COMMUNITY ECONOMISTS

Insights from community conversations

JANUARY 2026

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper,
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What We Know and Feel

For many, the economy is an alien concept. In headlines and briefings, it emerges abbreviated and cryptic: CPI, GDP, market swings, unemployment rates, fiscal policies, budget cuts. It sounds separate from us and our lives, yet it consistently demands our sacrifice. We need to trade in our health in service of growth, our time for productivity, our sense of justice for 'stability'. The way the media talks about the economy has become so convoluted that often it feels like we're no longer their target audience. And we're left to wonder, "Where is my place in all this? Do I even matter?"

We're told that the current economic system is a natural outcome of centuries of progress. Yet what surrounds us are deepening levels of national and global inequality and a system, exclusively serving the very rich, whereby a handful of elites amass obscene wealth at the direct expense of billions of people and the planet.

We're left to wonder: where is my place in all this?

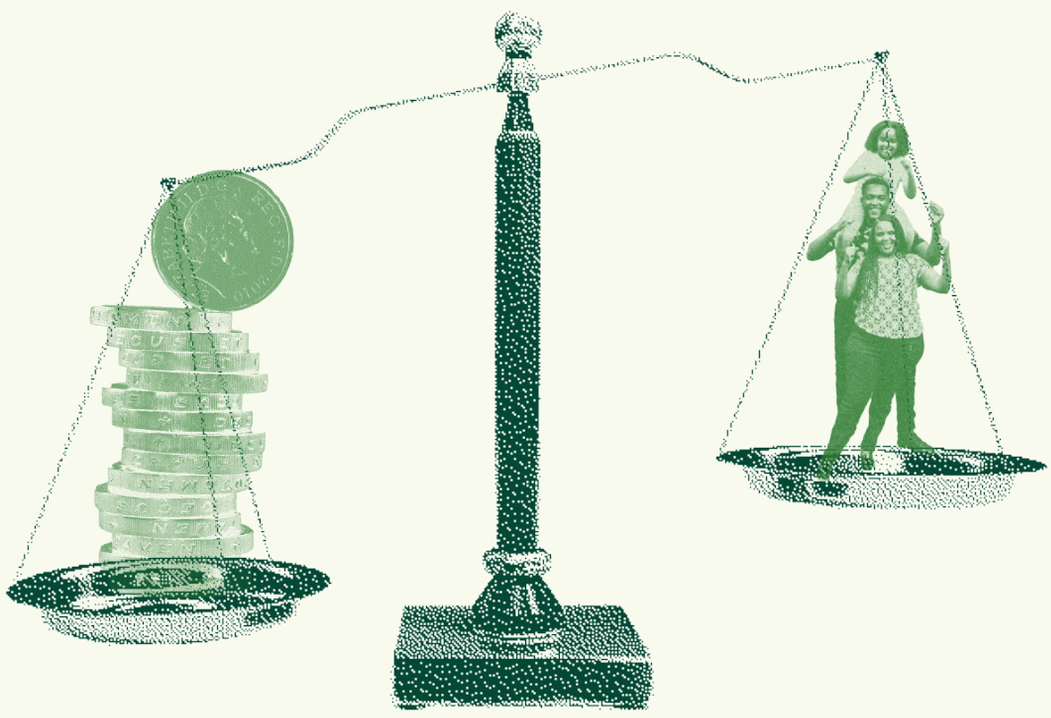
Do I ever matter?

This arrangement, we're told, is an improvement. Yet most of us recognise the opposite in our daily lives: soaring living costs, exploitative global supply chains, food insecurity, absolute poverty, climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the list of despairs goes on. There's a belief that this gloom is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Some have gone so far as to suggest that the world is suffering a crisis of imagination.

What is the economy and how should it work? These questions may sound simple, but when asked to a small group of 34 people, the response was an array of deeply imaginative and thoughtful ideas, not just about what the economy is, but what it should be doing, and how it can be changed.

The overwhelming agreement among them was that each and every one of us is the economy. Whether we're earning or caring, extracting or sharing resources, making or solving problems – we participate in, produce, and shape the economy.

The Community Economists believe we all have a right to ask these questions, no matter how simple or complex, and to get the answers we need. The economy should work for us, and we should be able to understand how, and why it works the way it does. And we all have the right to believe in and demand something better.



What We Did

The Community Economists project is our response to these feelings of frustration and disconnect. Spanning 18-months, it is an invitation and counterweight to show evidence that everyday expertise exists, matters, and can guide action. If ordinary people are the economy, then ordinary people must also be architects of its future.

This project creates space to re-imagine what the economy is and sketch a vision for a fairer future. This is not about building a new system overnight, but democratising who gets to produce economic knowledge and laying the foundations for practical change.

A Community Economist is someone with no formal economic training who wants to be part of challenging economic inequality. Economic understanding is inaccessible, and getting to be one of the people who have a hand in shaping the economy is harder still. We wanted to widen the pool of decision-makers; everyday people speaking to everyday people, learning by doing, listening, and leading.

Over the first phase of the project, participants from throughout the UK were trained in the Community Reporting methodology to gather stories in their own networks and analyse them together. This summary report shares the insights from Community Reporters and storytellers, in which 12 themes were identified, illustrated by quotes.

