

The Social Guarantee:

Local action: meeting needs locally

Harry Ewart-Biggs, Maeve Cohen, Isaac Stanley

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For more information about The Social Guarantee, please go to: www.socialguarantee.org
You can also email info@socialguarantee.org or tweet us at [@SocialGuarantee](https://twitter.com/SocialGuarantee)

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Introduction

Meeting basic human needs depends on providing essential public services. From childcare, education, adult social care and healthcare to housing, energy, transport and digital access, everyone relies on some or all of these to make life possible and worthwhile. Together, they support good health, well-being and security so people can meaningfully participate in society. When services are poor or non-existent, social potential is restrained and it becomes impossible to build a strong economy. The future of the planet depends on public services too, because carbon emissions are closely associated with service-related activity and resource use. Service reform must be at the heart of decarbonisation efforts and a truly just transition.¹

Provisioning across these essential service areas requires an array of actors and institutional structures, spanning the public, private and third sectors. Policy, decision-making and action at all levels of government and society – from local to national – determine the shape and quality of public services. Delivering life's essentials thus hinges on the interplay between locally led, place-based activity and central government planning, resourcing and oversight. Very often local communities are best placed to find ways of meeting residents' needs and to identify local priorities.

In the UK, the balance between local and national control is out of kilter. Britain's governance system is highly centralised compared with peer nations. Many communities struggle to take matters into their own hands and feel left behind without sufficient agency or resources. Financially, local authorities are at breaking point, with increasing numbers filing for bankruptcy. From 2009/10 to 2019/20 local government core funding fell by 40% in real terms.² Due to long-term lack of investment, public services are severely strained. Local communities are on the frontline of the 21st century's overlapping crises – specifically the cost-of-living crisis and consequences of climate breakdown – yet are seldom equipped to respond effectively.

Nonetheless, there are inspiring cases of local service providers organising and mobilising available resources to meet their communities' needs. This report seeks to showcase a range of innovative examples.

The Social Guarantee represents an approach to designing policy that starts with meeting the needs of people and the planet. It recognises that this is only possible through collective measures, specifically high-quality public services to deliver life's essentials. These depend on pooling resources, sharing risks and working together through public institutions and through neighbourhoods and communities. The Social Guarantee upholds the framework developed for universal basic services (UBS), which embodies five principles outlined below:

- **The right to life's essentials:** everyone should have what they need to survive and flourish – as a right, not a privilege or concession.
- **Built-in sustainability:** services should be designed to cut harmful emissions and safeguard natural resources, and be able to continue meeting needs for successive generations.
- **Devolved powers:** subject to the principle of subsidiarity, services should be planned and delivered at the lowest appropriate level, with decisions shared by residents.
- **A mixed economy of provision:** services can be delivered by a range of state and non-state organisations, provided all are bound by a shared set of public interest obligations.
- **Fair pay and conditions for service workers:** to include a living wage, good working conditions, career development and trade union recognition.

This document sets out 12 examples of local services providing adult social care, childcare, digital access, energy,

housing and transport. They span the public and third sectors, from local and combined authorities to charities, voluntary and community groups, social enterprises and co-operatives. To varying degrees, they bring different aspects of the Social Guarantee to life, pointing to strategies and initial steps for reorienting service provision in line with human and planetary needs. Based on testimony from those directly involved locally, and not subject to independent evaluation, they serve as illustrations of what is possible. They show how the Social Guarantee is a big idea that can start small and local, learning and growing incrementally. Following the 12 examples, we point to further literature that showcases more local service providers. We hope this is a useful resource for other local communities, practitioners, policymakers and researchers, to help develop a new direction for service delivery in coming years.



Equal Care Co-op

Equal Care Co-op's digital care platform

Service area: adult social care

Background

Across the UK, nearly two million people have unmet care needs and nearly ten million, disproportionately women, provide unpaid care.³ Exploitative employment practices by for-profit providers have contributed to declining social care services. On-demand digital platforms have too often disempowered care workers, stripping away basic labour protections and imposing forced flexibility and low wages. Workers rarely have opportunities for career progression or the chance to assume wider responsibilities. Providers struggle to recruit and retain staff. All this impairs care quality.

It is commonplace for people getting support not to know who will turn up to provide care each day. A range of different (often new) caregivers may support one person in any week. This means they lack familiarity with someone's unique needs, risking harmful results. The effect can be worsened when communications are mediated through the provider company, rather than directly through the caregiver.

Local action

Equal Care Co-op (Equal Care) is a digital platform social care co-operative, founded in 2018 – the first of its kind in the UK and globally. With backgrounds in the mental health and social enterprise sectors, the two founders, Emma Back and Kate Hammon, attribute their inspiration to the Recovery Movement, disability rights, co-production and the sharing economy. The ethos and values surrounding these ideas, particularly in terms of rethinking power dynamics entrenched in the health and care sectors, have decisively informed Equal Care's development. Equal Care is owned and operated by the people who receive and give support.

The co-op is situated in Calderdale, West Yorkshire, matching locals seeking care with care and support workers and professionally trained volunteers nearby. Currently, the platform incorporates a calendar, a list of profiles, a method (known as 'hats') for organising roles and responsibilities within Equal Care Teams and Circles and an integrated chat so team owners (the people getting support) and their families can identify and communicate with paid caregivers.

Teamwork is a core component of Equal Care's model, which places control over service delivery in the hands of caregivers and receivers together. The team owner chooses and owns their personal team of care workers through the platform, ensuring continuity of care and thus fostering stronger caregiving relationships. The number of people a care receiver sees for support is significantly reduced by planning rotas on a per team basis, rather than centrally.

Within each team, members hold nominated roles (hats) depending on members' experiences and relationships to each other and/or the care receiver. Hats are decided by the members, varying from team to team. This system encourages a wide distribution of labour, so workers can be remunerated for a range of roles beyond solely care giving, including recruitment, training, peer observation and supervision, and management of rotas and medication. In this way, knowledge and expertise is spread more widely and burnout levels are minimised as job sharing reduces concentrations of power and responsibility.

Impact on local residents

Equal Care has greatly improved service quality for those using the platform in Calderdale. Just over 90 care workers are part of the platform, supporting around 70 people locally.

Across the sector, service users typically receive care from around 10–40 different people, while at Equal Care it averages at 1.8 individuals. Facilitating consistent support and thus the development of real empathy and stronger relationships improves care quality. Intuitively, continuity of care is likely to have better health outcomes than uncertainty and constant change. Equal Care has received affirming feedback, with team owners' families describing it as a life saver. The reversal of dementia symptoms (thought to be exacerbated and accelerated by the disorientating effects of conventional care systems) has been recorded for some people.

The efficiencies Equal Care delivers ensure that workers not only receive a more equitable rate in comparison to typical agencies, but also a better quality of life. Under this model, greater control and thus flexibility allows staff to self-regulate, establish boundaries in caregiving relationships and achieve a healthier work life balance. Equal Care's care worker turnover is very low, at 4%, compared to the industry standard of around 30%.

Environmental impact

Equal Care has been designed for greater efficiency, by placing control with workers and reducing the number of caregivers seen per person. Working in this way can reduce travel distances for care workers and streamline resource management as well as enable workers to juggle their own family caregiving responsibilities. Staff self-manage and oversee their rotas so it is up to them to take advantage of these efficiencies if they want to. To cut emissions, Equal Care also provides an e-bike scheme for workers as an alternative to driving.

What's next?

Some aspects of the platform are still basic in terms of functionality, so the co-op is planning to develop new and upgraded features, such as integrating payments. To make these improvements, another tranche of investment is required. Funding has been a major restriction for developing software. Unlike privately owned, profit-driven care

platforms Equal Care cannot turn to capital funds for investment. Financial viability is a critical hurdle for developing this kind of service.

Many aspects of Equal Care's approach have evolved during its six years of operation, from its theory of change to its service development strategy and overall governance model. A core focus on power dynamics is particularly difficult to quantify, so the co-op's evaluation methods are continually adapted to optimise future decision-making and efficacy.

