Making Norwich's Wealth Work for Norwich

Conference discussion summary - Public panel and stakeholder roundtable - 6 November 2026

This report attempts to synthesize the public panel and stakeholder roundtable held on 6 November 2026, informed by presentations from Matthew Brown and Sarah Longlands, Chief Executive of CLES. This records themes and opportunities rather than a verbatim account or an agreed action plan.

A shared ambition for a different local economy

The discussions began from a central question: not simply how much wealth Norwich creates, but who benefits from it, who controls its assets and how more value can remain within the city. Sarah Longlands argued for moving from an extractive towards a generative economy: changing how institutions commission, collaborate and deploy their combined economic weight. Her definition of community wealth building centred on increasing the flow, circulation and democratic ownership of wealth. Finance, employment, land, property, spending and ownership are therefore connected levers for local change, not isolated policy areas.

Matthew Brown, a leading advocate of community wealth building and a former Leader of Preston City Council, drew on Preston's pioneering experience to demonstrate how local authorities and other anchor institutions can reshape their economies. Following the collapse of a major regeneration scheme, Preston developed an alternative approach based on progressive procurement, cooperative and community ownership, fair employment, local investment and the strategic use of public assets. Brown also highlighted the experience of the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, USA, illustrating how locally rooted enterprises can create jobs, retain wealth and share economic benefits more widely. His central message was that Norwich has the opportunity to build on these experiences, adapting community wealth building principles to its own institutions, communities and economic circumstances.

Clive Lewis MP situated community wealth building within wider debates about economic power and public ownership. He cautioned that it is not a complete answer to structural economic problems, but argued that successful local practice can demonstrate what is possible and strengthen democratic participation and pride in place. Lucy Galvin, Leader of Norwich City Council, emphasised purposeful partnership, listening to communities and using the city's rooted institutions and businesses to deliver good jobs and shared prosperity. Sarah's presentation reinforced that community wealth building must reflect the particular strengths, history and circumstances of a place.

The principles behind community wealth building

Sarah Longlands identified four connected principles: participative democracy and people-powered policy; ownership of wealth and the means of creating it; recognition of the social economy as a source of resilience and preventative value; and an approach grounded in the strengths, history and context of place. These principles help distinguish community wealth building from a narrower "buy local" campaign. The objective is to

change how wealth is generated, circulated, owned and governed, while using collaboration and commissioning to improve outcomes for residents.

Anchor institutions, procurement and local supply chains

Matthew Brown's presentation showed how anchor institutions—such as councils, universities, hospitals and major employers—can use their purchasing, employment and investment decisions to support local prosperity. Sarah Longlands extended this beyond the public sector, identifying anchor organisations across the public, private and community sectors. She cited Birmingham's community wealth partnership as an example of coordinated action on procurement and employment. The Preston experience similarly illustrated how institutional spending can strengthen local supply chains while promoting fair work and diverse ownership.

Roundtable participants saw considerable potential for Norwich but also identified practical obstacles. Institutions need a clearer picture of existing local suppliers, their capabilities and the supply chains through which goods and services are purchased. A previous procurement club was recalled, prompting questions about whether a collaborative mechanism could be revived or redesigned. Businesses, including small and micro-enterprises, need accessible routes into institutional contracts; institutions need to understand where local capacity exists and where it could be developed. Participants also asked how procurement rules could be used effectively to secure social value and local benefit without assuming that contracts can simply be reserved for local firms.

The discussion suggested that coordinated mapping of purchasing needs and local suppliers could be an achievable early project, with larger institutions and business networks working together.

Good jobs, skills and opportunities for young people

Skills and employment emerged as particularly pressing issues. City College Norwich and business representatives highlighted difficulties in developing the next generation of workers, including in hospitality and catering. The creative sector and Norwich Theatre raised the importance of a reliable skills pipeline, work placements and routes into careers in sectors dominated by small organisations.

Participants identified several linked barriers: gaps between courses and employers' needs; difficulty accessing apprenticeships and placements; insufficient guidance about opportunities; transport; and the costs to employers of recruitment and training. The Norfolk Business Board discussion pointed towards closer collaboration between education providers and businesses in shaping provision. The Federation of Small Businesses stressed that the goal must be good jobs that meet young people's needs, not employment at any cost.