An accompanying soundscape sits alongside this summary report so readers can hear the texture in voices that statistics alone can't carry: care and frustration, joy and stress, the quiet labour of making life work.

Watch the soundscape

You can watch and listen to the Community Economist soundscape on YouTube at:

https://bit.ly/communitysoundscape

or by scanning the QR code

COMMUNITY ECONOMIST:

A community economist is someone with no formal or in-depth economic training who wants to be part of challenging economic inequality.

Over a period of 12 weeks they explored what the economy meant to them, trained as community reporters and interviewed 26 people across the UK.

What we're trying to achieve

With the Community Economists, we aim to:

- Co-produce knowledge about how the current economic system shows up in people's lives, and open permission to think differently about what the economy is for.
- Blend marginalised and mainstream voices to evidence the power of participation and new ways of working.
- Connect lived experience to policy by building a robust, story-led evidence base that shapes messages, campaigns, and decisions.
- Empower communities, businesses, and governments to build practical alternatives.
- Embed collaborative systems change within the wider economic justice movement and co-create a shared vision for a fair economic future grounded in lived experience and strong evidence.

How we did it

A note on language in this section: The body of this report is written to be accessible to anyone who cares about how the economy shapes daily life. In this section, we use more technical terms so researchers can assess our approach with precision, replicate it, and situate it in existing literature. If you are not reading this as a researcher, please feel free to skim or skip, as nothing in this section is required to understand the findings, but is included for transparency and rigour.

If you would like any more information on our approach, please feel free to contact us at info@equalitytrust.org.uk

Phase 1 used Community Reporting, a participatory, peer-to-peer storytelling method developed by People's Voice Media. This approach is grounded in Pierre Lévy's concept of collective intelligence: "Nobody knows everything, everyone knows something, and all knowledge resides in humanity."

This approach values lived experience as evidence, creating a two-way flow of insight with communities, and is designed to be participative and disrupt the extractive nature of research.

Community Reporting moves through 3 linked phases:

1. Story gathering: Community Reporters are trained in ethical interviewing, safeguarding, and consent and deliberate on a question to ask their communities. They then record stories from people in their local networks–referred to as Storytellers–about their lived experiences.
2. Story curation: Stories are reviewed and grouped to surface patterns and tensions, using a grounded, inductive approach to provide a usable database for decision-makers
3. Story mobilisation: The insights found inform messages, advocacy, and practical change.

How we gathered stories

Led by 8 Community Reporters, supported by the Equality Trust team, we gathered 26 stories from across the UK, using snowball sampling.

After carefully deliberating language and purpose over the course of their training, they proposed a simple, urgent question:

What would it be like if EVERYONE had what they needed to live a good life—and how would that be different from how things are now?

Right: Stills from other Equality Trust community reporting projects

To support consistency when having conversations with storytellers, the group also developed a shared, plain-language working definition of the economy:

> The economy is how we organise and manage the things we want and need. We are the economy, it's the sum of everything we create, produce or collect.
>
> Some people grow food, some build things like homes or services, some make things like clothes or art, others share ideas or solve problems. Everyone contributes and does different things and we need to organise and manage ourselves to make sure we all get what we need to live good lives.

With permission, stories were recorded (in audio, video, transcripts formats) and anonymised where requested. Both Community Reporters and storytellers were remunerated for their time.

How we analysed stories

Participation and co-production are embedded in this project, including the analysis. Stories and accompanying transcripts were analysed using a curation methodology. Community Reporters independently coded story segments, then engaged in collaborative sense-making to compare interpretations, cluster codes, and refine categories. Verbatim quotes were used to to evidence each theme.

Multiple reporters reviewed themes and quotes to reduce individual bias. An audit trail was kept of coded decisions.

Why stories as well as numbers?

Quantitative indicators such as wage growth, inflation or employment rates are necessary, but insufficient for understanding people's relationship to the economy. Narrative data, or stories, can better capture affective and relational dimensions of economic life that aggregate measures may obscure, including stress, care, agency, constraints, and hope.

Stories help illuminate economic injustices and show where policy or services don't match people's realities. In this way, narrative evidence complements quantitative analysis, to inform pathways to change in policy design and communication.

Limitations

The findings should be read as analytical generalisations from a purposive sample, not population estimates. The goal of this approach was context and depth which are balanced by limits to external validity. Nonetheless, the resulting themes provide insightful and robust patterns grounded in lived experience evidence capable of guiding agenda setting, messaging and policy development.

What We Found

Visions of a good life

Over 12 weeks, the Community Economists explored storytelling, interviewing and thematic analysis around the question: *"What would it be like if everyone had what they needed to live a good life, and how would that be different from how things are now?"*

The results below are based on over 10 hours of interviews, which have been been compiled into insights about our system's consequences. If we were in any doubt that the economy wasn't working for most of us, these insights make it clear that change is needed and our storytellers have lots of ideas of how this can be achieved.

Analysis of the storytellers' evidence found a number of common themes:

Visions of good life:

1. Affordable housing and health
2. Work, value and purpose
3. Education
4. Collective responsibility for children and planet
5. Community strength and space
6. Expectation of the government

Real costs of the status quo

7. Culture of survival
8. Sacrifices and social fractures
9. Growing class divides
10. Undue influence on democracy

Is change possible?

