



Building a Brighter Future Together

February 2026

Emily Bolton

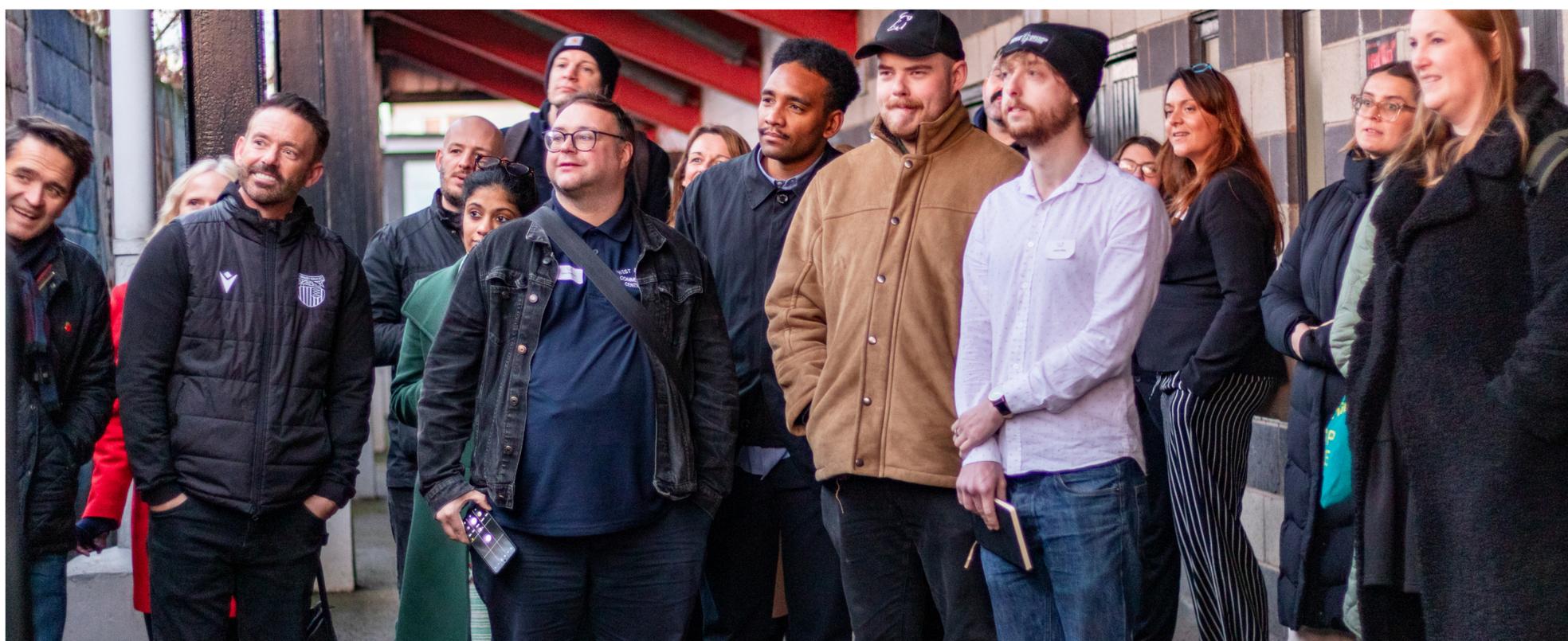
When did we collectively give up our sense of agency, and our responsibility to future generations?

Optimism feels out of fashion right now. It often feels easier, even safer, to assume the future will be worse rather than better.

When did we collectively give up our sense of agency, and our responsibility to future generations? I know a brighter future is possible because I see it taking shape. In Grimsby. In Rochdale. In communities across our country.

This isn't about a new central government programme or a fresh policy initiative. It's about people choosing to take responsibility where they can. Contributing what is within their gift to give. Deciding not to pass their problems on. Choosing to leave something better behind than what they inherited. At Our Future, we work with hundreds of people who are not waiting for permission. They are already building something better. The talent and ambition are not missing. What is often missing is the infrastructure that allows that energy to grow rather than stall.

