



**co-operative  
party**

**COMMUNITY**

**POWER**

# INTRODUCTION

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Policy Officer

Community power is co-operative politics. At its heart, it's about giving everyone a meaningful say and stake in the world around them. As co-operators, we know that power isn't something to be jealously guarded at the top, but something which increases when shared. When everyone has agency and voice, we all benefit – and when our voice isn't heard and our communities have no stake in their future, it hurts everyone.

Because power and inequality and outcomes are inextricably linked. Powerful communities means thriving high streets. It means a fairer economy with better jobs and profits reinvested in the things we care about instead of squirrelled away at the top. It means responsive services, accountable policies and institutions, and investment in the things that matter to us.

A little power goes a long way. The decision of a handful of ordinary working people in 1844 to empower their community in the form of a co-operative food shop sparked a movement of communities not just raising their voices, but changing the way politics and the economy function.

So imagine what a lot of power could achieve.

Imagine a future where communities are emboldened and empowered to make the decisions on things that affect them, where community ownership becomes the norm and on every high street around the country shuttered shops are reopened and new life is breathed into town centres. Imagine local services shaped by, even run by, the people who use them and work for them.

Think bigger: community power extends beyond the local neighbourhood. Imagine an economy where communities, not distant shareholders, are in charge. Where everyone owns a stake, where employees have a say in their workplace, and where consumers decide the values and priorities of the businesses they rely on. Imagine an energy system where we are not at the behest of global gas prices but able to generate clean energy here, owned collectively for our collective benefit.

Bigger still. Imagine transparent, accountable institutions. Imagine a political system that people had faith in – where by virtue of their participation they don't just see why decisions are made, but play a role in making them. Where power flows from the bottom up: the corridors of power are not in Whitehall but in town halls and high streets. Where this power cannot be taken away: because having a say is meaningless if it can be ignored or your ability to exercise it can be removed.

It's a politics of empowerment. A new settlement which recognises and strengthens the democratic power of communities rather than top-down targets and reorganisation. A settlement which doesn't just talk the talk about rebalancing, but which shifts control from the centre to regions, councils and communities.

This new settlement must shift from community participation to community power. Because power is not achieved by asking more of volunteers. Shifting services from the public sector to the voluntary sector is not empowering, it is taking advantage. Power demands ownership and control.

This agenda is more radical and vital than consultations and meetings. Power and control are things you either have or don't – they cannot be done to you or on your behalf, and they cannot be withdrawn if the government of the day doesn't like your conclusions.