11. Perceptions and narratives to change
12. Alternative economic choices
13. People power to create change

Affordable housing and health

"Your starting point is having a home. If people don't know they've got a secure home, for those people especially, things will never be equal." – Carol

Any vision of a fair economy must guarantee truly affordable, healthy homes for everyone, and rein in profiteering that extracts from people's basic need for shelter. "That's one of the important things you need: a place to live. Nothing more than that," said Bee. Housing should be treated as a home, not an investment vehicle or commodity. Yet the sector, as it currently functions, has drifted far from that role. Over recent decades it has been dramatically reshaped as a lucrative investment opportunity, with landlord and developer profiteering fuelling homelessness and insecurity. As Esther states:

"I don't believe that housing is a luxury and if we cannot get free housing we should have incredibly affordable housing. Our social housing at the moment is disgraceful, it's beyond disgraceful and more and more private landlords are able to seize council houses and turn them into private housing and the lack of checks and balances there are incredibly disgusting ."

Prices have surged, locking people out of security and choice. Dan noted that, "in the 80s or 90s it was sort of three times your salary. Finding a house for three times my salary is a ridiculous concept now ... .it's harder to achieve anything now... there's no upwards progress." He linked this to housing policy that rewards owners and penalises renters, and to the political avoidance of building genuinely affordable homes. In the UK, the income-to-house price ratio is now nearly eight times higher.

The state of housing now is having immense tolls on physical and mental health. Innocent described years of precarious living in unsafe, structurally unsound housing filled with mould, damp, and

inadequate heating where, "I was left to live in such an environment for 15 years. That psychologically affected me, but also affected the performance of my children in school." They were also clear about what access to decent homes would bring, further sharing that "there'll be less sicknesses, there'll be less hospitalisation and real happiness in those families." Storytellers also linked a vision of secure tenure to agency with Dan sharing if everyone, "could have a place of their own, they'd have a much more solid foundation for going out and achieving something and making the community better."

Work, value, purpose

"I think about how labour is really exploited, so people are always made to feel like they must work harder, they must work more, but to what end? Because they're just making someone richer, not themselves" – Caro

The nature of work in our current economy leaves people feeling like their worth is measured in a payslip, their humanity priced by the hour. Treated primarily as inputs, their days are structured to maximize productivity despite their own financial security always held just out of reach. Esther called this commodification of humans obscene, stating, "If you cannot afford to feed your employees you shouldn't have employees... you shouldn't be making them work for meagre wages while the CEO... receive[s]... millions... it's disgusting." The overall feeling was that the workforce is hustling to stand still, while being told to be grateful for a free-market system that enables this deep precarity and lack of fulfilment.

For most people, their long hours and enduring effort doesn't translate into meaning or value. Emile spoke to a deeper longing saying, "we need to feel like we ourselves have value... part of something that cares about us and that we care about." A culture that treats people as workers will always not meet that need. Jessie added that, "If you're living a good life you've got to enjoy your work, because if you don't that's a large proportion of your time where you're [..] just kind of getting through the day." Constrained in choice, Ben admitted that "If I had all my basic needs met, I think I'd aspire to do a different job [...] my dream goal would be to work in the public sector," but instead "I'm looking to go into finance because I know that's probably a way I can make money." Caroline linked this constraint to policy, saying if the state wants brilliant people in public roles, then,

"government also has to provide from that wealth that is created and that tax spend [to create] decent wages for people who work in the public sector so that all the brightest and the best don't feel the need to just go into the private sector [...] they need to know that they're going to be able to have a decent standard of life and a decent place to live."

While money may not have inherent meaning, Rab felt that it "provides avenues to reach a certain point of happiness," and that "financial stability is probably the biggest key to having a good life."

Storytellers further interrogated what gets to count as work, and whose labour is acknowledged as necessary. They pointed to unseen, underacknowledged, and unpaid care work. Caro described how, "society is being propped up by middle-aged women volunteering in places, volunteering their time and their energy." These "physical and mental acts of caring," including

