

Staying Power



Young people, wealth and power in Rochdale

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Registered Office: Innovation Forum, 51 Frederick Road, Salford M6 6FP.



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Thanks

Unlimited Potential thanks all of the local people for their participation.

We also thank Lankelly Chase Foundation funding the project and backing 'a people's approach' to wealth and economics, starting from the perspective of people who have directly experienced economic disadvantage.

The logo for Lankelly Chase, featuring the text "Lankelly Chase" in a red, sans-serif font on a white rectangular background.

Summary

Over the course of one year, a small group of young people aged 17-22 from Rochdale came together to think about wealth, the local economy, power, ownership and opportunity. They were a diverse group who brought a range of knowledge and experience.

Rochdale does not face a lack of ambitious young people. It faces the problem that their ambition often requires them to leave. Starting with their own lived experience, young people rejected the idea that their future should be limited by staying in Rochdale.

The young people engaged deeply with economic models when these were connected to real life. A key realisation was that it is not just that many local people lack money, but that they do not own anything.

The group formed their own agenda based on these economic ideas:

- spaces, but not just youth centres
- jobs, but not just any jobs
- funding, but not just short-term projects
- community, but not nostalgia

From their exploration and thinking, the group developed five key recommendations for local agencies:

1. create local futures, not exit routes
2. put real investment into young people's hands
3. build community-owned spaces and enterprises
4. make local economic decisions understandable and accountable
5. share decision-making power with young people

The young people are not asking for Rochdale to become somewhere else. They are asking for Rochdale to become more itself: more caring, more ambitious, more fair, more honest about power, and more willing to invest in the people who already belong there.

Their message is: "Let us help to grow the economy we are expected to live in." That is what it would take for Rochdale to become a place where young people stay, thrive and lead.

Key insights emerging from the project are:

- lived experience is economic knowledge
- participation must move towards power
- growing community wealth must be made tangible
- diversity strengthens economic thinking
- young people should be treated as economic actors, not just service users

1. Context

Over the course of the last year, a small group of young people aged 17-22 from Rochdale came together to think about wealth, the local economy, power, ownership and opportunity. The group included young people with very different experiences of life in Rochdale: living in poverty; caring responsibilities; managing complex personal, family and social circumstances; and seeking asylum.

The work required a process of growing trust, relationships and confidence and of creating a space in which young people could move from talking about their own lives to asking bigger questions about the systems around them.

The work was informed by the idea that the economy is not neutral or fixed but is, in fact, designed through choices or policies. Economic inequality is not simply a social problem, but is rooted in systems that concentrate wealth, capital and decision-making power away from some communities. Essentially, we wanted to get to a point where local people could confidently create an agenda for local economic matters.

For the young people involved, their understanding of the local economy was initially understood through their own lives. It was not about 'fixing' the economy, but instead:

"There's nothing here for us"

"If you want to do well, you leave Rochdale"

The journey of the project became about connecting these bold initial statements from the group into wider questions of power and of control of wealth.

2. The young people

The group was deliberately small, because the work required trust, time and depth. The young people engaged were aged between 17 and 22 and brought a range of lived experiences.

Some young people were living in poverty and financial insecurity where conversations about economy were not unfamiliar at all, but usually came in the form of rent, food, family pressures and constant calculation of what could and could not be afforded.

Some young people had caring responsibilities, meaning their experience of opportunity was shaped by obligations that many professionals and institutions do not always see. For these young people, 'access' was not

just about whether something existed, but whether or not they could take part alongside caring for siblings, parents or relatives.

Some young people were living complex lives, shaped by overlapping pressures around housing, family, mental health, education, work, social isolation or previous negative experiences with services. Others were seeking asylum and navigating the uncertainty of where 'home' was, while feeling excluded from many parts of normal civic and economic life.

This happened because the group did not represent a single Rochdale; they represented different realities. The diversity of the group made the process much richer, but also more delicate. It meant that nurturing the group could not be rushed. Young people arrived with different levels of confidence, different relationships to authority, different experiences of being listened to, and different expectations of what would happen when adults asked for their views.

3. Bringing the group together

The first stage was about trust and safety.

For young people facing poverty, insecure status, caring responsibilities or complex lives, participation is often difficult. It is not enough to invite people into a room and expect them to engage. The conditions have to be created and to be nurtured.

This meant paying attention to:

- practical access: travel, timing, food, working agreements
- emotional access: making the space feel welcoming rather than intimidating
- relational access: growing a good level of trust with one another
- language access: avoiding jargon and allowing people to speak in their own terms
- power access: making it clear that young people were not there to perform gratitude or give nice answers

At the beginning, some young people were quiet. Conversations about local economics are often dominated by professionals and agencies, while local people directly affected by economic disadvantage are excluded or made to feel that these issues are not for them.