Equal Care has inspired other recently formed social care co-ops in the UK. Its journey has helped inform the development of organisations such as the Great Care Co-op and Ealing Care Co-op. It will continue to offer guidance in this increasingly important service area.

Find out more at <https://www.equalcare.coop/>



Newham Council's innovative approach to home care

Service area: adult social care

Background

In 2017, Newham Council was experiencing issues with the quality and cost of its home care provision. Over half of care packages were purchased outside the council's framework agreement and above the agreed hourly rate. There were also many quality and safeguarding concerns, largely from within the providers contracted by the council. A 'time and task' culture and commissioning approach resulted in a lack of job satisfaction for care workers, and sub-optimal outcomes for residents. Subsequently, the council grew interested in the Buurtzorg model⁴ – an approach pioneered with community nurses in the Netherlands. The key principles of the model are:

- A neighbourhood-based structure: reducing travel time and enabling workers to become embedded in their local community infrastructure.
- Outcome, rather than time and task focussed: recognising that residents' needs are not static, so care should be accordingly adaptive and flexible.
- Self-management: reducing bureaucracy and giving workers the professional freedom to take decisions about working in partnership with residents to deliver care in a way that works best for both parties. Within the model, there is no hierarchy – workers do not have a line manager, but have access to a coach to help resolve issues and to a support centre for support with administrative tasks.

Local action

In 2017/18, the council piloted a new model of home care based on Buurtzorg principles: Living Well Local. It aimed to provide a viable alternative by improving outcomes and satisfaction for residents and care workers. Another priority was to achieve long term savings by reducing a layer of management and better meeting residents' needs (with bespoke care that improves independence, resilience and health). The pilot did not fully deliver its desired outcomes but provided key insights to help redesign Newham's services.

Drawing on the pilot, in 2019/20, the council remodelled and re-procured its home care service. It introduced a 'patch-based' model that not only reduced care worker travel but also embedded a neighbourhood model: maximising connections with professional and community networks to benefit residents' experience. The council also stipulated that providers appointed to the framework agreement pay their care workers the London Living Wage and sign up to the UNISON Ethical Care Charter.

Care workers are typically the professionals who know residents best. In the pilot they reported knowing what is needed to increase independence but often lacked the time, authority or contacts required to effect meaningful change (leading to reduced job satisfaction). From this premise, the 'Trusted Assessor' approach was born. A Trusted Assessor is an enhanced role seeking to improve care practice and enable career progression by expanding the role of care worker to include ongoing observation, risk assessment and monitoring of residents. The role seeks to empower workers by teaching them strengths-based, person-centred planning and risk enablement to build 'enabling' relationships with the local community; improving their knowledge of activities and services within the local area; and training them to assess and prescribe non-complex items of community equipment without the need for a separate occupational health referral.

The practical implementation of the model has required significant system and cultural change. Newham has worked in partnership with providers and its partners in health to 'test and learn' and refine the model over the last three years. Implementing these changes has proved challenging at times. For example, an initial training course for Trusted Assessors was too academic, requiring lengthy coursework submissions that placed unrealistic demands on busy frontline care staff. A new training course, accredited by the Disability Living Foundation, and with direct supervision and support from the local community health provider (East London Foundation Trust) is more practical.

Another challenge has been providing sufficient support for Trusted Assessors. Initial quarterly peer support sessions proved inadequate – sessions are now monthly. The new enhanced roles of provider staff risked confusing or alarming care recipients, their families and other professionals, so a clear communication plan was put in place.

A further challenge has been to ensure that providers themselves give the Trusted Assessor role enough attention and credit. In the next stage of the programme, the council is therefore seeking to change the selection procedure to ensure that those considered for the role are fully committed and given the time and influence that they need within their organisation to effectively deliver the role. The council is also working with health partners and Care City Community Interest Company to further evolve the role by developing apprenticeship level training to provider staff to qualify them as nursing associates/AHP assistant practitioners so they can perform delegated health functions and embed additional skills and knowledge within provider organisations. This work is enabled by innovation funding from the Rayne Foundation.

Impact on local residents

98% of new Care Packages are now purchased via the council's framework agreement, enabling commissioners to build meaningful provider relationships, better manage cost and improve quality.

Too often initiatives are developed to benefit one party – or, in the current climate, focus solely on savings. The Trusted Assessor approach found to benefit residents, workers and the council.

Residents receive higher quality, personalised support from better qualified staff to build their independence. Three years on, the council has 37 Trusted Assessors across 22 Providers. Trusted Assessors have prescribed 74 items of equipment directly from the Community Equipment Service – swiftly giving 41 residents access to what they need, and freeing up occupational therapy resource. Residents who have worked with Trusted Assessors have seen direct benefits and speak positively of the approach. One described how a Truster assessor worked in partnership with her to prepare her own lunch, which helped improve her strength to walk around her home. This enabled her care package to reduce from 12.25 hours per week to 8.75.

Workers report a greater sense of job satisfaction and have access to career progression in a traditionally 'flat' structure. Trusted Assessors now feel recognised in their role and empowered to make a difference for residents. Three have 'moved on' to other roles: one is training to be an occupational therapist; another, a social worker; and one has become a registered manager in another provider organisation.

The council generates immediate and longer-term savings by genuinely making residents more independent and reducing care packages. In 2021/22, the council saved £60,000. Then, £82,000 was saved in 2022/23 and £139,000 in 2023/24. Savings of £300,000 are forecast for 2024/25. (These figures do not include cumulative savings from previous year/s.)

In 2024, the council won an LGC Award for this work, in recognition of 'exceptional creativity and commissioning and partnership collaboration' and for 'elevating the status of care workers and providing a clear pathway for their professional development.'

Environmental impact

The hyper local nature of the new care model is designed to contribute towards the council's decarbonisation efforts by reducing travelling distances.

What's next?

The council is currently further evolving and re-procuring its home care framework to:

- Deliver an all-age approach, introducing the model to home care for under 18s.
- Work with health and education partners to develop a bespoke apprenticeship route; upskilling care workers to deliver additional integrated functions (i.e. low level 'health' functions in nursing and physiotherapy) and support the delivery of innovative care tech solutions.
- Co-design a video for residents explaining the Trusted Assessor role and process.
- Review the gain share arrangements to ensure the financial benefits filter down to the Trusted Assessors themselves.
- Set the foundations to 'future-proof' the workforce – growing the skills required to fill existing workforce gaps (i.e. within occupational therapy and other allied health professions).

Find out more at <https://www.newham.gov.uk/health-adult-social-care>



Grasshoppers in the Park

Parents leading the service in Grasshoppers in the Park

Service area: childcare

Background

In London there is growing demand for limited numbers of childcare places and great unevenness in service quality, although these challenges are not unique to the capital. Without adequate government intervention, service quality and availability have largely declined under the predominant private, profit-led model.

Staffing is central to the crisis. Due to poor working conditions, low pay and limited potential for career development, providers struggle with recruitment and retention. Without enough staff it's harder to meet the demand for places, especially in highly populated cities such as London. Functioning as a negative feedback loop, understaffed, overstretched services exacerbate poor working conditions, so childcare roles grow increasingly unappealing. As a result, many more children are denied access to high-quality early education before starting primary school.

Local action

In the early 2000s a group of frustrated parents informally set up Grasshoppers in the Park (GH) in response to the scarcity of formal childcare places. They started out sharing caring responsibilities in their homes, before locating premises in the London Borough of Hackney and registering with Ofsted. A communal ethos on early education pushed them to formalise and expand the service. As an alternative to the highly priced private chains dominating

the sector, the East London nursery continues to provide parent-led, affordable childcare.

GH's model is unique as parents are supported to take on a role within the nursery. Involvement spans teaching and the provision of care, to taking on operational and administrative duties, such as accounting, fundraising or laundry. Parental input in any capacity is encouraged, with GH providing training where necessary. This approach lowers fees and brings about the benefits of co-production. There is continuing dialogue with all families using the service, whether or not they play a direct role in the nursery. A monthly meeting takes place, open to all staff and parents to discuss issues and progress. The onsite garden was co-designed with parents.