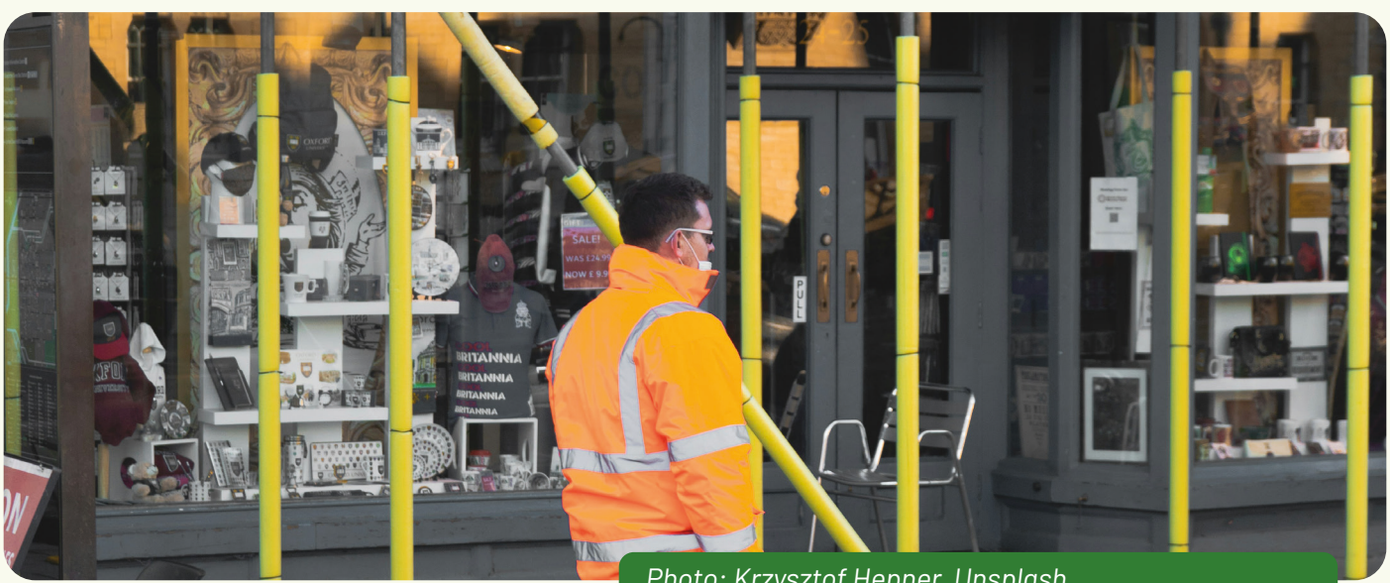


Photo: Krzysztof Hepner, Unsplash

community care and all care that happens inside and outside the home, are crucial labour but labelled as 'economically inactive,' as if love and care do not sustain life.

A fair economy would flip these assumptions. It would secure long-term income and job stability; pay living wages across sectors; value and resource care; and return time so people can pursue personal growth, meaningful contribution, and rest. Work would matter, but it would not be everything. We could and would contribute to society, knowing we were valued without being measured against an income or wage.

Collective responsibility for young people and the planet

"I was talking to my friends about this...we don't want to have absolutely everything, we want to just have basic needs and a bit of enjoyment...I don't think we need millions or whatnot like that. I think our goal would just be to have a nice, sustainable life where you don't need to worry about having to meet your basic needs" – Ben

A fair economy would be a caring one. It would centre children and support the people who raise them, and the way we utilise and circulate the earth's resources would be sustainable.

"If everybody could have a good life, it means that every child would grow up with healthy self-esteem as a result of being loved and belonging," said Maureen, advocating that care early on allows people to "live a self-actualised life, a life where they can live out their purpose in adulthood." She also stressed the importance of a child-centred world, saying, "I think majority of the world's problems would be solved if .... we lived in a children-centred world where every child mattered, because every child becomes an adult. And the way you're loved in childhood defines and determines how you're going to love and respect others in the future." Storytellers advocated for clear, practical help for people who want to learn about parenting; respecting the choice not to have children; and giving ongoing mental, emotional, and financial support to those who do. As Bee put it, the early years are when families "need a bit of economic help," and that work of raising children who go on to contribute back to society, "is a job for the nation."

Care also extends to the planet. Storytellers urged a shift from extractive consumption to a pace set by following ecosystems. "We really need to follow nature... it slows down in winter, it slows down. It has cycles," said Danielle, instead of a culture that is always "on", instant, and demanding our consumption and attention. Fast fashion came up as an example of unsustainability. Cheap goods invite disposal and hide real costs, especially in countries that bear the human and natural cost of producing them. Ben was blunt that if we want production to be fairer and cleaner, "consumers would have to consume less.. fast fashion's only viable at that scale because of the cheapness at which the items are made." Alongside using less, storytellers wanted more green space and infrastructure prioritised in their communities saying,

"I think more green spaces for communities. I like the way a lot of the sort of public transport has gone down the route of electric, like a lot of the bus services are electric now. I think encouraging more of that. Taking care of parks and places to swim, places to cycle. I think the greener that a place feels, the more you tend to feel happier."

Community strength and space

"There's a lot of pressure put on individuals as well to create a good life for yourself, as if it's all your responsibility, which I think, again, comes from this capitalist mindset and outlook" – Fran

A recurring frustration in the stories is how 'the good life' is treated as a private project, reflecting an economic culture that values self-reliance and independence over shared care. Work harder, self-soothe, and make do with their exhaustion while the commons thins around them.

However in their stories, participants imagined something different: a culture that values collaboration and a collective approach to wellbeing. But that culture needs physical space to hold it. Storytellers pointed to dwindling youth clubs, shuttered libraries, and the ordinary spaces where neighbours can meet as being absent or priced out. "We need places to encourage communal activities, communal gardens, workshops, schemes that get people out of the house a little bit [...]. It doesn't even have to be problem solving. It can just be somewhere to be amongst each other more." Dan said, lamenting that,

"Right now I don't think on an individual level you can really do much... without the facilities in place to encourage that kind of stuff," nobody has time for it. We're so busy. I mean, I do at least 60 hours a week. So by the time I come home, I don't have time or energy to do anything. And it's only the same for everybody else that lives around here."

Building an alternative means repairing the social fabric. Investing in community infrastructure, strengthening local and national support systems, and removing linguistic and cultural barriers so migrants and marginalised groups can shape community life on equal terms.

