectors. Older individuals in Ayrshire particularly spoke of the community that surrounded industrial involvement, recalling stories of fêtes, parties and other community events that encouraged friendship and collaboration across the town. Many spoke with a strong sense of pride, intrinsically linking industry to their perceived identity of a place.

Transition to new models of economy has not been easy – nor well managed from communities' perspective. In post-industrial towns such as



Ayr and Sunderland, the importance of gaining a new core industry was pronounced. Many felt not enough had been done to sustain new industries. Funding - as well as supportive and appropriate government policies - were seen by many to be lacking, leading to failures of sustaining new industrial employment routes in local areas.

"I have the impression mining was already in decline then to work here in the electronics industry, which was one of the attempts at a time when governments did try to find work for people. It was one of the things that was set up and that was quite successful for 20 years or so, but it's succumbed to global changes and the employment in that sector didn't seem to be as well protected by the UK government." (Male, 65-74, Ayrshire)

"The big problem with the regulation of the building industry in the UK I think as well, the Tory government just doesn't want to do it and the Treasury is very reluctant to give VAT exemption to foot for repairs." (Male, 65-74, Ayrshire)

"There must be some kind of industry or technology, [...] I think that local businesses need to be able to adapt to the needs of their local people, of the country, of the world even, so that whatever they are producing or making or selling or serving is relevant." (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire)

Tourism was frequently mentioned as a regional asset that was underused and underdeveloped. Many spoke of the beauty of the region and the economic benefits tourism would bring whilst comparing the

lack of development to other local regions which were harnessing the industry more effectively.

"Certainly in terms of the tourist industry, I think that's a sector that should be totally winning in here because they don't really have to do much. Just by going on [...] it seems like there's a lot of opportunities that people haven't taken, ideas that could happen. You just need the people with ideas and you need the money behind it" (Male, 25-34, Ayrshire)

One woman also highlighted the need for a holistic approach to boosting industry, noting interactions between sectors and development initiatives - "Will they continue to let our shopping area deteriorate to the point that the millions spent on tourists will be wasted because we will look like a slum?" (Female, 62, South West)

Industry was discussed not just in relation to employment, but also to the sense of regional pride and shared sense of purpose felt. This research highlights the importance of a wider shift to advance industry particularly in regions most in need of 'levelling up'. Here lessons can be learnt for the green industrial revolution, showing industry is not just a form of employment but relates more widely to regional sense of identity, belonging and pride.

In an aim to both recover from Covid-19 and to 'level-up', proposals for the green industrial revolution promise over 60,000 new jobs, yet critics note this capital-intensive recovery will leave out job-intensive services like tourism and hospitality (Alvis, 2020). This is particularly significant given many community members we spoke to, particularly residents in Ayrshire, believe tourism and hospitality should be the industries of focus in their local Covid-19 recovery. Policy makers engaged in the green industrial revolution must remain aware of the needs and priorities of communities, learning where policy has previously failed in order to harness industrial success and prevent a repetition of past failures.

In Summary: The importance of community, identity and belonging

The four factors set out above of 'Employment and the dilemma of work', 'High Street and the Debenhams Effect', 'Housing and physical spaces' and 'Industry' and the continued effects of industrial decline emerge as the touchstones of local economies for communities. Stemming from individual priorities and economic needs, each is however underpinned by the importance of the local economy to community belonging, socialisation and notions of identity.

By unpicking and mapping the touchstones in local economic discussion we can see that the local economy is more than just an economy. It underpins feelings of identity and belonging working as a mechanism to either bring communities together or drive them apart. Communities emphasised the local economy as a basis for social interactions, illustrating places of employment along with the draw of high streets underpins where and with who local residents interact.

"I think when we're isolated, it doesn't work. When you bring people

together, it brings ideas together and it brings the culture together. It brings races together. Then it builds a community, but it takes-- The local economy could be the centre of these. [...] everyone goes to a local shop, but if the local shop is quite isolated and quiet, you know, we only do this and that's that, but if they help people connect and help people come together[.], then I think it builds a stronger unity around the community" (Female, 35-44, London)

Local people showed an acute awareness of the tensions and conflicts that need to be managed in economic priorities for development. Many highlighted the need to support local businesses, keeping financial resources in the local area - yet acknowledged large businesses and brands had significant sway in drawing people to the town centre and creating jobs. Many also acknowledged the need to renew financial capital, drawing investment and new demographics to the area whilst noting this often side-lined existing communities and raised questions of who are local economies for?