GH takes an interdisciplinary approach to understanding early childhood, developing a rounded early education programme. It creates contexts in which children can explore and represent their ideas and thinking through their 'hundred languages', building on the Reggio Emilia pedagogical approach, so that play, creativity, role-play, drama, music, literacy and the outdoor environment are all key components.⁵

Impact on local residents

GH's structure is designed for affordability and accessibility. Fees are already set according to income, while parents who put in a regular day in the classroom get an additional monthly discount. Parental participation cuts the risk of the service suffering from staffing shortfalls.

The model prioritises the children's needs and fosters a strong sense of community. It demonstrates the benefit of early education to young children as well as to parents and the wider economy. Crucially, the provision of high-quality early education can close attainment gaps, acting as a counterweight against socio-economic inequalities. At GH, the child-centred approach specifically promotes wellbeing and emotional and educational development via parental participation and a rounded, child-centred curriculum.

GH recognises the worth of investing in staff: salaries are above average in the sector and reviewed regularly to keep up with inflation.

Environmental impact

Caring for the environment is widely encouraged at the nursery. Pollution, recycling and the planet prominently feature in the curriculum. Based on Scandinavian models, GH also runs a forest school programme, entailing regular trips to natural green spaces. They plant bulbs and seeds in the local area and pick up litter during walks in the park.

What's next?

Parental involvement is keenly appreciated at GH but is not seen as a long-term solution to the staffing crisis, which really needs a skilled, valued workforce to be developed across the country.⁶ Nonetheless, there's much to learn from GH's co-produced model, which puts families' needs – both children's and parents' – at the heart of the service.

Find out more at <https://www.grasshoppersinthepark.co.uk/>



LEYF, photography by Isabelle Johnson

Rounded, scalable early education at LEYF

Service area: childcare

Background

The London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) has a varied 120-year history, responding to the changing needs of Londoners through time. Initially known as the Westminster Health Society, it was founded in 1903 to address maternal and infant mortality rates. LEYF then specialised in family support throughout the 1920s (addressing food poverty and children's health) and first offered nurseries during WWII to support women working during the war effort. It has remained in the sector ever since.

In England today, childcare is primarily left to the market, so that quality services are expensive and concentrated in affluent areas. Government support schemes have so far done little to offset this effect, with a patchwork of inadequate entitlements often restricting access for the lowest-income families.

Notably, the level of public funding for the 15-hour weekly entitlement for disadvantaged two year-olds fails to meet the real operating costs, particularly due to the higher staff-to-child ratio requirement for this age group compared with over-threes. As a result, many providers do not offer the scheme, with only around 60% of eligible children accessing it.

Local action

With direct experience of England's dysfunctional early years services, June O'Sullivan, the current CEO, rebranded LEYF in 2008 and reconfigured the model to focus on improving access to high quality socially just childcare for all children but especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Today it is one of the UK's largest charitable childcare social enterprises.

As a social enterprise, LEYF combines social purpose and businesses techniques to deliver scalable, efficient and widely accessible childcare services. Its approach rests on a cross-subsidy scheme to promote inclusive, high-quality early education in low-income areas. Funds from fee-paying parents fill gaps left by inadequate government subsidies, enabling full provision of free entitlements (specifically the 15-hour entitlement for disadvantaged two year-olds).

Impact on local residents

LEYF currently runs 41 nurseries across 12 London boroughs, providing for nearly 4,000 children (around 31% are from disadvantaged backgrounds). It delivers the highest number of places in London for the government funded 15-hour offer for disadvantaged two-year olds. Many parents in full time employment eligible for 30 hours pay for additional hours beyond their subsidised entitlement, typically another 10–15 hours. While many providers use this profit rate for dividends, LEYF functions as a circular economy, reinvesting surpluses to fully fund children on targeted entitlements, support staff career developments, offer an enhanced apprenticeship scheme and develop support packages free to the sector such as the Prison Pack for staff working with children with a parent in prison or practice guides such as the Twoness of Twos. This is all done while achieving financial sustainability. Additional fees contribute to the cross-subsidy system, funding more subsidised places for disadvantaged children (where government subsidies fall short). Across LEYF nurseries 27% of attending children have fully subsidised places. Fees for non-subsidised hours are set competitively according to each nursery's location.

With the benefit of economies of scale, the social enterprise can effectively pool resources and target low-income areas to maximise redistributive effects. More than three quarters of its centres are sited in areas of deprivation.

LEYF employs nearly 1,000 staff with around 100 apprentices. In 2023/24 71% of staff were on the London Living Wage, up from 68% in 2022/23 and 43% in 2021/22. Its training academy, The London Institute of Early Years, incorporates LEYF's Social Pedagogy, offering accredited courses to encourage staff development within and beyond LEYF nurseries. Space for career development and supplementary training help build the necessary conditions to improve outcomes for all children. Just over half its nurseries receive outstanding Ofsted reviews, compared with an average of 14% across London.

Nutrition is a key aspect of LEYF's services, echoing its origins as an organisation confronting food poverty. Rather than the general shortage of food LEYF addressed in the early 20th century, the challenge it faces today is an overabundance of ultra-processed food. Eating healthily is expensive and challenging in the UK, leading to increasing levels of obesity that disproportionately affects children in areas of poverty. Alongside providing nutritious food in every nursery, LEYF is aiming to train chefs across the sector about nutritious menus, portion control and sustainable procurement. It has formed the first Early Years Chef Academy, offering an accredited qualification across the UK.

Environmental impact

The social enterprise is the UK's first early year's organisation to develop a sustainability strategy, running through its governance, leadership, operations and pedagogy. The strategy supports the three pillars of sustainability; economic, social and environmental, aligned to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. LEYF employs a designated sustainability manager who leads the delivery of the sustainability strategy (annually measured through the ISO14001 Environmental standard and accredited by Planet Mark, an environmental consultancy). To raise awareness about sustainability among staff across the sector, LEYF designed the first NCFE accredited Level 4 Diploma Sustainability in the Early Years.

What's next?

LEYF's model – which encompasses the cross-subsidy system as well as its pedagogy and sustainability policies – has been designed for scalability and replicability. While planning to continue to open and/or rescue more centres in deprived areas of London, LEYF actively shares its methods and knowledge externally to achieve better Early Years Education and Care nationwide. Specifically, the recent formation of the Early Years Social Enterprises Collective aims to link providers together to build a shared voice, offering free access to constructive guidance and pragmatic advice about how to develop social enterprise solutions to address the unique challenges faced in the sector.⁷

Find out more at <https://www.leyf.org.uk/>, or read [Social Leadership in Early Childhood Education and Care: An Introduction](#) by June O'Sullivan



The North East Combined Authority: a universal, minimum digital living standard

Service area: digital access

Background

Internet access is widely considered to be a functional necessity these days, although many are excluded across the UK. In the North East, the Covid-19 pandemic brought the three key barriers to digital access to light, as workers and students were required to go remote. Firstly, connectivity, underpinned by the physical infrastructure and network layer; secondly, affordability; and finally, the skill and confidence required to operate IT devices.

A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research in 2021 suggests that the North East experiences higher levels of digital exclusion than other parts of England.⁸ In the North East Combined Authority (NECA), particularly in rural areas, there are poorly connected locations without 4G/5G infrastructure, labelled 'not-spots'. In terms of Wi-Fi connectivity, around 9,000 homes are unable to connect to a (slow speed) 10 Mbps broadband service and around 27,000 can barely reach 30 Mbps (average speed).

Local action

The NECA is working to overturn the UK's digital divide and achieve a 'minimum digital living standard' (MDLS) for all in the North East. Several initiatives have been employed in the region to address the three aspects of digital inclusion.

Covid-19 emergency response inclusion pilot

With the closure of several sectors of the economy in March 2020, as lockdown began, those without internet access at home were abruptly unable to use everyday services, like schools or job-seeking support. In response, the combined authority designed a scheme to help get people online at home, rolling out 2,750 devices to residents. Accompanying mobile internet packages, including dongles, were also provided where necessary. Nearly half went to school children; 39% to adult education; and 12% to job seekers. In each council, the delivery of the devices in conjunction with partner organisations differed, reflecting the range of localised services and needs.