It also means tackling class segregation and status divides. Caroline said,

"by mixing, whether it's postcode mixing, whether it's wealthy families and not so wealthy families, people from a refugee background and people from a completely different background, these are all part of society and people naturally get on and make friendships... we are more similar than we are different, and we need to recognise that and value it as a society."

There are glimpses of what this could feel like. Rangel argued that there's enough money and space for everyone, and "we just need to start looking after each other. I think that would be a good way forward." Ollie pictured a lifted social mood, where

"people would be a lot more sociable. I think strangers would greet each other in public. I think people would generally feel a bit lighter and less kind of under pressure to earn money, concentrate on themselves and their immediate surroundings. And maybe people will just be, in general, more engaged with the world."

Photos: Birmingham University, Newcastle University staff on strike via Ian McDonald

The outcome would be a stronger commons, where mutual aid and public provision reinforce each other. Where everyday life could be a place of cooperation and care, instead of competition and solitary endurance.

Education

Young people today are told education is the ladder out of low pay and inequality. But storytellers told us how the rungs are priced, missing, spaced too far apart for anyone to hold onto, or pulled away. Inês described the racial and spatial division between her classmates long before exams: in Brixton, her friends "don't have enough money for a tutor," while in East Finchley "quite a lot of my friends… wouldn't even have to think twice." Schools in poorer areas are continuing to buckle where support is most needed, explained Khadijah, as "state schools are struggling to accommodate those with special needs and therefore there's shortages of staff, teaching staff, support staff in schools and so the poorest areas are the worst affected by all of these changes." Anna also spoke about how private school makes "getting good grades… irrelevant because people pay to go to private school because of all the connections and… confidence it gives you to put yourself in situations where you don't know what you're doing." Her verdict was that "they should get rid of private schooling," to get back on a level playing field.

Higher education was also named for reproducing market logic. Caroline warned that "far too much education now is being hived off to private providers," with hedge funds running courses whose interests are not "pure education." Anna also pointed to the bureaucracy involved in admissions paperwork when applying to higher education that assumes middle-class lives, creating inequality of access. She described the paperwork trap facing first-generation students, where, "if you're the first person in your family going to university and your parents are supposed to fill in some form to say how much they earn but their address keeps changing and their jobs keep changing," further complicated by how not all children having stable relationships with their parents and how off-putting occurring debt feels to those who haven't much to begin with, then, "even though they say it's equal because everyone can apply… it's kind of not." Ollie's remedy was that "universities should be free." Emile widened the lens to classroom practice and pedagogy itself, essentially how we teach and learn, as a system that "holds certain subjects higher than others" and mass-produces "cookie-cutter humans [because] it's not based on what that young person wants or needs or can offer or their skill sets or the way their brain works. It's not done like this." Expanding dignified routes outside university mattered too: paid apprenticeships and post-school programmes that lead to fulfilling work without stigma or penalty.

Our storytellers told us that a fair economy would open many doors, not just one. It would treat life-long learning as public infrastructure, not a marketplace to reproduce (dis)advantage. That would mean ending the private-school system as a premium that buys opportunity, guaranteeing free meals and specialist support in every school, resourcing special education needs adequately, renationalising and funding universities as public institutions, and opening up pathways to learn and earn outside of traditional higher education institutions by paying people to learn through accessible apprenticeships and adult education.

Expectation of the government

There is clear expectation from storytellers that the government should exist to guarantee the basics of a good life and to steward shared resources in the public interest. Storytellers defined basic needs as: safe homes, accessible transport, decent healthcare, and an income floor that protects dignity and mental health. "If the government is there to make every child… have every basic need, I think that's fair," said Debbie. In our current economic system or a better one, "The government also has to provide from that wealth that is created and that tax spend," Caroline said.

But many felt the social contract is broken as free market logic has seeped into every corner of public provision. Caroline said, "if we don't have a social contract in place, which works between the government and the governed, then you don't have a society that works," and "we pay our taxes and for that, we expect to get certain basics." These expectations are not simply nostalgic; they reflect how living standards rise with development and support. Ollie said,

"We've developed as a society and we quite rightly expect certain things like access to education and healthcare, and services. And people still struggle to get those things. So I think our standard for good life has, has quite rightly, increased because we recognise that there is more potential in the modern world for more benefits. And we're right to say that we deserve those benefits."

The expectation of the government also extends to meeting people where they are. Khadijah described "limited involvement and access to our

Photos: Make Them Pay protest in London, September 2025

councillors... because of the barriers that they have culturally and linguistically," underlining the need for services designed with and for diverse communities. When government and economic systems fail to include and meaningfully engage, responsibility is pushed back onto individuals who can least absorb it, and the promise of public provision becomes conditional. Fran added that,

"There could be more of a dialogue between what people actually feel that they need to live a good life, [and] the government understanding that in the end, that gives back because it's reciprocal, it doesn't just go into an empty pot. If you resource people so that they can maybe get back into work or feel energised and or not have mental health problems in the longer term, it would actually save money , because how much of the mental health budget that we lose in every year, because there's so many people having mental health problems."

