



Community Wealth Building and Partnership Working

Speakers

Mat Ainsworth,
Director of Skills,
Work & Inclusive Economy,
Salford City Council

Caroline Bostock,
UK Market Lead,
The Palladium Group,
and Chair of the BSA's
Regional Advisory Board

Karen Hirst,
Managing Director,
Maple Grove Developments,
part of the Eric Wright Group

Sarah Longlands,
Chief Executive, CLES

Alexander Rose,
Partner, DWF Law LLP
(Chair and Facilitator)

In December 2023 the BSA, in collaboration with [DWF LLP](#), organised a seminar in Manchester on Community Wealth Building and Partnership Working, focused on the North West.

The seminar heard from a range of speakers, and there was also wider participation from several central and local government representatives from the region, many of whom were in the forefront of Community Wealth Building activity, as well as service and infrastructure project providers from across business and the VCSE sector.

Alexander Rose opened the discussion, emphasising the importance of the topic, the political context and the work DWF had carried out in this area.

Sarah Longlands was the first speaker. Sarah introduced [CLES](#) as a 'think/do tank', and began by highlighting progress on growth, but also the level of wealth inequality, in Greater Manchester and elsewhere. Increases in the mean wage were not for example reflected in the median. There were questions about how growth was defined, measured and created, and indeed about who owned wealth.

Community Wealth Building aimed to increase the flow, circulation and ownership of wealth within a place. It was about democratising the economy by building wealth from within - wealth which was generative rather than extractive. Relationships were fundamental to this work.

Progress was then measured by how well local economies generated good lives, rather than simply by the growth of GDP.

Sarah outlined five key levers for achieving Community Wealth Building: finance; workforce; land and property; spending; and inclusive and diverse ownership. 'Anchor organisations', rooted in an area, were vital in all this, and could do more to use their combined economic power. Sarah also emphasised the importance of voluntary sector organisations in a community as well as the role of public services and the state, including local authorities - despite severe resource constraint.

Several case studies were outlined showing where these principles had been put into practice, including Oldham and Manchester City councils, housing associations across the south of Scotland, a five-year project looking systematically at the power and potential role of anchor organisations in the West Midlands as well as Net Zero and finance in two other Combined Authority areas, and efforts in LB Islington to use planning to help social enterprises and SMEs.

Finally Sarah ended with a series of questions about the nature and prospect of business involvement in this work, and about what being part of this vision would mean. Could businesses lead by example, using their economic power in terms of employment, spend and assets to raise standards? What could they do to move out of comfort zones, working collaboratively and sparking new ways of working? What did meaningful investment in place look like, with local challenges addressed in a way that was long-term, systemic, and humble?

Mat Ainsworth spoke next, setting out Salford City Council's experience. He summarised a SWOT analysis of how the city was faring - positively but there were also challenges. There was a five-point plan to deliver real change. This involved delivering local Community Wealth; growing the social economy; accelerating transition to a zero-carbon economy; strengthening public services; and strengthening civic participation and local democracy.

As part of this there were workstreams on an Insourcing Appraisal Framework, a new procurement strategy and planning guidance; accelerating payment of Real Living Wage; a new Employment and Skills Strategy and an Employment Standards Charter; work on inclusive ownership; and investment in renewable energy and active travel. 'Build Salford' was used as a case study of the Council's convening role.

Mat then focused on the Council's collaborative working and, like Sarah, asked how businesses could help. He listed the Real Living Wage, the Mayor's Employment Charter, the Social Value Alliance, supporting Salford supply chains and VCSE groups, local employment and training, minimising climate impact, and understanding local need.

Karen Hirst was the first private sector speaker. Karen introduced [Maple Grove Developments](#) as part of the Eric Wright Group, defined as a commercially focused business with a social purpose - with its profits either reinvested or donated for charitable purposes through the Eric Wright Charitable Trust. Its nature and ownership structure encouraged long-term sustainable employment and supported the building of strong communities.

Karen outlined the social value strategy of the Group under the four themes of people, place, planet and performance. Examples of achievement included: board diversity; over 14,000 young people being engaged through the career ambassador programme; and over £65 million being spent with local businesses.

