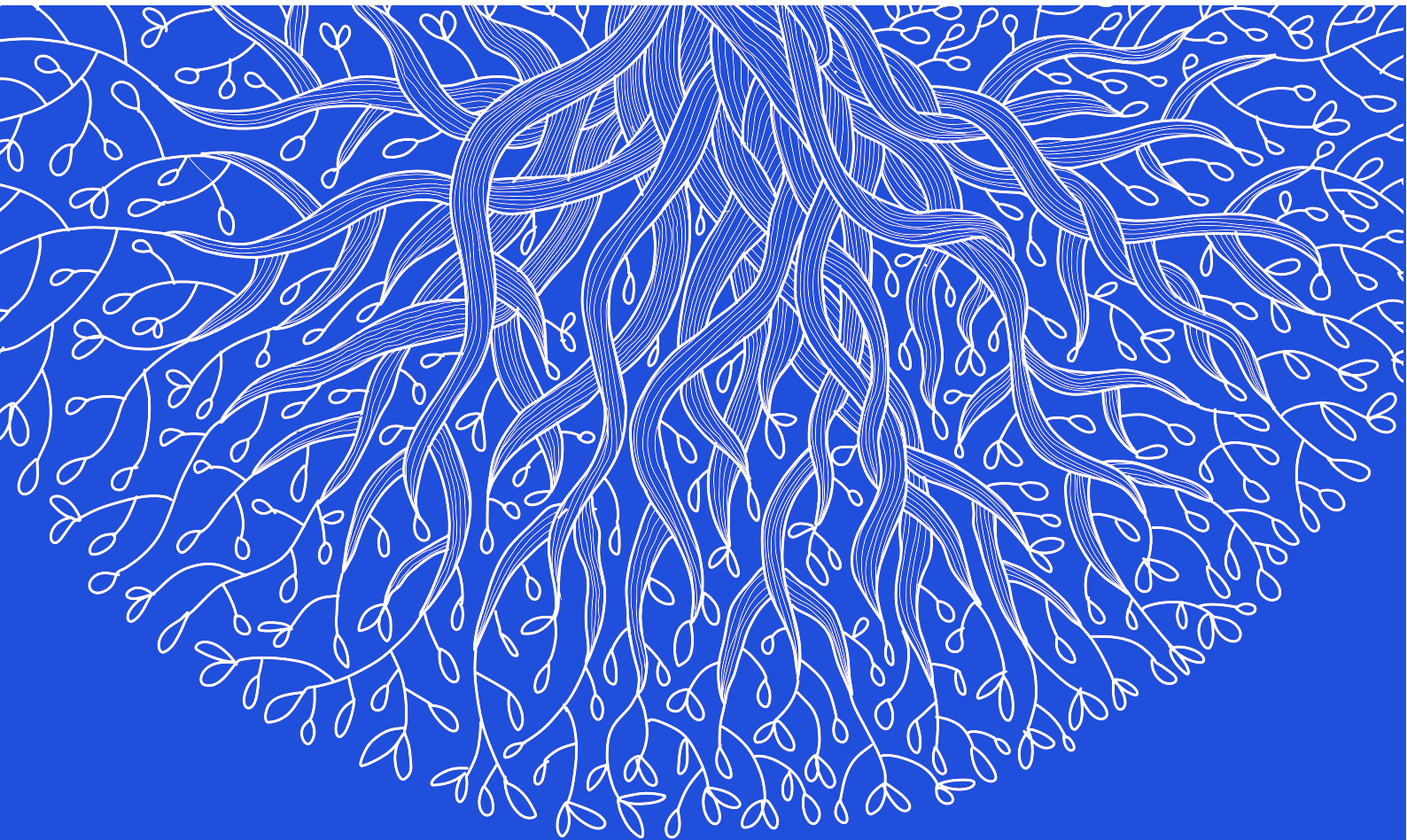# The 'Locally Rooted' Community Business:

meanings, practices, challenges and the role of community assets

Dr Bethany Rex and Dr Katrina Foxton

About this report

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This research was funded in 2019 by a grant from the Power to Change Research Institute's open call for research. These grants aim to support the community business sector and its partners to deliver the evidence the sector needs for its own development, and to make the case for the value of community business. The work and any views presented are the authors' own.

Dr Bethany Rex and Dr Katrina Foxton and the Social Design Institute (SDI) at University of the Arts London undertook research which looked at the multiple meanings and practices attached to being 'locally rooted' by community businesses who were delivering services from transferred assets (community asset transfers known as CATs). Power to Change specify 'locally rooted' as one of the core characteristics of community business and attach significant value to the idea. Yet, what this term means to community businesses and how being locally rooted works in practice has not been explored in detail. This presents a challenge for funders and partners who wish to support and nurture this work as well as for other community businesses looking to learn from their peers.

The project focused on community businesses' own definitions of the term 'locally rooted', the practices associated with these definitions and how common challenges are overcome. Across all these aims we have also sought to explore the role of community assets in these settings. This report is not meant to be the final word; we hope that it can be part of ongoing conversations about the practices and politics of community businesses and how they are influenced by policy interventions or funding initiatives.

About the authors

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Bethany Rex is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at University of Warwick and an Associate Fellow at the Social Design Institute, University of the Arts London.

With museums, public space, local government and community initiatives as her focus, Bethany is interested in the restructuring and reshaping of public space governance under conditions of austerity. She is currently involved in research into the ways in which local authority cultural provision in England is being reconfigured and how the ethics and values of public cultural work are balanced with new modes of income-generation and commercialisation.

Katrina Foxton is a freelance researcher and Heritage and Community Engagement Officer at a country park managed by Hampshire County Council.

Following on from her doctoral research, which focused on heritage CATs and social value (University of York), Katrina's professional interests lie in enabling community interventions of heritage and place management, and exploring entrepreneurial opportunities within areas of deprivation. Intellectually, she is fascinated particularly by potential (dis)connections between policy and pragmatism in heritage management, and more generally with how people form relationships with 'place'.

The Social Design Institute (SDI) champions social and sustainable design at University of the Arts London (UAL).

It works to build upon, amplify, support, connect and promote the research, practice, and knowledge exchange carried out by staff and students across UAL's six colleges, including its award-winning research centres. The Institute's mission is to use research insights to inform and shape how designers and organisations do design, resulting in positive and equitable improvements to communities, society and the environment. It achieves this mission through original research and the translation of research through knowledge exchange, as well as informing teaching and learning.

Acknowledgements

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This research could not have been conducted without the generous and insightful contributions of all the participants in the workshops and follow-up interviews. We are grateful for their contributions and allowing us the privilege to identify them.

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Gavin Marshall (AFMET)
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Dave Waller (Bert Boyden Community Centre)
John Mooney (Big Local North Cleethorpes)

Contents
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Executive summary
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This report presents the findings of the 'Locally Rooted Community Business' project which looked at the multiple meanings attached to being locally rooted by community businesses operating from assets transferred from the local authority.

The project focused on community businesses' own definitions of the term 'locally rooted', the practices associated with these definitions and how common challenges are overcome. Across all these aims we have also sought to explore the role of community assets in these settings.

The research methods

The research involved 17 community businesses operating a transferred asset working in three of Power to Change's 'priority places': Bristol, Grimsby and Leicester. In this research a transferred asset refers to a building transferred from local authority ownership to a community organisation or social enterprise which manages the asset, or owns it outright. We ran face-to-face and virtual workshops and used interviews to delve into the realities of being a locally rooted community business.

Academic approach

Our aim for this research is to encourage funders to reflect on the criteria they use to evaluate funding applications and the influence of the language they use on the organisations they fund, and on how community businesses are perceived more broadly. As part of this we have drawn on the idea of the 'local trap' put forward by Mark Purcell.[1] We see this approach as vitally important given the trend within government policy to legitimise pushing responsibility for public services downwards by celebrating the local as inherently better than other scales. The 'local trap' is the tendency to assume the local scale, and within that local people and local things, are inherently more democratic, more sustainable, more socially just and generally 'better' than other scales such as the regional, national or global. As geographer David Harvey observes, the 'warming glow of localness' can blind us to important issues of meaning, power, purpose and practices.[2] In order to avoid making assumptions about what counts as local for people and groups, we have maintained a focus on practices and the everyday reality of overcoming challenges associated with being locally rooted. We hope this report is evidence of the benefits of such an approach.

1 Purcell, Mark, 'Urban Democracy and the Local Trap', *Urban Studies*, 43:11, (2006), 1921–1941 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980600897826>
2 David Harvey, 'Heritage and scale: settings, boundaries and relations', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21.6 (2015), 577–593, p. 589.

Conversations about community business and indeed 'local' or 'community' initiatives more generally have been shaped by the wish to influence policy. As researchers we have approached these topics not as causes to be championed but objects of enquiry. As such, while this report contains key messages for funders and others involved in the work of community business, its primary aim is to deepen understanding of community business and the consequences of labelling them as 'locally rooted'.

Findings

Our key findings relate to a variety of themes:

The term 'locally rooted' resonated with community businesses

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Community businesses felt 'locally rooted' to be an apt description of their characteristics, motivations and working practices. As researchers we also found that the term provided a productive starting point for broad-ranging discussions about how community businesses operate and why.

While this resonance and utility should not be overlooked, what emerges is that community businesses did not uncritically accept the 'locally rooted' idea.

A deeper look: 'locally rooted' is both a blessing and a curse

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People operating community businesses did problematise the term on several levels:

First, the work of a community business is not limited to a clearly defined 'locale' or geographical zone. While many community businesses did use a language of geographical boundaries (e.g. postcodes or administrative regions) to talk about their work remit – illustrating the influence of requirements for 'place based' working – many seek to extend their work beyond this local scale and attract service users from further afield. Moreover, many community businesses work across multiple scales on wider socially progressive agendas, so a language of the 'local' does not do justice to their ambitions for broader political and social influence.

Second, the research found community businesses engaged in very different types of work but are united by a desire to be inclusive and welcoming to anyone who wishes to access the services they provide or use the spaces they operate. Community businesses reject connotations of exclusivity that come with the term 'local'. Part of this has to do with a heightened awareness that the opportunity to operate a community asset does not exist everywhere that it might be needed. This awareness of being part of an unequal landscape of service provision and community asset ownership only served to bolster these ambitions.

Third – and following on from the last point – people operating community businesses are motivated to make space for the complicated diversity of the areas they operate within, with many taking the unfixed and fluctuating nature of their locality as the starting point for their work. Community businesses aren't blinded by the local in a simplistic or nostalgic way but engage with it as a political arena, full of conflicts and tension.

Given the importance attached to these dynamics by community businesses, it is important that funders or supporters keep both the wider picture and inevitable differences and tensions between groups of people and their conceptions and experiences of place in mind.

Being a 'locally rooted' community business does not come naturally from being 'local'

Debates about the role of local people and organisations in solving complex social challenges often emphasize the importance of the local identity of these actors. Despite substantial differences in ideological and political commitments, this heralding of the local is a theme running through New Labour's approach to community participation and the 2010-15 Conservative-Lib Dem Coalition Government's approach to localism.[3] A similar emphasis on the local can be found in the language used by funders. For example, the Power to Change website advocates community businesses being run 'by local people for the benefit of local people' as this is seen as part of what makes them locally rooted. Here, a language of the local is used as part of an argument for 'locally rooted' community businesses as well placed, with adequate government support, to address varied local needs. However, in this research we argue that 'local rootedness' is not simply a characteristic which

3   See Nick Clarke and Allan Cochrane, 'Geographies and politics of localism: The localism of the United Kingdom's coalition government', *Political Geography*, 34 (2013), 10–23.

naturally arises when a local person is at the helm of an organisation.[4] For a community business to be locally rooted requires hard work and effort by staff to translate the sense of accountability they feel towards the local into ways of working that ensure the organisation is connected and responsive to local people's needs and interests.

This has clear implications for the importance attached to local representation on boards of trustees, as it may be more important to question the agendas people are working towards rather than the reductive matter of their address or birthplace. Relatedly, some community businesses questioned whether a terminology of 'local people' allows us to get to grips with important questions of class and ethnicity. If we want to see power transferred outwards as well as downwards then we need to ask whether the emphasis on someone's 'localness' is the best way forward. Of course, it is highly likely that funders and others are more than aware of these issues but the fact is that language matters: it is what community businesses interact with as they draft funding applications and it is part of what they use to understand where they sit in the broader system of the community and voluntary sector.

Knowledge of 'local needs' is at the heart of the 'locally rooted' community business

Community businesses use a variety of approaches to ensure their work is informed by an in-depth knowledge of local needs. This allows community businesses to avoid providing services that are ill-suited to the community by relying on representations of local need constructed by people without first-hand knowledge of a place. We heard from people doing this work how they go about the difficult business of reaching consensus about whose perspectives to take forward and how to balance the demands of funders and other partners against the desires of other stakeholders. Our research shows that community businesses are not entirely free to work at the scales that they wish. The demands of funders can supersede their plans but experienced practitioners have the agency to adapt and bend this issue to their advantage.

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4   Our interests in the practicalities and how things are done has been influenced by Helen Graham's work on heritage, politics and participation. See, for example, 'Power, Purpose and Practices: Insatiable debates about community engagement and participation in museums' (August, 2018) <https://bradfordsnationalmuseum.org/2018/08/21/power-purpose-and-practices-insatiable-debates-about-community-engagement-and-participation-in-museums/> [Accessed 22 October 2020].

Yet the range of formal and informal approaches they use to develop this knowledge show us that this is about more than service design. People operating community businesses have a strong sense of accountability both towards the place they live and the different people and groups who live there. Many are always looking to expand their connections and develop relationships with people with different perspectives because they see these relationships as part of what gives meaning to their work.

Many community businesses operating from transferred assets told us they wanted to do more to go beyond delivering services or hosting events *on behalf of* others by investing in community development approaches, but had consistently struggled to make this happen. Existing staff did all they could to build relationships, stay connected and offer support, but there is clear potential to provide community businesses with the resources to employ community development staff. Several community businesses felt it was important that the wider community saw the building as a resource for them to use because of its previous life as part of the public sector. However, without the resources to invest in staff to support a community to explore ideas for how they might use their skills towards using the building in new and innovative ways, community businesses found themselves working *on behalf of* others much more often than they would like.

Community assets serve a variety of functional and symbolic roles

Community businesses are driven to take on assets that are often 'challenging' buildings in terms of their upkeep costs, because they see the activity that takes place within these spaces as part of a rooting process for communities. The asset provides a physical space for diverse communities to come together and root by sharing experiences and memories. Community businesses spoke about wanting to be part of the process by which people come to feel they belong in a place. Within this, extending a welcome to a range of groups from beyond the building's specific locality, who may not live close to community spaces, was felt to be just as important as being open to people living in close proximity to the asset.

Although community assets play a multiplicity of roles for individuals, communities and places, they can be a drain on community businesses' resources unless an appropriate lease arrangement with the local authority is in place. Community businesses with a favourable lease can generate significant financial benefits from operating an asset. Furthermore several participants told us that having the asset had led to funders and partners taking them more seriously, with their commitment to the building being read as a symbol of longevity and ambition. Sadly, knowledge about how to negotiate such an arrangement often emerged in hindsight, which is why we have included an extended discussion and set of recommendations about asset transfer in the report.

Concluding remarks

Through this research we have sought to confront and problematise the idea of the community business as 'locally rooted'. In order to avoid making assumptions about the 'local' we have maintained a focus on practices and the everyday reality of overcoming challenges associated with being locally rooted. The report concludes with a series of recommendations directed towards our key audiences: community businesses and those who seek to fund and support them. It is our hope that this report will prompt community businesses to recognise what they *already* do as valuable forms of engagement work or to spark inspiration for those who are looking for it. It is also a learning opportunity for funders and other bodies to reflect on the pressure of external agendas and their role in shaping the activities of the organisations they aim to nurture.

1. Introduction

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1.1 Why this research now?

We began this project with a very specific aim in mind: to capture and dig deeper into what it means to call something 'local' for people and groups who operate buildings that have been transferred from the local council. How does the desire to involve the 'local community' work in practice? How is a community identified? How and why do those doing it make it happen, from the very practical steps involved, to the challenge of making decisions when you're confronted with lots of different people and perspectives? What different approaches have developed where and why?

