



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

Supporting inclusive economic growth in the West Midlands and across the UK



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## **RSE Workshop on *Looking beyond growth: exploring the transformative potential of alternative economic development approaches* – Birmingham, 5 July, 2023**

This note provides a summary of one of four workshops that explores how alternative economic development approaches are being put into practice. Other workshops - in addition to this workshop in Birmingham - will be held in Sheffield, Cardiff and Glasgow. Our aim from these workshops is twofold: 1) Develop a policy-research learning network on alternative approaches (online and through further events); 2) Prepare for a larger research funding bid that would enable a more detailed examination of the alternative approaches and how they are operationalised.

The research group – which spans colleagues at Birmingham, Glasgow, Sheffield Hallam, Manchester, Newcastle and Cardiff universities – have been working together since 2019. We have developed an initial paper (now out in *Urban Studies* - <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980231187884>) that contrasted five prominent alternative approaches: wellbeing economy; doughnut economics; community wealth building; foundational economy; inclusive growth. The workshop events in this series enable us to build on this initial work by incorporating practitioner experiences.

This workshop in Birmingham was attended by 25 persons from the public, higher education and third sectors.

### **Key findings from the session are as follows:**

1. A **'pick and mix'** approach combining different elements of alternative economic development frameworks is favoured.
2. The alternative economic development approaches **provide a useful overarching framework and concepts** (e.g. focusing on supply chains, employment contacts, etc.) but even where/when one is adopted (e.g. doughnut economics) there is recognition that there is **not a single panacea**.
3. The reality is one of **patchwork funding and accountabilities**, with concurrent pressures which serve both to demand and stifle innovation. Hence, there is a need to **'get on and act'** at local level regardless.
4. In an environment characterised by **short-termism, time and space** to think and act for the medium- and longer-term is at a premium.
5. **Devolution** is a possible enabler – it may offer potential for greater local integration.
6. There is value in **demonstrator projects** from the **bottom-up**, showing what can be achieved.
7. Often **success is about culture change** – this might take some time and so 'quick wins' are often unrealistic.
8. It is important to **measure what is happening at the micro/ local level** and then illustrate how this **links to larger trends** and the ultimate **bigger goals**. It is also important to consider 'who sets the end goal for policy?'
9. Given alternative economic development frameworks address issues across multiple policy domains it is important to **multi-layer/ integrate data across multiple data sources**. The **quality of data** is crucial too – especially when/ where use of AI might accentuate existing inequalities if used with poor quality data.
10. At the time of the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of the NHS it is important to keep in mind that the **NHS is a key enabler** – as a large employer, procurer, etc., that is (relatively) geographically ubiquitous. **Health** is prominent in debates about inclusive growth and in alternative economic development frameworks given its linkages across key policy domains.

### **The discussion in Birmingham was organised around the following objectives:**

- 1) Examine how alternative approaches are being understood, adopted and implemented in different cities.
- 2) Explore the factors that enable or constrain the operationalisation of alternative approaches.
- 3) Identify what success looks like and how this can be measured.

Detailed points linked to each objective are as follows (a point noted here does not necessarily equate to agreement across all attendees):

### Objective 1 – Understanding, Adopting and Implementing alternative approaches

The argument for alternative approaches is not yet won ... there is still an economic orthodoxy

Politicisation of phrase “community wealth building”

Problems with adoption/implementation ... rather there are ‘silos of doing’

Doughnut is a concept ... Community Wealth Building is more delivery

Doughnut economics is concept rather than toolkit; Wellbeing economy - broader church

Delivery is hard ... culture change is often needed

Birmingham Anchor Network aims to solve issues piece by piece

Searching for levers for impact

Individuals may champion alternatives ... but this is usually on top of their day job

Crisis management drives people to search for alternatives, but there is not yet a clear movement towards alternative approaches

Which model supports response to poverty?

Different types/approaches are needed ... to reflect diverse urban contexts

Approaches need to sit outside the political sphere

In practice funding arrangements shape agendas

Explanations are needed for [communities about] why we are doing things

Challenge – going against the status quo

Interest in a network for the ideas regarding alternative local economic development approaches – this is a learning process for local authorities

Have to scale down frameworks and make ideas locally tractable

### Objective 2 - Exploring the factors that enable or constrain the operationalisation of alternative approaches

Emperor’s new clothes? [have we been trying to do this all along?]

All siloed in what we are doing

Can’t make mistakes

Projects start up and stop

We only take action at crisis points

#### Enablers

New values of young people/future policymakers

Defined focus/approach

Accelerating buy in through concept design

Combined authority can help empower places (enable)

Birmingham can do things like delivering the Commonwealth Games, but needs to find similar enablers to solve issues like youth unemployment

#### Constraints

Orthodox views of investors, programmes

Demise of triple helix

Funding short-termism

Easy to say – difficult to do

National government ... do not use approaches

Government wants quick wins

### Objective 3 - Identifying what success looks like and how this can be measured

Owners of the aims need to determine the measures

Indicators can lag the current picture significantly

Indicators open doors to ideas

Importance of demonstrating small impacts

[Indicators] have to capture vision but have granularity

Fine line between successful initiatives that are taken for granted/ignored, and fads that come and go ....

Politicians often want something new

Need for investment in capacity for data collection and analysis

Lack of use of logic models

Relationship between inputs and outputs and outcomes needs to be realistic – “world peace for £50K?!”

Need for bounded problems that you can measure effectively

Ability to learn from mistakes

Issue of displacement in community wealth building – look at areas that are influenceable, and that are super specialist [so less movable], and ask the question of how we could add value if we can source locally