

Making the Economy work for Everyone

'Making the Economy work for Everyone' was the topic of an event at St Vincent's SVP Centre in Newcastle on September 25th 2021. 30 representatives of communities from across the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) area gathered with six members of the Authority's Inclusive Economy Board and their officers to explore the barriers and pathways to participating in and benefiting from the economy. They were joined by another 30+ people from the churches, voluntary sector and communities with an interest in making the economy work for our most disadvantaged communities.

The primary aim of the event was to ensure that key people in the Inclusive Economy Board hear and take on board the voices and experience of the people they aim to include, as they develop their policies and programmes.

This was an initiative of Church Action on Poverty North East. They were taking the opportunity of Bishop Christine Hardman, of the Church of England Diocese of Newcastle, chairing the NTCA Inclusive Economy Board, to create a space where the voices of some of the people furthest from benefiting from the economy could make their voices heard. Those representing the communities on the day stood for many more who had been involved in different ways over the course of a year, which had been dominated by Covid, and they represented the experiences of many people in their communities

The day began in workshops organised on a geographic basis, where members of the communities shared their experiences of barriers to accessing training and employment and in some cases the local initiatives which had helped them to break through those barriers.

The Newcastle workshop

Migrant contributors

The first contributors had found their way through JET but still faced major barriers. JET was set up to help those who were either from long-standing immigrant communities, or newly arrived in the UK, to overcome some of the challenges they faced in searching for work, suitable training and work experience, as well as integrating into their local communities and wider society

Khalid, who came from Sudan originally, was now settled as a tutor with JET but prior to this he felt very vulnerable in exploitative work situations.

- He worked for agencies. His pattern of working was a succession of jobs on zero-hours contracts for six-month periods but each time he was dismissed before he completed the period of the contract.
- Close to the end of each contract period he was pressurised to work more than one shift a day. He was paid after 45 days but only for one month, and in the end he was owed 15 days' payment on each contract.

Amal is a Moroccan woman with EU citizenship. She accessed JET's services and received support to find accommodation, register with a GP and improve her employability skills. She was also directed



to Newcastle College where she achieved a diploma in Health & Social Care and now works as a carer on low pay, but is also studying for a degree.

Bassel, who is a qualified solicitor, spoke of a common experience: that qualifications and skills from countries of origin are not recognised, not transferable, and conversion pathways are not easy to access. Instead inappropriate training and job search is offered.

Now also working at JET, he is very concerned that new regulations relating to English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) mean that people cannot access other vocational or sector specific training until they have attained a level 3 ESOL qualification.

East End contributors – finding support through Building Futures East

Elaine was working with people with disabilities but her mental health broke down. The Job Centre kept sending her for inappropriate interviews. Following a course to improve her mental health she eventually decided to become self-employed but became very frustrated because she was passed from one agency to another – she didn't know where to get appropriate help.

Sheridan, a young pregnant woman living with difficult neighbours, explained that her dyslexia meant she had problems completing forms whether they were to access benefits, find suitable housing or find a suitable job. Eventually she got help from her local councillor.

Madjit had been left by an abusive husband. Without family support in this country she was under a lot of stress. Eventually she found

personal support through the Angelou Centre and Building Futures East, who have helped her get a visa and a house.

The difficulty of finding help or accessing training if you were isolated in a more affluent area was also raised.

The common thread in these experiences was the urgent need for long-term pre-employment support addressing the various individual needs and circumstances of each one before they are ready to access training and seek employment.



West End contributors

Stacie and Emma had both started their families at an early age and dropped out of education because of this. Stacie had later trained in floristry and had her own business until she was put out of business when a large supermarket opened nearby, and she found herself in a very dark place. Emma eventually gained a Masters in guidance but was unable to find employment because of a lack of experience.

Both speakers found their way forward through volunteering at Riverside Community Health project where they were eventually employed and they felt they were able to offer effective support and help to build peoples confidence because of their own experiences. Volunteering as a route to employment has long been a hallmark of the working practice of Riverside CHP.