Our interest in these questions came from the experiences we'd both had as researchers doing PhDs into community asset transfer, a process that allows public bodies to dispose of land and buildings to community groups at less than market value. As part of our PhD research, we learnt that people who had been driven to get involved in operating community buildings at risk of closure wanted to engage with the wider community to make decisions about how these spaces should be used. What several of the groups who participated in our research told us, however, was that they weren't sure where to start or whether their approach to engaging with the community was in line with the requirements of funders looking for evidence of consultation. While a general motivation to develop relationships with others underpinned these concerns, there was also the feeling of pressure from funders and the local authority for groups to prove that their plans for the asset would benefit a broad range of people, not just the people directly involved in the transfer.

Beyond our personal trajectories, the key context for this research project is a series of political shifts which have led to greater emphasis on the role of 'community' in the design and delivery of public services, including community management of assets. While the politics underpinning these shifts are different, there has been a shift in policy towards – on the face of it – recognising the value that flows from enabling people and groups, from small-scale community groups to established voluntary organisations, to play more of an active role in the places they live.[5] One of the assumptions underpinning these initiatives is the belief that local people are often the best placed to solve local problems.

5   See Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), 'Making assets work: The Quirk Review', (London: DCLG, 2007) <https://libraries.communityknowledgehub.org.uk/sites/default/files/making_assets_work_-_the_quirk_review_of_community_management_and_ownership_of_public_assets.pdf> ; DCLG, 'Communities in control: real people, real power', (London: DCLG, 2008) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228678/7427.pdf>; HM Government, 'The Coalition: Our Programme for Government' (London: HM Government, 2010) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/78977/coalition_programme_for_government.pdf> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

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While this emphasis on community and the local is clearly convenient in the wake of wider (top-down) state restructuring and austerity, it also speaks to the real desire of many people to make positive and lasting change in their area.

In our view, the emphasis on community business is important as although successive governments have spoken about the value of community, what many places have experienced is a mismatch between the rhetoric and the reality. In an increasingly complex landscape of welfare and service provision, public sector funding and provision has substantially reduced (albeit unevenly and unequally) and what resources do exist tend to be allocated to private providers that often have very little interest in establishing ongoing relationships with the places they operate in or the people who live there.[6]

Some of the terms used in this report are not easy to define, either because they are specialised or because people have different perspectives on what they mean. For clarity, when we say:

Community asset transfer (CAT) we mean:
buildings formerly operated by the local authority transferred to an external organisation at less than market value.

Community business we mean:
the organisations who participated in the research. We do not mean all community businesses. We do not mean all the participating organisations would meet the definition of a community business in the eyes of Power to Change either.

It is in this context that Power to Change has sought to advocate for the value of community business. It describes being 'locally rooted' as one of four characteristics of community business, a quality it defines as: 'a business started by local people that will benefit the immediate community around it. Community businesses are rooted in a particular geographical place. They build on the strengths and assets of that place to address community needs'.[7]

6   See Locality, 'Scale fail: why our public service market is failing people' (2018) <https://locality.org.uk/blog/scale-fail-why-our-public-service-market-is-failing-people/> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

7   'What support and funding is available?', *Power to Change*, <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/get-support/>   .

By exploring the meanings[8] and purposes community businesses attach to the idea of being locally rooted and how these translate into various practices, we have attempted to 'confront and problematise the local'.[9]

For more detailed definitions of community asset transfer and community business see Appendix 1.

1.2 Aims of the research

We began from the position that to search for perfect examples of locally rooted community businesses was a fool's errand, given that notions of what constitutes success or best practice can look very different depending on the context of the locale in question or who's asking the question. As we outlined above, based on our interest in the nitty gritty of 'community' work more generally (what it means, how it feels, its politics and ethics) our aim was to generate findings that spoke to the concerns of community businesses, especially those new to the world of community organisations, and to inform funders' practices in terms of assessing and supporting funding applicants.

8   Illustrations, created by Katrina Foxton, have been used to visualise some of the meanings gathered during research and are laid out in the Findings Section.
9   See Neil Barnett, 'English local government and the local trap', *Local Government Studies*, 46.4 (2020), 604–621, p. 606.

Specifically the research aims were to:

01	**Explore whether the term 'locally rooted' resonated with community businesses and the meanings and purposes participants attached to the idea.**
02	**Deepen understanding of what being locally rooted looks like in practice and to share this 'know-how' of different approaches between community businesses.**
03	**Pinpoint the challenges associated with being locally rooted to understand how these are addressed in practice.**
04	**Consider how such practices can lead to sustainability of community businesses and what lessons and hopes our participants had for this, in the face of challenging times.**

We have necessarily focused on the perspectives of people operating community businesses, not the local people and groups who they interact with. As John Hitchin astutely observed in a working paper on place-based approaches to community business support, however: 'there is a risk that a focus on "people-powered localism" celebrates the defaults of places, and not what it might take to improve that place for local people'.[10] In other words, we may have flourishing community businesses all talking about being locally rooted but are these operating in such a way as to create the type of change many feel is needed or are they defaulting to what they know, and what the structures they operate in allow? A limitation of this research is that it does not explore the outcomes of the various practices of local rootedness it illustrates. Instead, we engage with the meanings and purposes assigned to the idea of being locally rooted and how this idea is made and remade in practice.

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10 John Hitchin, 'Community business in place: a working paper', *Power to Change* (October 2018) p. 20 <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Community-Businesses-in-Place-Working-Paper-Final.pdf> [Accessed 3 October 2020].

1.3 Current definition of 'locally rooted'

Power to Change defines 'locally rooted' as:

"a business started by local people that will benefit the immediate community around it. Community businesses are rooted in a particular geographical place. They build on the strengths and assets of that place to address community needs."[11]

Power to Change has taken the following assumptions as a starting point for further research and evaluation:

"Community businesses deliver the products and services best suited to their area because they are locally rooted and closely connected to the communities they serve."[12]

This hypothesis has been altered slightly since we began this project to:

"Community businesses have high levels of customer/user satisfaction because they understand what people want. This is because the majority of staff, volunteers and/or customers/service users are from the local area. As a result, they offer better products and services than alternative providers."[13]

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11   Power to Change, 'What funding and support is available?' <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/get-support/> [Accessed 20 October 2020].

12   Power to Change, 'A consultation on Power to Change's Register of Hypotheses' (2019), p. 2.

13   Power to Change, 'Register of hypotheses – October 2019', <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Register-of-hypotheses-2019_FINAL-02.10.19.pdf> [Accessed 20 October 2020].

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In both formulations, the relationship between community and place is key to this characteristic, as is the knowledge contained within community businesses about the dynamics of a place and its needs.[14] The most recent document replaces the term 'locally rooted' with the suggestion that community businesses can deliver something that other types of business cannot because its staff, volunteers and service users are 'from' the same place.

Based on discussions with community businesses, this report unpacks this definition within the research findings section 'How did community businesses define 'locally rooted'?'. In seeking to avoid falling into the 'local trap' and through our exploration of what community businesses consider local rootedness to be and its everyday practice, we question whether there is more to what makes a community business locally rooted than being *from* a place.[15]

14   The characterisation of community businesses as locally rooted can be traced back to a report published in 2015. See, Adam Swersky and James Plunkett, '"What if we ran it ourselves?" Getting the measure of Britain's emerging community business sector' (2015) https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/What-if-we-ran-it-ourselves-JAN2015.pdf [Accessed 13 November 2020].

15   The key question here being: is place the same place for everyone in that place? 'No' would be the resounding answer from Timothy Ingold, Doreen Massey and other key cultural geographers such as Nigel Thrift, who highlight the intersectionality and entangling of places. This positioning highlights how race, gender, physical (dis)abilities and other characteristics change our experiences of 'place', thus complicating the notion of the 'local''.

2.
Carrying out the research
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This research intended to explore the perspectives of people and groups operating community businesses from transferred assets and to get under the skin of their ways of working. As outlined above, one of the aims of this project was to establish and deepen connections between community businesses working in the same area, and in particular to connect people at an early stage of the asset transfer process with those with several years' experience of operating buildings (Aim 2). The methods used to gather data were selected with this aim in mind.

We used a case study approach in order to explore perspectives and practices of community businesses in depth and within their real-life context.[16] We used workshops and interviews to gather data in relation to our research questions.

We provide attributed quotations from interviews and workshop discussion throughout the report. While we acknowledge that there are important differences between what people might say in a group setting and an interview, we do not distinguish between contributions here.

Please see Appendix 2 for a full description of the research methods.

Online workshop with Bristol Participants.
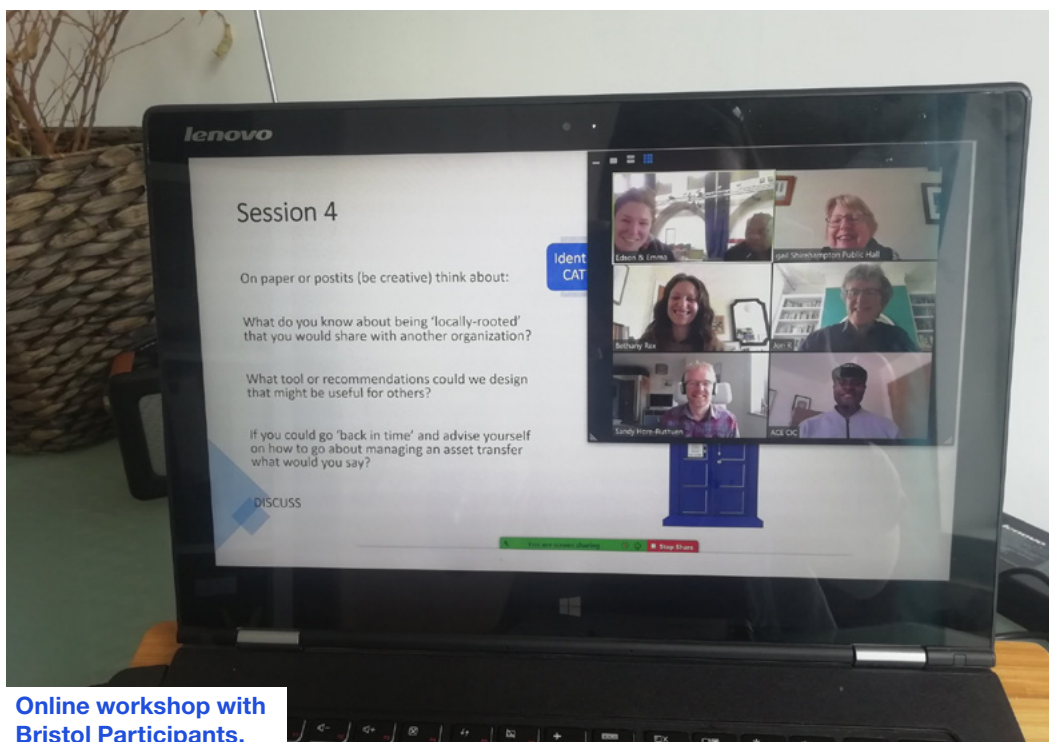
16 Robert K. Yin, *Case study research, design and method* (London: Sage, 2009), p. 4.

Workshops at Grimsby.

Worksheets and notes sent back by participants.

Case studies

01 Grimsby/Cleethorpes

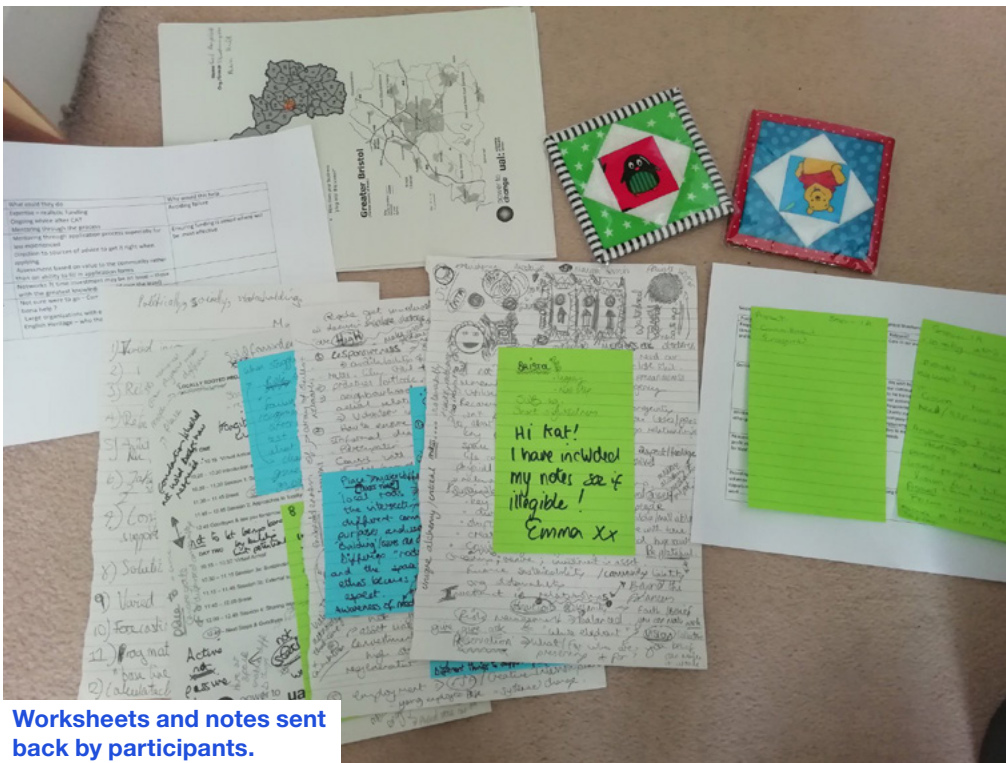**Population:** Grimsby 88,200+ Cleethorpes 39,500+[17]
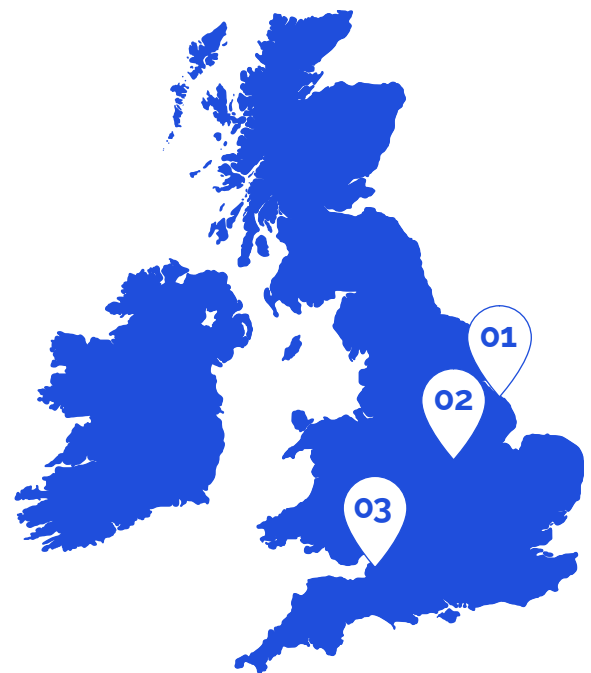
Demographic info: 97% White British

Political makeup: In 2019 national election, NELINCS went from red (Labour) to blue (Conservative) for the first time in 74 years.

Local authority: North East Lincolnshire, in partnership with private local authority service provider ENGIE. NELINCS had previously worked with some of the participants on CAT policy but had since changed approach. It is now working with organisation Locality and regional North Bank Forum on CAT policies.

Numbers of initially identified CATs: 20

02 Leicester

Population: 329,000+[18]

Demographic info: 50% White British, 37% Asian, 6% BME

Political makeup: 2019 Labour, with 52 seats already, won another 1 from Conservatives.

Local authority: Leicester City Council. This council's approach to CATs is notable as it has sold most of its assets. Most community organisations pay rent to LCC of around £15,000 p.a.