Finally, participants insisted that accountability is a right. People should be able to ask for better without fear. "We should not be afraid of our government... we should be not just asking for it but demanding what they promised us," said Esther, citing the use of state force through surveillance and police brutality to deter protests and scrutiny.

Real cost of the status quo

Culture of survival

Stress has become contagious, the social script we recite to prove we're keeping pace. "You go see someone, [and they say] 'Oh I'm stressed'. And then you almost feel like, well they're stressed, I should be stressed. Why am I not stressed? And then you start to question yourself" said Danielle. Life has become a daily grind, that leaves little room for anything beyond surviving, let alone thriving.

Time, not just income, was a key inequality identified by storytellers that reduces people's autonomy and leisure. Long hours, mounting debts, anxiety and stress fuelled by financial insecurity and precarity are squeezing out rest, care, and joy. Fran captured the daily calculation:

"People don't feel able to maybe experience a good life, because so much of their life is dominated by worries about, am I going to be able to feed my family? Am I going to be able to have a roof over my head? Do I live in a mouldy property that I can't move out of? ... people experience it in their bodies and their psychology and their overall wellbeing."

She added the obvious implication on health and standards of living: "when people are not under as much stress in society, they have much better health outcomes." Dan put the squeeze bluntly:

"People struggle so much just existing. It doesn't leave much room for being able to care about much else. Putting food on the table, paying the bills, trying to save for a place of your own or being stuck in a rut of rent that costs more than what a mortgage would anyway."

Even relative comfort can't buy ease, said Caroline when she shared that,

"I have quite a comfortable life but it is quite stressful, and I don't feel like I have the time or energy to do the things that I would like to do. Mainly to care for myself, you know, take more exercise, do some nice things with the people that I love. I feel like I'm always running on a treadmill."

Storytellers pushed back on the idea that rest is a luxury, rather than a necessity. "It's a privilege to have time [...] for yourself or for your family. And

actually, I would argue that everybody's entitled to that." Fran [noted]. The cost of denying the need for rest and slowing down shows up in our wellbeing and ability to care for each other: "There would be perhaps less mental health difficulties because people wouldn't feel stressed by not having the things they needed," Jessie shared. Danielle added,

"It's not that people are self-centred; it's just that we have to survive. So you don't have that space to think about others. You can't be in that energetic space if you're not in a thriving space."

People also linked the culture of survival to a weaker democracy. "If people are just scrambling to survive… there will be whole swathes of people that can't participate," Marieanne warned. A fair economy, then, is not only one with higher wages; it is one that returns time, so people can slow down and be, become, and breathe, and move from barely surviving to genuinely thriving , with the capacity to participate and shape the futures of their communities.

Sacrifices and social fractures

"A lot of people have had to crush their dreams in order to survive capitalism" – Esther

Storytellers shared with us a culture of constant comparison and dreams that can never begin. They described a system that forces constant trade-offs: pay the rent or rest, care for family or chase overtime, study or take any job that pays. Participants linked this pressure to poorer health, financial anxiety, thin social ties, and a politics that keeps people occupied with short-term survival rather than collective change.

Several storytellers noted that better lives would reduce crime and improve health, but the status quo instead produces scarcity, mistrust and social division. Steve noticed how status gets policed through wealth, creating false feelings of inferiority and superiority. "When people don't have ways to differ or 'other' you… they can always find a way to point it back to, yes, but you're poorer than me, which makes me better than you… that creates a lot of social divide." He added that this infighting leaves people without "the time, the mental space or the energy to think about the wider, bigger problems." Jen traced the mindset this produces,

"If you've been put in that situation yourself, you're kind of raised with this fear mindset of doing everything out of necessity and not looking out after people that aren't within your immediate reality… it just kind of makes it more difficult for everybody."

Growing class divides

"If you have poverty of opportunity and poverty of aspiration, you don't have a happy or thriving or cohesive society" – Caroline

Many storytellers shared how promises of 'opportunity' do not match reality. They described rising costs, growing class divides, and social mobility that isn't blocked by ambition, but by policy choices that favours and protects the asset-owning wealthy, which narrows choice and limits social mobility. Ollie captured the structural pattern, saying,

"Over the course of the last 50 years, wealth has been gradually extracted from the working class and concentrated in the hands of corporations and extremely wealthy individuals… there's actually still so much unfulfilled potential due to the… economic system in which we live, which denies people… access to certain resources which would massively improve their lives."

Inês voiced how this lands emotionally and politically: "[imagining a fairer future] is really hard… there's always got to be something wrong…

it's very dysphoric to think about." Dan added that, "we're supposed to feel like we have more opportunity now with social media and being able to experience more things, but I don't think that's translated into tangible reality at all."

Caroline spoke to class and cash during life's key transitions saying, " if you don't come from a background where you are going to get any financial help, then your choices are governed by that, and that seems really sad at a time in your life when you should be exploring," concluding that "people's choices are narrower today." Khadijah plainly observed the distributional reality: "the richest are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer." The price is paid by those with the least, while gains flow upward.