Next steps and pilot plan

Since then, increasing internet access has become an important focus. While the emergency response pilot was effective, the NECA is now working on rolling out a long-term approach based on recommendations from the initial pilot's evaluation. Crucially, a consultation process led it to identify a MDLS and to give this priority. Drawing on input from key stakeholders (constituents and local organisations) and research findings, the NECA came to define the minimum standard as having not only accessible and affordable internet, adequate equipment and the necessary skills and knowledge but also the capacity to communicate, connect and engage in opportunities confidently and safely online.

A cluster group has been mobilised under the LA7 Digital Steering Group to consider the development and delivery of a MDLS for the North East. The Group recognises that before the region can offer a MDLS to residents, it needs to look inwardly and acknowledge that digital inclusion does not fit into one service area or directorate. It is initially considering how in-house standards and services across authorities promote digital inclusion, accounting for the region's unique demographics and geography. Each authority is at a different starting point and stage of development, providing opportunities for learning and information sharing so effective projects can be expanded and deployed across the region. Through supporting and enhancing existing structures, the NECA aims to improve coordination and awareness of digital inclusion interventions and campaigns, while working to ensure key metrics are captured and evidenced to monitor impact.

Connectivity infrastructure and provision

Alongside collaborating with local partners on the ground to support communities with devices and training, other projects are centred on ensuring strong connectivity across the region. The 5G and Future Connectivity Partnership aimed to level up connectedness and extend the reach of 4G/5G networks, particularly in 'not-spots', by improving the way local authorities cooperate with the big four mobile network operators. With funding from central government's Digital Connectivity Infrastructure Accelerator, the NECA now provides information to mobile network operators about available local authority owned assets, including buildings and streetlights, which can be used to install access point antennae and increase coverage. In this way, 5G signal boosters placed on lamp posts, council offices and libraries, for instance, improve connectivity for residents. The combined authority has worked in tandem with communities, businesses and the network operators to determine locations that require enhanced mobile capacity.

To extend the reach of full fibre broadband and gigabit-capable connectivity, the combined authority is helping infrastructure providers who have commercial rollout plans to target areas of need, where possible linking them with government-backed intervention schemes (such as Westminster's Project Gigabit⁹) to fill gaps. Full gigabit capable connectivity is the NECA's target for 2027, ahead of the national ambition of 2030. In locations where it is impossible to introduce fibre (for example, 300 homes in the region are not on the National Grid), other modes of mobile connectivity are being considered, such as fixed wireless access, or low earth orbit satellite solutions.

The planned activity under the MDLS also focuses on the large value contracts granted by the local authorities in the region, to consider where social value can be achieved by filling gaps in existing services. This would involve coordinating the supply of contracts awarded for mobile and broadband coverage, as well as any other large value contracts deemed relevant, to ensure that the service providers adhere to commitments to deliver social value. To receive contracts and/or public funds, providers must conform with shared public interest obligations, to promote socially and ecologically desirable outcomes.

Impact on local residents

Following the initial Covid-19 response pilot, 79% of beneficiaries said they would not have had access to the internet otherwise. An external evaluation found 100% satisfaction among partners involved in the delivery. The pilot was considered a success in terms not only of getting residents online and meeting their needs, but also of cost-effectiveness and positively building and leaning on existing cross-sector partnerships.

Evaluation will be critical to gauge the efficacy of these projects. Efforts to address the different barriers to digital access should help more people in the region to get online with confidence. Designing policies to steer independent and private providers in the region towards underserved areas is a promising approach.

Environmental impact

By increasing the availability of online services and the capacity to work remotely, digital access reduces the need to travel and commute. It is therefore likely to reduce energy consumption and contribute to decarbonisation. Working towards the MDLS is likely to support a just transition.

Future application of the Future Connectivity Partnership project may have further positive environmental impacts by facilitating the rollout of electric vehicle charging points. As a part of the green transition, demand for EV charging will rise significantly in the near future, and charging points rely on connectivity, ideally 5G. This is currently in the planning stage.

What's next?

The NECA's approach rightly addresses the different dimensions of digital inclusion. The combined strategies are intended to cater for a mixed economy of providers, which already operate in this service area, and to comply with the principle of subsidiarity. For the future, the NECA will need to monitor and, where necessary, adapt its rollout of the MDLS accordingly.

Find out more at <https://www.northeast-ca.gov.uk/projects/digital-connectivity>



Repurposing Gateshead's abandoned mines for geothermal heating

Service area: energy

Background

Servicing around 85% of homes in Britain, gas-powered domestic heat is one of the most carbon intensive areas of the economy. Reliance on gas heating exacerbates fuel poverty because domestic bills are subject to volatile international fossil fuel markets. Decarbonising household heating typically requires a heat pump to be installed by the householder at an often prohibitive cost of around £10,000. Minimising fossil fuel dependency and cultivating renewable alternative energy sources is crucial to ensure the future viability of the planet. Many localities are developing unique solutions suited to their geography and infrastructure to help build a green energy future for the UK.

Local action

Gateshead Council notably launched its geothermal heating system in March 2023, making use of the area's abandoned mine networks. Gateshead Energy Company (GEC), the municipally owned power supplier, integrates heat and power generation and distribution with energy storage and National Grid services.

Remnants of its industrial past, deserted coal mines filled with warm groundwater lie beneath Gateshead. The council has invested in technology and infrastructure to exploit this untapped geothermal energy source and deliver a low

carbon heat network. It works through a scaled heat pump – extracting and concentrating the heat energy from the external source (in this case the mine water) and directing it to the pipes used in buildings.

The heat network supplies Gateshead town centre, currently connected to 23 buildings including council offices, depots, education facilities, a leisure centre and 350 newly built homes. Expanding the heating system involves installing new pipelines at viable sites and buildings. Now the infrastructure is in place, low carbon heat can increasingly be used in Gateshead as more customers connect.

The initiative is entirely council led but has been helped with support from government as part of a national drive for green energy solutions.

Impact on local residents

At this early stage the scheme only services council buildings in the town centre, so has not widely improved conditions for residents. As more buildings join the system more of the community will benefit from cheaper, green heating. For the initial connection to the sustainable mine water heating, the council charges industry rates but offers a discount of at least 5% compared with market energy tariffs. It also significantly cuts out the high upfront costs required to install sustainably powered heating equipment, such as heat pumps.

Environmental impact

Mine water heating currently provides carbon savings of around 60% compared to a gas boiler. This is expected to improve further because the pump runs on National Grid power, so will become more sustainable as the Grid includes more renewable energy. By 2030 the National Grid is aiming to operate carbon neutrally.

What's next?

GEC intends to take the heat network into existing housing estates. It is developing a pilot on an estate of 550 homes.

Gateshead Council has reimagined the town's mining legacy to form part of the green energy solution for future generations. While Gateshead's specific approach can only be replicated in areas gifted with the right geohydrology, it is possible to create low carbon heating networks from a range of other sources including rivers and waste. Elsewhere, innovative local actors are working to deliver green heating systems that are compatible with local resources.

Nationally, low carbon heat networks account for just over 2% of the market – the target for 2050 is 20%. Funding for GEC has come from the government's Heat Network Investment Programme, followed by additional grants from the Green Heat Network Fund.¹⁰ The latter has just been extended for three years, with another £288m available to public, private and third sector organisations.

Find out more at <https://www.gatesheadenergycompany.co.uk/>



Oldham Council

Oldham's Green New Deal

Service area: energy

Background

Councils have an important role in achieving net zero by coordinating place-based solutions in conjunction with local communities. The Oldham Green New Deal (OGND) was born in 2020, when Oldham Council had the opportunity to refresh its climate change strategy.

