

## **RSE Workshop: *Looking beyond growth: exploring the transformative potential of alternative economic development approaches***

**Sheffield, 05 October, 2023**

This briefing summarises the workshop held in Sheffield on 05 October 2023 to explore how 'alternative' economic development approaches are being put into practice. Other workshops are being held in Birmingham, Cardiff and Glasgow.

Our aim from these workshops is twofold:

- Develop a policy-research learning network on alternative approaches (online and through further events).
- Prepare for a larger research funding bid that would enable a more detailed exploration of the alternative approaches and how they are being put into practice.

The research team – which includes academics at Birmingham, Glasgow, Sheffield Hallam, Manchester, Newcastle and Cardiff universities – has 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; and Inclusive Growth**. The workshops in this series enable us to build on this initial work by incorporating practitioner experiences.

The workshop in Sheffield was attended by 25 representatives from the public, higher education and third sectors. The discussion was organised around the following objectives:

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

Key feedback is outlined on the page which follows (please note that discussion points noted do not necessarily equate to agreement across all attendees).

### Objective 1 – Understanding, adopting and implementing alternative approaches

- Inclusive Growth has the most traction, perhaps because it presents the least challenge to the “existing system” and is easier to implement.
- Community Wealth Building, Doughnut Economics and the Foundational Economy have also influenced work undertaken by local authorities.
- Other approaches that have been deployed in South Yorkshire include the Circular Economy and Regenerative Economies.
- Understanding and usage of the five approaches varies: some organisations’ activities align with approaches but they do not always refer to them explicitly e.g. using progressive procurement but not framing this as Community Wealth Building.
- Buy-in to the broader principles which cut across the different approaches is perhaps more important than adopting a single framework or a ‘pick and mix’ approach across frameworks.
- Activities in South Yorkshire which align with elements of the five approaches (even if not always explicitly) include Doncaster Council’s Economic Strategy 2030 and Fairness and Wellbeing Commission; Doncaster Health Determinants Research Centre’s (HDRC) work on health and wellbeing; and the Sheffield City Goals project.
- Alternative approaches may sometimes be seen as “anti-growth” or, for some stakeholders even, “woke”.

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

#### Enablers

- Stable, consistent and supportive political leadership in key local institutions has helped to “shift the mindset”.
- The pandemic opened up opportunities to do things differently as it made organisations realise “there is nothing we can’t achieve”.
- Good communications, appropriate language and demonstrable public sector capabilities and competence are important to engage businesses in these agendas.
- Long-term plans e.g. 10 year NHS plans and the Integrated Care Plan community development duty can provide more enduring opportunities to pursue these approaches.
- ONS’s ‘beyond GDP’ work has raised the profile of the wellbeing agenda.
- Local initiatives add capacity (e.g. South Yorkshire Sustainability Centre).
- Devolved funding provides opportunities to experiment.

#### Constraints

- Central government remains focussed on traditional growth agendas.
- The churn of personnel in central government creates challenges in building relationships.
- The short-term and competitive nature of much available funding, spending cuts and short-term electoral timescales prevents the long-term strategic planning needed to adopt and implement agendas.
- The orthodoxy that growth should be prioritised over other outcomes is still engrained in some local conversations about the economy.
- Even where the limitations of traditional growth-focussed models are recognised, there is not necessarily consensus on what should replace them.
- The proliferation of new approaches, each with its own language, can be confusing and limit engagement.
- The appetite for risk is limited - it is sometimes easier to pursue “business as usual”.
- A tendency to work in and defend silos (in both local and central government).
- The potential burden on businesses limits support for these agendas.

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

- No agreement on what ‘success’ looks or the key questions that need to be asked e.g. “is growth good?”.
- Defining longer term *outcomes* crucial to visions but funding tends to support short-term *outputs*.
- It is essential to engage communities in the process of defining what success look likes (e.g. Doncaster Council’s appreciative inquiry work); however, this can be challenging to do meaningfully, especially when long-term strategic visions may not connect with more immediate struggles to get by that residents face.
- Setting targets can help to define collective ambition but there needs to be a balance between ambition and achievability - leaders can also be cautious about targets because of risks of failure.
- There is a lack of existing impact frameworks to measure change and more resource is needed to support capacity to design these systems and undertake analysis.
- Measurement is difficult in complex systems and some things are easier to measure than others.
- Monitoring and selection of measures is often seen as an afterthought, rather than being a core part of strategies.
- Indicators selected to monitor progress may not be directly influenceable, particularly at local level and over the short-term.
- Official datasets are sometimes out of date, have limited value (e.g. ONS Wellbeing Indicators) or lack granularity at neighbourhood level.
- Some types of valuable data (especially qualitative data) are difficult and costly to collect.
- Elected members may be more focussed on the perceptions of residents than what wider evidence and data show.
- It is important to develop appropriate metrics to monitor the growth and traction of alternative approaches e.g. number of businesses engaging with these agendas.