The next voices of experience came from a group of **Romanian women** who shared partly via video. Like the speakers from

JET, they found their experience, skills and qualifications from their home country were not recognised here and struggled with an unfamiliar culture and system. Family and community are very important in their culture, so it has been very important for them to find support which recognises and builds on those values and key members of the group have been able to mediate between UK services and their communities, e.g. in relation to Covid and health visitor services.

Finally, a story illustrating that the problems of exploitative working conditions and zero-hours contracts are also a problem for the UK-born community. **July**, who has young children, got a job in a restaurant and was then asked to do split shifts. She had to travel to work on public transport (expensive). Sometimes there was no work, so she was sent home. Staff tips, which are an essential boost to low wages in the catering trade, were capped at £5.



North Tyneside Workshop

The North Tyneside workshop also started with stories of the positive role of volunteering.

Susannah shared her experience of mental health challenges. Working as a volunteer at Mums Space in North Shields made her feel valued and restored her confidence. She now has employment as a lunchtime supervisor at a local school and has been invited to train as a classroom assistant.

The importance of voluntary work in helping to restore confidence was also part of **Danielle's** story. As a young pregnant woman in urgent housing need, she had approached the Cedarwood Trust on Meadow Well estate during the Covid crisis. They helped to find her a suitable house near the project and offered practical support in many ways. She has now gone on to volunteer at Cedarwood, gaining in confidence and widening her horizons.

Brian had spent much of his adult life in the navy, but found the skills and expertise he developed in the navy counted for nothing in civilian life. As with the migrant communities in the Newcastle workshop, he highlighted the need for people to be able to adapt their skills for the labour market rather than just being told you cannot do the job. He had got into a downward spiral without job or home, and

until he found Cedarwood he encountered a lack of a person-centred approach to address his needs and enable him to find employment. "The system has not been designed to help people, but has a one size fits all mindset. If the system does not fit you - then tough."

Andrew, who had found support through Shiremoor Health Advice & Resource Project for his struggles with mental health and alcohol, shared how casual work and zero-hours contracts make life very difficult with weekly levels of incomes fluctuating. Universal Credit has not made it easier to survive doing this kind of work.

This led on to a discussion about the difficulty in leaving exploitative work because this can mean forfeiting the right to claim benefit.

Mary, like Susannah, spoke of her struggles with mental health. She had been a nursing sister but when her mental health broke down, she wasn't supported or given time to fully recover but had to apply for jobs, which she was not well enough to tackle. Like others there was a sense of isolation and not being offered the help needed. There wasn't an appropriate path back to employment on offer.

There followed a general discussion which acknowledged the following points:





- The system of supporting people looking for work and claiming benefits seems to have been designed to make life as difficult as possible. “You are never told what you are entitled to.” “You have to know what you can claim for.” The dignity of people is not recognised.
- The importance of mentoring and support is key. The need is for wraparound support for people seeking employment – support that meets the human, social and physical needs of people. The need is for a person-centred approach to people seeking training or employment just as we talk about person-centred care in terms of NHS or Social Care.
- Another way of seeing mentoring is friendship. The quality of relationship with people is key for their development and for their ability to access the training or employment they need.
- Clearly, addressing mental health needs is essential for delivering an inclusive economy.



The Northumberland workshop

This workshop, facilitated by Amble-based Women's Workshop and Number 28 project based in Hexham, focussed on voices from the North and the West of the county which are the voices least heard as 47% of the population lives in the South East of the county.

They used four videos and two poems to powerfully communicate people's personal experiences, which included:

- **A woman travelling from Embleton to Lindisfarne (Holy Island) to work in the largest business on the island.**

She is largely dependent on getting a lift to work as the bus, which only goes three times a day, only takes her as far as the causeway, and is not practical for the return journey. Her shifts are totally irregular in terms of times and length as they are tide dependent and this makes attending to family responsibilities very difficult and stressful.

- **A man who normally earns his living as a chimney sweep and a performance poet but found both sources of income came to a halt during Covid.**

His work as a performance poet is non-contractual so did not qualify for any assistance, and his dyslexia meant he gave up on the necessary online forms to access compensation for his lost income

as a self-employed chimney sweep. Living in Haltwhistle near the western boundary of the county he found that the projects that might have been able to assist him had been withdrawn and just to access the Job Centre meant a costly journey to Hexham. He found himself dependent on the part-time wages of his wife who works in a supermarket in Hexham and also has to spend a significant percentage of her wages on travel between Haltwhistle and Hexham. Throughout Covid he worked as a volunteer driver taking people to hospital. People in the west and north of the county have to travel to Cramlington for emergency services and North Tyneside and Newcastle for most general hospital and specialist services – impossible journeys by public transport.