Only by involving local communities - understanding their priorities, touchstones and reference points can community outcomes really be achieved in successful economic development.



Chapter 3: Looking to the future

A need for real change

The need to reconnect people and place, and put the local economy at the heart of local community life, was a key and recurring sentiment of our interviews. Local communities highlighted plausible changes that could be made in their local area to better their local economy.

“There has been too much development that has not been thought through. Offices built & left empty whilst green belt has been declassified. These issues need to be addressed and, more importantly, thought about with the view of a positive effect on the community not for a profit or tick box actions to make individuals, government or organisations ‘look good’.” (Female, 45-54, South East)

Better communication between local councils, local businesses and local people about available opportunities and the types of support needed also came up as a recommendation in all four regions. Advertising was one route suggested by a woman in Sunderland to enhance the capacity of local businesses and better communicate with local communities. Targeted investment was also mentioned frequently.

The interviews show local communities have realistic ideas about how to improve their local economies, not only understanding their own specific needs but also the interactions across anchor institutions. The findings from this research show a desire to engage in local economic conversations, however far more needs to be done to regain the trust of local communities and incorporate their views into local economic development projects.

“investing in trying to revamp the town centre. All the buildings and everything seem run-down. If they were trying to bring people in, if you’d give them a wee splash of paint or something, it would even help there. [...] It’s all just down to funding and money and everything.” (Male, 18-24, Ayrshire)

“I think it’s just providing opportunities and communicating with the community on what’s to come, what’s out there. Obviously providing a lot of more funding, giving opportunities to everyone.” (Male, 24-35, Sunderland)

“Government needs to step in and help local businesses, help them out to stand on their feet.” (Female, 25-34, Cardiff)

“My thoughts are, the local economy definitely needs more support. The changes, as a result of Covid-19, need to be recognized by the government. It’s no good pouring all this money into furlough and all this. [...] when the virus eventually gets to a point where we can have some sort of normal living, what’s going to happen then? Who’s going to help those people who have lost their jobs when furlough no longer runs? Who’s going to help them because there’s going to be so many more persons unemployed? Who’s going to help them?” (Female, 55-64, East London)

“It still boils down to those in power, giving the necessary support to mitigate whatever economic crisis that has befallen the people during the coronavirus. Supporting those that need to be supported, supporting the local businesses” (Male, 25-34, Cardiff)

Covid-19 and community spirit

Whilst the devastating economic effects of Covid-19 cannot be ignored, the positive impacts on communities’ sense of agency are also important to note. Covid-19 and the subsequent community mobilisation through mutual aid and crisis support groups has demonstrated that local people across the UK have the capacity and combined strength to make a difference. For many it was the first-time they felt they were able to affect change, realising the strength of their own potential through their crisis response.

“When I see the mutual aid group just outside Tide Mill, just seeing a community group, a grassroots community group just responding to the needs and watching so many different people queueing up. I think there have been glimpses of actually seeing the community pulling together and actually trying to support” (Female, 35-44, South London)

Local people noted that this mobilisation and capacity building was trickling into other parts of the community, for example *“people taking [it] upon themselves to improve the quality of life and the economy. On a positive note, I think groups starting up some different types of activity with a lot of people [...] I’m not so sure how much the local council is helping. I think a lot of the time it’s more the people, the community that are actually trying to make all the difference.” (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire)*

A community member in Ayr (Female, 55-64, Ayrshire) echoed similar sentiments noting an increasing *“community-led as opposed to council-led”* response that saw *“people rallying around and trying to keep some things like [the local theatre] going”*.

As communities pulled together in response to the pandemic, the positive potential of community action and engagement had galvanised acknowledgement and spirit. Community members spoke of positive community efforts to support each other, ranging from food banks popups and charity donations to social media groups promoting local businesses and services and informal neighbourly support. Even in areas where the crisis response had not been so active, residents spoke of their joy at seeing communities come together

in other parts of the country and their desire to captivate and carry forward that community spirit action in their own neighbourhood.

Indeed our research found that many hoped this spirit of civic action would carry on beyond the pandemic and would lead to more long-term engagement in local economic development from a wider demographic of local residents. It is this spirit that must be galvanised by community leaders, working to break the cycle of development projects designed without real and meaningful involvement with communities.