That is the work we have been doing alongside partners in the towns where we work. Not delivering projects to places, but helping to put in place the conditions that allow people working for the common good to become more than the sum of their parts. To come together. To back one another. To attract resources. To turn shared ambition into lasting change.



The Future We Create Together

Imagine a future where communities feel not just heard, but hopeful. Where people feel backed, connected and able to shape what comes next.

Imagine civic institutions that bring people together in practical, everyday ways. Modern equivalents of colliery clubs or working men's institutes. Places and networks where people debate, imagine and build.

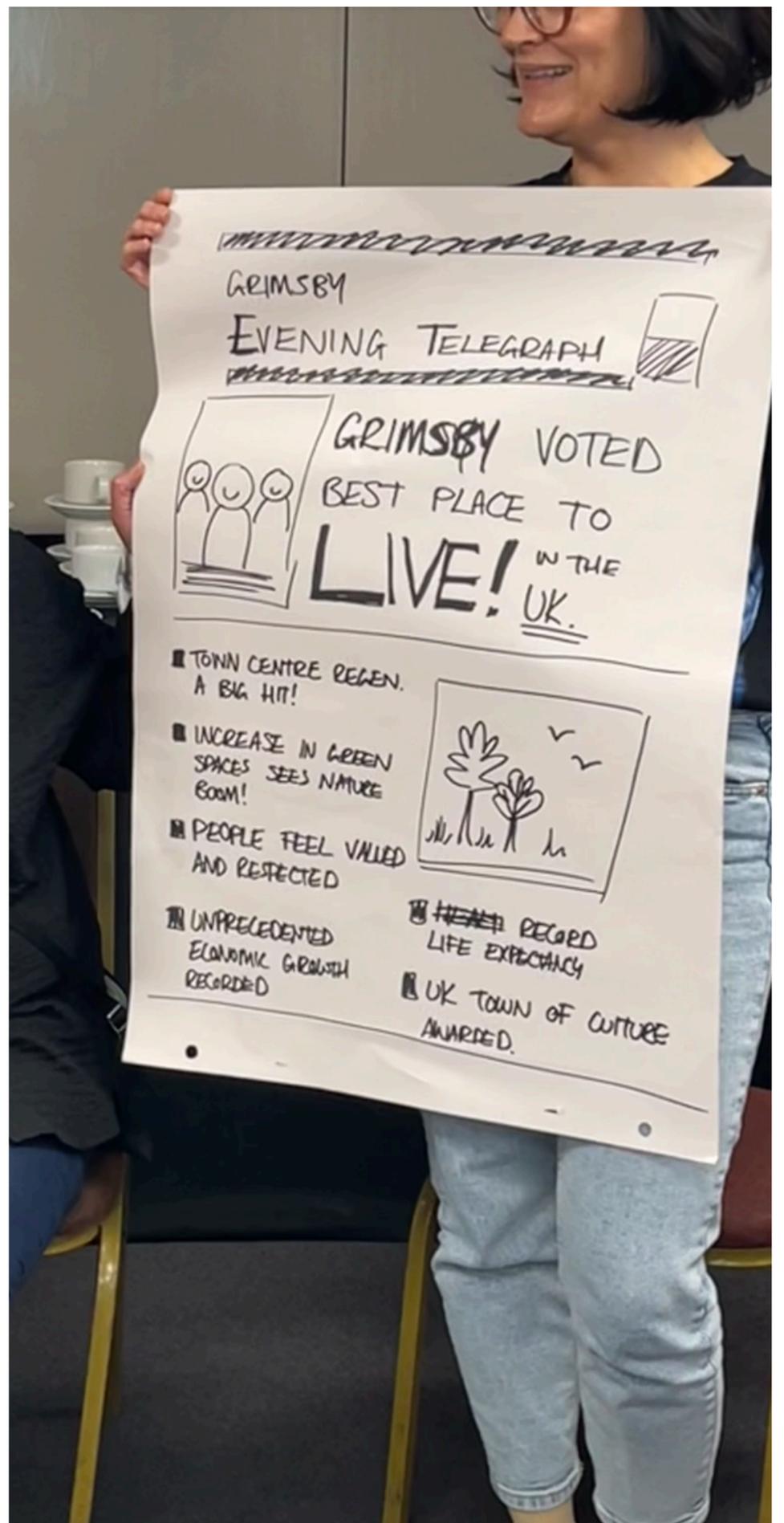
Institutions that amplify local energy, wisdom and aspiration. Institutions that embody the future they are trying to create, rooted in trust, collaboration and shared responsibility.

