**An alternative to Levelling-up:**

**Tackling Inequalities by involving communities**

**in place-shaping, the social economy and gender equalities**

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**Synopsis**

Working British people are worse off in 2022 than they were in 2019 and as fuel prices rise soon the British will be experiencing poverty not seen since the 1950s. The pandemic revealed the scale of inequalities in Britain. Levelling-up is no longer a matter of rebalancing the North and the Southeast but creating wealth and opportunities for the ‘left-behind’ and of developing more sustainable, green, and caring local economies.

This paper argues that involving communities in the social economy, transforming public services and wealth creation will create pathways out of poverty in both cities and rural areas. This is not rocket science but a shift of focus from large shiny infrastructure projects to small, community-based, innovation, which works for those most in need which grow when supported by accelerators and progressive, local leadership.

There is an economic model emerging at the local level where both political and community leaders are transforming public services and addressing inequalities by involving communities in the social economy and gender equalities.

**Introduction**

In 2021 Marmot estimated that 14.5mn people[[1]](#footnote-1) in the UK were living in permanent poverty, by 2022 the Resolution Foundation, estimated that this figure could rise to 20mn given massive price rises, for fuel, food, and household bills when wages and benefits were capped at 3% even though inflation was precited to be 9% by the December 2022.

The pandemic has left fifty percent of Black and Asian children living in poverty and revealed the extent of pre-existing inequalities, affecting Black and Asian communities, single parents[[2]](#footnote-2), those with disabilities, pensioners, and women in all groups most.[[3]](#footnote-3) [[4]](#footnote-4)

Meanwhile the rich, including ministers, had boosted their income by five percent or more[[5]](#footnote-5) when public sector workers have two or three jobs did not enough to pay the bills. The huge disparity between the rich and working people has escalated inequalities and worsened the experience of poverty across the UK and billionaires in the UK own £576bn worth of assets.

In February 2022, the government announced their White Paper on Levelling Up which was met with dismay by Sir Michael Marmot (2010, 2020 & 2021[[6]](#footnote-6)) who had repeatedly shown the correlation between inequalities and poor health. Marmot said levelling-up fund were derisory[[7]](#footnote-7)and would not compensate for ten years of local public service cuts nor replace lost essential services in the poorest communities which would require massive investment[[8]](#footnote-8). Lisa Nandy, Shadow Secretary for Levelling-up, Communities and Housing agreed

*The challenge for politicians is to address the damage done by years of austerity and unfair funding imbalance between the North and the South and have sensitivity to how it feels to be left behind[[9]](#footnote-9).*

Lisa Nandy said

*None of this is new. ... they have cut the funding for buses; scrapped rail promises to the north and where is the digital Britain we were promised? …. We don’t need to look to Rome for inspiration- Preston, Wigan and Grimsby people are delivering change for themselves, imagine what if government gave us the power to make the decisions ourselves.[[10]](#footnote-10)*

The most challenging problem is reaching those most affected by inequalities and poverty.

Throwing small packets of investment into preferred towns with no strategy or plan will fail, because it will do nothing for the most disadvantaged in those towns, just as ‘Trickle-down’ from large infrastructure projects rarely reaches the ‘left behind’[[11]](#footnote-11).

The government needs to address entrenched inequalities caused by the decline of previous industries and made worse by austerity. Levelling-up investment must increase and stop focusing on large infrastructure projects and start reaching those living in deprived areas, working in the gig economy with no access to better paid work or support apart from food banks; and focus on mainstream investment in services and integrate economic policy with health and social care.

**The Time is Right - Post- Pandemic**

Before the pandemic, the Women’s Budget Group (WBG)[[12]](#footnote-12)had been a lone voice *calling for* a *more caring economy, not just investment social and care, but in an economy which values the wellbeing of individuals, communities, and the planet. An economy which values all care, paid and unpaid, will nurture us all.”*  *Professor Diane Elson, Women’s Budget Group Commissioner[[13]](#footnote-13).*

The pandemic has changed the public mood and made people more concerned about fairness, the importance of care, how little care-workers are paid and that social care in England is not free. During local-down people slowed down and thousands joined local response teams[[14]](#footnote-14) and became volunteers. However, while the pandemic made us value our neighbours more; many caring for vulnerable people in need of care were frightened of any visitors including home carers[[15]](#footnote-15); providing end-of-life care at home without any support during the pandemic was hard and resulted in100,000 more deaths at home compared with previous 5 years[[16]](#footnote-16).