Local action

The OGND was the UK's first local authority GND strategy to be adopted and, like other GND-style programmes and proposals that have emerged over the last few years, it seeks to bring together climate change mitigation and economic planning. Investment in low carbon infrastructure and growing the local green economy supply base are important pillars of the programme. In addition, the OGND takes up the challenge of addressing the local economy more comprehensively, to encompass ways of meeting residents' basic needs and how people shape the places where they live. Here are two relevant projects within the OGND:

Oldham Energy Futures

Oldham Energy Futures is a collaboration between Oldham Council and Carbon Co-op, a Manchester-based energy

services and advocacy co-operative. In 2021 and 2022, residents of two Oldham neighbourhoods, Sholver and Westwood, worked with Carbon Co-op to explore how transforming power, heat and transport might benefit local people. Throughout the 20-month process, residents were upskilled in order to be able to engage confidently with the technical aspects of decarbonisation and energy systems change. Together the group developed, shaped and tested plans and projects designed to transform their neighbourhood and energy system. A Community Led Energy Plan was produced for each of the two areas with recommendations to various key stakeholders, including the council, the local housing association, Transport for Greater Manchester, and Oldham Community Power (a local community energy group). Recommendations included the energy efficiency upgrading of homes and turning disused areas of land into green space.

Local energy market

The OGND seeks to address fuel poverty by reshaping the local energy market. Oldham Council has invested in two local community energy co-operatives: Saddleworth Community Hydro and Oldham Community Power. It has supported their expansion by enabling solar panel installation on local schools. At the same time, the council has been exploring the potential to implement a technology-enabled platform for peer-to-peer energy trading. This would allow individuals or organisations with the capability to generate renewable energy – for example, Oldham Community Power – to set up contracts directly with local consumers. While the supplier would receive more for their generated electricity than they would by selling it to the grid, it would still be significantly cheaper for the consumer than it would be from a large supplier. The system would thus disrupt the traditional energy company model, simultaneously tackling fuel poverty and promoting renewable energy use.

Disruptions and financial pressures brought about by Covid-19 and its aftermath continue to seriously challenge Oldham Council along with most other local authorities, but the OGND agenda is surviving these difficulties. Oldham has recently been awarded £1.3m in grant funding from the DESNZ Local Net Zero Accelerator programme, £150,000 from the Innovate UK Net Zero Living Pathfinder Places programme and £8.7m from the Green Heat Network Fund to implement an Oldham Green New Deal Delivery Partnership – an initiative to demonstrate a delivery model for the full spectrum decarbonisation of the borough, which places residents and businesses at the heart of energy planning for the low carbon transition.

Part of the credit for this success can be given to firm political support by council leaders. Locating the GND project lead in the Economy Directorate's PMO team (rather than within a policy team, as is common in other local authorities) has helped to ensure it is more consistently and systematically reflected in council action (particularly capital programme delivery areas), rather than remaining as a policy principle not always realised in practice.

Impact on local residents

The OGND seeks to address fuel poverty (by increasing energy efficiency of homes and turning to community-based energy providers) alongside local efforts to improve air quality – both measures are likely to improve residents' wellbeing. Specifically, Oldham has recently developed an approach to area-based retrofit, working with Carbon Co-op and Connected Places Catapult. There is not yet data published on the numbers of residents who have benefited.

An important part of the GND is to empower and engage local residents, which has helped to generate the kind of collective ethos that's required to deliver needs-oriented, sustainable services. In particular, bringing citizens' perspectives and priorities for decarbonisation into the heart of the Oldham Energy Futures project has prevented the OGND from becoming merely a top-down infrastructure programme. Rather, its stated aim is to create a space for co-production between citizens, the council and other key stakeholders. It also aims to enhance local social and economic value by involving and contracting with community-based organisations and actors. Who is involved in these projects – and how – critically affects the way benefits are distributed among the local population.

Environmental impact

A GND programme is of course designed to protect the environment. The combined authority has committed to carbon neutrality by 2038. Local Area Energy Plans conducted in each Greater Manchester district detail the local transformations needed to meet the 2038 target. Oldham's Local Area Energy Plan specifies that £5.6bn of low-carbon infrastructure is needed to reach net zero locally.¹¹ The GND programme is the council's vehicle for achieving this goal. The latest data shows that within Greater Manchester Oldham is the borough with the lowest per capita emissions and total carbon footprint.¹²

A review of the OGND thus far by Carbon Co-op highlights the importance of citizen and community engagement for decarbonisation efforts.¹³ Without it, local opposition is more likely. Additionally, failing to work with local communities means missing out on projects and innovations developed at ground level through local knowledge.

What's next?

The OGND is geared towards achieving carbon neutrality locally and in the wider combined authority. Oldham Council hopes its approach will encourage other local authorities in Greater Manchester and beyond to work with their own communities and develop the locally led collective measures required to drive a just green transition.

Fine out more at https://www.oldham.gov.uk/info/201249/green_new_deal



Bioregional

BedZED: South London's eco-housing complex

Service area: housing and energy

Background

Housing provision is closely entwined with environmental goals. Building construction, usage and maintenance are typically highly carbon and resource intensive. If everyone's housing needs are to be met within planetary boundaries, it will be essential to develop and replicate radically different approaches.

Local action

Beddington Zero Energy Development (BedZED) is an estate of 100 homes first opened in the London Borough of Sutton in 2002. The complex was designed for low carbon living, so residents can meet their needs sustainably.

Different non-state actors came together for BedZED's construction, involving collaborative efforts from Bioregional, the sustainability social enterprise; Peabody Trust, the housing association; and ZEDfactory architects. A green future rests on this kind of cooperation between various sectors.

The project integrates housing and other services, notably energy and transport. It underlines that essential service areas – and the environment in which they sit – are highly interrelated and must be designed and managed accordingly.

Impact on local residents

Of the 100 homes, a quarter were reserved for social rent, a quarter for shared ownership and half were sold on the open market. While short of ideal, the social rent quota far exceeds that typical of new builds in the UK.

The BedZED project has aimed to promote wellbeing and a strong sense of community. Residents all have access to a communal field, allotment spaces, a wildlife area, a gym and a community bar for social events.

Environmental impact

Various aspects of the housing scheme were designed to minimise resource usage and its overall carbon footprint. Some green features have certainly been effective, while others have been unsuccessful.¹⁴

Construction materials were selected from renewable and local sources where possible. For structural components, Bioregional remanufactured reclaimed softwood walling studs and structural steelwork from local demolition sites. Materials and labour were largely obtained within a 50-mile radius of the site. However, many of its key structural components are products of fossil fuel consumption, such as ground granulated blast-furnace slag blocks, bricks and concrete.

BedZED homes require 40% less water than average metered homes in the borough, with water-saving appliances such as dual flush toilets, aerated flow taps and water-efficient washing machines.

The buildings incorporate simple solutions to minimise the need for energy use, such as highly insulated double brick walls and double and triple glazed windows. Energy-efficiency has been central to the design to reduce heat loss and maximise solar gain.

Solar panels on site generate 30% of its electricity, with the remainder provided by a green tariff energy supplier. Originally a wood-powered boiler provided heating on the estate but was replaced by a biomass alternative in 2017 following technical difficulties. Also, several residents have had to install individual gas boilers because the wind cowls used for passive ventilation led to cold temperatures in some properties.

BedZED saw the introduction of England's first car club onsite, which allows residents to rent a car by the hour, so that mobility needs can be met while bypassing private vehicle ownership and associated emissions.

What's next?

BedZED was an early pioneer and has helped encourage advancements in sustainable housing since 2002. Despite some shortcomings and teething problems, its embodied carbon is still lower than most new builds today. The project remains a source of knowledge for future developments and points to ways of reshaping existing infrastructure.

Find out more at <https://www.bioregional.com/projects-and-services/case-studies/bedzed-the-uks-first-large-scale-eco-village>



PEACH

PEACH: opposing the housing crisis in Newham

Service area: housing

Background

East London's skyline is emblematic of inequality in the UK and the property that underpins it. The financial district in Canary Wharf towers above neighbouring working-class residential areas in Newham, Tower Hamlets and beyond. Across the UK, long-term patterns of property ownership and finance have led to a severe housing crisis, preventing growing numbers of people from feeling secure and meeting their basic needs. The gap between those who bear the brunt of this system and those who reap its benefits is more deeply felt in London than anywhere else in the country.