This is not about writing a new list of what is broken. It is about recognising the potential already present in towns up and down the country and creating the frameworks that allow that potential to flourish.

The future of a place should not be decided in Davos, Westminster or even the Town Hall alone. It should be shaped by the people who live there and love it. It is the next chapter in a place's story, building on history, identity and shared assets.

In the summer of 2024, we worked with citizens across Grimsby, community groups, local businesses, the football club, the council and Demos to shape a ten-year vision for the town. We used Pol.is, a democratic participation tool that allows people to add and test ideas with one another. The invitation to take part was everywhere. On bus stops. In McDonald's deliveries. In places of worship. At the Citizens Advice Bureau. It was a genuinely town-wide conversation. What emerged was joyful, grounded and beautiful: a vision of a thriving place where there are opportunities for children to stay and build their lives; communities are welcoming; the green economy works for the town; arts and nature make life rich and fulfilling; and the history of the town is cherished and carried forwards into the future.

This vision feels *real*. It both seeks to reconnect people to the sea, the town's history and identity, while harnessing the opportunities presented by burgeoning offshore wind to ensure the town is back on the map.



This vision developed in Grimsby aligns closely with what the 80-year Harvard Adult Development study, alongside other evidence, tells us about what makes for a great life and strong community: a sense of belonging, healthy relationships and a shared sense of purpose.

This is not an abstract dream. It is a future imagined collectively, grounded in place and history, and oriented towards people flourishing where they are. It is both locally-directed and firmly rooted in what we know works.

Barriers to Transformation

If this is the future many people want, why does it still feel so hard to realise?

From what we have seen over the past four years, there are recurring blockers.

First, we have lost the habit of, and often spaces for, collaboration. In many places there are simply fewer opportunities to build relationships across difference and imagine what could be possible together. When trust thins out, everything becomes harder.

Second, places are rarely in control of their own destinies. Decisions are often made at a distance. But proximity matters. Without it, local assets are overlooked, identity is flattened and commitment is weak. It is unsurprising so many of us feel powerless.

Third, the stories we tell about places can do real damage. Post-industrial towns are too often portrayed through the lens of decline. When Grimsby talked about applying to be the UK's first Town of Culture, parts of the media chose to mock rather than back the ambition.

Cynicism is contagious, but so is belief. If we want people to do bold things, we need to tell the true stories of what is happening now, not just show architect's drawings of what might happen one day, or (worse) reinforce lazy generalisations of decline.



Fourth, money often works against change rather than for it. Short-term, competitive funding drains energy. Too much energy is spent bidding against neighbours, chasing pots that disappear just as initiatives begin to take root. Funding comes and goes; programmes appear and vanish; people are left wondering why nothing ever seems to stick.

The deeper problem is that our current approach funds projects rather than movements, organisations rather than ecosystems, and short-term activity rather than long-term change. It separates social capital from financial capital, when, in reality, the two need each other. Relationships, trust and shared purpose are just as important as money. Without them, investment rarely delivers lasting impact.

That is why we believe we need to rebuild the infrastructure that sits underneath change. In North East Lincolnshire we are working to do exactly that. Not by importing answers, but by building ecosystems that back people, connect assets, and give places the confidence and capacity to shape their own future.



Institutions that support the change



Our Future's focus has been on infrastructure, though perhaps not as you know it.

Since 2021, we have been working alongside people in North East Lincolnshire to build the foundations that allow ambition to stick. That work has been steady and relational: Convening. Connecting. Bringing national partners alongside local ambition. Creating the conditions where collaboration becomes normal rather than exceptional.

From that experience, three things consistently matter.

A collective of people working for the common good

When people across a place come together around shared purpose and values, something shifts. We see it clearly in North East Lincolnshire. New collaborations are forming across sectors, people are looking beyond their individual roles, and there is a growing sense that the future of the town is something we can shape together.