Karen then outlined practical examples of the work of Maple Grove Developments in projects across Burnley and Preston, including community benefit frameworks, apprentices trained, links with local colleges, and local supply chains and jobs created and supported. These were step-change projects which delivered significant Community Wealth to the areas concerned. Public, private and voluntary sectors all had a part to play working together, and a clear strategic steer from public sector conveners was invaluable along with plans and collaborative working from the private sector.

There were initial questions to panellists, covering the nature of 'good growth' and the work of CLES, Salford City Council and Maple Grove Developments, and how more businesses could be encouraged to work with a social purpose, like that of the Eric Wright Group. Asked about policy levers, it was considered that many of the policy tools were already there, but strong leadership was also important - including use of 'soft' convening powers by local and devolved government - as was further and more systematic devolution and greater certainty with local government finance. Single settlements to Greater Manchester and elsewhere would help.

The final speaker, Caroline Bostock, developed the theme of partnership working. By definition, Community Wealth Building involved a collaborative approach to local economic development. The public sector's role was in leading the strategy, through policy creation and implementation (including through procurement), leveraging public sector resources and assets. The private sector could foster local business growth and sustainability; encourage responsible business practices; and collaborate with local businesses, social enterprises and VCSE organisations. The VCSE sector meanwhile could champion advocacy; had a deep understanding of local issues, barriers and opportunities; could be a driving force for change; and could pioneer community level, grassroots projects.

A true partnership approach, necessary to achieve Community Wealth, involved a shared vision and strategy, partnership initiatives and projects which maximised Community Wealth, cross-sector inclusive decision-making processes, and trust being built through transparent communication and shared responsibility.

Caroline listed the ways in which business could play its part in this process, through a commitment to long-term local engagement and investment; utilising local SME supply chains; employing local staff and underrepresented groups; a focus on employee health and wellbeing through for example payment of Real Living Wage; providing progression opportunities such as through upskilling and apprenticeships; and concern for the local environment.

Caroline asked what could be done to maximise such a positive private sector engagement and commitment. Answers included commitment to long-term and scalable investment, with a focus on outcomes; collaborative dialogue throughout commissioning and delivery; and transparent procurement pipelines with enough time for local engagement and supply chain development.

Finally Caroline presented a case study of Community Wealth Building: the Lake Windermere Water Quality Partnership Project, which had used nature-based solutions to reduce phosphate pollution. The National Parks and Palladium were combining their environmental and economic expertise to create a new model for nature restoration, called Revere. There were positive implications for the local environment, business sustainability and growth, skills and job creation, and wider Community Wealth through carbon credit profit share to community projects, volunteering opportunities, and a thriving local economy.

There was then wide-ranging discussion involving all participants.

There was a need to get procurement right. It should involve genuine collaboration and focus on criteria other than price. One issue was the difficulty many VCSE organisations encountered with social value criteria in procurement frameworks, which suggested something was wrong in the commissioning process. It was also important that procurement requirements didn't unnecessarily preclude SMEs. There was a need for dialogue and market engagement, which was made more difficult by resource constraint; central government could work in partnership with local areas, including when services were devolved.

There was also a need for long-term thinking, so supply chains could be developed and jobs and training organised in an area. This could be through a strategic partner, clear pipelines of work, or other ways to provide assurance and investment in order to support long-term relationships and programmes to provide real social value legacy and impact. There was discussion of procurement rules and embracing what was possible within them, and the possible positive effect of the new Procurement Act.

It was also important for clients to fund Real Living Wage through suppliers, which was happening slowly. Public sector participants discussed their convening role and what more they could do with the information they had at their disposal from multiple partners, in order to direct investment where it was most needed.

It was discussed that the construction sector had led the way in aspects of Community Wealth, especially in terms of local employment and training and use of local supply chains. The facilities management sector also lent itself to long-term programmes.

It was raised that some national organisations might be constrained by national procedures, although many involved with local and devolved public sector had devolved approaches to reflect local differences and local procurement. Some national client organisations also need more devolution in commissioning. Overall, devolution offered opportunity for improving the way processes were organised.

Increased remote working itself enabled people to be recruited from outside London and major cities, which brought in a wider range of experience and enabled richer conversations to take place.

Finally, there was discussion of the role of the private sector as anchor institutions. The London Anchors Network was private-sector led, and Leeds had set out the characteristics of private sector anchors.

The issue of Community Wealth Building was one that had been discussed in many BSA meetings to date, and the themes raised would form the basis of similar discussions in the future.