In Newham, the crisis has led to deteriorating housing services and soaring costs. Between 2011 and 2018 rents in Newham rose by 56%, and house prices by 89%.¹⁵ Wages on the other hand, only grew by 21%. Residents have increasingly experienced insecurity, overcrowding and homelessness. Much of the council's housing stock was outsourced during the 2000s, exacerbating these trends. Notably, the publicly-listed private rental company Mears Group PLC and its subsidiaries significantly expanded activities in the borough.

Local action

Responding to negligence and mismanagement in the private rented sector, local residents took matters into their

own hands. The People's Empowerment Alliance for Custom House (PEACH), a residents' action group, was founded in 2013 and has been organising and taking action to improve services ever since. It has pushed the council to provide more affordable, better-quality homes for residents, with support from Rokhsana Fiaz who was elected Mayor in 2018.

One approach has been to enforce existing laws, so that tenants are better protected and more providers are obliged to uphold sufficient standards. Newham is responsible for over half of all landlord prosecutions in London.¹⁶ By using the law to enforce energy efficiency standards of privately-owned properties, the council can also tackle fuel poverty and help mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, while the development of a private renters' rights service provides support for renters facing evictions and other problems.¹⁷

PEACH has applied pressure to improve the delivery of related services in the area, including cleaning and maintenance. PEACH members now have a direct line of communication with senior staff in Newham's housing department, enabling them to apply pressure on those in power. A repairs escalation service has been set up, providing residents with a way of regularly liaising with council officers and contractors to prioritise urgent issues.¹⁸ Housing Hubs provide a network of spaces in estates and community centres where residents can speak with housing officers in person.¹⁹

Increasing the supply of council housing in the borough is of paramount importance for addressing the long waiting lists and unmet demand, while delivering secure tenancies at genuinely affordable social rents. Reacquiring privately owned former council housing stock via compulsory purchase orders has been one strategy. The Greater London Authority's 'Right to Buy-back' citywide scheme has supported this approach since 2021.

The council is planning to build around 10,000 new homes as a part of a regeneration project.²⁰ Across London, however, estate regeneration has too often led to gentrification and removal of vulnerable residents.²¹ While Newham Council claims the project is in the interest of the local community and the result of a democratic process, the legitimacy of its balloting methods has been brought into question.²² Some residents in one estate due for demolition are uncertain they will be rehoused with affordable social rents when it has been rebuilt.^{23, 24} PEACH has been pushing to steer the plans in line with the local community's needs and consider this a test of how far the council supports residents.²⁵ Alongside other campaigners, such as the Public Interest Law Centre,²⁶ PEACH is concerned about the permanent displacement of existing working-class communities (who are vital to the functioning of the city), calling for a minimum guarantee of social rented housing

Impact on local residents

Action in Newham has provided relief for some residents on the frontline of the housing crisis. In particular, those provided with repurchased council housing are paying affordable social rents without having to deal with negligent private actors for repairs and other key services. In 2020, PEACH won the repossession of 250 homes, with the council issuing new contracts to bring rents down by around 60%.²⁷ In 2021 and 2022 Newham Council bought more than 400 properties through the Right to Buy-Back Scheme and purchased over three times more properties than the average across all participating boroughs (only Hounslow scored higher, with 550).²⁸ It continued acquiring homes in 2023 to provide for insecure households and those experiencing homelessness.²⁹ However, the numbers supported through repurchase schemes (around 1,000 since 2020) pale in comparison with the council's housing waiting list (over 36,000)³⁰ and with those experiencing homelessness (over 17,000).³¹

Environmental impact

While environmental concerns are not at the core of Newham's approach, aspects of its strategy are relevant for developing greener housing policy. Academic researchers have pointed out that use and allocation of housing space is highly inefficient in the UK and that trying to build enough new homes to match unmet demand would consume

the country's entire carbon budget.³² The repurchasing programme in Newham and the London-wide Right to Buy-Back scheme show that reallocating existing space at affordable rents is at least part of the answer.

What's next?

Despite these concerted efforts, Newham experiences the highest rate of homelessness in London, affecting one in 20 people.³³ While universal, green housing is beyond the remit of one London borough alone, it is worth noting what can be achieved when a determined community-based organisation works closely with a local authority. Much depends on how much momentum can be gained by Newham's initiatives and the GLA's Buy-back scheme.³⁴

What happens to the council's regeneration plans will be pivotal. If local people are effectively engaged in developing them, there is scope to buck the trend of gentrification and actually improve living conditions for existing communities in the borough.

Find out more at <https://peach-e16.org.uk/wpc/>



Angus' free bus travel scheme

Service area: transport

Background

Rural bus services have been acutely strained by public spending cuts and route closures through the 2010s. Remote areas are caught in what one Angus councillor calls a 'catch-22 situation', where low-density populations yield lower passenger levels, so that services become less and less viable until they are cut. Service cuts further depress usage, resulting in more cuts – functioning as a negative feedback loop and dismantling connectivity. The Covid-19 pandemic made matters worse.

The local authority in Angus, north-east Scotland, is aware that accessible transport can make all the difference for residents facing financial difficulties. Extra grant funding has made it possible to address the issue. One-off Local Authority Covid-19 Economic Recovery (LACER) grants were issued to councils in Scotland in response to the downturn that followed the pandemic. Angus received a £1.6m support package from the Scottish Government, which councillors used for a range of projects to tackle problems such as fuel and child poverty.

Local action

A portion of LACER funding was devoted to setting up a free bus travel scheme. The bus pass pilot catered for people struggling financially, including those receiving the school clothing grant, foodbank users and those in receipt of universal credit. Free bus travel was already available to 5–21 year-olds in Scotland, through the Young Scot National Entitlement Card. This latest LACER scheme was aimed at adults who did not fit the criteria for full welfare assistance but were still vulnerable as the cost-of-living soared. Free bus passes were allocated via referrals from specific agencies

and council departments. Once issued with a pass, participants' journeys were logged and the bus operating companies invoiced the council for the free travel.

Local organisations representing residents were involved in developing the scheme. For instance, welfare rights teams and community groups were consulted to decide how remaining LACER funds should be deployed. Alongside serving residents, the scheme was designed to increase uptake and thereby support the financial viability of transport services in isolated areas.

Angus delivered another pilot that finished in 2024, this time focused more closely on the issue of rural connectivity. A traditional rural bus route in the Sidlaw area was not well used or cost-effective but did provide a vital link between some rural communities. Consequently, a demand responsive transport (DRT) service was introduced to replace it, using on-demand, smaller vehicles to meet residents' mobility needs. The DRT service will become permanent in 2025.

Impact on local residents

While councillors cannot prevent the devastating effects of inflation and soaring living costs, they have at least been able to remove some of the extra costs of travel. Accessible transport brings a wide range of social benefits, by increasing the availability and usage of other key services and enabling residents to participate in society more extensively.³⁵ Many essential activities, including job interviews and medical appointments, depend on transportation. Transport also makes social contact possible, helping to improve wellbeing and alleviate isolation and distress.

The bus pass pilot commenced at the end of 2022, running for roughly 18 months before closing in the summer of 2024 as funding came to an end. Monitoring of the scheme showed that there is a need within Angus communities to support people with their transport needs. Feedback from passholders demonstrated that it made a positive impact. In total the scheme cost nearly £74,000 and just under 16,000 local bus trips were undertaken by the 673 passengers who were provided with travel passes. The five privately-owned bus operating companies saw the scheme as a way of encouraging passenger uptake and were keen to participate.

The DRT pilot was highly successful and will be made permanent. It was not only well-received and popular among residents but also cost-effective to run in comparison to the old service. The original bus route was around twice as expensive as the DRT service during the pilot.

Environmental impact

The bus pass pilot was run in conjunction with the private operating companies and the council were unable to increase use of electric or bio-gas buses or make this a condition of their participation in the scheme. Nonetheless, encouraging public transport usage over driving private vehicles is crucial for cutting emissions and encouraging a socially and ecologically oriented 'modal shift'.

The creation of the DRT service is greener than the previously underused bus service. Rather than functioning at all hours, DRT only operates when it is required, resulting in energy and emissions savings.

What's next?