In Grimsby, this has meant deliberately building a community of people committed to the long-term good of the town. For example, to turn the ten-year vision into a plan, more than 80 people volunteered their time and agreed to a simple charter to work together for the common good. This meant 24 gatherings over four months, setting aside potential competition for money to work in the greater good of the town. That commitment matters. It changes how people show up, how disagreements are handled, and how responsibility is shared.

We've also seen this play out at neighbourhood level. Working alongside residents, the council, the Health and Care Partnership (HCP) and a national funder, we supported the creation of a new kind of community plan in the East Marsh. The plan is now led by people who live there, with institutions backing rather than directing the work. The HCP is now collaborating with other neighbourhoods in the same way – ensuring that the people who live there shape their own priorities and paths forward.

When you create spaces where people can come together to believe and imagine, other things start to follow. In Grimsby this has included the creation of the town's first social enterprise children's home, designed to ensure children in care can stay close to their roots and receive the right support. These initiatives don't emerge from programmes alone. They grow out of trust, relationships, a shared sense of possibility and commitment to your home town.

This is why so much of the work looks deceptively simple: creating spaces for people to connect out of the day-to-day, open-to-anyone lunches for those already getting stuck in, moments of celebration as well as challenge. These relationships become the real infrastructure of change.



Telling a new story about a place

The stories we tell about a place shape what people believe is possible. For too long, post-industrial towns have been described almost entirely through the lens of decline. Changing that doesn't mean pretending challenges don't exist, but it does mean making space for pride, progress and possibility.

In Grimsby, we have contributed to a shared story that reflects what is actually happening. Open House has become an annual moment to bring people together and recognise the change underway. Alongside this, partners like the [2025 Group](#) have been running sustained communications campaigns that highlight real improvements in the town centre and challenge the idea that 'nothing ever changes here'.

What matters is that these stories are sharing the change that is actually happening today. When that happens, confidence grows, ambition feels legitimate again, and people are more willing to invest their energy in the future.



Connecting people to money and resources

None of this works if the money gets in the way. Funding systems have too often been short-term, competitive and extractive, draining energy rather than building capacity. If places are to thrive, resources need to be aligned behind long-term local goals, governed transparently and shaped by the people who have a long-term commitment to the place.

Pride in Place is a central government programme that, in the first phase, has provided £20m to 75 towns including Grimsby. What sets Grimsby apart is how they're leveraging this support into something far larger and longer lasting. In 2025 through citizen engagement there was a collective decision to pool that resource into patient, locally-governed capital to create a legacy institution. This will be a new, citizen-led fund, designed to back local ambition and support delivery of the shared ten-year vision. This is a statement of intent: that the future of the town should be stewarded locally, with wealth circulating for the benefit of the place.

Connecting people to patient, locally accountable capital is not a technical detail. It is a signal of trust in the town and a practical way of turning shared ambition into action.

From our work across places, one thing has become clear. Long-term change does not happen through projects alone. It happens when people have somewhere to come together, and when there is money that backs them to act.

To sustain transformation, places need two simple but powerful forms of infrastructure: a collective of people and a fund that works for them.

Built together we believe these have the power to do something important. They turn individual effort into shared momentum, and shared ambition into real change.