- **A woman for whom English was a second language.**

She had to travel from Blyth to Morpeth to access in-person English classes as she found online provision too difficult. The combined barriers of language and county location left her feeling very isolated and vulnerable – without support.

- **A woman from Hexham, who had spent most of her adult life as a family carer.**

Coping with traumatic and complex needs and behaviour, now in her fifties, she faced



the daunting task of re-entering the world of employment. She was fortunate in that she found person-centred support through Escape family support and the Bridge project. However, if she had not had access to her own car, she would not have been able to volunteer and follow the training at Ashington-based Escape which has ultimately led to part-time outreach work with Escape. Number 28 were able to help her develop the IT skills she needed and

crucially have had the flexibility to continue that skills development and support during the early stages of her employment.

The discussion in the workshop centred on the assumptions about poverty in Northumberland which keep the system the way it is rather than addressing the changes demanded by the reality of people's experience:

Access assumptions

■ Transport

Public transport is taken for granted in cities. In Northumberland, car is often the only feasible option and the cost is prohibitive for many. It just takes a road diversion and you might have to drive 30 miles out of your way. This is a huge cost if you are on benefits which don't cover the essentials let alone this kind of extra expense.

If the bus service is hourly or two-hourly, then a missing bus can make you hours late for work or appointments, resulting in sanctions.

■ Services

Advice and support services and even in-person training are generally based in the South East of the county where the

majority of the population are located, but they are not accessible for people living in the North and the West of the county.

■ Employment

The major employment is tourism and hospitality services. This means that people are stuck in low-paid, seasonal jobs with zero-hours contracts. They do not progress out of these jobs because there are no better jobs.

■ Digital access

It is assumed that people can access services and cope with distance barriers by using IT. But lack of equipment, poor and patchy internet and mobile phone coverage, lack of necessary skills and different learning abilities are all barriers.

Attitude assumptions

- Northumberland is a wealthy county where poverty is not a major problem, but there is a lot of **hidden poverty** which people are slow to acknowledge due to the stigma attached to being on benefit or low pay.

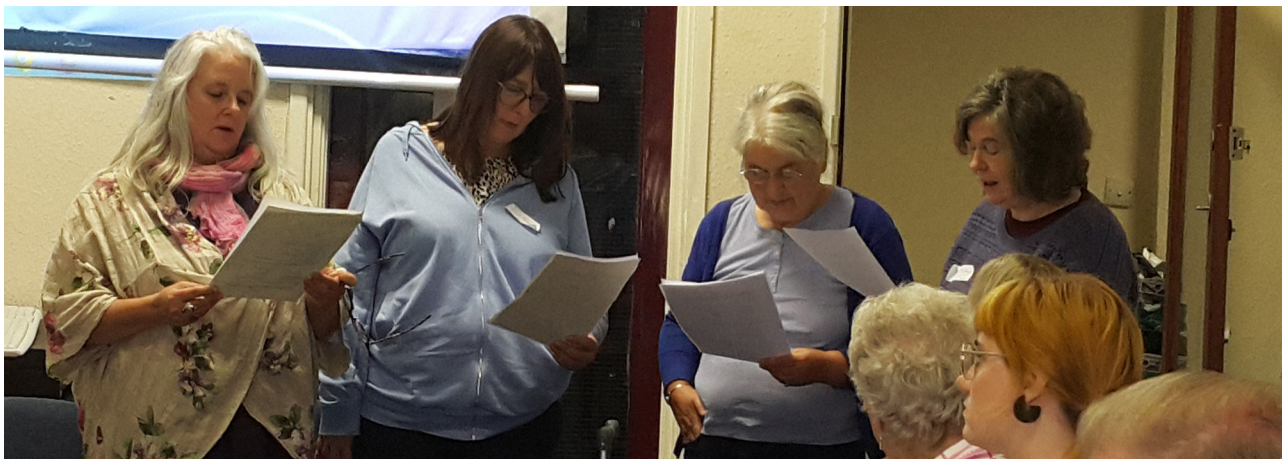
- There are still **judgemental attitudes** making distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, typified by an official who judged someone as being impossible to help because "she is wedded to her chaotic lifestyle".