4. Starting with lived experience

The first task was to make the economy feel discussable. Not by starting with 'economic models', but by starting with life.

The early sessions focused on questions that felt real:

- what does Rochdale feel like to grow up in?

- where do young people feel most welcome?
- where do they feel most ignored?
- what makes life easier in Rochdale?
- what makes life harder in Rochdale?
- what would make someone stay?
- what makes people feel like they need to leave?

These conversations revealed a strong emotional attachment to Rochdale. Young people spoke about family, food, diversity, culture, familiarity, faith, shared struggle, friendship and the feeling that Rochdale is a place where people know how to look after each other.

However, alongside the pride was frustration. Rochdale was described as a place with love but not enough opportunity. A place with community but not enough power. A place where people survive together but are not always given the tools, resources and investment to thrive as a collective community.

Young people were not rejecting Rochdale, but rather the idea that their future should be limited by staying.

This is important because Rochdale does not face a lack of ambitious young people. It faces the problem that their ambition often requires them to leave.



5. Personal connection to economic questions

Once trust had begun to form, the group started to move from personal reflection into shared analysis. Individual young people:

- talking about the cost of getting to college led to a conversation about transport and access;
- talking about not seeing people like them in good jobs led to a conversation about local employment pathways;
- talking about empty buildings or underused spaces led to a conversation about assets and ownership;
- talking about businesses opening and closing led to a conversation about where money goes and who benefits;
- talking about asylum and exclusion led to a conversation about who is allowed to participate in the economy and who is kept at the edge of it

Slowly, the group began to see that their individual struggles were connected. This was a turning point.

The young people began to understand that the economy was not only about wages, jobs or prices. It was also about:

- who owns buildings
- who controls land
- who decides what gets funded
- who gets trusted with resources
- who has time to participate
- who is seen as 'risky'
- who gets to shape the future of the town

Disadvantaged communities remain economically disempowered because they own little or no wealth or capital, and therefore have limited ability to retain money, control assets or secure investment that benefits them.

For the young people, this became a practical realisation:

**"It's not just that people don't have money.
It's that we don't own anything."**

6. Growing confidence

We first start from valuing lived experience as highly as any other type of experience. From there, young people learned that what they knew from life is a form of expertise. This was especially important for young people who had been made to feel that they were too young, too poor, too busy caring, too complicated or too new to the country to contribute meaningfully.

Secondly, the process slowed down. Economic language can be alienating. Words like 'procurement', 'assets', 'capital', 'inclusive economy' and 'community wealth building' can make people feel shut out before the conversation begins. The process allowed young people to develop their own language first.

Thirdly, the process used conversation rather than teaching. The young people were invited to test ideas, question assumptions and connect examples to their own experience.



Fourthly, the process allowed disagreement. The group members did not always think the same thing. Some were hopeful about Rochdale; others were more cynical. Some believed change was possible; others felt systems would never really listen. These differences were not treated as a problem; they became part of the learning.

By the middle of the project, the group had shifted noticeably. They were not just answering questions, they were also asking their own.

7. Young people creating their own agenda

One of the most important parts of the process was moving away from adult control.

As the group developed their confidence, the agenda increasingly came from the young people themselves. They began to decide what mattered.

Their agenda did not begin with policy categories. It began with things that were important to them:

- having somewhere to go
- having something meaningful to do
- being able to earn and progress
- feeling safe and respected
- being trusted with responsibility
- seeing investment reach local people
- making Rochdale feel alive but safe for young people
- having a say before decisions are already made



From there, the young people began to form more developed economic ideas.

They want spaces, but not just youth centres.

They want spaces that could support enterprise, creativity, advice, culture, food, learning and connection. Spaces that are not just 'provided' for them, but shaped and potentially run by them.

They want jobs, but not just any jobs.

They want pathways into good work, with progression, dignity and local relevance. They want routes into creative industries, care, digital work, green jobs, social enterprise and practical trades.

They want funding, but not just short-term projects.

They want investment that trusts young people to be involved over time. They are sceptical of temporary programmes that disappear just as relationships start to work.

They want community, but not nostalgia.

They love Rochdale's sense of belonging, but do not want 'community' to mean accepting low ambition. They want community to become a source of power, not just comfort.

This is where the project moved from participation to agenda-setting.

8. Young people developing economic ideas

The project revealed that young people can engage deeply with economic models when they connected to real life. They did not need to begin with formal definitions; they needed examples, stories and questions.

Growing community wealth became understandable through talking about money leaving the area.

Young people recognised that money is spent locally but does not always stay local. They understood that external companies, landlords and agencies can benefit from local need without growing local power.

This led to questions such as:

- what would it mean for more money to stay here?
- what would happen if local people owned more local businesses?
- could public organisations buy more from local suppliers?
- could young people be supported to start co-operatives and social enterprises?

Co-operatives became understandable through talking about fairness and shared control.