A need to talk, now more than ever

In our conversations with residents about their local economies we found many had difficulty tackling the subject head on. Yet, while it was a topic that many appeared uncomfortable discussing, we also found that when the dialogue was rooted in the personal and in lived experience it became much more accessible. This is important if the voice of communities is to be heard in the flurry of policy announcements about new funds and programmes to regenerate high streets and town centres, level up the country and improve the lot of so-called ‘left behind’ areas.

The experience of working with communities to identify the issues and priorities in their local economies furthermore highlights that we need approaches that enable communities to start from the issues they think are important. To address and to set the terms and principles for change – so that community conversations can directly set the agenda, and not just be invited to participate in it. If this does not happen, there is a risk that economic development will continue to be driven by what government, experts and local authorities think communities need, rather than from what matters to and will resonate with communities and furthermore – economic models which they can and want to participate in. There are many models seeking community participation in solving challenges set by local authorities or government – but the ongoing issue is that these still put the ‘cart before the horse’ in terms of who sets the agenda and the indicators of success for local economic change.

A new framework for engaging local people with their local economy

So how do we move forward? How can policy makers have a more open and participatory conversation with local communities about their economies, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic? Through this research we have the makings of a participatory approach that we think could be used in a wide variety of settings to ensure that local people are not just passive participants in the development of their local economies, but stakeholders to be consulted. Instead we propose the following principles as a framework that positions them as active co-operators in the process, working with policy makers to design solutions that work with and for local people, not in spite of them.

• No need to be an expert

Interviews, workshops and focus groups with local people on the topic of their local economy must centre the idea that no one has to be an 'expert' to engage in conversations around the local economy. Lived experience itself provides the necessary expertise and fundamentally strengthens the legitimacy and effectiveness of local development. Programme designs must emphasise that simply by virtue of having a stake in the local economy the participant is an expert and their knowledge is enough. Ensuring that the engagement process is interesting and fully accessible must be at the forefront of the research design process.

• Centre the personal

Our research found communities respond more openly and comfortably when questions centre the personal. Questions should be framed in a personal form, using phrases such as 'from your experience' and 'based on your opinion'. Given the known reticence discussing economic development and the long history of community exclusion, an emphasis on the value of community members' personal opinion is key.

• Setting clear expectations

Setting clear expectations for research participants proved to be a necessity when engaging communities in conversations surrounding the local economy. As a result of long-term challenges where community voices have been ignored, the need for clear expectation management, timelines and progress updates is particularly crucial to avoid alienating communities further from engagement with the local economy. This is particularly significant when working on local developments and upscaling local infrastructure and resources.

• Communities at the heart

Local people must be given a stake in their community. Words such as 'collective', 'community' and 'together' emerged from our research as the cornerstones of community hopes for the future. Communities emphasised there was no need to shy away from physical engagement – such as repainting shop windows or volunteering for a community business – and that engaging people in discussions about the local economy does not just have to be through consultation. This is critical. Often only certain sections of the community get involved in formal consultation processes, whereas if you get local people doing something locally it gives them a unique stake in their local economy and keeps the community at the heart of the local economy.

"The local community, as people would take an interest and joined up ways and we're together, they could set up little places that would bring people out, bring them together and hopefully, earn some money at the end of the day. Even individuals doing knitting, and crafts, and things like that, but you need a community that's interested in sitting together to be able to do that. That would lift an economy locally"

(Female, 65-74, Ayrshire)

Appendix: Methodology

A Peer Research approach

A peer research methodology was at the heart of this qualitative research conducted with communities on perceptions of local economies.

Peer research is a participatory research method that sees individuals with a shared experience or identities taking part in planning and conducting the research (Lushey, 2017). Peer research moves away from the extractive model of social research (Wadsworth, 1889; Kindon et al, 2007) instead positioning community members as the experts (Edwards & Alexander, 2011). Utilising the lived experience of community members to help generate information about their peers within a particular context, peer research allows a richer set of evidence to be built.