Numbers of initially identified CATs: 13

03 Bristol

Population: 428,100+[19]

Demographic info: 84% White British, 16% BAME (notably these percentages change dramatically depending on wards)

Political makeup: Labour 35 / Conservative 14 / Green 11 / Lib Dem 9

Local authority: Bristol City Council. Had worked on a CAT policy but participants were critical about how this was being applied in practice.

Numbers of CATs initially identified: 26

17 Office for National Statistics, '2011 Census Data', *ONS webpage* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/2011censusdata>. [Accessed 7 October 2020].

18 Office for National Statistics, '2011 Census Data', *ONS webpage* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/2011censusdata>. [Accessed 7 October 2020].

19 Office for National Statistics, '2011 Census Data', *ONS webpage* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/census/2011census/2011censusdata>. [Accessed 7 October 2020].

3.
Research findings
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3.1 How did community businesses define 'locally rooted'?

In this section we consider how the term 'locally rooted' was received and interpreted by those who participated in this project.

The current definition of locally rooted used by Power to Change contains several subjective and conceptual terms. Each of the headings in this section presents analysis of data from the workshops and interviews to shed light on how these terms – highlighted in the definition below – were understood by community businesses.

"a business started by local people that will benefit the immediate community around it. Community businesses are rooted in a particular geographical place. They build on the strengths and assets of that place to address community needs."

3.1.1 Did the term 'locally rooted' resonate with community businesses?

For the 17 community businesses who participated in the research, the term 'locally rooted' deeply resonated with the way they thought about their role and their way of working. The term also prompted detailed discussion about the motivations and values informing their work, many of which go beyond 'the local'. This contrasts with other terms in circulation such as 'community accountability' which earlier research found did not resonate with the values-based practice of community businesses.[20]

This was not just a question of the term being vague and therefore attractive to a broad range of people. There was a strong consensus that it was an apt description of the characteristics and working practices of a community business. This position was exemplified by Angie Wright of B-inspired in Leicester:

"It really resonates with me and with what we do. I think it's quite straightforward actually the term. It says what it is. I think there's maybe been other variations of the same meaning in the past you know, like community-based or whatever. I think the thing about the rootedness I think is key to it to be honest.

20   Eliza Buckley and Mike Aiken, 'Community accountability in community businesses', *Power to Change Research Institute Report No.10* (2017) <https://www.powertochange. org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Reseach-Report-10-Digital.pdf> [Accessed 16 October 2020].

A similar perspective was shared by Priya Thamotheram of Highfields Centre, also in Leicester:

"the locally rooted concept is highly relevant. There's been other ways of describing this connectivity in neighbourhoods like hubs and so forth but for us locally rooted is significant, it reflects the focus of our work, it describes the relationship we have with our staff, our board, our volunteers."

Looking across the data, our research suggests that the term resonated with people participating in this project because:

— **People operating community businesses know that they are always learning** – the programmes and activities they offer are rooted in a deep understanding of the identities, histories and needs both of the areas they operate in and the people they seek to engage. Being rooted, we found through this work, is about developing a deep understanding of local places and people. Developing this understanding is at the heart of their work. It takes time, care, thought and resources to work against the tide of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to people's needs. We share practical examples of how community businesses develop this knowledge in 'What is locally rooted in practice?'

— **Community businesses think long-term about people and relationships** – whether with staff, volunteers or other organisations working towards similar goals there is a commitment towards making a difference to the social fabric of a place and people's lives in the long term through establishing roots.

— **People operating community businesses view community assets as roots** – operating assets (i.e. buildings) is an essential income source for many community businesses but buildings are also seen as providing essential space for people and groups to put down roots through the creation of individual and collective memories. We discuss the role of community assets in depth in 'What drives community businesses to take on assets?'

However, we would also argue that community businesses engaged with the label 'locally rooted' because it provided a means for eliciting rich accounts of the type of difference they want to make through their work and who for. Through listening to these accounts we learnt:

— **Community businesses are rooted but want to branch out** – people operating community businesses may concentrate on working with people and groups living in close proximity to their organisation but this does not mean they impose geographic restrictions on who they work with. Most community businesses feel it is important that anyone who wishes to use the space or services be made to feel welcome. However, community businesses are influenced by the preferences of funders in some aspects of their work.

— **Community businesses would like to make a difference beyond the local** – many community businesses are committed to making a positive impact on the people's lives through the programmes and activities they offer but many (not all) would like to go further, by doing work with an explicit emphasis on tackling the underlying structures that produce the needs they work to meet (e.g. health inequalities, isolation and loneliness, mental health).

3.1.2 How do community businesses think about 'the local'?

One strong finding that came from the workshops is that community businesses problematised the very idea of 'the local'.

Community businesses were conscious of the term 'local' having connotations of homogeneity, implying that a group or place was comprised of similar individuals, when accounting for difference, plurality and diversity was central to their values. Participants were concerned that in pronouncing themselves as locally rooted or local their organisations and the spaces they managed were at risk of being interpreted as exclusively for a particular group or community when they had the opposite intention.

This take on the local is highly relevant to a core debate on groups who take on formerly public buildings via the asset transfer process over whether the 'publicness' of these spaces is maintained for 'collective use for a range of functional and symbolic purposes' or whether asset transfer represents a shift to an exclusive and closed approach.[21] Jonathan Raban observes a parallel between Ambridge, the fictional setting for BBC Radio 4's *The Archers*, and the vision of society articulated by David Cameron and other key thinkers associated with the Big Society and localism agendas.[22] Importantly, the descriptions of being locally rooted articulated by community businesses could not have been further from the image of the romantic ideal of homogenous and coherent community associated with the language of localism policy. By exploring the range of meanings community businesses attach to the idea of being locally rooted, participants challenge these overly simplistic and idealised images of community and community organisations which are ubiquitous in policy.

21 Claudio De Magalhães and Sonia Freire Trigo, 'Contracting out publicness: the private management of the urban public realm and its implications', *Progress in Planning*, 115 (2017), 1–28, p. 3.
22 Jonathan Raban, Cameron's Crank, *London Review of Books*, 32.8 (2010) <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v32/n08/jonathan-raban/cameron-s-crank> [Accessed 16 October 2020].

We saw how community businesses are highly attuned to the complicated and ever-changing diversity of the communities they serve. As Emma Harvey of the Trinity Arts Centre put it:

"For a space to be truly locally rooted, you've got to have the driven people behind it to respond and adapt to a neighbourhood or locality that might shift in its priorities. Otherwise what you end up with is a closed social club or network and not really a local asset that is shared, it's about how you are responding and flexing with your use, rather than being a static kind of thing. Neighbourhoods and communities are not fixed things but what your locally rooted asset becomes is the constant through that narrative so even though the community is changing and adapting your space can be that constant thread that strings that together. That becomes hugely valuable to that sense of how a community defines itself, how people identify with one another, and how people connect in terms of civic identity."

Similarly, Dr Edson Burton, also of the Trinity Arts Centre, spoke of how the idea of a community business as locally rooted had to do with the question of difference too:

"I think of local roots as complex intersections of various communities with different local roots all intertwined, so recognising that within a space there are communities of different lengths of settlement, different needs and so on, so that in a sense it's also about responding to those different kinds of heritages and local roots that exist within a geographic space."

The 'Locally Rooted' Community Business
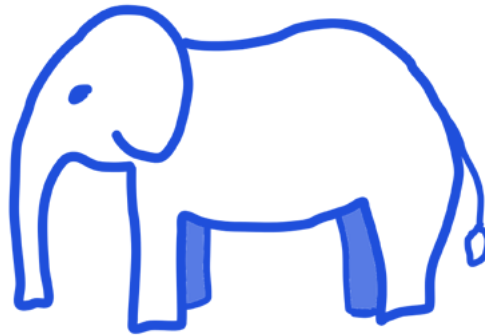
This gave rise to a discussion about the danger of community assets becoming 'white elephants', buildings with large upkeep costs which are no longer used or valued by the community. By remaining attuned to the changing demographics of a place and the shifting nature of communities themselves, a locally rooted community business can try to avoid this situation. The capacity to respond and adapt to difference was a common theme across all three workshops. The section 'What is locally rooted in practice?' describes the combination of formal and informal approaches used to achieve this.

The danger is that in using a vocabulary of the local without being explicit about the complicated politics of the way groups of people conceive of and experience the local, funders are at risk of their advocacy efforts in support of the value of locally-led initiatives being taken as part of a simplistic, parochial or nostalgic attempt to look away from the complex realities of social relations and change processes, when this is far from the case. As we have seen here, community businesses consider themselves to be committed to the local but not as a place with a fixed identity or as something that needs to be protected from fluctuations 'out there'. Quite the opposite: community businesses relish the multiplicity of the local places where they operate with many being driven by the desire to respond to the shifting identities of people and places within their work.

An important point raised by several participants was that in spite of acknowledging and attempting to respond to the complicated diversity of community, what also matters is that some groups are in the driving seat – deciding which needs to respond to and which image of community will inform their practice – while others remain at the receiving end.

3.1.3 How important is it that a community business is run by 'local people'?

Edward:
"Are you local?"

Customer:
"No"

Edward:
"This is a local shop, for local people, there's nothing for you here."

This exchange is taken from one of the best-known scenes from the BBC comedy *The League of Gentlemen*, where one of the shop owners, Edward, makes it plain to an unsuspecting customer that he is not welcome, hailing from parts unknown. Trivialising, perhaps, but the hostility towards outsiders that motivates Edward's attitude towards potential customers is an example of a parochial mentality that comes to mind with the term 'locally rooted'. As Gail Amphlett of Shirehampton Public Hall in Bristol put it during a workshop: "I worry about locally rooted being exclusive and I think there is a conflict there for me as well".

Reflections on the definition of 'locally rooted' offered by participants in this research suggest that a community business may be run by local people who are from or who live in the area but being locally rooted is more about the values and agendas of the people operating it which impacts on how things are done. This is why we find it helpful to think of 'locally rooted' as an outcome of practical arrangements (i.e. how things are done) rather than a quality which naturally arises from when a local person is at the helm of an organisation. See 'What is 'locally rooted' in practice?' for examples of this.

A locally rooted community business appears to be one run by people who want to make an impact both within and beyond a particular geographical place. Although one participant expressed the view that it was, for them, about being both born and residing in the area, other participants in this workshop were quick to say that they did not share this view. For them, it was the orientation towards a place and its people that was important for local rootedness and a sense of responsibility towards the local: not being *from* a place but being *of* a place in terms of taking responsibility for the role you might play in its present and future.

Workshop participants' initial definitions of locally rooted

- Ethos always goes back to local community needs.
- TAKES TIME.
- Services are for those families + young people
- ROOTS ARE ESSENTIAL — remove + plant dies

· Local people working together
· centre place to work from

geographically and socially linked to an area and community. With an understanding of the local conditions

working with people within our area.
what value derived from asset by local people eg £ social. what meant by 'local'?
→ immediate neighbourhood presence (shared civic i.D.)
→ different relationships with different communities in a particular locality
→ wider Town/city role eg as place of public gathering/info sharing.
Different things to different people.

Alchemy combination of elements constant process (perceptions)
① History/Heritage a place where people can → story and memories sustained use allow things forward
② Locality itself. Place/awareness + use by local people DRIVEN people
③ Mechanism of engagement and access
④ Roots/ethos responsiveness

Session 1
Emerged from the expressed needs of local people and led by local people.
Based in the area operating for the benefit of local people

- Challenge to the local
- Local roots complex intersection of various communities with dif 'local roots' intertwined
- Not wrong but best needs clarity

Locally ROOTED means:
· Being physically present in the community
· Having mutual respect and understanding of the community & its members
· Providing positive social impact to the community
· Having sustainability
· Having the community feed into your organisation (voice & influence)

IT'S desirable to have community members lead or work for your organisation

· LOCALITY ACCESSIBILITY AVAILABILITY PROMOTION OF SERVICE

Priya Thamotheram who moved from London to the Leicester area for a job at Highfields Centre, spoke of a strong affinity with the founding purpose of the Centre as a "response to emerging needs of the then migrant, recently arrived migrant communities in Leicester in the 60s", and told of the exclusion and discrimination faced by these groups over time. In this case, what makes the Centre locally rooted is not simply that its staff and volunteers are *from* the Highfields area but that they are united by a common interest in improving the lives of a community with a shared experience of exclusion.

Likewise, it was Louise Dean's personal experience of being out with a screaming toddler and finding the public toilets closed in the building she now hopes to open up which spurred her to take action, by enquiring about whether the building was available for commercial use. Again, Louise may live in close proximity to the facility she would like to turn into a functioning café and community space, but it is the steps she has taken to translate this into a commitment to confronting the ongoing closure of public toilets – and the impact this has on whether certain groups feel able to use the park – that is at the heart of what will make her project locally rooted or not.

For others, such as David Kerwin of the Manor House Community Centre in Leicester, religious belief animated the value attached to "making a difference to where I live". For David and his colleagues, providing community space and serving the community is motivated by Christian morality. David moved to the Braunstone area with his family for the explicit purpose of establishing a church and associated community activity there. Again we can see that people running community businesses care about the places they live and channel their social and/or political commitments towards them, and it is this motivation that is important rather than whether someone is local or not.

We found that there are spaces within community businesses where a purely geographical interpretation of 'local' does hold sway and there are good reasons for this. Angie Wright, of B-inspired explained how:

"In terms of decision making, 80 per cent of our board are local residents, that's partly by design because our constitution says that a third of all of our trustees have to be local residents, that we will maintain a minimum quota but it's never a third it's always a majority. We actually operate with a majority and have done the whole time."

Carol Prendergast described the influence of the criteria used to judge funding applications on the composition of the staff and board of trustees for Green Futures:

"We've got five trustees who are all from Grimsby and three of them live literally within five minutes of the project so when we're doing things around being locally rooted they [funders] want to know that it's not somebody from London who has set up a charity in Grimsby for the benefit of poor people in Grimsby, it has to be about [trails off] that for me is locally rooted, we've got four members of staff, I'm the only person that is a foreigner [i.e. not from Grimsby], the other members of staff are from Grimsby so the staff are from Grimsby, two of them used to be from Grimsby, the directors are all local people so the actual business is completely people from the area."

These comments show that it can be important for community businesses to be governed or operated by people from the local area. By appointing local people as trustees or members of staff, community businesses – especially those in deprived areas – can ensure their activities and programmes are informed by the personal knowledge of a range of people with different first-hand experiences of living in a place and using community spaces over time. In this sense, the involvement of local people is important to ensure that a community business is responding to local knowledge about places and their needs rather than relying on the perspectives of people without lived experience of a place.

People operating community business tend to be local in the conventional understanding of the term, with many being from the area where the organisation is located or currently living there. However, the fact that an organisation is run by someone from or living in a particular area does not equate to a locally rooted community business. As the definitions offered during workshops make clear, the term carries a more nuanced meaning than this. The locally rooted community business is not simply operated by local people but by people with a strong sense of responsibility towards people and place and knowledge about its needs built up over time.

3.1.4 To what extent do community businesses seek to benefit the 'immediate community around it' or a 'particular geographical place'?

This section explores how community businesses understood their remit.

We hope this analysis will encourage reflection on the importance currently attached to seemingly singular and bounded notions of benefit or remit when the reality of community business, in our research at least, appears to be much more fluid and dynamic. Of course, it is highly likely that funders and others are more than aware of these issues but the fact is that language matters: it is what community businesses interact with as they draft funding applications and it is part of what they use to understand where they sit in the broader system of the community and voluntary sector. As such, this report suggests that the language used should reflect the complexity of the landscape it attempts to describe.

The use of different kinds of maps in the workshop elicited accounts of how community businesses define their sphere of action (Appendix 2 provides a detailed description of our research methods including the role of maps). Our analysis of these discussions suggests there is a clear spatial dimension to this, with the majority of community businesses using the maps to outline the areas they focused on. Yet in every case it was more complex than this. Participants often began with a straightforward account of their area of

responsibility but frequently expanded on this in such a way as to complicate their initial descriptions.