Those with and without a garden appreciated birds, nature and their local parks. The greening of cities began to make sense and those in cities began to appreciate more policies to humanise services and the environment.

**Accelerators for Levelling-up**

The following examples of towns and cities to humanise local environments, reconnect to nature, and demonstrate the value of local shops and the importance of the social economy, climate action and the role of community collaboration in future public service delivery. It is significant that the energy for transforming services and the economy often comes from women leadership in communities, in local government and in governments and that gender equalities is at the heart of widening economic strategies

**Humanising Cities**

In European countries local politicians are more explicit about the connections between municipalization, service transformation and popular democracy. Radical women mayors such as Ada Colau in Barcelona and Manuela Carmena, in Madrid (ex-mayor) who have transformed relationships between citizens and local government by involving communities and revitalized local democracy and transformed public administration[[17]](#footnote-17).

Transforming planning as well as services has also become central to improving wellbeing and health in cities. Melbourne developed the twenty-minute rule in planning, which is shorthand for the time it takes for walkers or cyclists to reach the shops or health services from their home. This rule has since been adopted by other cities including Paris, Barcelona, Madrid; introduced by progressive mayors wanting to humanise their cities by creating smaller districts and involving communities in service redesign and clean air, transport, waste collection etc.

In the UK community-led planning is weak and has in the past led to 1970s housing estates without facilities, shops, playgrounds, clinics, or parks. The British public have a low opinion of public consultation, believing a masterplan already agreed and developers and governments thinking involving communities will be time-consuming and a nuisance. As a result, British cities are overrun by traffic and public spaces neglected, especially on run down estates starved of public investment. This is changing as local groups take over green spaces and clean up parks and city authorities begin to tackle air pollution through electric vehicles, public transport, walkways, and traffic free public spaces. As more people get involved in early design, planners recognise that involving communities can reduce later problems.

In the UK progressive city leaders in Bristol, Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool who are integrating health and social care, improving public transport systems, reclaiming green and public space, and until recently retrofitting housing. All face the challenge of ten years of financial cuts and a dependence on foreign investment. Smaller cities such as Preston, Coventry, Wigan, which attract less investment are finding ways to use local assets, promoting common ownership and local wealth creation; and focusing on a recirculation of finance through shared public procurement schemes.

**Preston Council with CLES** developed the Preston Model[[18]](#footnote-18) of public procurement by bringing large employers, such as the NHS, universities, local councils together, and agree a local procurement policy and increase spend in local economy. This was successful and between 2012 and 2017 the Preston Procurement Model increased spend in Lancashire from 5% to 18.2%. Preston also created co-operative networks, released land and property into common ownership, lifted wages and used the public pension pot to invest in local SMES.[[19]](#footnote-19) Centre for Local Strategies (CLES) has been advocating of public procurement as a lever for retaining wealth within cities since 2010 and has since been adopted by many UK. More recently CLES has been promoting local wealth creation through asset transfer and the development of the Commons and Land Commission especially in Scotland and Wales.

**The Wigan New Deal** was forged when an innovative chief executive and leader werefaced with a funding crisis in adult care and sort a solution that involved the community rather than a cut in services. This involved a radical transformation of adult care, based on working with existing strengths in the communities, of family, friends and community organisations, social workers got know the community by leaving the office and walking and talking to Wigan people and getting acquainted with local voluntary agencies. This did not suit everyone; but most staff welcomed an escape from the office and the time to talk to people. It was a people-based approach where social workers ceased being assessors and reinvented themselves as community coordinators of good neighbours and existing voluntary organisations and new social enterprise[[20]](#footnote-20). The Wigan New Deal involved a community paradigm and new settlement between voters and the council and involved a radical reorganisation of how the council worked in adult care.

Donna Hall, [[21]](#footnote-21) then CEO of Wigan MBC said ‘A community paradigm is emerging because it makes sense and is necessary;’ she is Chair of New Local, a new network of innovative councils. Government and public services are beginning to recognise the strengths in communities; however, it takes innovative councils to welcome this sector into strategic decision-making and the redesign of services and funders supporting people transform where they live.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**Community power in rural areas demand a rural model for inequalities**

Much of the energy for tackling innovation through place-based innovation has tended to be based in cities and urban areas and inequalities in rural areas ignored; despite rural poverty affecting as many as 30% of the population in clusters of Norfolk, Shropshire, Cornwall and Devon. Isolated communities suffer from poor mental health and chronic health conditions. The problem is not just patchy service provision but accessibility to existing services when rural public transport is irregular and expensive.