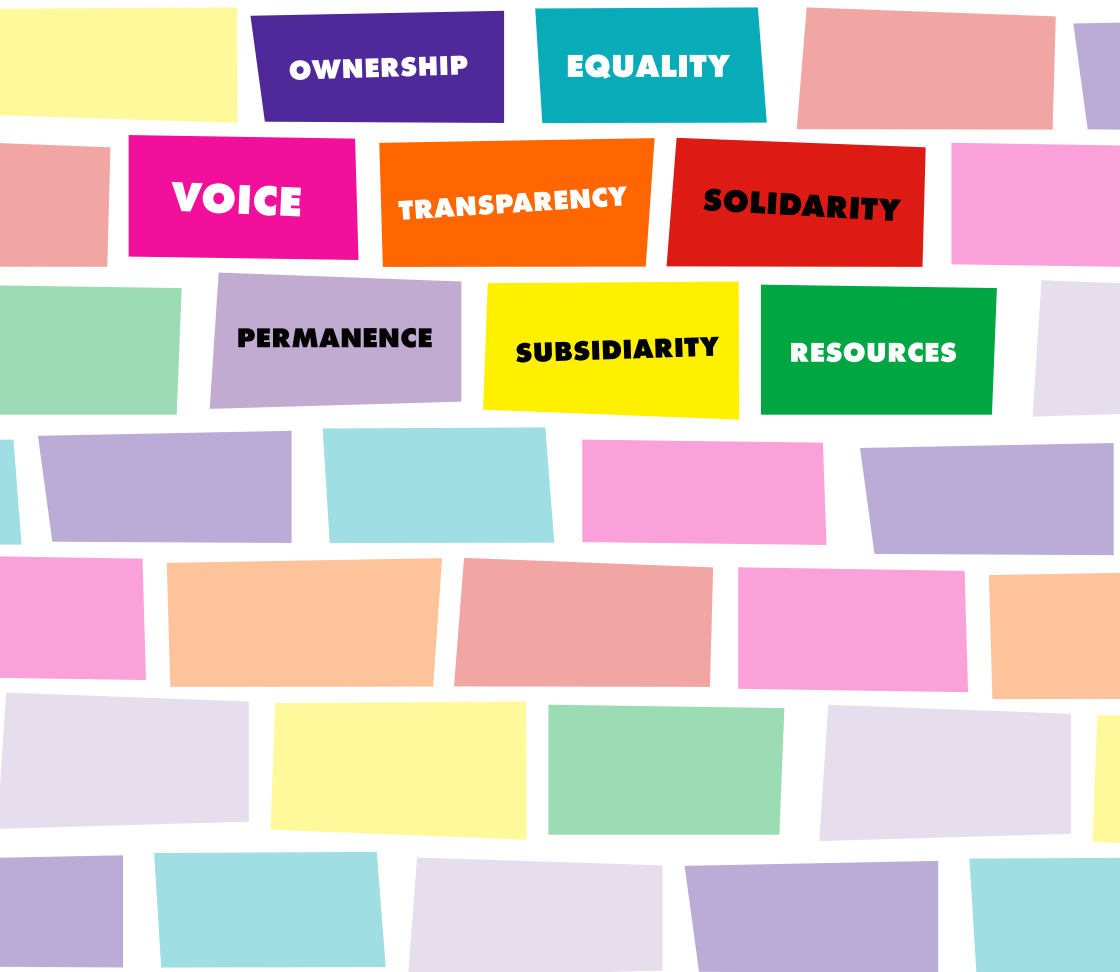
And to this end, community power must be a clarion call for the left. Progressive politics evolved not simply from dissatisfaction with deep-seated socioeconomic inequalities, but from the struggle of ordinary working people against the power imbalances that robbed them of agency and voice. After centuries of a political and economic elite making decisions in their own best interests, communities did not simply demand better pay but representation in the places where decisions were made and a stake in the economy that had failed them time and again – leading them to organise in their workplaces and communities, and giving birth to the Labour and co-operative movements.

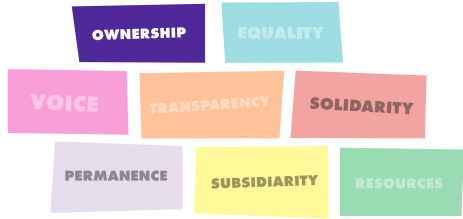
And today, communities need that agency and voice. Communities up and down the country are grappling with deep inequalities, squeezed household budgets, a cost of living crisis and the erosion of rights in their workplaces. Many communities feel left behind, ignored, and disenfranchised.

This agenda demands that we widen ownership in our economy and devolve decision-making in our politics. Fundamentally, we need to trust local communities to draw on their lived experiences of services and the local economy to lead change. This is a co-operative mission, where wealth and power are shared, not coveted by a narrow political and economic system. ●

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# THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF COMMUNITY POWER



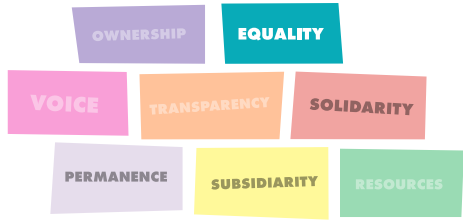


# OWNERSHIP

Ownership and control make up the first co-operative principle as set out by the co-operative pioneers in Rochdale in 1844 - because they knew then as we know now that who owns something defines who's interests it operates in. Those with the least stake in our economic and political life have the least power – and that has to change for this agenda to be meaningful.