Peer research closely ties to the aims of the ICS agenda – bringing communities and their priorities to the forefront of the research process. For conversations about local economies, the benefits of this approach were:

- **Empowerment:** Peer research is premised on a commitment to conducting research ‘with and for’ the subjects of the research (Lushey, 2017; Edwards & Williams, 2011). The approach blurs the line between researcher and subject, mitigating the traditional power imbalance inherent in that relationship (Ibid.).
- **Access:** Because peer researchers are drawn from the community being studied, they often have privileged access to people who might be unwilling to engage with professional researchers (Elliott et al., 2001;), this is particularly relevant in relation to topics such as the economy where marginalised communities have been turned away from engagement after decades of

challenges (Local Trust, 2019). Peer researchers can use their existing networks and relationships of trust to involve subjects that may not otherwise have been included in the research.

- **Better data:** When those conducting research have experience in common with the people they are interviewing, it reduces the risk of misunderstanding between researcher and respondents and increases the likelihood that the inquiry will be relevant to the participants involved (Smith et al, 2002). In addition, participants may respond more honestly and openly to an interviewer they know has personal experience of the issue being discussed, or with whom they are already familiar and feel they can speak more informally (Littlechild et al., 2015; Tanner, 2012; Burns & Schubotz, 2009; Fleming et al., 2009; Kirby, 2004; Dixon et al., 2019; Harding et al., 2010; Vaughn et al., 2018). The result is higher quality data with more depth and nuance.
- **Activated communities:** Participatory approaches critique and challenge academic research as the only legitimate way of knowing (Maguire, 1987) and instead embeds peer research as a method to pursue social justice within research (MacKinonnon et al, 2021). In addition, participatory research strives towards “the radical transformation of social reality and improvement in the lives of the individuals involved” (Macdonald, 2012: 39). Participatory approaches create activated, self-critical communities invested in their own wellbeing (McTaggart, 1989) and awaken those who participate to their innate potential (Selenger, 1997).
- **Benefits to peer researchers:** Peer research has the potential to benefit those who participate by providing them valuable work experience and training that may increase their employability in

the future (Dixon et al., 2019). A substantial body of evidence indicates that people gain confidence and self-esteem by participating in peer research and finding that they add significant value to the process (Dixon et al., 2019; Thomas-Hughes, 2018). It may also promote social inclusion among groups who often experience exclusion and isolation such as those challenged by stigma or marginalisation (MacKinonnon et al, 2021; Tanner, 2012).

Research scope and sources

We aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. **How do people understand the term ‘local economy’?**
2. **How does their daily life influence their understanding?**
3. **What are people’s perception on who local economies are for, and how is this changing?**
4. **What are the key factors / indicators that people use to talk about the health of their local economy?**
5. **What effect has the Covid-19 pandemic had on how communities relate to their local economies?**
6. **How best can we engage local people in conversations about their local economy in the future?**

51 interviews were undertaken between November 2020 and January 2021 by nine peer researchers in four locations around the UK: Ayrshire, Scotland; Cardiff, Wales; Sunderland, North East; London, South East. Peer Researchers recruited participants from their own networks and locality. Participants demographic details were screened to ensure an appropriate and diverse sample where possible.

A thorough review of secondary literature supports our fieldwork process to situate the findings within a wider national context of local economic policy, cross compare regional patterns with the national picture and explore the economic challenges facing communities. To situate the research within the current political context the review focused on recent

publications from 2019-2021, but also drew on literature from the mid 2000s to 2021 to engage with the shift in policy and to situate the research within wider structural changes. The desk review focused on relevant academic and grey literature as well as blogs, news articles and other forms of journalism.

Searches were conducted using electronic databases including Google Scholar, JSTOR and Wiley Online Library and Google with search terms including, but not limited to: local economy, peer research, Covid-19, economic engagement, high streets, industrial decline. Paper recommendations provided by colleagues at The Young Foundation and partner organisations were also engaged with. Additionally, bibliographies of existing literature were also used as a starting point for the identification of additional publications.

Limitations

Whilst the peer researchers who undertook the research are a diverse group of residents reflecting different backgrounds, the recruitment of interviewees occurred through their own specific networks and channels. In some regions this means data collected overrepresents ethnic minority communities as a proportion of the population, particularly where interviews took place through just one peer researcher. It therefore cannot be taken to represent the region as a whole. Conclusions therefore centre on community perceptions of their local economy and the wider concept of local economic change, rather than making comment on the economic situation within specific regions in which interviews took place.