However, severe disadvantage remains invisible when surrounded by wealthier neighbours and attractive surroundings. Dartmoor is a beautiful place but that has not alleviated rural poverty where the rented sector has collapsed, well-paid jobs are rare and public services are out of reach and underfunded. Rural communities tend to have little idea of what services are available to them and are too embarrassed by their poverty, to make a fuss. The pandemic did reveal gaps in services in mental health, for younger families, early years and school link workers, much needed in areas where local people remain suspicious of education.

Assess to which data on pockets of rural poverty is weak and masked by the current IMD categories. This leaves local officials less informed and completely unaware of where severe deprivation exists, working from distant county and district offices and few community-based staff; managers rely on the voluntary sector to meet local needs. There is an assumption that the third sector and community organisations reach remote villages, but this is rarely the case. Even where innovative community organisations and social enterprise are supporting rural communities, they can never replace statutory services which have statutory responsibilities.

The one-size-fits-all urban model of inequalities

* Overlooks the rural context of pockets of severe deprivation
* public services are poor and difficult to access
* The combination of factors leaves those in poverty isolated
* People suffer in silence when surrounded by wealth of neighbours
* There are clusters of severe disadvantage and data scattered
* Need for funded capacity to work at scale for wider hinterland
* Rural development research tends to view work through the lens of farming not service activities where women work. Thousands of small farms are kept going by women working off the farm, particularly in health and social care.

There is an increasing recognition of rural poverty by public health and agencies involved in poverty alleviation such as food banks; however, most support particular groups rather than addressing rural inequalities with a place-based approach.

**Be Buckfastleigh** a community-based development agency on South Dartmoor was cited by Professor Marmot as a model for addressing rural inequalities

Buckfastleigh is a small, ex industrial town on the edge of Dartmoor with a population of 3.9K, with few jobs, expensive public transport where families struggle on low paid, part-time work, have 30% endure chronic health problems. Be Buckfastleigh has developed an integrated strategy to address inequalities by providing personal, social, health and economic support in small rural towns in South Dartmoor. Their activities are free and open to all and include sports, walks, nature & rewilding, arts & crafts, early years support and holiday food programmes, in 2021 they organised thousands of meals and fun activities to children during school holidays. Word-of-mouth and social media are the marketing tools. The model is to attract people rather than target them; the most disadvantaged are usually hesitant and under confident but when a friend encourages them, they soon get involved as volunteers.

Be Buckfastleigh has become a community connector for the statutory sector, because public services are under-funded and their knowledge of inequalities in villages and small rural towns is poor. Their small rural model is to provide routes into work training and work from the above activities which demands active partnerships with anchor employers such as Riverford Organics and Dartmoor National Park which need skilled local staff and support wider supply chain for local businesses.

Funded by the Lottery, *Growing Great Ideas programme,* Be Buckfastleigh’s aim is to develop a cluster of small, South Dartmoor towns to support a wider hyper-local network for work and business development and for data collection for a rural population of 40K, rather than 4K.

Rural Model for tackling inequalities. <https://bebuckfastleigh.co.uk>

https://www.facebook.com/hallosummer

**Economic Accelerators**

1. **The social economy**

The social economy is a major driver for change across Britain[[23]](#footnote-23) and a growing recognition that the social economy is an economic accelerator in deprived areas in cities but also in rural areas in the Southwest, the Highlands, Ayrshire, Wales, and Cumbria. There is a surge of social enterprise in rural areas which have become anchor and catalyst for small town revival, especially in the Southwest and Scotland.

The sector includes a range of co-operatives, social enterprise and community business seeking to trade for profit and community returns. All stimulating the local economy and revitalising high streets through independent shops, cafes, art’s organisations, food outlets and care co-ops, creating local wealth, jobs, and training opportunities, whilst stimulating more circular, local economies and local supply chains.

The number of community business in the UK has risen from 5000 in 2015 to 9000 in 2019[[24]](#footnote-24)The Social Economy is worth £60bn to the national economy and £4.3bn to the creating 10% of all jobs on Merseyside, 60% of which create jobs for women.

The social economy has for some time been a driver for renewal in cities where neighbourhoods have been in perpetual decline. The *Power to Change* [[25]](#footnote-25) reports that Liverpool is one the three places in the UK where there is a groundswell of community business; another is Plymouth, named the city of social enterprise by former leader Tudor Evens.