There was support for practical, small-scale collaboration, particularly better signposting, work placements and employer engagement—that could be tested and expanded. Fair pay, secure conditions and Living Wage commitments were also seen as essential elements of community wealth building, not optional additions.

Land, property, ownership and local finance

The discussion repeatedly returned to who owns land, buildings and productive assets, and how those resources are used. Sarah Longlands emphasised democratic ownership of wealth and the means of creating it, alongside the contribution of the social economy to community resilience and preventative public services. She illustrated the possibilities through Beinn Ghrideag community wind farm on the Isle of Lewis, where community ownership can support long-term local investment.

In Norwich, council assets, housing providers, charitable trusts and community organisations offer potential routes to locally retained benefit. Participants noted the contribution of local charitable grant-making and the influence that charities can exercise through their own property and procurement decisions.

Matthew Brown's examples from Preston and Cleveland demonstrated that community wealth building extends beyond buying locally: it can include cooperatives, community-owned enterprises, municipal activity, patient finance and more democratic control of assets. Roundtable contributors called for more locally rooted and democratic enterprises and for practical consideration of how existing buildings and land might meet community needs. Examples of community facilities and the role of faith organisations suggested opportunities to bring a wider range of asset holders into the conversation.

Climate, energy, food and wellbeing

Climate action was seen as integral to a fairer local economy. Participants explored community-owned energy, including rooftop solar, both to reduce environmental impacts and retain income locally. Sarah Longlands' example of the community-owned Beinn Ghrideag wind farm demonstrated the wider principle: energy infrastructure can generate lasting community value when ownership and returns are locally rooted. The scale of opportunities across Norwich's institutional buildings, alongside planning policy and delivery capacity, warrants investigation.

Food procurement was another tangible example. The Preston experience of using school meals and public purchasing to influence supply chains prompted discussion of local food production and the wider changes needed to build a resilient food economy. Contributors also linked economic exclusion and deprivation with poorer physical and mental health. On this view, community wealth building should be judged by its contribution to wellbeing, inclusion and environmental sustainability as well as economic indicators.

Culture, civil society and community participation

Norwich's cultural and civic strengths were prominent throughout the discussion. The UNESCO City of Literature was cited as an example of organisations coming together around a shared identity and purpose. Norwich Theatre and other cultural organisations were recognised both as employers and as contributors to skills, wellbeing and place-making. The voluntary and charitable sector was described as a significant economic actor, with larger charities potentially serving as anchor institutions in their own right.

Participants emphasised the need to work with communities rather than design solutions solely through institutions. Sarah Longlands described democracy as people-powered, participative policy; she also stressed the economic value of the social economy and community resilience. Pride in place, community facilities, volunteering, faith networks and residents' lived experience were all raised. A recurring question was how to resource collaboration so that communities, particularly those facing disadvantage, can help set priorities rather than merely be consulted after decisions are made.

From shared principles to practical collaboration

The roundtable showed enthusiasm for the direction of travel, alongside a clear concern that discussion must lead to visible results. Sarah Longlands' framing of community wealth building as a way of harnessing combined institutional economic influence provided a useful test: what could partners commission, employ, own or invest in differently together? Speakers encouraged participants to identify specific problems, start where there is energy and willingness to act, and demonstrate what works. Suggestions included a local supplier and procurement initiative; joint action on apprenticeships and work placements; community energy; and opportunities for community use of assets.

Several participants recognised constraints beyond local control, including employment costs, national economic conditions and uncertainty around local government reorganisation. Sarah Longlands placed the discussion in a changing policy context, pointing to the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Act 2026 and a community wealth building commission in York and North Yorkshire. These were examples cited in her slides, not evidence of equivalent commitments in Norwich. The wider context makes it important to focus initially on opportunities where local partners can exercise real influence.

Conclusion

The conference established a strong common starting point: Norwich does not need to begin from scratch. Its institutions, enterprises, cultural organisations and communities already possess substantial assets and expertise. Matthew Brown's examples demonstrated what can be achieved through local procurement, cooperative enterprise and investment; Sarah Longlands added a clear emphasis on participative democracy, community ownership, the social economy and the combined economic power of anchor organisations. Together these ideas offer a route towards a more generative, inclusive and sustainable local economy. The next test is whether partners can translate that ambition into a small number of jointly owned, measurable initiatives.