A common approach was to talk about postcodes. This was particularly the case during the Leicester workshop where the majority of community businesses did so. For example, Angie Wright spoke of the reach of B-inspired as: "essentially in terms of our mission, we serve the LE31 postcode of Leicester which gives us a very good definition of our locality". Describing how profits made from the trading company are used: "any profits made from that are donated to the charity which are only used in the LE31 area and I think that's the difference. We define our own, you know the funds that we raise ourselves, particularly we will only use those for the delivery of services to the people of the LE31 area and that's whose benefit it's for. So are quite clear on that". For Martin Buchanan of E2 too: "the map I've drawn covers a lot of Leicester, it goes out to LE5 on the right-hand side and all the way out to LE11 at the top ... more locally, however, I would say that we are LE4, that's our locally rooted or place-based activities".

In the Leicester context, the withdrawal of council-led provision in many areas across the city appeared to be part of what drove community businesses to concentrate their work on clearly defined geographic areas. However, looking closely at the data leads us to suggest that it is not simply geographic proximity that matters to community businesses. They are in fact much more focused on establishing connections with people and communities on the basis of shared material and economic conditions and/or interests than the relatively rudimentary issue of where someone lives.

Many community businesses spoke of choosing to work in areas with similar demographics to their own. What follows from this is that remit has to do with social as well as geographic proximity. Martin Buchanan of E2 in Leicester explained: "the areas that we choose are similar to Beaumont Lees in a lot of ways in terms of demographics, we work in the most disadvantaged communities and working class communities, very little community capacity so those are the types of communities that we aim to work with: the ones with the greatest need is where you'll find that we focus our attention on". For Priya Thamotheram, postcode was one way of understanding the remit of Highfields Centre but only because this maps onto the area where migrant communities have settled in Leicester. Rather than the relatively arbitrary fact of being located in the same postcode, it was individuals and communities with shared experience of exclusion and disadvantage that Priya and colleagues sought to draw into their work.

Although geographical boundaries, notions of territory and shared social and material conditions formed part of how some participants understood their sphere of action, there were some participants who would potentially discount themselves as community businesses as per the current definition.

Take Carol Prendergast, for example, who described how the idea of benefitting an immediate community was irrelevant to how Green Futures operated, explaining that the people living closest to the project were not their main audience, with several having in fact objected to the project. Dr Edson Burton of Trinity Arts Centre in Bristol pointed out that its events tend to appeal to people from more affluent areas some distance away from the Centre itself.

Jon Rogers, of Full Circle @ Docklands, explained how they had done their own research to identify "where the young people come from": a process which had challenged their perceptions "that they were mostly from inner-city Bristol". Learning of "one child that comes from Weston which is about 15 miles away because it was the only place where they felt actually at home" led to the understanding that although "based in St-Pauls …", an inner-city district with a boundary, "the people that see [Full Circle] as their base is based more on ethnicity than on geography".
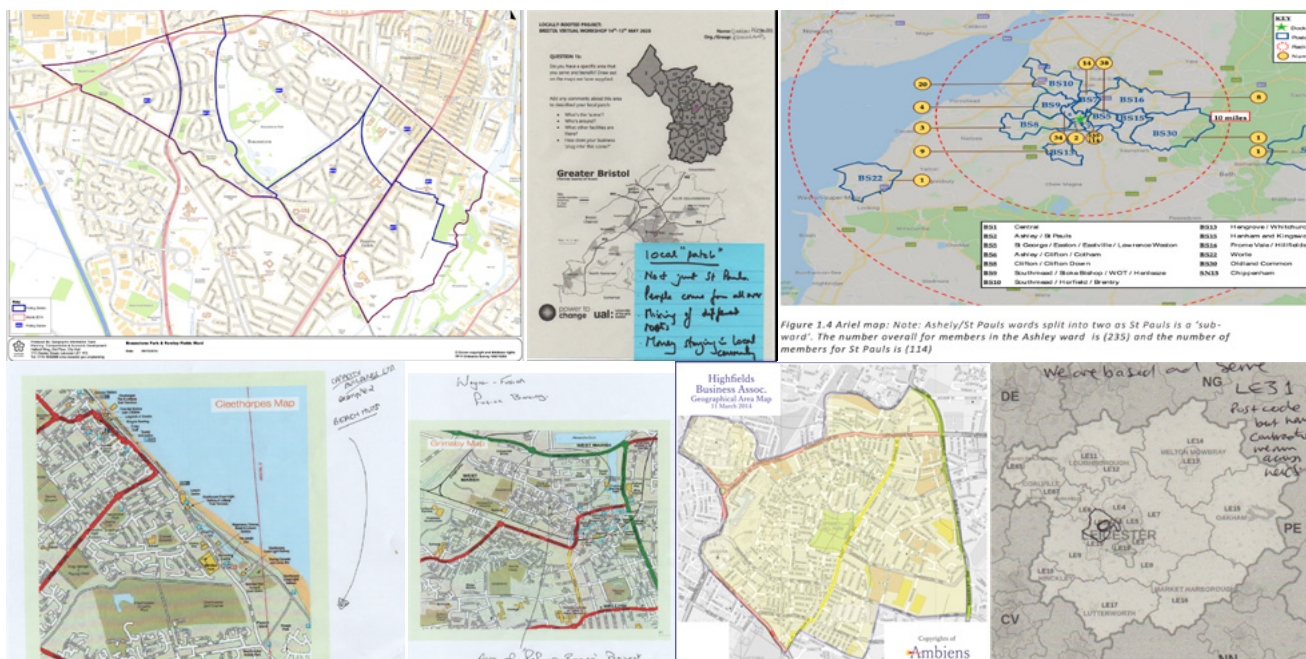
Maps of service remit by participants

Gail Amphlett, of Shirehampton Public Hall in Bristol, highlighted the welcome they extended towards groups who live some distance from the space:

"I think it's quite a strong element for community cohesion, but I am probably very wishful thinking and idealistic in holding that view … but without it, how do you bridge those gaps? How do you make and allow people who are near to a community to come in and feel a sense of being welcomed? So our hall is used by a Sri Lankan Christian church, they don't all live in Shirehampton, but we are saying very clearly this is a place where you are welcome that you can get together. You can forge your community's links here, but you are also part of this hall and we want to respect and encourage you to feel a sense of belonging to it."

In some cases, the remit of a community business or particular programmes of activity were defined by funders. This was a common theme across the workshops, particularly in Grimsby where community businesses spoke of being heavily influenced by their funders in terms of being contracted to deliver services, or target their work towards a specific population located in a particular local authority administrative area or area of social need.

Alex Baxter, of AFMET based at the Knoll in Cleethorpes, spoke of their responsibility to support veterans and their families, with the remit clearly linked to their funding from The Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust, with some services targeted across the whole of North East Lincolnshire and some extending further depending on transport links. Similarly, for Wayne Bloy, the area covered by Fusion Boxing is centred around areas of disadvantage, with the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and crime rate statistics providing his focus, particularly for project-based work funded through the Police and Crime Commissioner. Likewise, Carol Prendergast of Green Futures highlighted that the "community that you serve, and the geographical community are two different things", giving an account of being heavily influenced by the demands of funders, as evidenced in this discussion:

Carol

"geographically and financially, sometimes we are in the Yorkshire and Humber boundary, sometimes we are in North East Lincolnshire boundary and sometimes we're in Lincolnshire boundary …"

Richard:

"Or East Midlands!"

Carol:

"Yeah, and there's a tendency sometimes to mission creep because if there's some funding available in the East Midlands then it would be tenuous because we're literally at the top in a tiny little bubble …"

Others agreed, summed up by Paula Grant of Capacity Buildings:
"We are driven by funders whether we accept that or not, you have to follow their lead ... it's driven by economics for me, supply and demand, the funders are demanding that it's driven by local people, locally rooted, call it whatever you like, at the end of the day the community group needs the revenue, for me it's got to be about supply and demand, people in supply in that community wanting to do something but also demand for that service from others". Our research suggests that this form of mission creep, the gradual shifting of objectives which can lead to long-term change in focus, is a specific challenge that community businesses in Grimsby have identified. Sustaining roots via other working relationships discusses how the community businesses in Bristol and Leicester approach this issue.

Beyond the local?

Participants also believed they had a responsibility to extend their agendas further than their local remit and to connect to broader social issues impacting on their staff, volunteers and service users. Darren Alexander of Aspiration Creation Elevation (ACE) – an initiative offering activities and programmes for young people which partnered with Full Circle for the transfer of the building now known as @ Docklands – exemplified this point as part of a discussion of the importance of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement to their organisation. Darren describes the significance of his social and political perspective on his work:

"Yeah, so the Black Lives Matter movement is something which, it is integral to us as an organisation. We represent a diverse community, predominantly of BAME individuals and, you know, we've been talking about, you know, politics and politicising what we do. It is around kind of ethnic racial, you know, economic, sociological factors in society is why we exist. So when you look at the Black Lives Matter movement it just spoke for everything which we're trying to change about society and everything that we're trying to change about the world in the way of these inequalities are, you know, they are an evil which damages us as a human race. So I can't speak any more deeply or more seriously about such a movement or such a political issue, because it is absolutely paramount to who we are and what we believe."

Following on from this, several other participants spoke about the political dimension to their work. The point made here was that community businesses were political with a small 'p' rather than party political with a big 'P'. As Gail put it: "It can't not be political because the need for the voluntary sector is because the state's not doing it". Indeed, some felt their work was necessary as a way of 'filling in' or mitigating negative impact from policies: "I think everything we do is political to some extent in that it's about addressing power, it's about supporting people that are perhaps negatively affected by other social and policy decisions that are made elsewhere" (Paul Gutherson, Centre4). Although community businesses might be locally rooted in the sense of addressing issues which influence people who live in a particular area they also work to translate that local knowledge into broader social change. As Darren put it: "we're not trying to campaign for any kind of political agenda or manifesto so we're not political in that respect, but we are political in the way that we are trying to better people's mindsets, and we are trying to have an influence on the big P politics".

Here, as in the comments presented in ['How do community businesses think about the 'local'?'](#), we see that community businesses do focus part of their energies on clearly defined places and communities. As we have seen, there is a social and political dimension to this with community businesses working to address exclusions in the current system. Nevertheless, alongside this, several community businesses are against an exclusive or restrictive approach to who might use the space and/or the services provided within it. The more difficult but keenly felt ambition here is to open up these buildings for a range of uses by a range of people. Relatedly, many community businesses want to take their work to the next level or are already doing so. Time and again they see how decisions taken elsewhere impact the people they work with locally and the places they operate within, so even though they are locally rooted in several respects they also have an eye on the relationship between spatial scales.

The point that emerges here is that a more nuanced approach to language is needed from funders, not least because of the potential for prospective applicants to exclude themselves from funding opportunities because they may not see themselves as community businesses as per current formulations. We are not the first to identify this issue. Our findings correspond with recent research conducted by Local Trust on the difficulty of a geographic approach to place-based funding in which the authors argue: 'area boundaries drawn by funders or cartographers do not necessarily reflect how people interact with their locality'.[23] However, and again this is something we heard about during this project, 'residents [and other actors] do have agency to negotiate the boundaries imposed on them' meaning that questions of remit, areas of responsibility and boundaries of action are continuously being made and remade by people on the ground.

Questions of equality come in here. Individuals and communities living in the 'wrong part of the city' or a postcode which no one has claimed as their focus, and without a community business ready to take on the community centre to stop it closing, clearly stand to lose out here.

3.2 What drives community businesses to take on assets?

In contrast to other research into community business we focused on those based in community assets. This part of the workshop started with a question about whether operating an asset (not just any building but one with a former role as a 'public' space) had meant the community businesses became more committed to being locally rooted (whatever that meant to them) or not.

Unlike other parts of the workshop which remained quite focused, this question led in a slightly different direction to what we had intended. On reflection this was a good thing – asset transfer is a complex process involving ongoing negotiations with the local authority, and participants clearly found it helpful to share their experience and hear about how other people had approached the task. Nevertheless, this meant our empirical material allows for a discussion of the range of symbolic and functional roles assets play for community businesses. The contribution of these functions to the 'locally rooted' question was implicit; we have attempted to draw this out in our analysis.

23 Local Trust, 'Power in our hands: An inquiry into place-based funding in the Big Local programme' (July 2020) <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PIOHPlaceBasedFunding.pdf> [Accessed 22 October 2020]

3.2.1 People breathe life into assets

Community businesses were clear in their descriptions of their buildings as providing a support or starting point for their work. Much like root systems, the buildings were seen as an anchor from which other important functions grew. Discussing the building's function as an enabler as opposed to the primary purpose, Jon Rogers of Full Circle @ Docklands spoke about the dangers of becoming building-centric:

"It is tempting to become building rooted rather than community or locally rooted because the building, certainly for the last four and a half years, has taken up so much of our energy … We're not a building rooted organisation though as part of what we do we use our buildings to help us deliver our purpose. Having a building can skew focus. We need to ensure the vision is aligned with the reason for the building. The building is not the reason it has to be that, our vision is the reason, and our building supports that."

Sandy Hore-Ruthven of CYN expressed a similar view:

"To become locally rooted takes time, you can't just plonk a building in and say you're locally rooted, people have to feel a passion for either the place or what happens there … What I really agree with is that the reason a place becomes locally rooted is people building their experience there, you kissed your first girlfriend there or you went to your grandma's party there or whatever and that builds slowly over time."

As did Gail Amphlett of Shirehampton Public Hall:

"People tend to be more invested in the groups that use the hall rather than the hall itself and I think that's right and proper because those are providing the services, those individual groups that are often community groups in their own right ... having the asset allows them to exist."

While participants spoke of their attachment to the building, they all insisted that the asset was not the essence of the community business. There will be transferred assets where the focus is placed on sustaining the building for its own sake but the community businesses we spoke to felt strongly that groups managing assets should beware of resting on their laurels. For a community asset to be a resource to a community business and the wider community there was a need to ensure a clear vision for the building.

3.2.2 Assets allow community businesses to survive and grow

The organisations involved in this research varied widely – from established charities operating multiple buildings to newly formed groups still progressing through the asset transfer process. Thus, their experience of asset ownership was understandably very different, in terms of whether viable income streams had been established, the costs involved in building maintenance and agreement with the council as to the share of the costs taken on by the community business. Yet, although all participants were aware of the potential for assets to be a drain on resources, a key message that came through was the potential for assets to generate significant financial benefits for community businesses.

This does not happen overnight. Explaining how they had made asset transfers work for Creative Youth Network (CYN), Sandy Hore-Ruthven highlighted the steep learning curve involved as well as the practical ways they had made it work for them:

"I think a lot of people take on community asset transfers wanting to do good in the community so that's the first thing, but they just don't think, they don't have their business head on as well and so we've always divided the two. So I always have a person who's managing our buildings. And a person who manages our youth work right? And the two work together and they're equal within the organisation."

This approach may not be achievable for all community business, particularly those who operate in areas where there is little in the way of groups who might hire the space:

"I tell myself that relying on room hire won't work. It might work in certain areas but in this area, it doesn't work because [there] just isn't the community capacity to take up those spaces and to rent those rooms off you. So yeah, that was something we'd planned on our business plan, we relied heavily on it, that's what we were advised to do by places like Locality and other places that advised us on our business plan. But it wasn't relevant for this area, it was never going to work. it was a failure before we even began."

Martin Buchanan, E2

Nevertheless, even in cases where the asset was not the main income stream of a community business, it was still felt to provide important stability for the organisation. Although most local authorities transfer on a leasehold rather than freehold basis, those with long leases spoke of the "security of having an asset" and its importance for "long-term planning and long-term thinking" free from the anxiety that "things are going to be pulled away from you any minute" (Martin Buchanan, E2). Several participants told us that having the asset had led to funders and partners taking them more seriously with their commitment to the building being read as a symbol of longevity and ambition. For some this need for a sense of continuity had become more important over the previous decade of austerity:

"When austerity kicked in it was like, firstly, who's getting cut and you kinda have to fend for yourself and in times where you have to fend for yourself it's hard unless you have something to hold onto and you know if you have a building or you have an asset, for example it gives you something to hold onto and something to give you a position of power."