The tried and tested model for this is co-operation. Collective ownership of businesses with accountable democratic structures and where profits are reinvested or evenly distributed among members.





# EQUALITY

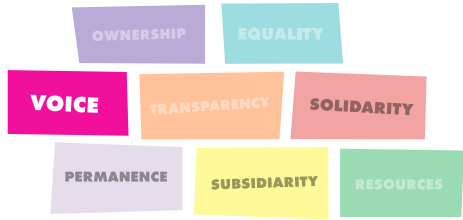
Britain is plagued by deep inequalities. Even before this pandemic, the UK was one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. Poverty was on the rise then – and our cost of living crisis means many more households will be pushed below the line. And the gap doesn't just exist between one household and the next – there is a huge variation in the local economies, investment, transport systems and infrastructure from region to region too.

Compounding this, structural inequalities that mean women are paid less, that disabled people are often excluded from the workforce, that the poverty rate for BAME groups is nearly twice that of white groups, and that social mobility has stalled.

A drive for equality must sit at the heart of community power for it to be meaningful. Inequality breeds power imbalances both between people and between places. As well as tackling the systemic inequality and discrimination that exists across Britain, we can

seek to rebalance investment in local places and widen ownership of local economies. Because, by widening ownership, we can narrow inequality and create a new normal – one where you own your workplace, own your community and own the future.





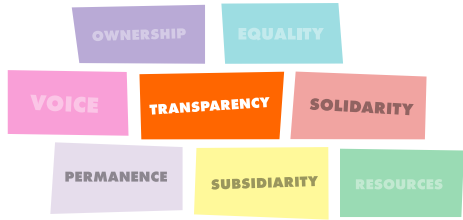
# VOICE

Having a voice gives people and their communities agency and power. When we exercise our collective voice we're able to protest injustice, call for change, speak the truth, express our preferences and share our hopes.

But simply having a voice is not enough. A voice that is felt to have no influence could be argued to be as bad as having no voice at all. For a voice to be powerful, it must be listened to. And when communities' voices are heard, they can influence policy, set government priorities, hold institutions accountable, improve governance and shape the services they rely on.

The ballot box is one way that communities can make their voices heard – but waiting four years to have a say in how decisions are made is not enough. Elections, while essential to our democracy, remain a blunt instrument.

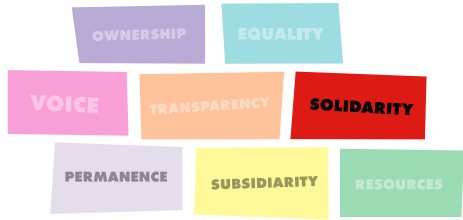
Community power demands an ongoing, meaningful voice. It requires new ways to engage, which go beyond the bare minimum consultations with participation and co-production institutionalised at every layer of government. Giving people a say, not just on the services they rely on but as an integral part of every level of decision-making, should become the norm. This means inclusive, democratic governance structures and a cultural shift to a more participatory way of doing politics which ensure diverse voices are heard.



# TRANSPARENCY

Knowledge is power – or rather the inability to find out key information about things that impact on your life is disempowering.

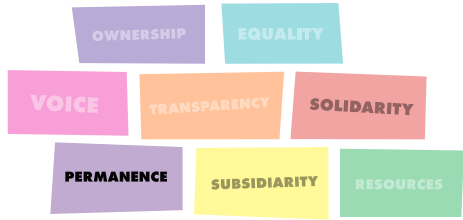
Opaque ownership of land, for example, makes it incredibly difficult for communities to lead local regeneration or shape the character of their town. Without being able to see a register of landlords, it's impossible to hold the irresponsible ones to account. A lack of tax transparency means anonymously owned companies can get away without paying their fair share, and a lack of board transparency means it is difficult to challenge unequal pay or gender and ethnicity gaps.