Undue influence on democracy

Our storytellers described a democracy corroded by concentrated wealth. "We have changed the governments, we changed the prime ministers, but policies stay the same," said Rangel. That sense of stagnant policy sits alongside a sharper claim of the small, ultra-rich minority that sets the agenda, defining what is worth pursuing, who is to blame, and confining public consciousness to a stale sense of slow progress so as not to disrupt the status quo. As Aaron put it, "The ruling class doesn't just control wealth, it defines the boundaries of thought [...] The idea that this is the best we can do is not a fact; it's an ideological victory."

The buyout of traditional media by the ultra-rich was identified as steering public attention away from root causes. "They're being told by our incredibly powerful establishment right-wing media that it is the people who have less than you, have less than them, that they're the ones stealing the jobs and stealing the houses and making it expensive to live in the UK," said Esther, while the real drivers are actually, "landlords and [...] billionaires being able to buy off our MPs so they abandon all their progressive policies to appease the wealthiest in our society ". The machinery of the press scapegoats immigrants and the poor, divides communities, and keeps the spotlight off the distribution of power and the escape of scrutiny.

Storytellers linked that narrative power to material power, referencing loopholes and lobbying that tilt the rules. "Some of these taxing rules [mean] big corporations... don't pay their fair share," noted Khadijah. Rab pushed the point further, saying, "At the end of the day, the people that do have the money and the power to make big changes, they would have done it if they wanted to. There's enough money in the world to fix [hunger and severe poverty].There's not enough want to do it by the right people who have the money." The result is a politics that too often performs concern, while preserving the flow and concentration of wealth at the top.

Is change possible?

Perceptions and narratives

Change, storytellers told us, sits between feelings of hope and exhaustion. "People have lost faith in politicians," Ollie said, and many "have stopped believing optimistically in the future," sensing the world is sliding toward "chaos and destruction." These feelings came from living inside institutions

that repeatedly deliver insecurity, then ask us to be grateful. The result is an imagination desert where alternatives feel distant, even when the status quo is visibly failing; it's kept in place by mainstream economic narratives. Fran shared, "we sometimes feel limited to think big because we feel so hopeless, or I feel hopeless by the capitalist philosophy that's permeated into so many levels of how things are done." Aaron paraphrased Frederic Jamesson to add "it's easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism."

From school to news bulletins, we are taught to treat the economy as untouchable, technical, and someone else's job. "There needs to be a lot of education... a lot of explanation of the economy and... how money flows around the world," Steve argued. Without basic economic literacy, he sees it easy for fatalism to harden into common sense. If the only lesson is that "life isn't fair," as Emile was told from childhood, then resignation becomes a civic habit and policy failure is reframed as personal failure. It also means naming the emotional toll of a slow grind, where progress feels glacial.

Storytellers were adamant that the possibility for change and a better world exists. "The conditions for a good life for all do exist—materially," Aaron reminded us, "what's missing is permission to believe in it, to organise for it, to fight for it." He connected the past with the present to show how we have many examples throughout history of people fighting for, and creating, something better: municipal housing, universal healthcare, mutual aid, collective bargaining, none were inevitable; all were built. Remembering that lineage is important because it turns "utopian" into "unfinished," and invites us to resume the work, instead of treating it as myth.

So, is change possible? Yes. But only if we change who gets to imagine and make decisions. Our storytellers spoke to a politics that makes room to dream and then treats those dreams as policy instructions; their hope both provisional and earned. If the dominant story says "this is as good as it gets," their answer is a counter-story grounded in lived experience: we have changed things before; we can do it again, together.

Alternative economic choices

Storytellers told us they want an economy that is measured by and prioritises the quality of life it makes possible, not by how fast it grows. Alternative economic choices require conversations around circulation, ownership, and power. As DJ put it, "the world has to have a factory reset on finance." That reset begins by questioning who the economy is built for, and how money moves through it.

Several storytellers argued for a vision centring local economies. Rangel described a "bubble-up" approach that invests first in people and places where the need is greatest, and lets economic prosperity rise from below. As opposed to trickle-down economics, his remedy is to direct funding into local institutions–including schools, nursing homes, hospitals,and local businesses– because money spent at the base "will gradually stay in the local community and go... upwards." Steve made the same point at street level: economies thrive "when people have money to spend on things in the first place," wages are paid, and "the money circulates in the economy."

Redistribution is also necessary to fix public wealth draining into private bank accounts. Rangel argued that "a chief executive of a company... would have [no more than] five times [the salary

of] the lowest pay." Anna added that no private fortune should be able to justify the public hunger it causes, "You should not be allowed to have a billion pounds while other people can't eat." Caro reached the same conclusion saying, "it's really time that we redistributed and re-appropriated the way that money flowed around in communities."

There was also lively debate about tools to achieve an economy that works for people and the planet. Some wanted a universal basic income to create real choice. Others emphasised guaranteed routes to agency through fair pay and public investment. Marieanne's touchstone was autonomy, with "people being able to provide what they need for themselves is preferable to people receiving what they need... in terms of people's sense of power and agency in the world." For Esther, the destination is clear: "work for a society that is anti-capitalist... It prioritises our humanity over what our labour is providing for the economy." Taxing wealth over work, closing avoidance, and shifting priorities around the spend of public money were the levers people pointed to most in order to fund our basic needs and support our local and wellbeing economies.

Across the stories, it was clear that the economy as it exists is only one design, and that ordinary people have the care, imagination, and tools to redesign it.