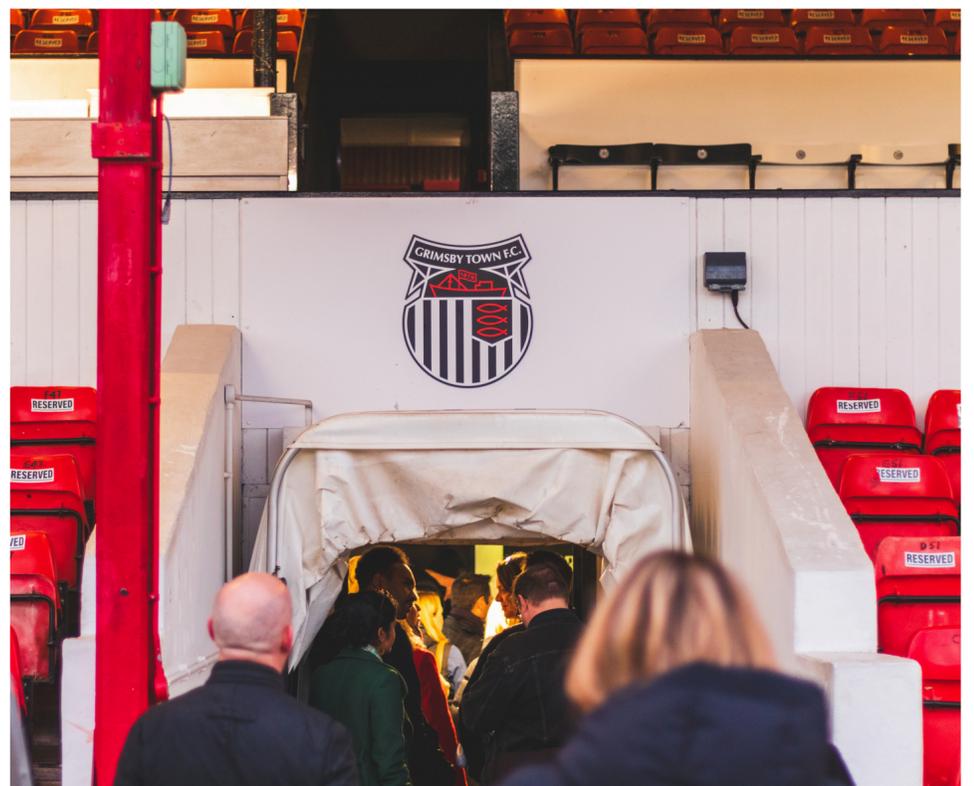
Social Infrastructure

The social infrastructure for change is named and owned by a place, brings together people who care about the long-term future of that place and gives them the space to grow and create relationships and to work together differently. In practice, this looks like regular moments of connection, celebration and shared work – not committees or formal structures, but a living network.

This infrastructure brings together people from all sectors and backgrounds, recognising we all have something to contribute and none of us can do this alone. We see people build trust across sectors, develop a shared sense of direction, and begin to see their individual efforts as part of something bigger. Ideas travel. Collaborations form. Ambition grows.

Sometimes this happens through events or workshops that take people out of the day-to-day. Sometimes it happens through open-to-anyone lunches, shared problem-solving, or public moments that celebrate progress and possibility. What matters is not the format, but the conditions: people feeling welcomed, supported, connected and backed to work for the common good.

Over time, these relationships become the real infrastructure for change.



A Fund for the Place

A Fund is the financial infrastructure that makes this work possible.