Both cities have a strong, longstanding partnerships with an anchor social enterprise which connect the council to the most disadvantaged communities. The Real Ideas Organisation (RIO) with the backing of Plymouth CC has spawned hundreds of start-ups across the city, especially in Devonport.

Liverpool has relied on the Baltic Creative CIC in the development of Liverpool Docks and in 2019 they launched Kindred an investment and development vehicle run by the sector to fund community organisations to grow new businesses – backed by £5.5m.[[26]](#footnote-26) Steve Rotherham, the Metro Mayor reports that the social trading sector is the silent engine of the region employing 50,000 and generating £3bn every year.

Increasingly, city leaders are recognising the role that large social enterprise play as anchors and drivers of social and economic regeneration, because of their relationship with the unemployed, creatives and young people and especially women, who when supported are the energy behind wider regional regeneration,[[27]](#footnote-27) In Manchester, the music and hospitality sector continues to attract international visitors.

The question is why is *the social economy not at the heart of levelling up options?*

1. **Gender Equalities**

It is women’s leadership that galvanises community organisations and often city led service transformation.[[28]](#footnote-28) Deloitte found that projects led by women founders could boost the national economy by £100bn[[29]](#footnote-29). This is not an isolated case, there are numerous business reports that state that companies continue to ignore competent women, despite the evidence that women directors lead to greater productivity,[[30]](#footnote-30),[[31]](#footnote-31) :-

* companies with women directors are the most profitable
* companies those no women board members are the least profitable
* Small businesses with women founders are the least likely to go bankrupt.[[32]](#footnote-32)
* Women contribute sixty percent of UK economic activity
* narrowing the gender pay gap will boost UK economy significantly

Despite this overwhelming evidence, the economic consequences of the persistent gender pay, which has not improved since 2010[[33]](#footnote-33). During the pandemic, the gender pay gap, increased to 15.5%.[[34]](#footnote-34) This is a huge problem for business and reinforces low wages in those sectors where women dominate the workforce, such as in care and cleaning.

* 78% of social carers are women
* 60% of unpaid carers are women, providing unpaid care worth £13.6mn
* 78% of 10.5K care workers in Bristol are women[[35]](#footnote-35)
* 50% of childcare is done grandparents, 75% of whom are women.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Care and cleaning are sectors where local pay is universal and little career progression non-existent,[[37]](#footnote-37) yet child and social care are also services that are expensive for families to buy. Childcare costs have increased from 17.8% to 35.6% of wages[[38]](#footnote-38), an added burden for women wanting to work. To complicate the picture for women is that fact that nearly half of all working-age women also provide on average 45 hours of unpaid care, which means women in the UK providing unpaid care, worth £382bn, reports the Centre of Progressive Policy (CPP).[[39]](#footnote-39) The Chancellor, Sunak said that he wanted to help families and as yet he has offered no additional support for childcare, which if free as an essential service would allow women to return to work and lift national productivity and economy immediately.

Significant investment in child and social care would improve the quality of care, create jobs and support care providers, unfortunately this is not happening largely because the Treasury does not recognise *care* as a productive sector. The numbers of 50-70 year olds who became 'economically inactive' to look after family members almost doubled between the beginning of pandemic and Autumn 2021. [[40]](#footnote-40)The exclusion of the social infrastructure from industrial strategies leads to poor investment decisions, such as not investing in social care.

Health and social care are the fastest growing sector in the regions, including the Southwest. Yet, regional economic planners make not mention of the sector because they view it through the gendered lens of the social infrastructure and separate from the business development. Despite the WBG proving that if 2% of GDP were invested in social care it would generate 1mn jobs, compared to 750 jobs resulting from a similar amount invested in construction.[[41]](#footnote-41) Still, politicians prefer to invest in male industries even though jobs in social care is what the public wants, would get women into work and make communities healthier. Economic decision-making would improve with the introduction of a national Wellbeing Index?

**Gender Equalities and Women’s Leadership**

Too often gender equality strategies are not ambitious enough and ignore the gendered assumptions integral to economic planning and financial investment decisions. In 2019 Liverpool women challenged this decided to write their own industrial, gender equality strategy. Their report, One Day was based on forty women coming together for One Day to share their experiences and develop a socially inclusive strategy for the city; informed by the work of the Women’ Budget Group[[42]](#footnote-42) and reports by Deloitte for the Liverpool City Region (LCR). Reaching communities involves engaging with community leaders, 66% of whom are women it is they who have the motivation for change and energy for systemic transformation. [[43]](#footnote-43)

Their message was that gender equalities could be the economic driver the city needed.[[44]](#footnote-44) [[45]](#footnote-45) They suggested that the economic strategy should integrate gender equalities into the LCR industrial strategy to boost the economy, by focusing on investment in women’s jobs and improve caring services which would bring £230mn bring into city region and reduce the gender pay gap[[46]](#footnote-46) .