People power to create change

A more aware, empowered populace with a sense of agency. That's how I think we'll see change – Marieanne

Across stories, a route from bottom-up action meeting top-down responsibility was described as fraught or outright broken, with meaningful change remaining stalled at the policy level. Behind those feelings is a long term reality that partnerships between those with power to make decisions over resources, and those working on-the-ground to support communities, has consistently been unequal. Storytellers identified the need for active engagement between decision-makers and the public, through a commitment to listen, resource a visible and meaningful path from local pressure to national policy, and act to turn community energy into durable change. As Dan put it, "if communities can pressure their local government in the right way, which then pressures central government... things can get a hell of a lot better."

However, storytellers went further to insist that everyday people are agents of change, and should have real opportunities to exercise greater ownership over their lives and communities. Rab shared that,

"I don't think the government's going to be responsible for the betterment of this country. And I don't mean that particularly towards one group of politicians [...] I think the people will be. The everyday person is probably going to have a better chance at actually actively making a positive change."

Crucially, citizens' power to make choices and take action must be enabled, not just invited, by investing in the networks, infrastructure, and places that connect people. Although grassroots and community groups were identified as a key pathway by sparking real community-led engagement, without funding and resources, their impact disappears.

"I'm someone who very much doesn't think that it's going to be able to work from the top down. It has to start from the bottom. It has to start with us making all those changes. I'm someone who's really interested in community activism and working with community groups [and] it is very much around bringing people together to have genuine connection, which I think we're losing increasingly now, and [..] instil in people a sense of value that they're worth something more than how much money that they bring in each year or whether they look the way that society dictates that we should look." – Emile.

Ultimately, people power works when people have the real power, time, income, and spaces to meet, to allow them to create change together, and when the state is set up to respond. But despite the barriers, storytellers were frank in believing in the power of communities to collaborate in order to work together against their biggest obstacles. Esther reminded us that people movements have already been successful, and how "we should learn to productively use our anger and our rage and look to past movements as well, look to past and present liberation movements from all over the world."

What's Next

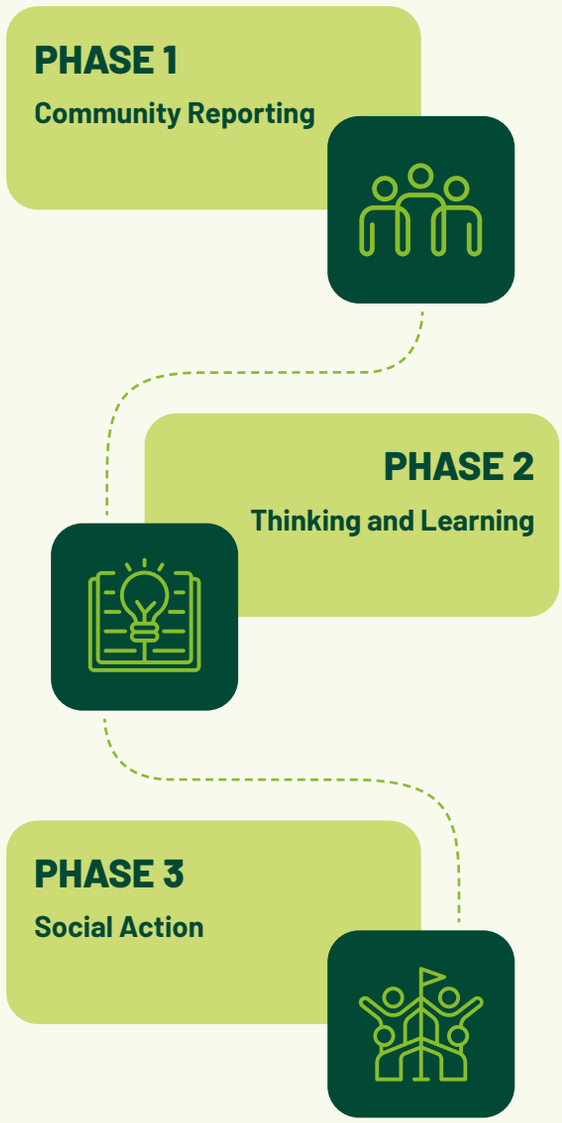
The Community Economists project starts from a simple claim that people make economies.

If that's true, then economies should function to make it easier, not harder, for people to live the lives they value. Our work ahead is to make the changes needed to choose the former, together.

This report is only the beginning. The imperative now is to turn private worries and hopes into shared action, and community conversations into community power.

As the project moves forward into Phase 2 we will build on our insights by running focused workshops, message testing, building advocacy, and coalition building.

In Phase 3, we will reflect on the evidence and energy we've gathered, and use it to run a social action to turn what we know and feel into real change.



How you can help

- Share the report or soundscape with someone you know
- Host listening circles: Gather your family, friends, or neighbours to share stories and visions for change
- Carry the language: We can all ask questions and challenge the narrative that there are no viable alternatives.
- Join the conversation: Get in touch with us for updates and how you can participate by emailing us at info@equalitytrust.org.uk

Watch the soundscape

You can watch and listen to the Community Economist soundscape on YouTube at:

https://bit.ly/communitysoundscape

or by scanning the QR code on the right.

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