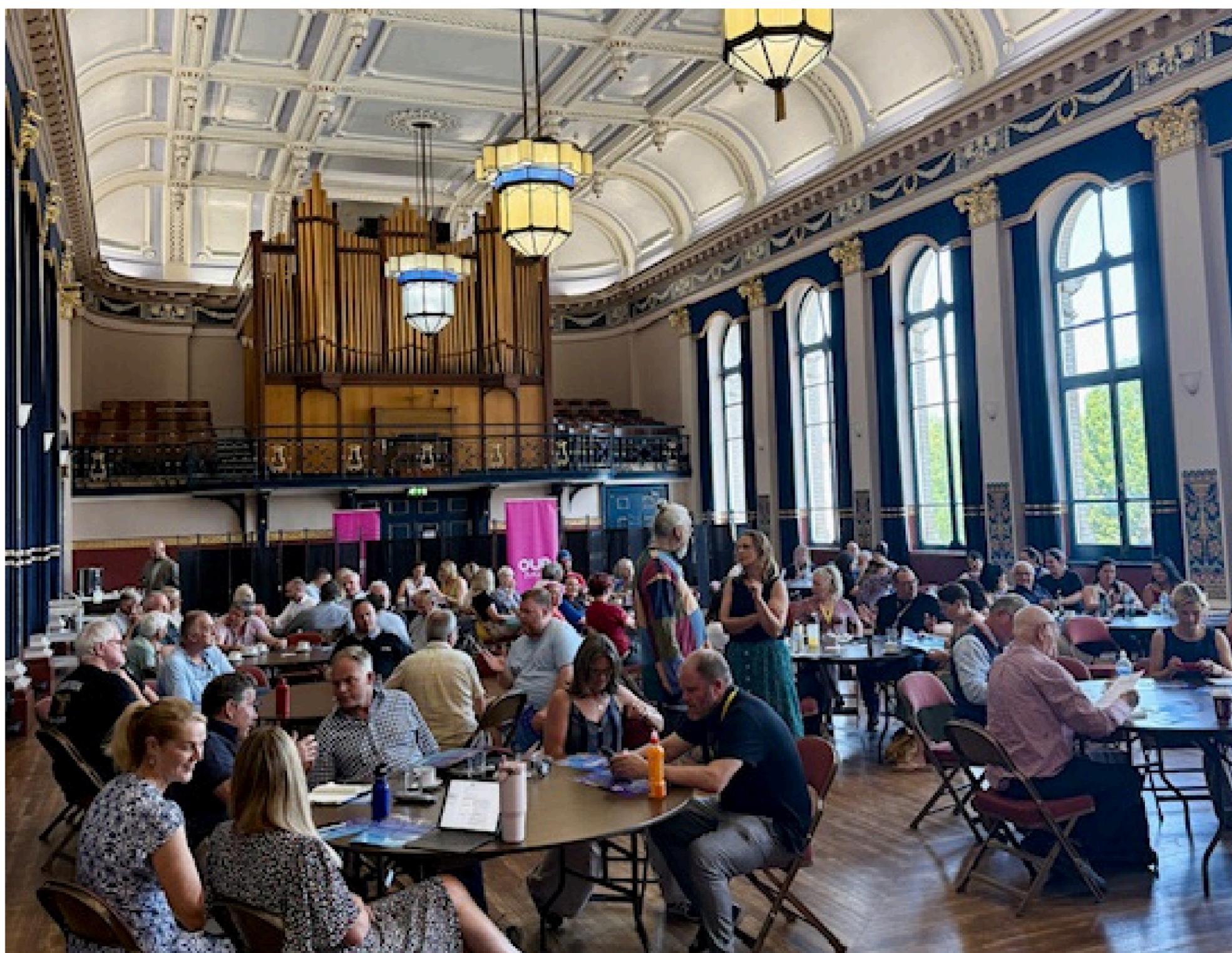
Funding is needed to back local priorities with patient, community-controlled capital. Not short-term project funding, but money that works on the timescale of real change and stays rooted in the place.

The Fund can bring together grants, loans and other funding in a way that supports ideas at different stages, from early experiments to growth and scale. Decisions are shaped locally, through transparent governance, so that money flows towards what the community values, not just what fits external criteria or timescales.

Crucially, the Fund is willing to take risks that traditional funding avoids. It backs people early, learns as it goes, and focuses on building shared assets and circulating wealth locally.

In doing so, it sends a powerful signal, to residents, partners and investors alike, that the place believes in itself and is serious about its future.

The work we are doing during 2026 is to build this fund with citizens so that it backs and enables the collective vision and supports people across the town.