- If a **couple** are claiming benefit, there is an assumption that payments should be made

to the man but it is often the woman who manages family finances.

- **Unpaid work**, e.g. as a carer or supporting the community, is not recognised as work. If you don't have a regular pay coming in you're not considered to be working.
- There is a lot of **informal support** in rural communities but this is not available to everyone.
- There can be a lot of **isolation** – if you are different in any way or if you are ashamed or embarrassed about your situation.

The often hidden anger and frustration caused by these assumptions was given voice in the powerful poems overleaf.



You want to hear from me? Really?!

You make me afraid

You left me without money

You make me feel like a threat to other people

You have no understanding how the benefit system impacts on my mental health!

You make me have to prove I'm ill

Your system makes it worse

Your decision to sanction me keeps me in locked in poverty

You need to be in my head for just an hour to know my life is fucked up and I really need help!

You make me feel unworthy

You have disempowered me to keep me in my place

You never offer solutions, you just make me feel stupid

You often fail to treat your customers with basic human empathy and kindness!

You make me mad

You did not risk everything to come to this country for a better life and end up worse off

You don't understand my culture, you don't help me,

You say WE have the most generous system in the world, then why does it cost ME so much emotion!

You make me feel like shit and I believe you

You scare me

You don't do joined up thinking

You don't understand the depth of shame, guilt, and anxiety that some people feel on benefits

You make me feel powerless

You are listening but you do not hear me

You wish there was something more could do, your hands are tied

You have no idea what mountains people have to climb to want to wake up!

But you do provide me with choices... heat or food!

We grew up learning that poverty is....

P painful, prejudice, pissed, pissed off, proud

O obnoxious, overshadowed, outcast, OMG

V vagrant, victim, vilify, very tricky, virtuous

E embarrassed, excluded (from) education, envious, exploited

R rage, rejected, ragged, race, rancid, rent boy

T thankful, thieving, trollop

Y yearning



Benefit Bingo

The 'Unexpected' Poet, David Roe, September 2021

I'm just a number to you
 A random ball, spinning your little basket
 If we met on the street tomorrow
 You wouldn't know me
 But you demand my attendance
 I sign to say "this is ME"
 who I am... ME
 My life in your little white boxes
 But I'm just a number to you
 Do you even see my number
 My spirit 6, hunched, broken
 and unsmiling
 There's no joyous cheer for 21 at this door
 My 7 isn't lucky any more
 It isn't slinky and sublime
 Slim and sexy
 It's starved, hungry and falling
 Weak arms reaching, hoping and waiting
 For your next number to be gifted with one hand
 And stolen with the other
 Your "one size fits all" falls off my legs 11
 You don't know me, or where I fit in the full house
 And what of the 88's, do you see what their numbers need
 My 22's are NOT just an addition for your calculator
 They are part of my number, part of ME
 Can you see me yet
 Or am I still just a number to you
 "Unlucky for some"
 Another 13 for your lists
 quota's and spreadsheets
 A few more key taps for your next equation
 To save a million
 And when my angry 9 shouts its voice
 Screaming and begging, pleading in frustration
 You strike me down in a single stroke
 Defeated by a 1.
 Sanctioned.
 "Go away 13, no full house"
 Your prize? The bedroom tax
 I'm just a number to you.

Key issues

The workshops were followed by a plenary presentation by community members of some of the key issues arising from the workshops and from the work in the communities.



Key issues with job-seeking and benefits

Margaret and Wendy from North Tyneside highlighted some of the problems with the benefits and job-seeking system and this was supplemented by observations from the Northumberland workshop.

■ **Financial risks and vulnerability**

The benefits system is high-risk for vulnerable people and is not fit for purpose. It is based on a one-size-fits-all theory. There is no time to explain your personal circumstances or the barriers you face. You have an allocated slot and time. If you miss on any small demand, miss your slot, or make an IT error, you can lose benefit for a long time. Advisers seem to be motivated to get people off the books rather than to understand and address people's pre-employment support needs, e.g. illiteracy or mental health issues can be totally ignored.