Darren Alexander, ACE

There are clear lessons about the need for community businesses to consider whether the benefits of asset-ownership can be made to outweigh the costs. We provide examples of how community businesses achieved this in 'Sustaining roots from the outset – council relationships and negotiating the lease'.

3.2.3 Assets form part of a rooting process for people and communities

Although operating a community asset was not felt to make a locally rooted community business, buildings played a crucial role in the processes by which people and communities establish roots. So, as well as providing a root or starting point from which community businesses can grow, encounters with and within community assets also provide something tangible through which people can form attachments to places and to each other. For Gail Amphlett of Shirehampton Public Hall, the building was a space for the negotiation of difference: "If we want to deal with isolation and building a strong community where there is an understanding of the different elements within it you need a place where people can get to know each other".

Much was made in the workshops of the role of buildings in enriching how people felt about where they live:

"I think it's about identity. I think people really value having something permanent, that longevity is important, it gives a sense of place ... so yeah, I think the asset is critical in people's identity and how they feel about themselves and where they live."
Steve Sayers, Windmill Hill City Farm

"So I think the asset both practically provides meaningful activities for people in the BS5 area and further afield, but also, I think at a psychological level, its solidity on the landscape helps us to frame this area in a more positive light than I think if it wasn't there."
Dr Edson Burton, Trinity Arts Centre

The 'Locally Rooted' Community Business

Participants also spoke about how this had become more pressing in the wake of austerity, as evidenced in this quote:

"I think it's become much more important with austerity. I think people quite quickly began to see services and buildings declining around them. I'm sure Leicester was no different to anybody else in that. One year, the housing office closing and then next year the youth centres closing and it was just constant year on year and people were seeing it all retracting that sort of thing and I think a lot of people felt helpless. I think people often felt completely helpless. What could they do? I think in the face of that the whole thing around being able to do the asset transfers and make positive steps against what would seem otherwise a very depressing process has been really important."

Angie Wright, B-inspired

On another level, some participants felt the building functioned as a representation of 'belonging' and 'collectivity', giving tangible form to conceptual ideas:

"It's the thing that's concrete in the abstract notion of belonging to a community. Because actually people live in a space but they may have quite little relationship or shared institution – it's the shared institution that helps to actually make something real in a geographic space."

Dr Edson Burton, Trinity Arts Centre

"Society, laws are 'made up things' – fabricated things that we create in order to exist together and live side by side, but they're not real things that people can touch and see. So that sense of giving people something real, something really tangible you can say 'that's what society is, that's what being a community is … otherwise it's all just fluff isn't it?'"

Emma Harvey, Trinity Arts Centre

As these perspectives illustrate, community businesses operating assets

feel they do much more than respond to need. The participants we spoke to were drawn from a range of types of community businesses – arts centres, community gardens, youth centres, multipurpose spaces providing a range of education and training services – but they all underlined the crucial role of assets as spaces of sociability and culture. So while there was a strong awareness of the difficulties a building can present to an organisation, this was overshadowed by a strong sense of these spaces as playing a multiplicity of roles for individuals, communities and places.

Now we turn to practice. If being locally rooted is important to community businesses, then how do they achieve this as part of their everyday work?

3.3 What is locally rooted in practice?

We found that the majority of community businesses view responding to community needs as part of what makes them locally rooted. The question that arises then, is how do community businesses get to know what the needs of their local community are? While a range of practices were discussed by participants as part of what makes them locally rooted, we made a decision to focus on the way community businesses respond to local needs. This is because while it is relatively obvious how employing local people works in practice, it is much less clear how an organisation identifies the needs of the people and communities they aim to support.

Considering this focus, it is worth highlighting that community businesses do not just respond to clearly defined needs or policy priorities. For example, Carol of Green Futures spoke about the importance of having cups of tea with people who have told her they come to the garden specifically because it's one of the only places where they're not treated according to their 'need' as it might be written down on a funding application. In other words, the locally rooted community business is so much more than a simple reactor to clearly defined needs. It is part of a social infrastructure which responds to the broader human need for connections and care.

Each community business operates in a distinctive context, with implications for the way they work and the capacity they have to engage in practices to identify and meet needs: there is no one-size-fits-all model for any of the practices we describe here. What appears to be most important is the heart and thought put into these practices as community businesses feel and think their way towards ways of working which are appropriate to their situation. However, it is hoped that accounts of real experiences will be helpful to other organisations concerned with how to translate their desire to be locally rooted into reality.

3.3.1 Getting to know local need: formal approaches

In this section we focus on formal approaches used by community businesses to gain knowledge of community needs and interests.

A common approach was to draw on existing data and reports produced by other organisations. Carol Prendergast of Green Futures framed this as a question of resources, meaning that if her organisation could demonstrate that its work was meeting local needs around "health issues, inequalities, obesity" as specified by the relevant Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) or the local authority, then it would be more likely to receive funding. Several other community businesses worked in this way, as evidenced by this quote from Gavin Marshall of AFMET:

"We receive directives from the MOD [Ministry of Defence] and the government as to what level of legislation and what cooperation we need with the individuals and that also goes in with NELC [North East Lincolnshire Council] and the NHS [National Health Service]. That's also based on the government of the day because it depends who is in power, depends what the flavour of the week is so that alters our funding it may also alter the funding of the clinicians that work here so we are actually very heavily influenced by external powers and not by local communities."

We provide examples of how community businesses balanced this disparity in 'Sustaining roots via other working relationships'.

There is an element of agitation in these descriptions, of being dictated to rather than having complete control over the way you work, resulting in the mission creep discussed earlier where the continual need to change in response to external demands can push an organisation to alter course. Yet participants also valued ways of using the wealth of existing information already available. Several participants explained that they were based in the same building or in close proximity to other organisations that they could turn to for knowledge about local needs. Nevertheless, as Paula Grant of Capacity Buildings highlighted, this type of knowledge can be hard to obtain:

"You can find stats and information but it's getting it up to date so it's within five years if you're lucky and also getting it at the micro level because obviously all the areas are divided up so there's the unitary authority level, the electoral ward level but no level below that so when you're doing locally rooted stuff that's absolutely for a local community it's validating and cross-checking the factual information so where do you look?"

Such a lack of information was felt to be problematic given the feeling of a hierarchy of evidence according to how the data was gathered and its form. Paula spoke of how community businesses may have a wealth of in-depth knowledge about local needs but if they are unable to access the evidence to 'prove' that their perspective is supported by statistical knowledge then they may struggle to obtain funding, because funders view certain forms of knowledge as more valid than others. Angie Wright of B-inspired found it difficult to find up-to-date data that was specific enough too, instead preferring to draw on several different sources of information as part of a biannual process of organisational planning.

It is worth outlining the processes used by B-inspired in full as it provides a helpful illustration of how one organisation draws on multiple types of knowledge in their decision-making, yet still manages to come to a shared understanding of priorities which are made available for the benefit of other community businesses working in the area. We should point out that B-inspired has been around for several decades and is well-resourced in comparison to other community businesses in the area, due to the income generated from the assets it owns – one of which is a health and social care centre which houses a GP practice, pharmacy, clinics and a café.
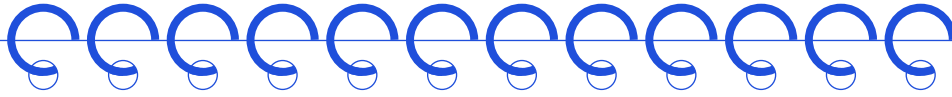
At the heart of the approach used by B-inspired is the Braunstone Neighbourhood Management Board. This was set up by the organisation and is therefore independent of the council, meaning that it is still functioning in spite of Leicester City Council discontinuing its support for Area Forums in 2004. The management board is composed of residents and local service providers, meeting every six weeks to share information about the projects and initiatives they are running and to discuss local issues. B-inspired also helped to set up the Braunstone Residents' Network, a group of local activists and volunteers who are based in the building and have around 400 contacts who can provide feedback on ideas. As Angie described, "We try and maintain a civic infrastructure in the area really and one of the main reasons we are doing that is so that we can properly keep plugged into the needs of local people".

Combined with this, B-inspired produces a biennial Neighbourhood Action Plan for the Braunstone area. The process of developing this involves reviewing all the available statistical data on health, education and crime and so forth, which provides some perspective on how local needs may have shifted over the years. After this, a survey is sent round to other service providers in the area, asking them to outline the outcomes they are working towards which helps to avoid duplication. Another survey is open to anyone with an interest in the work B-inspired do, in which respondents are asked to give their perspective on local priorities and any other issues which they feel need addressing. However, as Angie explained: "right from the off it has always been about not just consultations. You know, in sort of the generic sense of consultation, but actually understanding what the need is and talking to people about what their perception of the need is and then coming to some sensible priorities based on that". So, in addition to the mechanisms described above, Angie spoke about organising focus groups with specific groups as a complement to surveys and door-knocking as well as the importance of going "to particular places where there might be different cultures meeting" as part of an effort to ensure "the right demographic mix".

Based on these different sources of information, B-inspired then agree about five key priorities to work towards in their own work, as well as using this research to influence other organisations.
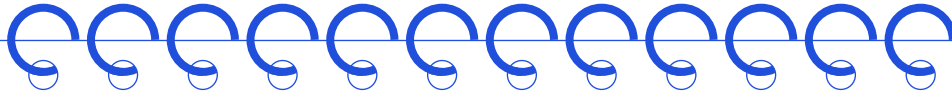
Crucially, Angie spoke of the way this process "often exposes the differences between what the data says ... and what people say their needs are". Health inequalities are a key issue that B-inspired addresses through its work, with ward profiles demonstrating that people in Braunstone are likely to die up to 10 years younger than people in neighbouring wards of the city. However, when asked about their needs, people don't tend to talk about improving their life expectancy. Instead they might talk about there not being enough for older people to do in the area, indicating but not voicing an issue around loneliness and social isolation, the health impacts of which are widely recognised. This leaves a task for Angie and colleagues to design programmes and services which tread a path between needs as expressed by local people, and the persistent health inequalities that arise when these needs remain unmet. We see here how getting to know a local area and its needs involves analysis of multiple types of knowledge with a view to getting to grips with the points at which they meet.

Martin Buchanan of E2, also in Leicester, explained how he makes this work, to figure out which groups to prioritise and how to build strong connections with people and groups whose ideas you may not be able to take forward every time: "The first thing we tend to do is we discuss what we are thinking of with local residents to find out what they want and from there we can work out what we can deliver". During these conversations, the team is clear with groups about what is possible within current structures so as to manage expectations: "it's okay making a decision but if we can't afford to deliver there's no point people making a decision about it ... some of the challenges around that are obviously building consensus with the local people that we want to help". Martin highlighted the importance of being upfront with groups about what E2 might be able to offer them and engaging in conversations about how the organisation can adapt to suit their interests:

"We've been running youth projects in areas outside of our normal area, some of the activities that we thought we wanted to do, once we'd taken them to young people and talked to them and discussed with them, and spoke to the parents, actually we found that what we proposed to do wasn't exactly what they wanted. So we made sure that we did provide what they wanted and that's how we achieve consensus. It is about identifying what they want, identifying what we need to do for our funders, for the resources that we've gotten in, and meeting halfway then ... I think that's the important thing really building that consensus with the groups we are working with. Just be open, honest and transparent."

Regular feedback sessions were another way that community businesses gained knowledge of their local area, with the session functioning as a means of collecting information but also of demonstrating the willingness of the organisation to take on board suggestions and ideas. Jon Rogers explained that every club they run has a short feedback session at the end where the volunteers and sessional staff get together and discuss comments made by young people during the session. In addition to this, open evenings and stalls at various community events ensure that connections with local people continue to be built. One community business we spoke to used a paid-for online impact-measurement tool, run by a social enterprise to gather feedback from users through surveys.

3.3.2 Getting to know local need: informal approaches

We also found that informal methods of building relationships, networks and knowledge with people and communities were felt to be just as important as the formal ones outlined above.

Community businesses spoke of the value of building and maintaining connections and relationships in their local area. In some cases these connections came from living in the area such as Martin Buchanan of E2: "a lot of the areas that we work in generally we've worked and lived in those areas ourselves so our staff, myself and other members of the team ... we are connected quite deeply into those areas" and Steve Sayers of Windmill Hill City Farm: "All the staff here are local people. We're not an operator within this community. We are part of the community."

Others framed being locally rooted and gaining knowledge of their local area as part of their everyday work, explaining: "It's about being available for people to see me, talk to me on a face-to-face level. Whether that's walking in the area, rather than driving to another project, walking across and meeting people. You know, being here when there are functions going on … and being able to have those little conversations with people" (Priya Thamotheram, Highfields Centre). Likewise, Sandy Hore-Ruthven spoke about the practical steps he takes to ensure CYN is rooted: "we don't have an explicit plan to reach out and understand our local community, but we, as you say, it's almost it's so embedded in what we do … our staff are talking with young people all the time and therefore build up a picture of what young people's needs are and that informs our strategy".

Many community businesses employ local people wherever possible too, which provides another mechanism through which to gain first-hand knowledge of a place. Emma Harvey of Trinity Arts Centre compared the type of knowledge gained through formalised data-driven approaches with the informal "neighbourhood beyond the data" approach. Relationships that staff and members of the board have, as a result of being connected to a place through shopping or socialising locally, are a valuable resource to be drawn on in decision making and should not be dismissed as in some way less valid than statistical data.

Being 'on the ground' was also felt to be one of the factors enabling community businesses to respond quickly to community needs during the coronavirus pandemic too. For example, Gail Amphlett of Shirehampton Public Hall found out through informal conversations that the local food bank needed a place to store additional food. People who are locally rooted know what is already there in places and communities and can act quickly to provide help to other community organisations.

Steve Sayers of Windmill Hill City Farm felt that the absence of a predefined agenda was what made their conversations with people different from other organisations working in the area. While a conventional approach to consultation might look to the community to rubber-stamp existing plans or to give their perspective on an already limited set of options, Steve explained his approach to "listening without an agenda". Reaching out to people through knocking on doors, asking open questions on social media or joining local social media groups where staff members could be aware of what people are discussing were all part of ensuring that ideas came from the community rather than being devised elsewhere.

Our research suggests that these informal approaches to building connections and relationships are part of what makes a community business locally rooted, suggesting a need for support and resources for community businesses not only to make time for this work but to ensure that they are visible to local people and groups as an organisation that is interested in their ideas and perspectives. Paul Gutherson made an important point on this: "it's not enough that Centre4 think of themselves as a 'listening organisation'", as Paul put it, they need to communicate that stance outwardly to ensure people know that they "are there to listen, to empower and to help people take action".

Both Steve Sayers of Windmill Hill City Farm and Dr Edson Burton of Trinity Arts Centre, respectively, told us they wanted to invest in community development approaches but had consistently struggled to make this happen:

"I keep trying to get some funding for a community development officer who can go around and knock on doors and ask questions but nobody is willing to pay for us to do that."

"The current project I've been working on is around stepping out of the way so that if there are community assets, as in people, who would like to do something or deliver something which they see as a gap, we should support them to deliver it rather than pre-empting what we think people want ... the caveat to that I would say is that ... often when communities or people in communities don't have a lot of confidence and don't have a lot of capacity or skills then they are looking for somebody to put a flag in the ground first. So the ask 'what would you like?' often ends up with silence ... what I think one needs and it's difficult when this isn't your remit, is a much more strategic, long-term programme to support communities to name what they want ... I partly think that the model of community development or how we create an ecology of community support is a missing resource and long-term commitment at the moment."

While these informal approaches to getting to know the needs of different groups are clearly valued by community businesses, our research suggests that there is appetite amongst community businesses to formalise these relationships by working with community development models in a more sustained way. We return to these points in the Conclusion.

3.4 How do community businesses sustain their roots over time?

There are some fundamental challenges that community businesses operating assets face which if left unaddressed can limit their ambitions and aspirations towards being locally rooted. The depth and breadth of knowledge accumulated by the people who participated in this research is part of the reason these community businesses have managed to sustain themselves and the assets they manage over time. This research has shown that these challenges can be successfully overcome in the following ways.