The Liverpool City Region Gender Equalities Strategy has been endorsed by Liverpool and Manchester mayors, political leaders who are putting gender-equalities in the driving seat in response to women’s community activism and the One Day Strategy. One Day aims to create opportunities for women in the creative and hospitality sectors as well as in care which would underpin a more socially inclusive, local economy. [[47]](#footnote-47) Their gender equality strategy is based on the following assumptions relevant to any progressive strategy, and include: -

* Gender and diversity as essential to realising local economic potential
* Care and hospitality the key to women entering the local economy
* Social enterprise is an accelerator of local productivity
* Community ownership key to circular economy[[48]](#footnote-48)
* Small initiatives that Spring Up rather than Trickle Down
* The need for a circular economy that reduces costs, renews, recycles, and shares.

The principles above would apply to any local economic strategy seeking to reach disadvantaged communities, but especially women who are trapped in part-time, low paid or unpaid work.

One Day would not have been possible without a wider women’s movement in Liverpool. Both they and Bristol Women’s Voice[[49]](#footnote-49) report that it is community-based strategies that unlock doors for the unemployed, and especially for Black women from working class communities. The election of Jo Anderson as Liverpool mayor is testament to that says Erika Ruston[[50]](#footnote-50)

*“One Day has reinforced and given confidence to a wider group of women, Black and White and opened doors for Black women. Liverpool now has the first Black city mayor in the country. [[51]](#footnote-51)[[52]](#footnote-52)*

Women’s Day March 8th, 2022, the Steve Rotherham, LCR mayor announced a more detailed Acton Plan to implement the strategy.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The exclusion of care and the wider social infrastructure in regional industrial strategies needs to change because it is not only undermining women but the economy- investing in the health and social care sector would create jobs, bring women back into the workforce and lift the economy. A more innovative economic framework would emerge faster if involving communities, gender strategies and environmental interests are fully integrated into local, regional, and national economic strategies. Professor Marmot’s Team report Build Back Fairer published in 2020 called for Health and Wellbeing to be placed at the heart of all local economic strategies. The political narrative that investment in care is a cost to taxpayer and investing in the physical infrastructure adds value, is outdated – when we face huge challenges in 2022 of escalating price wages and inequalities, as well as climate change.

**Tackling Inequalities demands political leadership**

The globalised economic model where companies are looking for short term gains at any cost just doesn’t work – it has an impact on the climate, biodiversity, and social inequalities – which forces us to build a more sustainable model says Tikehau Friedberger[[54]](#footnote-54) When the FT arrives at this conclusion, we know that alternative models are emerging not driven by investors but by the challenges inequalities and climate change by those closest to their impact in communities and places .

The examples here demonstrate how when local leaders appreciate the strengths of communities and motivated to forge new settlements they can. The Wigan New Deal had an impact on council leaders across the UK, but most didn’t talk enough to staff or communities about how the New Deal would improve life for communities and so were less successful in radical transformation.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Tackling inequalities demands brave leadership that is empathic to poor rather than impressed by the rich, and confident of alternative strategies and the motivation to reframe the default system that currently obstruct change. Devolution is key to rebalancing the regions and to reconnecting to the disenfranchised which requires a reversal of priorities in national government, to be aligned to progressive, local community leadership evolving socially inclusive economic models. A more caring and green economy would take root faster if gender equalities were the heart of industrial strategies and more sustainable economics at all levels of government.

**A Community and Place-based Approach to Tackling Inequalities involves: -**

* Politics of community empowerment-
* respect people and identify problems with people
* Invest in community connectors and thriving communities
* devolution to communities, localities, and cities
* invest in the social infrastructure and social economy
* women’s work invisible resulting in low wages
* gender equalities at the heart of industrial strategies
* collect data on the impact of not investing in the social infrastructure
* recognise that the care economy is central to economic renewal
* create routes out of poverty through place-based routes to training and work
* local integrated economic strategies to sustain local supply chains, to support producers and consumers and reduce transport emissions
* rural inequalities remain invisible without a rural small-town model
* public system redesign to support wider transformation to support community paradigm and locality innovation

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