■ **Financial risks for job-seekers**

If you take a job, all benefits stop immediately and you can be left for a month without money, but you still have to eat, heat your house and pay your rent, so you are likely to wind up starting work in debt. "People don't realise how expensive it is to be poor."

■ **Childcare**

Parents of young children really struggle with childcare issues. They may not be ready to leave their children in childcare when they feel the pressure to become a job-seeker, and the cost of childcare means they really can't afford to take low-paid work.

If a couple are claiming benefit, there is an assumption that payments should be made to the man, but it is often the woman who manages family finances, and she can be left without the income to do this.

■ **Disability**

The disability benefit system causes huge stress for people. You have to prove that you are disabled, when it is obvious. Mandatory reconsideration is the first step prior to appealing a decision. Often people are too stressed or distressed to do this in the given month. They can lose the benefit completely or be given lower rate when their disability should entitle them to the higher rate. Appeals can be equally distressful and people may not be able to go through with them. There is no validation of your experience. You think, "Am I going crazy here?" People have become suicidal.

Key rural issues

Fiona and Nicola highlighted the rural dimension to the key issues with the caveats:

There are clear differences between rural and city – due to geography!

There is a lot the same, and depressingly so.

Northumberland has both a large rural agricultural area and a more populated, ex-industrial South East area. This means that different services and solutions are needed for these areas. Both areas have problems with poverty but require different solutions.

■ Multiple disadvantages

In a rural area all disadvantages are compounded by isolation, distance, lack of services and lack of transport!

■ Transport

Public transport is expensive, infrequent, or non-existent in some places and very time-consuming. A car is really necessary to be able to work, take children to school and to do shopping.

■ Isolation

This comes from distance and lack of support. But it also comes from not having enough money to be involved in the community or seek work.

■ Multiple discriminations

People are discriminated against because of e.g. their poverty, race, sex, sexual orientation, learning difference, or any perceived differences. It is made worse by shame, mental health issues and feeling

different and fear of discrimination.

Attitudes can be very discriminatory in rural areas and people suffer shame and isolation!

■ Hidden problems and lack of support services

Due to small communities and attitudes, problems are often kept hidden and are invisible. People are prevented from seeking support. Consequently support is not identified or funded!

■ Lack of employment opportunities

Focus on hospitality sector and tourism sector means mostly low-paid jobs and little chance of progressing to better jobs!

■ Housing

Lack of availability and cost are made worse by being in a tourist area, Not enough social housing – need more dialogue with social housing providers!

Key issues for migrants

■ Training/qualifications

The interplay between asylum status, refugee status and settled status in relation to accessing training and employment is not constructive in furthering an individual's ability to contribute to and benefit from the economy. All asylum-seekers and refugees want to work to support their families. They do not want to be dependent on benefits. The denial of access to vocational or sector specific training until at least level 3 entry level in ESOL is achieved together with a residency qualification does not recognise the valuable interplay between language and practical skills.

Moreover, the lack of a clear pathway to convert qualifications gained in the home country denies the British economy access to valuable skills as well as impacting on the wellbeing of the individual and their family.

■ Vulnerability to exploitative work practices

Many migrants find themselves only able to access work with zero-hours contracts and any attempt to establish, for example, rights to flexible working results in dismissal.

Migrants are also vulnerable to unscrupulous agencies who place them on a series of temporary contracts which are always terminated before the contract period is fulfilled.

Migrants also find themselves vulnerable to harassment, bullying and discrimination which goes unchecked in the workplace.

There is a need to enforce existing employment law and to introduce additional legislation to protect workers' rights.

Seeds of change

Following the presentation on key issues, we heard about some of the creative community initiatives, which are helping people, find pathways to engage with an economy which has not worked for them.



Long-term mentoring and volunteering

Anne and Stacie from **Riverside Community Health Project** in Benwell explained that when people first come to Riverside, they often have urgent issues that need to be addressed before they could even begin to consider volunteering, embarking on training or seeking employment, e.g. issues around housing, benefits, domestic abuse, mental health, residency status.