# SOLIDARITY

To date, the Government's approach to community power has been one which emphasises competition – pitting towns and cities against each other to vie for limited funding. Under the banner of "levelling-up", the Levelling Up Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, the Towns Fund in England and other national funding pots take power away from communities. While on the face of it, they are about rebalancing the economy, they do so only through Westminster command and control – and when one place benefits another loses out.

A rising tide should lift all boats. Community power has solidarity at its heart, ensuring no community is left behind and putting in place shared objectives and values so that everyone benefits.



# PERMANENCE

Community power requires genuine, structural reform of who owns the economy and how decisions are made. Without this, our agenda falls down – because if something can be taken away as easily as it is given it is hollow and temporary. If power is the ability to dictate the actions of others and exercise control over one's environment, and community power therefore the ability of communities to dictate their own actions and exercise control over their own environment, then it must be lasting.

Permanence is important. There is little so disempowering as having your agency taken away from you, your voice ignored by a government that doesn't like what you have to say. If our system stopped relying on communities taking their begging bowls to Westminster and instead gave them the tools they needed to make change happen themselves, we would see those communities scarred

by deindustrialisation, Westminster indifference, and austerity rise again and provide economic power which would serve our country as a whole.

There are two ways that permanence can be embedded to make community power meaningful. First, institutionalising devolved power structures and secondly widening ownership.

Devolution is the half of the jigsaw dealing with political power. Community power has to mean more than simply creating more mayors through backroom deals. The scale of devolution required to shift power from the centre to communities requires a fundamental shift in the governance and culture of the British state. This means meaningful decentralisation and a degree of fiscal devolution, with decision-making going beyond the town hall to the communities affected.

Ownership is the other half of the jigsaw concerned with economic power – the ability to exercise agency through having a stake and a say in the economy. Democracy must not end at the balance box – because the actions and choices of businesses and private companies impacts on our lives too. Power means having some control over the economy whether it's a voice in our workplaces, the power as a consumer to challenge mistreatment or the ability as a community to decide how profits are redistributed.

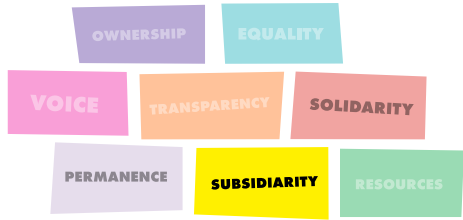
To achieve this, wealth must no longer be concentrated in the hands of distant market providers with little local



economic or social return. For political democracy to be supplemented by economic democracy, we need an economy characterised by co-operatives. Because only through co-operative ownership can we ensure an accountable economy where wealth and power are shared.

Widening ownership also offers protection against the potential centralising instincts of future governments, because by virtue of the collective strength of communities owning assets that cannot be taken away, their interests cannot be side-lined so easily in the future.

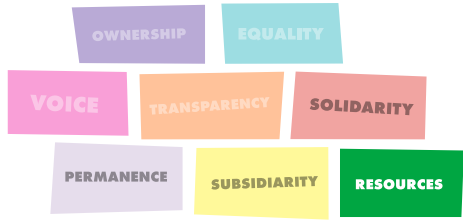




# SUBSIDIARITY

Relocating decision-making and economic regeneration closer to those affected has been a principle long championed by co-operators. Services, businesses and economies function best when the communities in which they operate and the users, consumers and workers who rely on them have a say and a stake in how they are run.

This means giving local government greater powers, and the funding to match, but also devolving decision-making beyond town halls. This has to mean strengthening the laws that give communities greater powers. Communities need new routes to ownership – whether it's breathing new life into the shuttered shops on their high street or installing innovative green technologies to generate clean power. So changes to the Localism Act, for example, are necessary to create longer time periods for communities to mobilise and challenge developers, and new rights to purchase assets. Community Improvement Districts should be codified to reconnect communities with the levers that drive economic development.