The concept of a local economy, even defining the ‘local’ was challenging for both communities and peer researchers alike. This led to challenges whilst conducting interviews on individuals opening up, as well as during co-analysis. Although peer research as a method in itself assisted levels of comfort and openness the challenge of grappling with the topic led many community members to feel a level of discomfort and uncertainty, potentially reducing the depth of insights gained through the interviews.

Working with a tech Partner

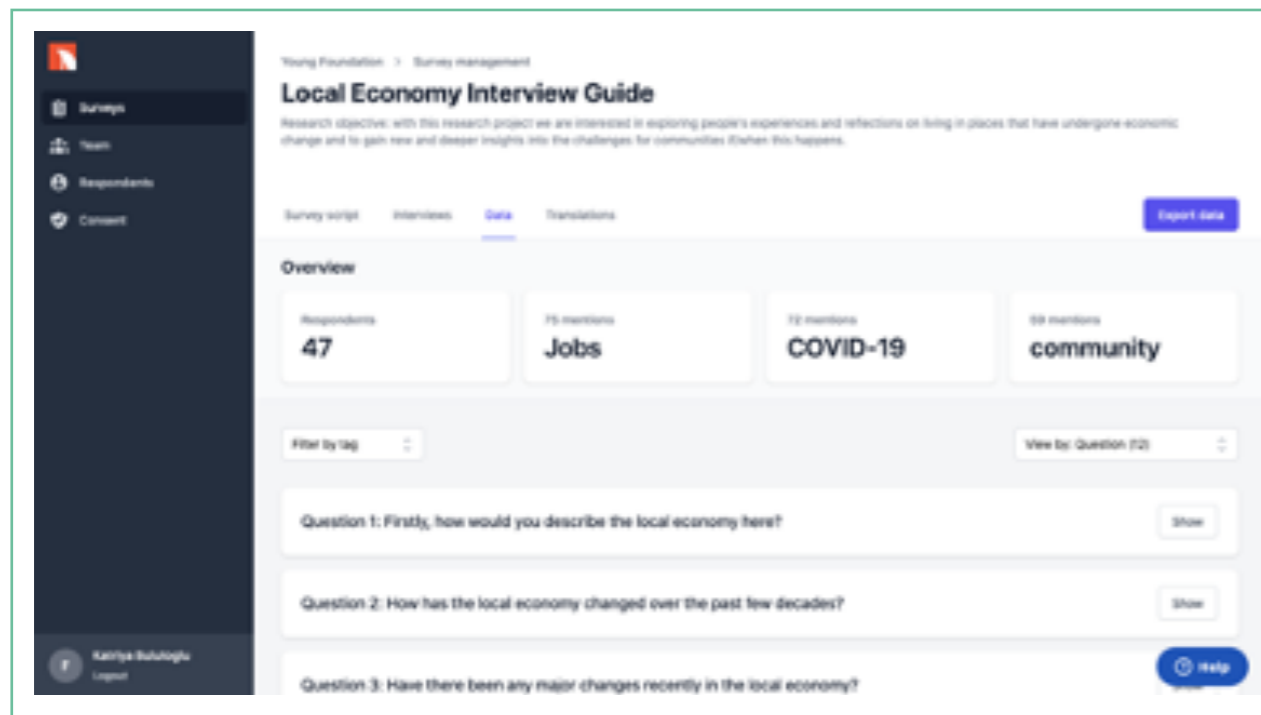
To support peer researchers in conducting interviews remotely we piloted the use of tech platform *Fatima*, owned by Here I Am. Although some peer research studies have used surveys in their methodology (which may have collected responses online or through a device like an iPad), none of the projects identified in Peer Research in the UK (ICS 2019) were built primarily around digital methodologies. The review identified a key gap here around making data collection far easier which could make peer research more accessible to those who only had a mobile phone. Digital literacy and access were noted as factors that should be of major consideration when designing data collection methods (Young Foundation, 2019).

In previous Young Foundation and ICS peer research projects, issues with data collection quality such as poor audio and recording failings have challenged the peer research process. This has had implications on delivery and analysis: the peer research process has been more logistically intensive and there have been limitations on the quality of data that can be analysed.

Given fieldwork took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews could not take place face-to-face. The need for an inclusive, digital method of data collection that avoided many of the recording challenges previously experienced, became ever more significant.