“You can’t expect someone to turn up every day if they are threatened with homelessness.”

While beginning to address the pressing issue, it is important to build trust and confidence

often through offering an enjoyable group activity, e.g. arts & crafts. A person may then reach a stage where they are able to volunteer and begin to help others. Volunteering opportunities are varied and not limited to Riverside. Stacie shared her own experience of gradually becoming almost a full-time volunteer, and how training offered alongside the volunteering eventually enabled her to gain employment within the organisation. Anne emphasised that to enable this process to take place for many people, a sustainable funding stream is needed.

Meaningful engagement with service-providers

Anne explained that structures set up with the intention of facilitating participation in the development of policies and service provision often become barriers in themselves and end up being merely tickbox exercises. If the desire to engage the community in shaping policies and services is genuine, then the process needs

to start with the community’s experience, and she went on to describe providing a section of the community with tablets and scrapbooks so that they could record their experience of daily life, which could then be used as a starting point for a dialogue with service-providers.

Local, flexible and graduated training opportunities

Lisa from **Cedarwood Trust** described two training initiatives which are embedded in the wider work of the Trust on the Meadow Well estate. The Bite Size Catering Academy offers people the opportunity to develop their catering skills, initially through helping to prepare meals for the community. People can engage in this for the number of hours suited to their capacity and it allows them to continue to take care of their family responsibilities. The fact it is based in and serves their own community offers a great opportunity to build confidence as well as skills. However, when people are ready, they are also offered the opportunity to train with

a professional chef, in a restaurant but still within easy reach of their own community. The second training initiative is called Step up to Care. Every woman who takes part in the Cedarwood Breast Feeding support programme is offered the opportunity to gain a level 1/2 qualification in care offering experience in care of the elderly, early years provision and basic community development skills. Again the key is starting where people find themselves and offering the training in a flexible way which encourages and supports participation.

Helping women think outside the box

Julia highlighted that the **Women's Workshop** has been helping women in rural Northumberland think outside the box since 2005.

The local economy traps women in low-paid low-status jobs while they are trying to manage family budgets and care needs.

Rural living makes social isolation more extreme, made worse by lack of access to services and other benefits.

Women face challenges because of disability, learning difference, racial, LGBTQ discrimination. Young parents, young women particularly, face limited opportunities.

Referrals are increasing from crisis services for abuse and mental health, with need for more long-term practical and emotional support. Responses from service-providers are often patronising – not valuing lived experiences versus 'expertise'.

These external factors result in women:

- feeling inadequate in company of people with power and resources
- feeling there is no point in having aspirations

- feeling specific situations are overwhelming
- lacking peer support

The Women's Workshop responds by:

- enabling peer support and a sense of belonging
- creating a welcoming informal space for learning
- tackling practical barriers like IT, transport, childcare, benefits, and safety
- raising awareness
- tackling injustice

In the process, confidence, resilience, creativity, and a sense of wellbeing, are developed. Activities include:

- one-to-one mentoring towards agreed goals
- small group sessions using arts and crafts and environmental activities
- short courses on issues facing women
- vocational skills and qualifications
- collective enterprises

While acknowledging the rural context and the feminist perspective, there is much in common here with other contributors.

Community development as the key to economic development

Economic growth can create long-term exclusion for people experiencing hardship. If any potential growth in a community is dependent on externally driven economic forces, it extracts everything good, including profit, and sends it elsewhere.

This can create a form of learned helplessness among local people, whereby people have no power to achieve anything because the opportunities which belonged to someone else are now all gone and community wealth simply doesn't exist.

Locally-owned and socially-minded enterprises are more likely to employ, buy and invest locally. But how do you ensure local people engage with this if, for example, some people are fifth-generation unemployed, have never passed a qualification, owned a car or even perhaps had a bank account in their own name?

It's about recognising the assets in people and unlocking them. At **Building Futures East**, Reemer explained, a relational one-to-one approach is used. We engage every household in a given neighbourhood, currently in Walker. We use a blend of asset-based community development, coaching, mentoring and teaching. We use carefully structured listening conversations

which employ tactical questioning to bring to the surface what a person wants for themselves and what they want for their community.