# RESOURCES

Community power is about hope. It's about people coming together to make a difference. It doesn't wait for permission – it gets on with it. People always have and always will work together for the benefit of their community.

But be under no illusion, communities cannot survive on volunteerism alone. The community is not and must never be a replacement for local or national government funding and action. Community power cannot exist as last resort solution to save austerity-hit services, rescue village shops at risk of closure or deliver the services that local councils and other public bodies used to provide.

The Coalition Government's 'Big Society' shows where this approach takes you. "We will take a range of measures to encourage volunteering" said the Cabinet Office paper at the time. This lens allows pride in the number of foodbanks and the volunteers that run them –

without the necessary anger about the fact that the state of our economy means foodbanks should have to exist in the first place. It allows politicians to overlook the staffing crisis in the NHS, instead framing the many million regular volunteers who fill those gaps as a great success for communities.

So we as well as recognising the contribution of volunteers and the huge potential of our communities, it is also important to understand the limits to what communities can do. Volunteers play an amazing role, and volunteering has huge benefits not just for the causes to which people offer their time but also to the individual volunteering and their wider community. The efforts and contributions of the 62% of Britons who have volunteered in one way or another over the past 12 months are amazing and deserve praise.

And it does them a disservice when they are used as a sticking plaster for underfunded services. Their phenomenal efforts are not what we mean by community power.

Communities alone cannot overcome the massive structural inequalities that exist between different groups and regions, and they cannot create resources from thin air. And what's more, the huge gaps in capacity and resilience between more affluent and lower income communities mean a reliance on volunteerism can in fact widen inequality – for example, evidence suggests that the vast majority of mutual aid groups sprang up in the places with strong existing networks, already thriving social economies and greater wealth.

And crucially, their contribution of time to good causes does not imbue them with a greater say. It doesn't widen ownership in the economy, and instead of giving people a greater stake in the services they rely on it shifts responsibility downwards without the funds and powers to match. And as a result it does little to challenge the existing power structures in Westminster.



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# WHAT DO THESE BUILDING BLOCKS CREATE?

These building blocks together create stronger, more responsive institutions, better services, accountable decision-making and participation at every level of politics. They result in communities feeling empowered, confident that they are listened to because the structures and institutions are in place to ensure that they have a role.

They upend power imbalances, putting communities in the driving seat, and ensuring every tier of government knows that any power they have exists only because communities have lent it to them – and that they therefore must be accountable and inclusive. And they ensure that power is not limited to public sector services. The building blocks make clear that political power must be supplemented by economic power, achieved by widening ownership in our economy.

To achieve this, shifts in power must be institutionalised. Communities must be at the centre, the most powerful part of the equation.

Their relationship with the economy has to shift so that communities are an active player, through ownership and structures which enable accountability such as workers and consumers on boards and stronger consumer protection laws.

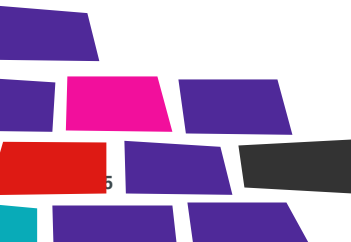
Communities' relationship with the services they use needs to change too – so that governance structures include staff and service users, and so that community and co-operatively owned providers can play a role instead of profit maximising multinationals. Decision-making should be inclusive and open, so that communities can play a role in shaping future services and holding them to account.

The way that local government and metro mayors work with their communities needs to centre the power of communities, doing things with people rather than to people. Metro mayors must not be appropriated by those who are determined to take away power from local government, and cannot form part of a centralising agenda. There is an important role for regional and city-wide decision making – and done right this increases the opportunities for communities to participate and be heard. Local government must be funded properly, so that its partnerships with communities is not one based on choosing between a rock and a hard place of cutting services, but instead based on equal partnership, shared values and empowering people.

And crucially, the role of national governments must be reviewed. Instead of distant decision-making and pork-barrel politics, funding should be based on need and communities encouraged to work together rather than pitted against each other. Levelling up should be more meaningful than a slogan and some well-branded grant funding. Instead, its success should be measured on how much can be devolved in a meaningful and properly funded way to mayors, councils and communities.