The Young Foundation developed a partnership with Here I Am (formerly part of Maido) to undertake the first UK trial of their new platform. *Fatima*, developed by Here I Am in August 2020 is a remote qualitative data collection tool with an integrated record facility. The platform allowed peer researchers to phone a participant anywhere in the UK regardless of if that person had a wi-fi connection. This allowed a wider range of participants to partake in the research, assisting us to sample those normally excluded by the digital divide.

The platform allowed peer researchers to tag responses during interviews with predefined codes provided early analysis support through theming. The anonymised data from this study has also been used to develop *Fatima's* new machine learning functionality, enabling automated analysis of the qualitative data.



A step towards co-analysis

A 2019 review, conducted by the Institute for Community Studies, into peer research projects in the UK found discrepancies in the extent of engagement with co-analysis (ICS, 2019). The process of co-analysis allows peer researchers continuous engagement with the research process, ensuring they maintain ownership over the research and provides a more holistic understanding of the research findings.

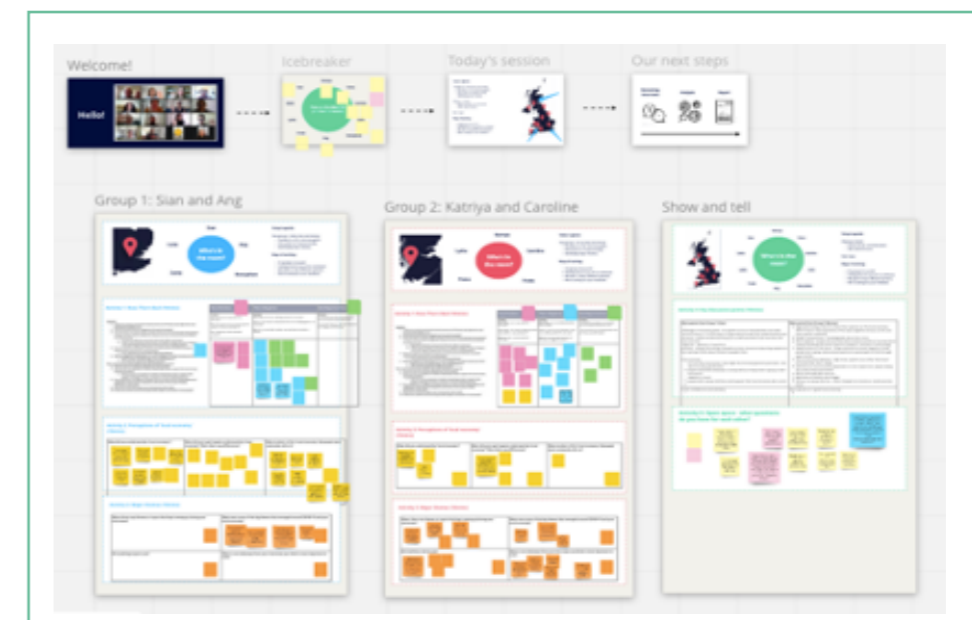
As part of analysing the community interviews, three co-analysis workshops were undertaken:

1. The first workshop covered feedback on the interview process and emerging key themes that peer researchers were picking up. Through their personal relationships with many of the community members interviewed, peer researchers provided greater insight into non-verbal cues - picking up on subtle uncertainties in the community members response and tone. This workshop in particular built up our understanding of the complexity of trying to engage community members in conversations about local economies.
2. The second workshop explored more deeply the emerging themes and peer researchers were asked to reflect on common markers of the local economy as well as on major themes

and takeaways from their interviews. These discussions and reflections shaped our final thematic analysis of the interviews.

3. Our final workshop provided peer researchers with the opportunity to engage with a coding task where they were provided the transcript of one question from three of their interviews. Peer researchers were given instructions on how to tag, associating themes with each sentence and writing up a summary sentence to describe the sentiment of each answer. Sentence tags were then drawn together in workshops, working with peer researchers to cluster and theme each tag. This helped inform our analytical approach, drawing out priorities across regions and building up peer researchers' analytical confidence.

Co-analysis with peer researchers informed the traditional supporting analysis led by the Young Foundation. Drawing on the tags and themes informed by the peer researchers and based on the initial reading of the data as well as the research aims and objectives, The Young Foundation research team developed a rough coding framework. The transcripts were coded and summarised in excel. The coding process enabled the documentation of relationships between themes and the identification of themes important to participants. This process also provided a check on the peer research co-analysis workshops to ensure the themes drawn out were representative of the sample of data received.



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