3.4.1 Sustaining roots from the outset – council relationships and negotiating the lease

Without an equitable lease arrangement with the council, transferred assets can not only be a drain on community businesses but can lead them away from locally rooted practices. If a community business has to direct all its resources towards managing a building then this leaves very little room for building relationships. Also, if staff are only focused on generating income to cover maintenance or other costs then there is a chance that purely commercial objectives will take precedence over locally rooted projects.

From what we have learnt about asset transfer, it would be difficult to overstate the importance of entering the lease negotiations with a view to securing a fair arrangement. Locality's 'Understanding Community Asset Transfer' provides excellent guidance on this topic.[24] Participants in our research also shared important insights based on their experiences.

A common issue was a lack of recognition from some council departments of the input and value created by the community business for their local areas. Emma Harvey of Trinity Arts Centre commented that there were those within the council who felt they should be "grateful" for the building as though it was a gift. There are several local authorities that have changed direction in recent years in recognition of the need for organisations operating transferred assets to be given the best chance of success. As Emma highlighted: "the tide is shifting" with campaigns run by national networks such as Locality "shifting that narrative away". This indicates an opportunity for groups in the process of negotiating transfer to use these campaigns as leverage in their own negotiations.

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24 Locality, 'Understanding Community Asset Transfer' (2018) https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/LOCALITY-UNDERSTANDING-COMMUNITY-ASSETS-TRANSFER.pdf [Accessed 13 November 2020].

By making the case to local authorities on behalf of community organisations who are "delivering services that wouldn't happen otherwise" often by "taking on a liability", these campaigns have led some local authorities to adopt a fairer approach to transfer.

Our research shows that there is still considerable variation in how individual councils approach transfer. As such, while all participants recognised the importance of finding allies within the council and maintaining positive relationships, they spoke of the importance of negotiating hard to ensure an equitable arrangement and being prepared to walk away if the flexibility isn't there. If a community business can demonstrate substantial local support for their plans either by encouraging supporters to write to the local MP or councillor, or by undertaking forms of consultation displaying a groundswell of support across the community, then this can often make a difference as a local authority will want to avoid negative press and may feel obligated as part of being accountable to the public. As several community businesses pointed out, if a lease places excessive financial burden on an organisation then this can lead to failure which impacts the community as a whole, not just the individuals undertaking the transfer.

Many of our participants aimed to establish an 'equal footing' with their local authorities and better connectivity: "I always find that when we are working as equal partners with the local authority, projects tend to work a whole lot better than if we are just seen as a junior partners" (Sandy Hore-Ruthven, CYN). Those community businesses who had developed productive relationships with the council tended to perceive them not as the monolith of 'the council' but as a complex and fragmented organisation, facing challenging circumstances and made up of different departments often working towards conflicting goals. As Steve of Windmill Hill City Farm put it: "The council is a many headed beast and different bits of it have different intentions around community asset transfer and different approaches to it". By seeing the individuals rather than the organisation, community businesses were able to find people who believed in their cause and were therefore more likely to support them towards an equitable lease. Relationships between organisations are in essence working relationships between people and therefore can be fluid.[25]

25   See Gilbert, Abigail 'A common interest: the role of asset transfer in developing the community business market' (November 2016) and Hull, Andy 'A guide to local government for community businesses' (September 2019) <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/A-Guide_To_Local_Government_FINAL_DIGITAL.pdf> [Accessed 22 October 2020].
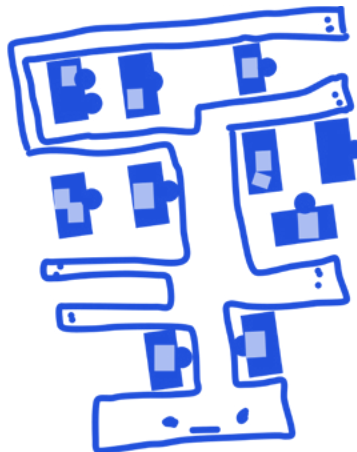
Other approaches to developing constructive relationships included having councillors on boards of trustees or involved in the organisation in different ways. As Angie from B-inspired explained, this can lead to "natural champions" for community businesses within the local authority making it more likely that you will be "on the same page". By engaging with councillors and officers in this way, local authorities and community businesses can build partnerships based on shared visions and empathetic understanding of each other's circumstances. In Grimsby, where responsibility for asset transfer was itself 'outsourced' to an external provider, many community businesses had engaged directly with council officials after finding the commercial approach to transfer inappropriate. Here, again, finding allies within organisations that can appear resistant was key.

While Angie's example above highlights the ideal scenario, we also heard of a notably poor working relationship with the council which led the community business to seek support elsewhere. In this case, the organisation was able to continue managing the asset by remaining relevant to particular localised communities, rallying these for support, and thus establishing a relationship of reciprocal need with their service users (i.e. the organisation harnessed relevancy in order to survive). This method resulted in a confident attitude despite their dispute with the council and resulted in them being able to rebuild depleted reserves through working with national organisations and funders. This tactic was also demonstrated in Bristol as an ever-increasing "cycle" of network building (Darren, ACE – see also 3.4.3).

While our participants voiced a desire to have good relationships with the council many felt the local authority was not particularly relevant to them beyond being a 'good' or 'bad' landlord. This raises significant questions about the role of local government after a period of substantial austerity where community businesses, in some places at least, are playing a much more substantive role in the delivery of services and as operators of public spaces. As democratically elected bodies, local authorities are, in spite of efforts to severely limit their role, part of the institutional landscape of the UK. As such we feel their role cannot be dismissed, yet there is clearly a need to engage with the question of how the relationship between local authorities and locally rooted community business can be strengthened.

There are no easy answers to this, yet one issue that came up in this research was the need for local authorities, community businesses and other partners to increase awareness of the basic fact that several public services and spaces are now being operated by community businesses, often without the safety net of ongoing funding via general taxation. Many buildings now run by community businesses have been operated by the council for decades if not centuries. Perception is key because the wider community can be unaware of the work being done by community businesses in their area. As Alex of AFMET which operates the Knoll in Cleethorpes said: "they think the council deliver everything that we do", a misperception which was felt to have led to financial losses over the years, with potential sponsors perhaps not realising the financial insecurity many community businesses (and indeed, local authorities themselves) face. This perspective was shared by several participants, and there was consensus of a need to change perceptions amongst the public about who was operating spaces locally.

3.4.2 Sustaining roots via other working relationships

Relationships with partners beyond the local authority are also key to the sustainability of locally rooted community businesses.

Relationships with funders

The first key working relationship to discuss is that of funders: these matter as they can be seen to steer the actions and objectives of community businesses towards particular ends. Of particular relevance to this project is the way funders often require grantees to specify the scope of a project or initiative and can be unaware of the challenge this presents to community businesses. Participants highlighted examples of where funder approaches can sit in tension with community businesses' desires about who they work with and how. One significant challenge that was identified by the Grimsby participants lay in evidencing 'social need' and the position this puts both community business and service users in:

"If I said to her, do you consider yourself to be isolated or lonely she would categorically say no I don't but I know the only reason she is coming in is to sit down and have lunch because if not she's not going to see anybody for another few days."

Carol, Green Futures

For a community business committed to establishing meaningful relationships with people as part of rooting themselves within communities, this issue of labelling service users or using their stories as 'case studies' in order to evidence 'need' was felt to be an unavoidable moral dilemma. An example of good practice in response to this is to ensure service users have the opportunity to explain in their own terms why they use the support systems provided (i.e. asked "what is important to you about coming here?") and reclaim the language by which their need is defined. This would enable community businesses to stay true to an ethic of care, led by local needs. The challenge here is establishing relationships with funders who take time to appreciate these dynamics. During this research we had conversations with several people working for funders or supporting organisations including: Mick McGrath, Cassandra Walker, Paul Hassan (Locality), Claire Etheridge (Sector Support, Grimsby) and Mike Lloyd Jones (Power to Change) who encouraged open conversations and offered potential applicants support in navigating application processes.

The awkwardness of not quite 'staying true' to service users and therefore against the ethos of local rootedness also lay in the writing of funding applications which changed their geographic remits or social objectives, leading community businesses towards mission creep. While this is a concerning challenge, community businesses in Leicester have addressed this issue by adapting and extending their constitutions, without impacting their more locally-focused missions:

"We now talk about not serving just the immediate Highfield's community but the greater Highfields community and our constitution has been amended to serve the wider population of Leicestershire That's as a result of a major bid we were leading on a few years ago that required us to have a remit to cover the whole of the Leicester area … But the local rootedness continues apace and that is where we are very much focused on as well."

Priya, Highfields Centre

Likewise, in Bristol, Sandy from CYN had collaborated with other organisations to allow them to bid for contracts that they would not have been eligible for by themselves. Where contracts require community businesses to evidence coverage of a broad geographic area this can provide a way to still obtain the resources without losing the local focus that is so important to what makes community businesses distinctive.

Priya also explained that it is important to work against the unintended consequences of potentially well-meaning funders who specify a particular remit, because framing a disadvantage in this manner can have an effect on stigma and division. So, this can involve flagging these issues from the onset and pushing against what is written down:

"[...] boundaries are problematic when it comes to funding applications. [...] We had to argue very firmly that we're not in the process of dividing people off from one another in the area."

Adaptations by funders to the locally rooted practices of community businesses have been demonstrated to an extent, for example by the Local Trust Big Local initiative and its place-based funding strategies.[26] We note in this project that applicants' perimeters were able to be expanded but not shrunk; we find this of interest and wonder if community businesses might be given more freedom to adapt their perimeters further depending on where they identify need over a period of time. In other words, a form of 'elastic funding' that reflected the development of locally rooted practices (see Recommendations for funders and other development organisations). This would enable more relevant, more flexible and more temporal work to be achieved in local areas, as is particularly pertinent during times of increased hardship or changeable conditions.

We have seen how Priya changed the remit of a funder by talking with them directly and arguing his case: in essence creating a good working relationship which benefited his local area. A challenge to this approach is that disparities between funders and some community businesses, both in terms of background and 'professionalisation', can mean community businesses don't feel comfortable having these conversations. To put it simply, there is a feeling of 'us' and 'them', which is problematic when it is community businesses who feel they don't speak the language of funders and that their in-depth knowledge of their locality might not be taken seriously. This issue identified a need for both parties to change. Funders need to do more to make themselves approachable and to recognise the language barrier that can limit understanding between two groups who are actually working to shared goals. Community businesses also need more learning opportunities to build confidence to have frank conversations with funders. Examples of 'on the ground' mentorship from funders were commended by participants, who wished for more opportunities to establish closer working relationships.

26 Local Trust, 'Power in our hands: An inquiry into place-based funding in the Big Local programme' (July 2020) <https://localtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/PIOHPlaceBasedFunding.pdf> [Accessed 22 October 2020]

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A significant extension of this problem of 'not fitting the bill' was highlighted by Dr Edson Burton, who made clear that part of the reason there were not as many BME-led community organisations managing successful assets is due to endemic racial inequalities, a problem money alone could not solve:

"[...] they think that it's a question of throwing money. Actually sometimes it's about dearth of skills, and how do you support the development of those skills so that people are able to tie their own shoelaces in some cases. [...] with BME it's recognising the asymmetries that exist between communities"

Edson, Trinity Arts Centre[27,28]

Asymmetries in the local community are indicative of a society that is fundamentally structured through racism. Funders or local authorities alone cannot 'solve' this but they can do more. On the one hand, they can ensure training is sufficient and tailored but, perhaps more progressively, they can reflect on their own practices and whether they might be part of the problem too. For example, we've spoken above about the importance of building relationships but if the people you're trying to build networks with are largely white then this may lead to self-exclusion.

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27 We experienced this issue first-hand with several organisations operated by ethnic minority communities being unable to participate in the project due to a lack of staff capacity and time.
28 We acknowledge that the term 'BIPOC' (Black and Indigenous People of Colour) is preferred by many to 'BME' (Black and Minority Ethnic) because it avoids the implication that BIPOC are minorities when in fact this view is one of the ways white supremacy continues to structure the experience of those who are impacted by racism. However what we do here is mirror the terms used by participants, many of whom are involved in anti-racist organising.

Relationships with the 'community'

The legwork required to create an equitable playing field in their own localities presents a key challenge for community businesses, one which many participants were dedicated to as part of a commitment to building working relationships *with the community*. For instance, some talked of addressing notions of exclusion from the kinds of people associated with certain groups: David (Manor House Neighbourhood Centre) highlighted the challenge of faith groups being interpreted as exclusive (and indeed some religious community businesses had been transferred assets which remained solely for the use of religious groups). David's organisation had deliberately not gone down this route in order to work against a bounded notion of community, which can lead to sustainable mixed use of an asset.

Several community businesses spoke of ensuring that their governing body was representative of the groups they wished to serve, though many said this was a constant challenge given the time commitment expected and the diversity of communities themselves. Emma of Trinity Arts Centre explained:

"with a venue like Trinity the groups and communities of interest and demographic are so broad that you could never have that [representativeness within the constraints of the board itself let alone board and staff team combined unless you're going to be really prescriptive about it".

Although ensuring that a range of people work at Trinity is still important, Emma also explained that it was important to "capture informal dialogue ... like talking to someone across the street and talking to someone in the neighbourhoods". For Emma "it's not just one open door, it's a number of doors and entry points that can be from an informal relationship with a member of staff and a regular hirer to formal board meetings".

Relationships with other community businesses

Alongside the need to create effective working relationships with the community, working *together* as community businesses to create partnerships and networks was highlighted as hugely important:

"And the other aspect of sustainability is partnerships. We are sustainable because people bailed us out basically. Sandy bailed us out, when we came to him we were in a situation when the money was just going to go negative and he said look this is what we can do with the existing let's help you out here and other people rallied round."

Jon

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This example highlights that locally rooted practices are not simply enacted between community businesses and service users but between the organisations themselves, which again can be entrepreneurial in approach. The sustaining of an ecosystem of community businesses is something we witnessed particularly in Bristol, but also during the workshops themselves we were pleased to witness further evidence of the cross-pollination of ideas and knowledge. This strategy has evidently been instrumental in the long term between certain participants and we cannot highlight it enough as a measure of good practice for survival, not least because it has the potential to increase coverage of knowledge and understanding of local needs over particular areas.

Relationships with other service providers

Lastly, private sector provision or competition from other organisations had an impact upon the community businesses' work in particular places.[29] Participants described the local rootedness of their community business in contrast to the perceived shortcomings of the small number of large national operators who tend to swallow up the lion's share of contracts to deliver public services, who then subcontract to the smaller organisations, effectively piggybacking on their work to win contracts and evidence outcomes. This situation was particularly pertinent in Grimsby as North East Lincolnshire Council has created alternative delivery models for services like adult social care (i.e. social enterprise models). These organisations are then competing with the existing voluntary and community sector both for resources and for engagement itself. As Paula from Capacity Buildings observed, both groups are attempting to consult or engage with the community and existing groups, which effectively means they are competing for funding and people. However, most community businesses had a pragmatic approach to this: "we just have to deal with it the best way we can" (Wayne Bloy, Fusion Boxing). While this may come across as dismissive, it is actually indicative of how community businesses deal with challenges: to put their mission first and just do as much as they can in a difficult context.

29 Locality's 'Keep it Local' campaign provides examples of how local authorities can invest in local organisations through commissioning services, channelling important resources towards locally rooted organisations instead of remote ones who do not invest in the community. For practical guidance, see: https://locality.org.uk/policy-campaigns/keep-it-local/keep-it-local-resources/

3.4.3 Sustaining through hardship

Austerity and hard times are often a *raison d'être* for many community businesses, whose purpose may be driven by a wish to fill the local gaps in social provision. But their relationship with hard times is complex and, conversely, how councils react to it can endanger the very collectivist ethic which propels community businesses. Against a backdrop of austerity, and evidence of councils selling off public spaces at an alarming rate – a recent report found 12,000 public spaces in England have been sold since 2014/15 – we need to take seriously the role that community businesses play in sustaining community spaces.[30]

As discussed in 'What drives community businesses to take on assets?' many feel these buildings have positive benefits for people's sense of self and their relationship to place, as well as contributing to the 'character' or local distinctiveness of a specific place. In other words, their motivation to take on the asset came from an understanding of the practical *and* symbolic role of community spaces. By sustaining community spaces, community businesses feel they have a role in the relationship and experience people have of place and the way a place is perceived by others.