If we find two or three people share the same idea, then we bring them together, and together we act on what we're hearing. Once the person agrees to engaging in the process we walk alongside them for as long as it takes and we never refer them on. Instead we invite the systems and services to come into the conversation. It remains hyper local and inclusive. The work with the person can go in any direction, for no set duration and has no agenda.

We look for a moment of 'emerging authority'; this is the moment when a person starts to take control. This then means they are tackling their own root causes of 'stuckness' or exclusion and will eventually be able to take control themselves.

Lastly, we are seeking long-term changes in the systems and services surrounding the community through a nudge approach. One aspect of the project that's helping this is the time donors, who are frontline public service staff that are learning the methodology and are employing it with local people and then are taking the learning, intelligence and new behaviours back to their workplace.

Emerging predominant themes

In essence Reemer described, in more structural, theoretical terms, a process used successfully in diverse contexts by all the 'seeds of change' contributors.

Throughout we can recognise the following predominant themes:

- Long-term person-centred mentoring
- Flexible volunteering and training opportunities
- Building on community context and community assets
- Engagement with resource-holders and service-providers, starting with understanding and valuing the experience of people excluded by the economy

Councillor Karen Kilgour

(NTCA Inclusive Economy portfolio holder, May 2021 – present)



Cllr Kilgour, who was unable to stay for the afternoon session gave an initial response on behalf of NTCA and the inclusive Economy Board. She said the aim of

the Combined Authority and Board was to ensure access to well paid secure jobs so that people had a reliable source of income and were freed from the stresses of poverty and discrimination

She thanked people for sharing their personal stories and said she was taking on board the primacy of respecting people's dignity and the importance of community. "It will be

important to build on the community support which was such a vital resource during COVID."

She was horrified to hear in the Northumberland workshop of the persistence of judgemental attitudes towards the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. She accepted the need to move away from transactional and even abusive relationships, recognising the centrality of the quality of relationship. She said she looked forward to working together to achieve the changes needed to make the economy work for everyone.

Lunchtime offered an opportunity to find out more about these creative community initiatives, then it was time for:

Responses from the Inclusive Economy Board members

This session was chaired by Helen Goodman, who was the former MP for Bishop Auckland and a keen advocate on poverty issues. She is now a trustee of Church Action on Poverty at national level. While acknowledging the limitations on the role of the Board, she called on the members to respond to what they had heard from the communities in the morning and to explain more about the work of the Board.



■ **Bishop Christine Hardman (chair of the Board, March 2020–21)**

Bishop Christine opened the session by saying she had been delighted when she was invited to chair the Board because she thought it was a real opportunity to make a difference. From the start she was determined that the Board would not be a talking shop but would be about action to improve peoples lives, and the breadth of the membership of the Board reflected that aspiration. She thanked those who had contributed to the morning, particularly those who had shared their personal stories in a very moving way and looked forward to further engagement.

■ **Cllr Joyce McCarty (Newcastle councillor holding the NTCA Inclusive Economy portfolio, March 2020 – May 2021)**

Cllr McCarty started by saying she welcomed the extra powers which came with the establishment of the Combined Authority and she appreciated being supported by a strong team of officers. She emphasised that the experience of Covid had reinforced the understanding that social, emotional and economic development are interrelated. She then went on to highlight some aspects of the Board's work:

- The **Good Work Pledge** is the Combined Authority's main tool for improving employment practice and promoting good jobs at all levels in the area. It encourages payment of the Real Living Wage as a minimum, supports the right to trade union membership, and encourages training and mentoring leading to career progression.
- **Kickstart** has been rolled out, offering young people six months' paid work experience with mentor support to the next steps.
- **Apprenticeships** have been made more available and better coordinated.
- **Poverty proofing in schools** has been supported.
- **IT equipment** with dongle internet access has been provided through schools.
- **Benefit take-up** has been promoted.

She acknowledged that the morning's contributions had made it very clear that

not everyone is able to move into work at this point in time. Opportunities are needed at the right time in the right place. She concluded by encouraging people to use their vote as politicians make decisions which affect their lives.