Although the LACER funding came to an end, Angus' pilot shows how free public transport options can positively impact people's lives, particularly those on low incomes. The council is currently in the process of setting up the permanent DRT service following the success of the rural connectivity pilot.

Find out more at https://www.angus.gov.uk/roads_parking_and_travel/public_transport



Transport for Greater Manchester

Bus franchising in Greater Manchester

Service area: transport

Background

Uneven and inadequate bus services have been a problem in Greater Manchester since their deregulation in 1986. Some parts of the conurbation are well served; others, often amongst the poorest and most marginalised, much less so. A large number of different operators have been pursuing different strategies, leading to a highly fractured, disconnected system. Poor bus services are known to encourage car reliance, but 25% of households in Greater Manchester do not have access to a car. Buses are a lifeline – 75% of public transport trips are made by bus. In this growing city region, bus services have failed residents, especially those who need them most.

Local action

A major priority for the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) has been to push for an accountable, integrated transport network for the city region, dubbed the 'Bee Network'. It was launched in 2023, introducing a franchised bus system. This is a power afforded to mayoral combined authorities under the 2017 Bus Services Act, whereby only bus operators contracted or permitted by the local transport authority are able to provide services. The GMCA can now deliver a more joined up and accessible system, for example by providing standardised and daily capped fares. The new system builds on successful existing initiatives, including 'Our Pass', introduced in 2019, which gives 16–18 year-olds free bus travel across Greater Manchester. Our Pass has widened access in other ways too, including free tickets for cultural activities.

Roll out of the network is now complete. From September 2023, yellow Bee Network-branded buses were introduced in Bolton, Wigan and some parts of Salford. A second tranche followed in March 2024, and the third and final franchise was just completed in January 2025, with buses in the south of Greater Manchester coming under local control.

A range of legal challenges from bus operators slowed down the franchising process but all these have now been successfully dismissed. According to the GMCA, clear and consistent communication, both with the public and with local authority leaders, has been crucial to maintaining strong support in the face of these delays.

The Bee Network has been designed to integrate different transport modes, joining up buses, trams, rail, walking, wheeling and cycling. To make active travel more accessible, the combined authority aims to connect every part of Greater Manchester with 1,800 miles of safe routes and 2,400 new crossings. Affordable and user-friendly rental Starling Bank Bikes and e-bikes have also been introduced across the city.

Residents had the opportunity to shape development of the network through large-scale consultations that yielded more than 12,500 responses. The first found that 86% of respondents supported franchising; the dramatic impact of Covid-19 on the local bus market gave rise to another consultation. These involved intense engagement with local authorities and key stakeholders, including residents and transport operators, in town halls, libraries and shopping centres across the conurbation. In 2021, a public consultation was held on the Bee Network as a whole, exploring public priorities for the service. A key response to the cost-of-living crisis was to introduce capped fares prior to franchising, with a £2 and £1 upper limit for adults and children respectively from September 2022. GMCA and Transport for Greater Manchester say they are keen to embed consultation and accountability, for example by introducing a Bee Network app for customers to provide feedback on their journeys. Feedback is used as a measure for service quality which is linked to operator payments.

Impact on local residents

12 months since the launch of franchising, the GMCA has reported record numbers of residents using Bee Network bus services, enabling people to access jobs, education, other essential services and leisure activities.³⁶ Areas where franchising was first introduced have seen bus usage increase by 5%. Lower fares and more reliable services (with more buses on time), are already leading to higher service satisfaction (fare satisfaction rates have jumped to 82% now from 63% in 2022).³⁷

GMCA are using the tendering process to maximise opportunities for work with decent pay and conditions in the city region. Bus operators who wish to bid are encouraged to sign up to the Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter, to prioritise employee wellbeing and favourable working conditions, as well as ensuring staff receive the real Living Wage.

Environmental impact

Care has been taken to maximise the decarbonising potential of bus franchising. In addition to providing a viable alternative to private car use, GMCA intends to maximise sustainability by requiring high environmental standards for vehicles through the tendering process. Prior to the Bee Network, less than 1% of buses in Greater Manchester were electric. This is anticipated to rise to 25% by the end of April 2025.³⁸ Meanwhile, integrating franchised bus services with other parts of the Bee Network will help to make active travel more feasible for many more residents and further minimise carbon emissions. As noted, GMCA's cycle and walking network is being expanded and a cycle hire scheme has been successfully introduced.

What's next?

It will be critical to continue monitoring the Bee Network's impact on residents and to tailor the project to maximise social and environmental benefits.

Other regions in the North of England have been inspired by GMCA's approach, including West Yorkshire and the Liverpool City Region. Both are in the process of implementing similar integrated transport systems and bus franchises. The Bee Network has inspired the new Labour government's Buses Bill, which seeks to empower local transport authorities to run their own franchised bus systems. To allow transport authorities to respond more quickly to local needs and demand, the GMCA is pushing for greater flexibility to amend franchising schemes within the forthcoming legislation. (Currently, even modest changes to a franchised service requires a formal variation to the scheme, as well as a lengthy statutory consultation process.) Greater Manchester's efforts are helping to shape urban transport policy in the UK in line with mobility needs and pursuit of decarbonisation.

Find out more at <https://tfgm.com/>



Nottingham City Transport

Nottingham City's municipally owned bus service

Service area: transport

Background

Most bus and train services across the UK were deregulated and privatised following the Transport Act of 1985. Nationally, service quality, connectivity and working conditions have since declined, while fares have increased. Research has linked rising travel costs with falling public expenditure, rising private capital investment and enrichment of shareholders, mainly investment banks, asset management firms, foreign government-owned firms and high net worth individuals.³⁹ Covid-19 placed further pressure on bus services, with intermittent lockdowns suppressing economic activity and travel. It led to longer term shifts in working culture that normalised working from home and cut back commuting. In Nottingham, bus usage dropped to around 60% of pre-pandemic levels after the last lockdown in 2021.

Local action

Nottingham City Council has maintained ownership of its bus company throughout this period, despite having to transfer its assets to a new legal entity in 1986 to comply with government legislation. Founded in 1897 as Nottingham Corporation Tramways, Nottingham City Transport (NCT) is today England's largest municipal bus operator and second in the UK only to Edinburgh's Lothian Buses. The council remains the majority shareholder, although Transdev PLC, a French company, acquired a 5% stake in 2001, which has grown to around 18% since.

Faced with numerous challenges over 40 years (mainly from government policy), NCT has managed to stay afloat and

even revive bus usage to just over 90% of pre-pandemic levels. It has won more UK Bus Operator of the Year awards than any other company in the last decade, recently winning two awards in November 2024. Withstanding attempts to privatise the service and maintaining the municipality's majority share has enabled NCT not only to run the service more in line with residents' needs but also to shift more effectively towards carbon neutrality.

According to city councillors, municipal takeover is not a quick fix for other authorities seeking to achieve similar success. It has taken Nottingham years of rigorous local management: finding quality personnel to administer the service is difficult, as is creating and maintaining the necessary infrastructure. As one councillor observed, 'it's a Rubik's Cube of demand and need, I think we've managed to get that as good as we could have done.' One enduring advantage has been that, under municipal ownership, funds that would otherwise go to shareholders' dividends remains available for investment in service quality, accessibility, sustainability and working conditions.

Impact on local residents

The company monitors users' experience by conducting regular surveys, which have recently shown 98% satisfaction. This figure has risen gradually year on year.

Against the backdrop of slashed central funding to local government, NCT's fares have been influenced more by the need for financial viability than by the goal of universal accessibility. Nevertheless, a recent government scheme offering £2 tickets reportedly received insignificant uptake in Nottingham because passengers found NCT's regular day pass more convenient.

Because it is municipally controlled rather than a purely commercial entity, NCT finds joint-planning with the local transport authority easier – for example, to organise infrastructure, such as bus lanes and signs, which are the basic architecture of a dependable transport system. Forward planning with the city council helps to maintain a stable and consistent service. And this includes some longer and less obviously popular routes that would not survive in similarly sized cities without municipal control.