Several tactics were used to sustain businesses through hard times and these are listed in the Recommendations section. Some demonstrate how community businesses can create 'vibrancy' in their area, using existing physical infrastructure to build better environments for local economies to thrive, as this example reveals:

"Trinity took on a second space along the high street, this was a tangible example of taking a risk of taking on an asset in an area where there wasn't much engagement and really show the potential. So then people start to see that place as desirable and the commercial business could go and be in the city centre but they're choosing to be based with you because you've shown them that potential of the locality because of the vibrancy of what's going on. And it becomes a place where people are based as opposed to it being 'why would I want to be placed in that random area?' You're attracting commercial tenants."

Emma, Trinity Arts Centre

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30 Davies, Gareth et al. 'Revealed: the thousands of public spaces lost to the council funding crisis' (2019) <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-03-04/sold-from-under-you> [Accessed 22 October 2020]

The 'Locally Rooted' Community Business

Investing in the area shows their willingness to take risks, highlighting the tightrope community businesses often need to walk in being both socially focused and economically viable.[31] If such tactics are considered appropriate to local areas (e.g. not 'gentrifying') then the resulting impact can demonstrate the strong sense of responsibility community businesses feel towards their locality, reinforcing their local rootedness. If this commitment is recognised, it can enhance the local standing of a community business and draw a wider range of people into its orbit.

Another tactic mitigates the fear of 'selling out' by converting commercial opportunities for social benefits that help businesses deliver their mission. This was exemplified by Sandy (CYN) and his team's decision to host a gin festival, which he identified as financially lucrative but "non-compatible" with the ethos of CYN's youth service provision. In the end, a compromise was reached and the festival organisers were asked to provide funds for a youth engagement activity; he credited this decision to his team finding "creative solutions to some of those problems". In some cases, balancing the need to stay both relevant to the community and economically viable can only be achieved by finding entrepreneurial and creative solutions which are sensitive to the locality and its needs.

The opportunities that snowball from these demonstrations of local rootedness further embed community businesses in the physical and social fabric of the places they serve – a social relevance that is particularly pertinent in challenging times like those that have prevailed since March 2020. While the coronavirus pandemic has had an unprecedented effect on businesses and services worldwide, lockdowns have had a particularly profound impact on the not for profit and voluntary sectors, and all of our participants either closed or partially reduced their services. This had varying consequences for their activity and the lives of those they were supporting:

"I think it's probably fair to say that the lockdown and pandemic, on balance, has probably removed some of our connection. I think it probably has everybody's but I don't think we're alone in this, but, it's just harder to meet with people, find out about what's going on"

Sandy, Creative Youth Network

31 Murtagh, Brendan and Philip Boland, 'Community asset transfer and strategies of local accumulation', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 20.1 (2019), 4–23

This concern for connectedness is key for community businesses and by the time of the interviews in July 2020, each of the community businesses had found ways to support their communities where they could, in some cases adapting within weeks of initial closure. They have adapted by using their knowledge of their target areas and communities: "I guess maybe part of that is because we're locally rooted so we don't sort of follow any one thing or another, we just kind of do what we feel is right for our community in our locality" (Edson, Trinity Arts Centre). Indeed, all respondents felt their handling of the lockdown emphasised their local rootedness and to varying degrees identified the shortcomings of others (e.g. councils).

The impact of the pandemic has been dramatic and community businesses have shown that being locally rooted allows them to adapt and respond to the changing needs of the community. Nevertheless, the long-term effects and economic impact is yet to be discerned. The critical issue here is whether the efforts of community businesses to balance social and financial objectives and take risks towards enriching people's lives and the places they live will be reciprocated by serious investment by a government making good on its promise to "stand for those who give time to help others".[32]

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32 The Conversative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019 <https://www.conservatives.com/our-plan> [Accessed 6 November 2020]

4. Recommendations

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One of the main tasks of the project was to unlock and share learning for community businesses beyond those who took part in research. Our research confirms that locally rooted practices are inherently diverse, therefore there is no miraculous fix for community businesses managing transferred assets in their localities and certainly no one-size-fits-all approach to CAT, particularly as, across local authority levels, the negotiations of transfer are different. Nevertheless, we did pick up many insights and pragmatic advice which we hope will be of use to either new or existing community businesses.

In response to listening to community businesses talk about the influence of external organisations on their work, we have also been able to suggest actions to be taken by funders and other groups which can benefit community businesses in the long term.[33]

4.1 Recommendations for community businesses[34]

Seek support and guidance from other community businesses

Most community business leaders will commit to sharing their experiences with others and are keen to cultivate reciprocal relationships. In general the people operating community organisations are not in the business of competing: they want to see more community organisations operating for the benefit of their area rather than fewer, and would sooner collaborate than see another good community business fail. One of the reasons community businesses support one another at the local level is because they see the importance of an infrastructure or network of community businesses all meeting different local needs.

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33 A limitation of the research is that it does not cover the work by local authorities and so we do not feel able to give viable recommendations. However, any council practitioners reading this may find interest in the recommendations for funders sections and external support.

34 There is a wealth of advice available for community businesses on these topics on the 'My Community' website: https://mycommunity.org.uk/

Although people operating community businesses are busy, they are generous and incredibly knowledgeable and will often have an open door for others wanting to share experiences and guidance. National networks such as Locality and the Community Managed Libraries Peer Network provide members with peer support and learning opportunities too.

Create a community business ecosystem

Following on from above, the more developed example of reciprocal localised networking is where you can see your work or objectives overlapping with other community businesses. In order to avoid duplication in local areas or outreach to key groups, see what different activities you can work on together while playing to organisational strengths.

Don't undersell yourself

There is work to be done in convincing the local authority to give you as much support as they possibly can. Many community businesses have secured financial support from the council (e.g. committing them to addressing maintenance issues) or other forms of in-kind support which can make a massive difference in the first few years of operation. You will need to make a case to the council that what you are asking for is reasonable, as it is unlikely that they will offer support without you asking for it. Identifying examples of where other local authorities have given financial support may provide you with some leverage. You can also draw attention to how your plans contribute to the wider strategic objectives of the council for the wider area (e.g. the city as a whole) or for your locality (e.g. the neighbourhood level). When there is a (supposedly) 'free' building on the table it is easy to forget that locally rooted community businesses can generate significant benefits for people and places and local authorities do value this. Use this knowledge as part of your negotiation strategy by having confidence in the benefits of your business plan.[35] Bear in mind you can walk away if you don't feel you are getting anywhere, particularly if you feel you are taking on more of a liability than an opportunity.

35 See Locality, 'Understanding Community Asset Transfer' (2018) for guidance on how to transfer wisely: https://locality.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Understanding-Community-Assets-Transfer-Guide-for-Community-Organisations.pdf

Avoid an asset-centric approach with a clear vision

Participants highlighted the danger of becoming asset-centric, where the demands of operating the building become all-consuming. A business plan that focuses entirely on the upkeep of the building can become a white elephant, expensive but of little value to a community beyond the people invested (financially and emotionally) in keeping it going. It is hard to carve out time to reflect on your vision, but having a clear sense of the role that the building plays for different communities within your area is vital if the asset is to become a community resource rather than a drain on your resources.

Invest in volunteers and apprentices

Sustaining connections with local or target communities and understanding their various needs can be achieved by investing in local or community-oriented volunteers and by creating apprenticeships for people of all walks of life.

Several examples showed a dependency on volunteers during lockdown and times of hardship. Moreover, we were presented with more than one example of apprentices who stayed on to become part of the team, thus creating continuity in terms of organisational memory which could enhance the cultivation of locally rooted practices.

Create varied income opportunities with local circumstances in mind

Participants emphasised the importance of taking time to consider how income-generation opportunities can support social objectives rather than conflict with them. For example, a corporate hire may feel inappropriate in the first instance but if a one-off event can allow you to subsidise other programming for groups without the ability to pay, then it may be a good trade-off, particularly if you are able to be transparent with the community as to why you have made the decision. Likewise, room hire will work for some community businesses located in areas where there are other organisations and groups operating who might want to hire space.

This may also depend on the size and layout of the asset you have as strategies can include hiring space for other community groups or businesses, to other freelancers or companies (even ones beyond a community focus). Branching out beyond local areas has also been seen as a natural route, particularly if you target types of communities who may be scattered.

Awareness of funders – adapt, challenge and communicate

You may feel your objectives are constantly changing as you chase much needed funding. Participants in our research had experienced this – known as 'mission creep' – but several had come up with their own strategies to fulfil funders' objectives without detracting from their mission. For example, a funder may want you to be very specific about where the people who will benefit from an activity live, but you may feel this approach creates unnecessary divisions between communities and goes against your goal to create connections between a range of people living in the same place. There is nothing wrong with discussing your concerns with funders and/or other community businesses. In some cases you may be able to argue your case by challenging what is written down. Those participants who had lasted the longest had shown examples of challenging the status quo and succeeded against the odds.

Funders are usually more flexible than you think and many offer support and advice on completing applications. Other community businesses are likely to have examples of how they have addressed these issues over the years too. During this research, we were told by several support officers that they wished more community organisations would get in touch with them for informal conversations about funding applications. They are human too and happy to talk' is clearer than what is there at the moment

Representation

Some participants expressed concern that their board of trustees was less diverse than the general public and did not reflect the communities served by the community business. We heard of several different approaches to this challenge, from being mindful of the time of meetings and making arrangements for childcare, to monitoring to ensure the right balance of views and experiences were represented.

Participants also shared their own experiences, in other activities outside the community business, of feeling as though they had been appointed as a trustee purely to make up a diversity 'quota' rather than due to their skills, knowledge and experience. Trustees need to be motivated by the aims and mission of the community businesses and know on what basis their contributions are being sought. A useful way to think about this is to consider whether a trustee offers technical skills, professional experience or expertise by experience (i.e., have they experienced first-hand the issues your organisation is trying to address).

4.2 Recommendations for funders and other development organisations[36]

Understanding 'beyond local'

Throughout this report we've threaded an ongoing recommendation to funders to reframe their language surrounding local and to acknowledge that what community businesses are doing goes beyond local, and beyond bounded remits of place. This is palpably demonstrated by their resonance with and response to social issues which are occurring nationally and internationally, by the fact that their services are in some cases attracting users beyond their geographical remit, and by the fact they aim to discard exclusive notions of local. We've noted some acknowledgement by funders of the potential for the term to be misinterpreted as more reductive than it is intended to be already. Although 'locally rooted' as a term resonates with community businesses, there is an opportunity for funders to examine their practices to ensure community businesses are encouraged to develop their own interpretations of what it means to be 'local' in their context. This approach could truly support those whose work is impacted by a disconnect between rhetoric and political/ power structures.

36 As part of the research some of these recommendations have been shared with colleagues at Locality to inform their ongoing work on community asset transfer.

Create more mentoring opportunities, not toolkits

As we have seen, the participants were extremely knowledgeable about their practices, having years of experience on the ground and considerable wisdom about local rootedness. Participants suggested that mentoring programmes (e.g. where a community business representative offers insight to fledgling groups) would be a sensible way to support community business networks. To set up such networks would encourage a collectivist ethic and build sustainability, particularly helpful during hard times. While toolkits can help and may be less time-consuming, they cannot replace learning from the shared experience of peers. Hearing from others about how they have managed to thrive can embolden previously uncertain and vulnerable businesses to explore similarly novel or creative approaches to meet their own challenges. Community businesses could be encouraged and supported to supply consultancy services to others in the sector, rather than relying on services bought in from outside.

Create elastic-local funding pots

There is a risk of creating funded projects or interventions which are either 'hyperlocal' (and work to the exclusion of others whose localities are not as well supported) or 'regional' (which can cause mission creep for some community businesses). While we have seen our participants grapple with these issues, and acknowledge the work of the Big Local project on these matters, we raise whether it might be possible to create additional funding opportunities which accept and cultivate elastic practices of local rootedness, allowing for ongoing branching out and development of locally rooted practices as the community businesses evolve over the long term.

Funders and other existing projects working together

There were examples of participants asking for funders to better network or to avoid duplication, while others had witnessed good practice measures of collaboration which had paid off and worked efficiently. The example of a 'shared application form' had been raised by Quartet Community Foundation – like a CV for community businesses interested in applying for different funding streams (although it is not confirmed whether this had come to fruition at the time of writing). Essentially, there is an opportunity to streamline funding opportunities to lessen the burden on community businesses. Collaborations formed between funders in response to Covid-19 are promising too.[37] There is also scope to consider how application processes work to exclude people and communities who do not 'speak the language' and who cannot afford to buy in someone that can.

In addition, there were several parallel research projects happening in tandem to this one in Leicester, Bristol and Grimsby. While we were able to collaborate to avoid duplication as much as possible and share findings, this presents an ongoing challenge to those funding and commissioning research to coordinate their efforts more effectively.

Promote sustainable models for community asset transfers

As it stands, while there are examples of encouraging practice, there are also instances where local authorities insist on lease arrangements which can make it difficult for community businesses operating transferred assets to balance social commitments with being financially sustainable. For example, while the majority of local authorities charge community businesses a nominal rent, there are local authorities who charge rents that are still below the market rate but are out of reach for a community business wanting to offer services that are accessible to a wide range of people in a community. Some participants felt there was a need for more democratic scrutiny of local authority decision-making on these matters. While organisations such as Locality already provide support and guidance on asset transfer, we put forward a participant's suggestion to establish an independent body which could support community businesses experiencing issues or in dispute with their local authority, in the interest of ensuring community businesses are supported to use assets to the best advantage of their communities.

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37 For example the Funders' Collaborative Hub: https://www.acf.org.uk/policy-practice/funders-collaborative-hub

Conclusion

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Through paying attention to the perspectives and practices of people operating a range of types of community facility in different contexts, this research has shown that when we speak of the 'locally rooted' community business we are referring to a complex and evolving entity, not a single empirical reality. The locally rooted community business takes various forms, depending on factors ranging from the personal to the structural, meaning we need research that captures the everyday realities of community space management and the diversity of contexts within which this takes place.

Although the report focuses on the elusive practice of getting to know and responding to local needs, we have argued that it is reductive to understand community initiatives as solely about attending to local needs in a programmatic way. In essence, the locally rooted community business is one that converts care about people and places into myriad practices, and sees relationships as part of what gives meaning to community life, with assets playing a crucial role in this process.

As we have seen throughout this report, the locally rooted community business thinks about the local in an expansive rather than an exclusive way. Their work is local in that it is often the difference between an area having community spaces or not at all. The buildings they manage are spaces of identity-making. They provide spaces where people build relationships both with one another and the place they live, contributing to a sense of belonging in a place. Community businesses are ambitious to ensure the widest range of people and communities are supported to use the buildings they operate in these ways, but this can be a challenge when funders often require grantees to fit a particular mould which may send a community business in a direction which is at odds with its mission. Although many community businesses feel a strong sense of accountability towards communities living in proximity to their buildings – a feeling which has only intensified over a decade of austerities – they operate in a way which suggests they are continually trying to draw in people living further afield for whom the community business could be an important resource. This is why we find a language of the 'local' and 'locally rooted' to be a blessing and a curse. Given our findings about the ambitions of community businesses to go beyond the local and remain inclusive, there is a risk that this terminology paints a picture of community businesses which is at odds with their character. Furthermore, community businesses may self-exclude from funding opportunities that they could benefit from if they do not see their organisation reflected in the language used by funders.

As such, there is a need for funders to hold onto a view of the local as dynamic, contingent and often contested as this is the nature of the local as experienced by community businesses rather than a coherent or 'natural' entity or scale.