■ **Cllr Peter Eardley (represents North Tyneside Council on the Board)**

Councillor Eardley explained two of the current foci in North Tyneside:

- A joined-up, wraparound approach to service delivery
- A serious effort to engage communities from the start in developing strategies to tackle their issues rather than consulting on a fully developed strategy

He went on to highlight some North Tyneside initiatives, e.g.

- Providing holiday meal vouchers and free uniforms for families on low incomes
- Resourcing small businesses to provide the training and support needed by their employees

■ **Lynn Cramman (manager at Cobalt Business Park)**

Her role includes developing links between the community and the business park. She also feels the business park can play a role in supporting small businesses to sign up to the Good Work Pledge, e.g. by providing access to training and mentoring for employees on a collective basis. Finally, she feels there is scope to develop the potential to build on the volunteer hours available to the community from employees in the business park, e.g. providing mentoring for young people.

■ **Anne Lyall** (CEO of Northumberland Community Voluntary Action) was also present but preferred to remain in the body of the hall rather than join the panel of Board members.

■ **Apologies** had been received from: Professor Mark Schucksmith (Newcastle University); Jonathan Walker (NE chamber of Commerce); Alan Ferguson (Fergusons Transport); and Ross Smith (Northumbrian Water), all expressing an interest in any follow-up. Apologies were also received from Carol Botten (VONNE) and Katherine Cowell (Regional Schools Commissioner).

Making the **Economy** work for **Everyone**

A question-and-answer session followed these opening statements.

■ **Long-term core funding**

The question asked if the Board recognised the need and could commit to going back to long-term core funding so that community-based organisations could continue their important contribution to making the economy work for everyone.

Bishop Christine clarified that the Board did not have its own budget but made recommendations to Cabinet re budget commitments. Cllr McCarty said Newcastle Council had made a commitment to longer-term funding for voluntary sector infrastructure projects.

■ **Centralisation of services and rural deprivation: limited connectivity, limited transport**

The question asked if the NTCA would reverse the trend of centralisation which had withdrawn rurally-based services, e.g. locally-based health services, advice services and youth provision.

It also asked how NTCA would address lack of connectivity, poor transport and low wages in rural areas

Bishop Christine indicated that Professor Schucksmith, who had been unable to attend, was the Board's expert in rural affairs but there was an aspiration that the Combined Authority would begin to address inequality of provision across the region. There is also a current consultation on bus services.

■ **Disability rights including mental health**

The question was whether job applicants should declare a history of mental ill health or disability in the initial stages of job applications. It was advised that this should be encouraged as flexible working is now a right.

■ **Fairness Commissions addressing Inequality**

Newcastle had a Fairness Commission – is there a role for a fairness commission across the wider authority and how would its success be measured, e.g. progress on payment of the Real Living Wage – curbing exploitation by poor employers, delivering on community wealth building?

Cllr McCarty said Newcastle City Council had paid all its employees the real Living Wage since 2012 but had not become accredited as a Real Living Wage Employer due to contracted services. The council felt it could not afford the increased cost of contracts (particularly in the care sector) that insistence on payment of the Real Living Wage would incur.

Cllr Eardley confirmed that North Tyneside was in a similar position.

Cllr McCarty said 70% of Newcastle City Council's spend was within the region.

Likewise Cllr Eardley said North Tyneside's spend was retained within the area whenever possible and that suppliers had to meet certain criteria, e.g. green credentials and good employment practices.

It was suggested that HMRC could be a source of useful information on malpractice by employers, but ultimately changes in employment law and enforcement are needed.

■ **Building Back Better and support during a time of transition**

The need for support and the inadequacy of Universal Credit when transitioning between jobs was raised – it was hoped that support could be improved at local level through better coordination between organisations.

In conclusion

The afternoon concluded with a commitment from the Board to engage in a follow up process to address the key issues raised which fall within its remit and to explore further the potential for building on the creative community initiatives presented.

A proposal was made that joint visits (community and board members) to areas with different experiences of community wealth building could be a productive way of developing a partnership approach.

It was also suggested that visits to the participating communities could be arranged for Board members who had been unable to attend the day.

For further information email Pat Devlin, patdev48@btinternet.com (Secretary to Church Action on Poverty NE and Event Coordinator).