The idea of a co-operative connected with young people's sense that no single person should hold all the power. It also resonated with their everyday experiences of mutual support: sharing child care, helping family, supporting friends, giving lifts, lending money, passing on information, and translating.

Co-operation was not unfamiliar to them. What was new was seeing it as an economic model.

Community ownership became understandable through talking about buildings and spaces.

Empty, inaccessible or underused spaces in Rochdale became a powerful way to talk about assets.

Young people asked:

- who owns these places?
- why are they empty?
- could we take them over?
- could we run something there?

Essentially, why does regeneration not feel like it belongs to us?



Social enterprise became understandable through talking about purpose.

Young people were interested in businesses that not only make money but also solve problems and do good. They were drawn to the idea that enterprise could be about dignity, culture, care, creativity and local benefit, rather than profit alone.

Democratic decision-making became understandable through talking about being ignored.

Young people were quick to identify the difference between being asked and having power. They had often experienced consultation as something extractive: adults ask questions, take notes, leave, and nothing substantial changes.

Their economic model therefore had to include accountability.

For them, community power meant:

- knowing who decides
- knowing where money goes
- having real choices
- seeing results
- being able to challenge decisions
- not needing to be 'professional' to be taken seriously



9. What changed during the project

The project created change at several levels.

Personal change

Young people became more confident in speaking about place, money and power. Some became more comfortable disagreeing. Some began to see their experience not as a personal failure, but as evidence of wider systems.

For young people facing poverty, caring responsibilities, complex lives or asylum processes, this mattered. It shifted the question

from

“What is wrong with me?”

to

“What is happening around us, and what could change?”

Group change

The group moved from being a collection of individuals to a group of critical allies. They began to listen across difference. They recognised that while their lives were not the same, many of the barriers they faced were connected.

This was especially important because Rochdale's diversity is sometimes portrayed as a challenge. In this project, diversity was a source of so much good. It helped the group to understand that economic power affects people differently depending on class, sex, disability, race, caring responsibilities, family networks, care experience, immigration status and so on.

Political change

The young people began to see themselves as people who could have a say in Rochdale's future.

Not all became optimistic, but many became clearer. They could name what was wrong, what mattered, and what would need to be different.



10. Key insights

Lived experience is economic knowledge

Young people might not use professional language, but they understand insecurity, exclusion, unpaid care, low wages, transport barriers, , migration, lack of space and lack of ownership. These are economic issues.

First-hand lived experience should be recognised as valuable knowledge alongside professional and academic knowledge.

Participation must move towards power

Young people feel tired of being asked for opinions with no visible change. Engagement has to include influence, feedback and accountability.

Growing community wealth must be made tangible

Young people engage with community wealth when it is connected to buildings, jobs, money, businesses, care, culture and survival.

Diversity strengthens economic thinking

The group's diversity meant that the conversation did not settle for one version of 'young people'. It included different realities: poverty, care, family pressure, complex needs, asylum and different relationships to Rochdale.

Young people should be treated as economic actors, not just service users

Young people are not only people to be helped. They are potential founders, workers, carers, organisers, co-operators, campaigners, designers, owners and decision-makers.

11. Recommendations

By the end of the journey, the young people's agenda can be understood through five recommendations for local agencies.

1. Create local futures, not exit routes

Young people should not have to leave Rochdale to imagine success. This means creating visible, supported pathways into good local work, creative industries, digital opportunities, green jobs, care, enterprise and leadership.

2. Put real investment into young people's hands

Young people need access to small-scale funding, mentoring, space and practical long-term support to test ideas.

This should include funding that is flexible, accessible and not overly bureaucratic.

3. Build community-owned spaces and enterprises

Young people need places in Rochdale where they can gather, create, organise, trade, learn and lead.

These spaces should not be delivered for young people. Where possible, they should be co-designed, co-managed or community-owned.



4. Make local economic decisions understandable and accountable

Young people want to know and get transparency about:

- who owns what

- who benefits
- who funds what
- who decides what
- how communities can challenge or influence decisions

Economic power needs to become visible and not hidden.

5. Share decision-making power with young people

Young people should be involved at the agenda-setting stage, not only after plans have already been developed and decisions made.

This means youth-led boards, participatory budgeting, paid leadership roles, community panels, and long-term relationships with local institutions, so that there is real influence over the future of Rochdale.

12. Conclusion: from voice to staying power

The young people involved in the project are not asking for Rochdale to become somewhere else. They are asking for Rochdale to become more itself: more caring, more ambitious, more fair, more honest about power, and more willing to invest in the people who already belong there.

Their message is not simply:

"Give us opportunities."

It is:

"Let us help to grow the economy we are expected to live in."

That is the heart of community wealth. That is the heart of local power. And that is what it would take for Rochdale to become a place where young people stay, thrive and lead.