This report illustrates how the programmes and strategies of community businesses are informed by a deep knowledge of how a place has changed over time and what these changes mean for people living there. This knowledge is gained by inviting and valuing conversations and connections with the community in all its diversity. Combining these approaches with formal, data-driven knowledge ensures that community businesses don't rely on understandings of a community developed elsewhere. Although these conversations allow community businesses to ensure their services are designed collaboratively, community businesses want to do more to support people in their communities to articulate their own ambitions for change and to design and deliver their own initiatives. As such, there is significant potential for funders to invest more in community development work.

Related to this, community businesses operating assets are highly conscious that simply caring about a place and its people does not make a community business. This is particularly the case where an asset transfer is involved, given the demands of the process and its lack of transparency in many areas. This research reveals the voices and experiences of those who have had the opportunity to act on the responsibility they feel towards a place, nurturing its roots through preventing the closure of valued buildings, while acknowledging but not examining in detail the experiences of those who are excluded from these opportunities. Community businesses are more aware than most that these opportunities do not exist everywhere they might be needed, both at the level of the neighbourhood (as local authorities may pursue asset transfer intensively in one area while selling off assets where there is money to be made) and at the national level where vast differences between local authorities' financial health mean many councils have closed services entirely or become increasingly reliant on outsourcing to private providers. While not ignoring the potential for CAT to deepen inequalities, investing in community development would provide a mechanism for community businesses to open up assets further, as resources for community-led initiatives whether they be about sociability or activism.

The executive summary presents an overview of the key findings in this report and the recommendations spell out their implications for different audiences, so instead of repeating these here, we conclude with important questions we believe are raised by this research:

— **To what extent is the community business sector delivering on its ambitions to be 'locally rooted' from the perspective of people who use their services and spaces?**

— **How might a shift towards digital technology prompted by the coronavirus pandemic alter the stakes for what is meant by the 'local'?**

— **How can successful community businesses share their learning constructively, bearing in mind different practices exist and without this becoming a burden?**

— **How can actors other than individual community businesses address the exclusions that arise from an approach to service provision that relies on the (uneven) capacity of communities to take on facilities and where provision has historically been unequal?**

Appendix 1: Key terms
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Community asset transfer

In England, community asset transfer (CAT) is the process where the leasehold or, more rarely, freehold of an asset is transferred to a community business or organisation. It is rented to them at less than market value on an agreed contract (typically 25+ years), during which the community business maintains the asset and delivers services from it. There are many different types of assets and ways to undertake a transfer: in this research we focused on buildings which had been previously owned by local authorities and transferred to community businesses and which may have had a civic role in the past (e.g. schools, park toilets, museums, libraries, village halls).

Community asset transfer in this country has a history in various guises since at least the 1970s when policies were established around the 'less than market value' issue.[38] The Quirk Review (2007) provided the impetus for local authorities to develop infrastructure to support CAT.[39] Increasing numbers of CATs have occurred in the last 10 years in parallel to a major political shift and restructuring of the role of local authorities.[40] This is attributed to the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government's strategies for devolution following a recession, the ensuing rhetoric of Big Society and the Localism Act 2011, with aims to create a climate that empowered local people and communities to take action in their local areas, taking power away from politicians.

38 See Mike Aiken, Ben Cairns and Stephen Thake, 'Community ownership and management of assets' (2008), Joseph Rowntree Foundation <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/community-ownership-and-management-assets> [Accessed 13 October 2020] and Katrina Foxton, 'Within the Walls Project: Comparing Heritage Values as Action within Council & Community Asset Transfer Practices, York, UK 2014–2016', (PhD Thesis: University of York, 2018), p. 45.

39 See, Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) 'Making assets work: The Quirk Review' (2007), London: DCLG, and Gilbert, Abigail 'A common interest: the role of asset transfer in developing the community business market', *Power to Change Research Institute Report No.3* (November 2016) <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2016-A-common-interest-The-role-of-asset-transfer-in-developing-the-community-business-market.pdf>

40 See Rex, Bethany, 'Public museums in a time of crisis: The case of museum asset transfer', *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage*, 7.2 (2020), 77–92. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20518196.2019.1688265>

Increased numbers of CATs under conditions of austerity meant local authorities often struggled to provide the necessary support and guidance to prospective new operators. Relatedly, being under significant financial pressure to cut budgets, local authority property departments lease arrangements often placed substantial financial burden on community organisations. While positive steps have been taken in recent years towards more equitable arrangements, significant challenges remain over the issue of 'liability transfer' – the buildings are often transferred because they offer limited alternative income-generating potential for local authorities or come with challenging maintenance costs.[41]

While predating mechanisms in the Localism Act – such as Neighbourhood Planning, Assets of Community Value and the Community Right to Bid – community asset transfer nonetheless suited the increasing emphasis on community ownership and volunteer management as a response to central government's reductions to local authority funding and the latter's subsequent shrinking of services and management of assets.[42] CAT continues to be framed as a process whereby local people can protect valued assets and deliver valued services locally, and is also celebrated as a stand against the threat of losing assets to the private sector as part of a 'sell off' by local authorities seeking to better secure themselves financially.[43] In addition, Power to Change research in 2019 estimated that community ownership of assets annually contributes £220 million to the UK economy – half of these were transferred from a public body to a community group.[44]

41 Rex, Bethany, 'Which museums to fund? Examining local government decision-making in austerity' (2020), *Local Government Studies*, 46.2, 186–205 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003 930.2019.1619554>

42 Dobson, Julian 'Community asset ownership: Progress, diversity and risks?' (July 2011), Joseph Rowntree Foundation <http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/wp-content/plugins/ downloads-manager/upload/seminar6.pdf> [Accessed 22 October 2020]

43 Davies, Gareth et al., 'Revealed: the thousands of public spaces lost to the council funding crisis' (2019) <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/stories/2019-03-04/ sold-from-under-you> [Accessed 22 October 2020]

44 Archer, Tom et al., 'Our assets, our future: the economics, outcomes and sustainability of assets in community ownership', *Power to Change Research Institute Report No. 21* (July 2019) <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ Assets-Report-DIGITAL-1.pdf> [Accessed 22 October 2020]

Community businesses

Power to Change identifies community businesses as businesses led by local people that bring benefits to a local area. It defines them through four characteristics:

— **Locally rooted**

— **Trading for the benefit of the local community**

— **Accountable to the local community**

— **Broad community impact**

Community business is a fluid and contested concept. For example, a community business movement was established in Scotland in the 1980s as an explicit counter to the 'enterprise culture' of Thatcherism.[45] In its current iteration, however, community business is a label attributed to a complicated diversity of organisational types. Research by Power to Change in 2019 estimates there are 9,000 community businesses operating in England.[46] However, as others have pointed out, with no simple metric for defining a community business – each of the characteristics listed above are highly subjective and contestable – measuring the size of the 'sector' is problematic.[47]

While these definitional issues are relevant for our research, so too is the question of why the term 'community business' is currently being used. We would suggest the term is used as part of a broader agenda to advocate for the value created by small-scale community initiatives in the face of public sector restructuring. In this context, community businesses are framed as distinct from other providers: 'no one understands a community better than the people who live there'.[48]

45 Gillian Murray, 'Community Business in Scotland: An Alternative Vision of 'Enterprise Culture', 1979–97', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30.4 (2019), 585–606 <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwy007>.

46 Power to Change, 'The Community Business Market in 2019', <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CBM-19-Report-DIGITAL-1.pdf> [Accessed 14 October 2020].

47 See discussion in Hitchin, 'Community business in place' (2018), Power to Change, p. 4.

48 Power to Change, 'A consultation on Power to Change's Register of Hypotheses' (2019), p. 1. <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/PTC-hypotheses-consultation_April-2019.pdf> [Accessed 14 October 2020]

The 'Locally Rooted' Community Business

Although our research indicates that many community businesses do not act solely for the benefit of a clearly defined 'place', at the heart of the argument for community businesses is that they are committed to creating multiple forms of value for the neighbourhood or 'locale' in which they are located. In contrast, those providers in pursuit of short-term returns and value extraction may be less concerned to meet the broader needs and priorities of the community in the places where they work.

What is more, and we saw this throughout the project, community businesses are often the 'last one standing'. In places where market-driven activity has long been absent and the state has effectively withdrawn, community initiatives can make the difference between an area having a social infrastructure or none at all.

Appendix 2: Methodology

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Case studies

This research intended to explore the perspectives of people and groups operating community businesses from transferred assets and to get under the skin of their ways of working. One of the aims was to establish and deepen connections between community businesses working in the same area, and in particular to connect people at an early stage of the asset transfer process with those with several years' experience of operating buildings. The methods used to gather data were selected with this aim in mind.

We used a case study approach to explore perspectives and practices of community businesses in depth and within their real-life context.[49]

We have taken a critical, reflective approach to our case studies in order to understand how the wider social and political environment influences the case. The 'case' in this research is both the individual community businesses and the 'places' where they are based (here meaning the geographical areas where the participating community businesses are based). It was important for us to investigate multiple community businesses within the same place because of our interest in how the distinctive dynamics of places shape and are shaped by the actions of community businesses.

We used three 'priority places' identified by Power to Change as our starting point and contacted community businesses operating there who had undertaken an asset transfer (in some cases extending the 'priority place' area to find a sufficient number of examples). This approach allowed us to signpost participants towards existing initiatives in their area and provided an opportunity for our findings to have an impact on future programming.

49   Robert K. Yin, *Case study research, design and method*, (2009), London: Sage, p. 4.

Our chosen places were:

– Grimsby and Cleethorpes (North)

– Leicester (Midlands)

– Bristol (South West)

Sampling

We approached community businesses that were either in the process of asset transfer or had already completed at least one. We did not ask participants to 'evidence' that they met the criteria of a community business used by Power to Change. For this research what was important was that participating organisations had undertaken a transfer *and* were interested in the research topic. We deliberately invited a mix of established and newly formed community businesses to participate in this study, partly to enable the workshops as a space where participants could connect by sharing their experiences and lessons learnt along the way.

Although we were aware that some definitions included assets comprising land, buildings and other physical infrastructures, we elected to maintain a focus on buildings to ensure the project established connections between organisations with similar concerns and experiences.

Potential organisations to participate were initially listed using information from several sources:

– the Keep it in the Community website

– the Locality members lists

– by contacting the asset management officers at respective councils

– connections from our own networks or those of colleagues, Locality, North Bank Forum (Sector Support), the Black South West Network or Power to Change.

As a result a list of 108 community businesses who had completed transfers was compiled across all three places. There was not an even spread across the places, with approximately 20 identified in the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area, 26 in Bristol and 13 in Leicester.

In sampling our participants, we were not always able to contact the community organisations or they were too busy, or felt 'over-researched' (one of the downsides of choosing to base our research in 'priority places'). We had also hoped that multiple members of staff and volunteers from each organisation

would be able to participate in the research, to hear perspectives from people working in different levels and roles. However, perhaps due to the difficulties many community organisations have in finding the resources to deliver their core work, most organisations were represented by one person who attended both the workshop and interview. As such, although our intended sample size was 15 community businesses (we felt five per workshop based on a maximum of 15 participants in each was manageable in terms of facilitating a mix of small group activities and whole group discussion), we ended up with 17 given that most were represented by one person rather than two or three.

The following 17 organisations agreed to participate in the project. These are identified by name of the organisation rather than the building name:

– **Armed Forces Major Events Team (AFMET) (Cleethorpes)**

– **Green Futures (Bradley, Grimsby)**

– **Fusion Boxing (Grimsby)**

– **Capacity Buildings Ltd (Grimsby)**

– **Centre4 (Grimsby)***

– **Bert Boyden Community Centre (Immingham, nr. Grimsby)**

– **Haverstoe Park Pavilion (Cleethorpes)**

The lead development worker for Big Local North Cleethorpes also attended the workshop in Cleethorpes.

– **Trinity Arts Centre (Bristol)**

– **Creative Youth Network (CYN) (Bristol)**

– **Full Circle @ Docklands (Bristol)**

– **Shirehampton Public Hall (Bristol)**

– **Windmill Hill City Farm (Bristol)***

– **Aspiration Creation Elevation (ACE) (Bristol)**

– **B-inspired (Leicester)**

– **Manor House Community Centre (Leicester)**

– **Highfields Centre (Leicester)**

– **E2 (Leicester)**

* an organisation that was unavailable to attend the workshops but participated in the project by being interviewed.

Research methods

We used workshops and interviews to gather data in relation to our research questions. Each workshop was designed to be spread over a full day, with ample time for breaks to allow participants to get to know one another, or to catch up. Participants were asked to prepare some notes in relation to the themes to be discussed on the day.

Each workshop was designed to include group discussions, individual brainstorming and one-to-one discussions between participants. Participants were encouraged to share their perspective orally and by writing or drawing. Each workshop was split up into four sessions corresponding to the research questions:

Session 1: Defining 'locally rooted' and mapping remits

First, we asked participants to respond to three questions on Post-its: how do you define 'locally rooted' in your own words? Do you have another way of thinking about your local roots and why? Does having an asset make a difference to being locally rooted? After sharing their responses we facilitated a group discussion on points of similarity and difference. Second, we asked participants to use the provided maps to draw their remit. We then used the group discussion to explore the relevance of a geographic approach to this question. To get a sense of place, we also asked participants to comment on their local 'patch'. We provided a range of different types of map for participants to use. There was also an option to draw their own representations of remit. We also used the group discussion to move beyond the map, as for most participants these geographic representations were only part of the story. The mapping exercise was devised as an elicitation device.

Session 2: Approaches to being 'locally rooted' and key challenges

Based on worksheets provided prior to the workshop we asked participants to describe the 'nitty gritty' of what locally rooted looks like in practice. Participants were encouraged to identify their own themes but as a starting point we used categories of 'local rootedness' specified in Power to Change literature: 'responding to community need; working with other local organisations; providing employment, training or volunteering, and reinvesting profit for local benefit'. We then asked participants to share challenges associated with these efforts.

Session 3: Addressing challenges past, present and future

We facilitated an open discussion on the relationship between being locally rooted and sustainability, including prompts about what participating community business could do to improve the sustainability of their asset and organisation. Based on worksheets provided prior to the workshop we then facilitated a group discussion on how the external environment might change to be more supportive of locally rooted community businesses.

Session 4: Sharing lessons and models for others

We asked participants to respond to the following questions on paper: What do you know about being locally rooted that you would share with another organisation? What tool or recommendations could we design that might be useful for others? If you could go 'back in time' and advise yourself on how to go about managing an asset transfer, what would you say? We facilitated a group discussion with the aim of identifying shared lessons and ideas.

Participants were aware that they could withdraw their consent to participate at any time, and were given the option to be named or pseudonymised in the research report. Participants were given the option for their contributions to be anonymised although they were made aware of the likelihood of their comments being identifiable given the limited number of community businesses managing transferred assets in each area. Group agreements were also part of the set up, in order to ensure our participants felt able to speak, withhold or retract statements in relation to the details of their work.

We planned for each workshop to be held in a venue operated by one of the participating organisations. Our plans were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic such that we were only able to host one out of three workshops face-to-face, at The Knoll in Cleethorpes operated by AFMET. A further two workshops were hosted online using video conferencing. Participants were sent workshop packages containing the necessary materials.

A total of 21 people representing 17 different organisations attended the workshops. We recorded key parts of the discussion in the face-to-face workshops and all of the online workshops. We transcribed key parts of the discussion.

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted as a follow-on from topics discussed during the workshop and to test emerging findings. Participants were sent a list of questions in advance. We used deductive and inductive approaches to the interview questions, as we wanted to follow up

on observations made during the workshops as well as hear participants' perspectives on academic debates as to how the voluntary and community sector had changed over the previous decade. The interviews focused on the following themes:

– the political nature of the voluntary sector

– the role of community assets

– the everyday work involved in being 'locally rooted'

– relationship between the community business and the local authority

– challenge of competing with private sector providers and, if relevant, solutions to deal with this

– Covid-19 and Black Lives Matter response

– hopes for the future of community business where they are based and more broadly

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and participants were given the option to review the transcript. The following workshop participants did not take part in an interview due to dealing with the response to Covid-19: Martin Buchanan (E2, Leicester), Dave Waller (Bert Boyden Community Centre), Gavin Marshall (AFMET) and John Mooney (Big Local North Cleethorpes).

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