That isn't to say the government doesn't have important roles to play, for example: ensuring community power is not subject to a postcode lottery by tackling regional inequalities, working with local and regional government and communities to set ambitious targets that are relevant to the places they impact, and ensuring the private sector behaves responsibly and is accountable.



# WHAT DIFFERENCE CAN THIS AGENDA MAKE?

Community Power is about more than bunting and village fetes, bigger than deputations to council meetings or petitions about parking schemes. It means more than volunteers running foodbanks or communities organising litter picks.

This agenda has the potential to be transformative, changing the face of every high street in the UK, shaping every service we rely on and improving our relationships with the places we call home.

The difference would be apparent as soon as you step out of the front door. You greet your neighbours who live in the same community land trust as you and spot that the leak you reported yesterday has been dealt with – a far cry from your days renting because not only is your rent now linked with your income so far more affordable, but you know your neighbours and issues are dealt with quickly. It's nice being your own landlords and having a say in the place you live.

You drop your youngest at the local nursery – you sit on its board since you were elected by other local parents last year. You've made sure that the fees reflect local incomes so that childcare is affordable for everybody. You kiss goodbye to your oldest at the school gates. They sit on the board of governors of their school, because students also have a voice in how their school is run.

You love Mondays, because your job is rewarding. You love that as an employee you also own a stake in the business. It means pay is transparent and fair, your voice is listened to, and everyone benefits when it turns a profit. Currently, the business is busy providing goods and services to the local NHS hospital, because they have ensured that their procurement processes make the most of local business and, crucially, invests in co-operative enterprises, because they know that to tackle health inequalities they must play their part in reducing socio-economic inequalities too.

On your commute home, you reflect about how much better your daily bus journey has become since passengers were given a voice in how the services are run. The routes are much more reflective of the places people want to travel to and from, and fares are more affordable too as last year's profits went into keeping the cost of bus passes low for another year in a row.

Your route takes you through the town centre. The local high street is a vibrant place now, because the empty units have been bought up in a community share offer, so you own a share in the success of your high street and therefore make sure you shop there rather than turning to online retail giants. It's win-win, because your vote as a shareholder ensured the shops and services available locally reflected your local priorities so you're always able to buy what you need.

You hop off the bus a few stops early to get your groceries for tonight. You're a member of your local co-op supermarket, and last week you got to vote for the youth

group to receive some funding from the Members' Local Causes Fund. You also stop by the community larder to drop off some surplus courgettes from your allotment and pick up some bread that has been donated by the bakery instead of being thrown away. You don't have to carry your groceries home – there's a bike co-op which delivers high street purchases to the neighbourhood which helps you leave your car at home.

As you walk past the Town Hall, you spot a group of teenagers talking with the police. They're holding a workshop on how to ensure local young people feel safe locally – a regular meeting now that the Police and Crime Commissioner is measured on how well they involve local communities in decision-making.

At home, you log into a virtual meeting to share ideas on tackling the climate crisis. There will be some new funding available for community initiatives, and the government department is waiting for communities like yours to tell them how much funding you need to hit air quality targets before they announce the funding, as they want to make sure there is enough to go around without places having to compete against each other.

After your dinner, you relax and browse for something to watch. It's easy to stream, because you and your neighbours are members of a broadband co-op which installed fibre in your street a couple of years ago. You pop the heating on – you're not worried because your bills went down again this year. They've reduced annually since you and the other customers voted for your energy company to invest in green gas technology instead of

importing it from private multinationals a few years back and you're reaping the benefits now.

Before bed, you ring your Mum to check in. She's like a new person now that she has a voice in the activities that the care home have to offer – and the quality of care has improved too now that employees receive a decent wage and can elect staff representatives to the board. She's enthused about the new community garden she's set up with other residents; you go to bed happy that her voice is finally being heard.



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