The council supports decent pay and conditions for employees as well as collective bargaining, specifically with Unite. In the last two years NCT staff have received an 18% pay rise and the company heavily invests in the pension scheme. NCT recently agreed a three-year settlement with the unions linked to inflation, which will also provide stability necessary for investment planning. It values measures that promote health and wellbeing, particularly for drivers who make up the majority of the labour force, in sedentary jobs that at times come under acute stress. There's a staff gym and regular efforts to foster social interaction, including football teams and staff outings. A 4-day working week arrangement is also offered to employees. Staff retention is high compared with equivalent private sector organisations.

More broadly, NCT supports the local economy by providing well connected transport across the city, as well as many well-paid jobs for local people. Technically outside the public sector, it is the largest private employer in Nottingham, surpassed only by four multinational corporations.

Environmental impact

NCT's procurement policy is central to Nottingham's citywide plan for carbon neutrality by 2028. With grants from the government's Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas Fund (ZEBRA), NCT has started to increase its fleet of electric buses, which also feature free Wi-Fi, USB charge points and electric air-conditioning. It has one of the largest fleets of gas buses in the country.

What's next?

Labour has set out plans in its Buses Bill to remove the previous government's ban on new municipal bus services, so that more local authorities can follow in Nottingham's footsteps. Nonetheless, NCT's experience highlights the challenges associated with municipal ownership. Due to high capital costs and the need for appropriate management expertise, starting a municipal company from scratch is virtually impossible. Buying out existing companies is more feasible but many local authorities are not in the position to do so. Franchising is another option (described in our GMCA Bee Network example, see p.32), although it comes with its own risks as local authorities take on more liabilities.

Sufficient and sustained support from central government – for both operating costs and capital investment – is therefore necessary for publicly controlled bus networks to become widely available, well connected and genuinely affordable for all who need them.

Find out more at <https://www.nctx.co.uk/>

Further resources and examples

This report can only include only a limited number of examples. Many other organisations – in the UK and further afield – have been documenting collective approaches to meeting needs within planetary boundaries. Here are some useful resources.

Abundance

Abundance promotes public-common strategies for democratising the economy and realising a just socio-ecological transition. It pools case studies as a resource for its partner organisations and others.⁴⁰ Examples include:

- The Gamecock, Hulme Community Plan: a collaboration between the local community in Hulme, Abundance and the Greater Manchester Tenants Union to design an alternative plan in the face of council and private led redevelopment.⁴¹ They have managed to resist private development repeatedly and now seek to provide social spaces and extra-care housing for vulnerable residents of Hulme.
- *Commoning The Public* documents case studies in Europe.⁴² It explores the development of public-common partnerships in Barcelona and Naples, showing how local communities manage local assets and services in conjunction with the local state.

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) is a think and do tank. It employs a 'Community Wealth Building' approach, supporting local governments to develop policies for wealth and power to serve local people. CLES documents case studies for each locality they work with,⁴³ including:

- Lewes District County Council has implemented a community wealth building approach to decarbonisation.⁴⁴ To enable economies of scale, Lewes has collaborated with seven other nearby local authorities to retrofit council housing and deliver skilled, good jobs across the region. This kind of local cooperation could help other local authorities to develop and implement transformative environmental policies.
- CLES provide case studies of Community Land Trusts (CLT).⁴⁵ These are democratically run organisations that develop and manage land in the interest of their members. CLTs can provide housing and services that are more affordable and geared to local communities' needs. CLES points to a number of CLTs around the UK, including Oxford; Granby Four Streets, Liverpool; and Glendale Gateway Trust.

Friends of the Earth and Ashden

Friends of the Earth and Ashden are leading environmental organisations in the UK. Friends of the Earth organises grassroots campaigns and actions, fighting for climate justice nationally and locally. Ashden campaigns for climate innovation in the UK and around the world. They have collaborated to produce a set of case studies showing the work of 40 local authorities that have implemented place-based solutions to environmental challenges.⁴⁶ Here are two examples:

- Liverpool City Council is trying to keep homes warmer by introducing 5-year selective licensing for landlords.⁴⁷

It is mapping energy performance of privately rented homes, identifying those with the lowest ratings and enforcing compliance with regulations.

- Dundee City Council is developing policies to support residents on the sharp end of the climate crisis.⁴⁸ The council is pooling resources to register community members affected by fuel poverty and liaising with the NHS to build a risk register to track vulnerability to extreme weather. It can then offer support by reducing fuel bills via social tariffs, addressing dampness and condensation problems and providing low-energy light bulbs. The council aims to embed climate resilience and tailor support for those most exposed across all its services.

Institute for Global Prosperity UCL

The Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP) at University College London studies solutions for addressing global challenges and achieving lasting prosperity. IGP has conducted research to promote UBS and applied it to local pilot studies. Here are two reports covering initial pilots:

- *Imagining a Welfare State that Supports Secure Livelihoods* documents five local case studies of UBS-style experiments and introduces Camden Council's Good Work Camden programme that draws on the UBS approach.⁴⁹
- *Stories of Change from the Connected Communities Inclusive Broadband Project* showcases Tower Hamlet's pilot, providing free internet and IT devices for low-income residents. Beneficial impacts recorded include improved educational, work and employment opportunities, and better physical and mental health and wellbeing.⁵⁰

New Local, Local Trust, Power to Change and the Co-operative Party

This collaboration of organisations produced *A Labour Vision for Community Power*, co-authored by a number of Labour council leaders.⁵¹ The report lays out an agenda for action to redistribute power from Westminster to local communities, inspired by the principles of participation, prevention and devolution. They point to a number of useful case studies, including:

- Bath & West Community Energy is one of the largest community energy co-operatives in England, providing local people with a new relationship to the energy system and a greater stake in achieving net zero. It develops and operates renewable energy projects in the area, generating enough energy to power 4,500 homes, reducing carbon emissions by roughly 3,300 tonnes annually.
- Manchester City Council's approach to early intervention and prevention for children and young families is helping meet needs and save resources by acting early and minimising crises. It has developed a model to provide wraparound support for the whole person or family. Overall, demand for reactive (and more expensive) services has fallen, with a cost-benefit ratio of nearly £2 for every £1 invested in this workstream.

Public Futures

Public Futures is a collaborative project coordinated by the Transnational Institute and the University of Glasgow, providing a database of (re)nationalised local services and infrastructure that had been previously privatised.⁵² It maintains an interactive map that is well worth exploring, so far documenting examples from 80 countries around the world. To date, it includes 131 local examples from the UK, such as:

- Heart of Wales Property Services worked to re-municipalise housing in Powys, Wales, ending a joint private sector-council venture and in-sourcing property services.⁵³
- Tyne and Wear Metro is a light rail system that was previously outsourced to Arriva but brought back in house to the municipal transport company Nexus in 2017 to improve the service and deliver savings.⁵⁴

Reclaiming Our Regional Economies (RORE)

The New Economics Foundation, CLES, Co-operatives UK and the Centre for Thriving Places co-produced RORE in 2023. It is a 5-year programme seeking to bring communities together with political and institutional leaders to design economies around local social and environmental needs. In three pilot regions (the West Midlands, South Yorkshire and the North East) RORE is exploring pathways to deliver better regional economies and systemic shifts. So far, the project has produced several papers:

- *Reclaiming Our Regions* introduces the programme and reflects on its first year, considering current barriers in the current devolution model and how they can be overcome.⁵⁵
- *A Piece of the Housing Puzzle* explores obstacles and opportunities for community housing in the North East.⁵⁶
- *The Foundations of the Housing Crisis* explores problems with the current model of development and how it should be reimagined.⁵⁷
- *Solid Foundations* maps the extent and areas where investment in local services and infrastructure is needed.⁵⁸

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About

The Social Guarantee is an approach to managing the economy so that it meets the needs of people and planet. It aims to ensure that everyone has access to life's essentials within the limits of the natural environment. Life's essentials are what we all need to participate in society and flourish. Education, health and care, housing, energy and transport are examples.

Universal access can only be achieved through collective action to deliver services that are sufficient and affordable for all who need them. And they must be sustainable so that future generations can meet their needs too.

The Social Guarantee offers a framework for service provision. It is a big idea that can start small and local – with a clear vision and practical pathway.