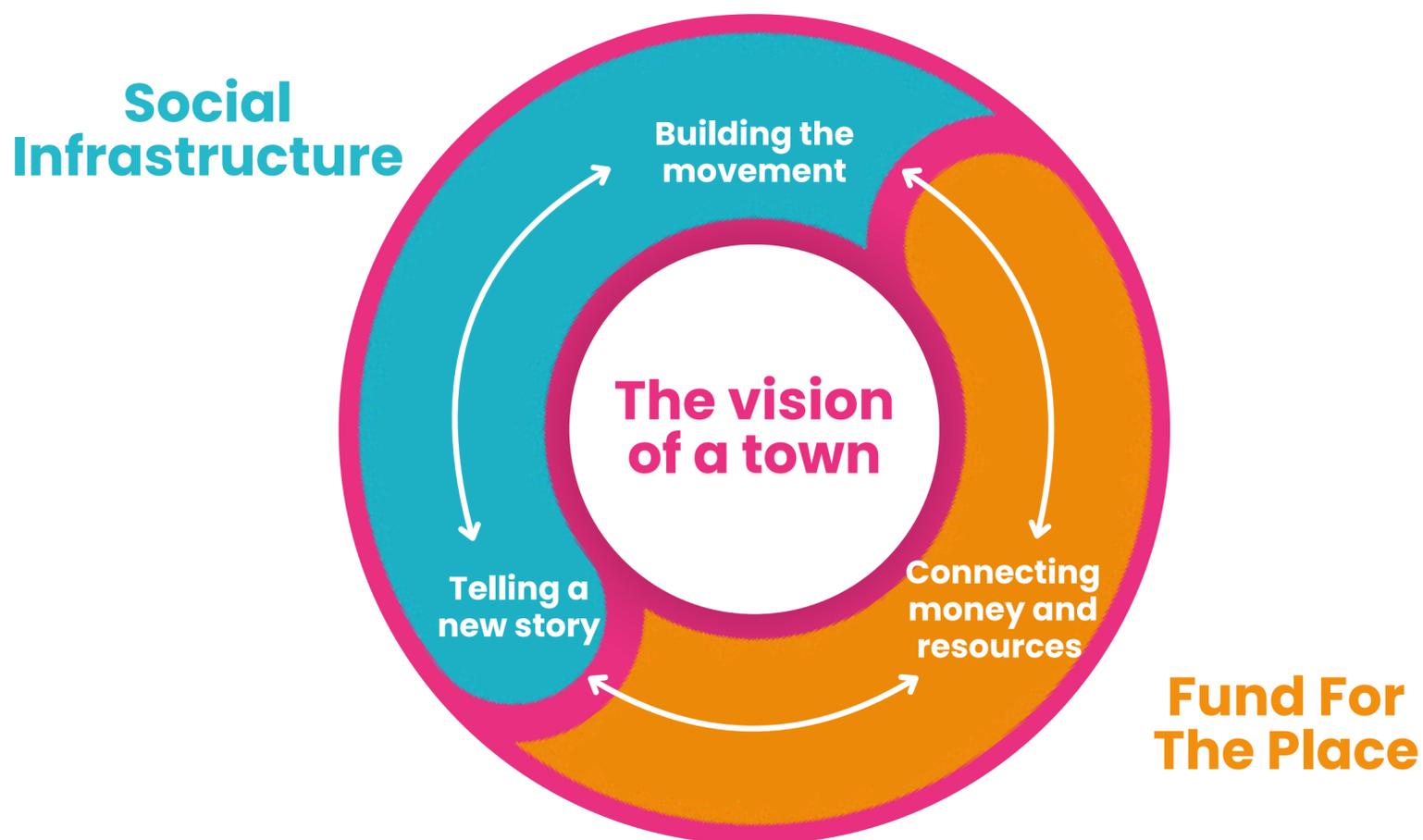
One System, Working Together

As a model, the social infrastructure and fund are fully interlinked. The first builds the social capital that surfaces the community's vision, shapes its ambition, inspires new work and helps people back each other in this work. The Fund provides the financial capital that powers this collective ambition. These are not separate initiatives and each strengthens the other.

Together, they create a reinforcing cycle: strong social capital attracts financial capital; financial capital enables more ambitious collective action; collective action deepens trust and confidence.

This is how places move from dependency to self-determination: from being recipients of support to shapers of their own future.

Our role at Our Future is not to own these institutions or control their direction. It is to help bring them into being, support local leadership, and then step back as confidence, capability and ownership grow.



We are at the foothills of this change, excited by the promise of the work and looking forward to working with many of you in this next chapter. This work is not simple, it requires all of us to work differently. This paper has articulated the 'why' and the 'what' of this work. Critical to it making a difference in the 'how'. We will be sharing our learning on the "how" as we go, over the coming months and years. Please join us in this work, bringing your wisdom, energy and belief.

This is not a blueprint but a living approach. Every community will implement these principles differently, shaped by its unique history, strengths, and aspirations. The future belongs to those willing to reimagine what is possible and to take collective action. By trusting people, aligning resources and maintaining a hopeful, pragmatic vision, we can build communities we are proud to call home.

The future does not have to happen to us. We can create it, together, by reimagining what is possible.

Author: Emily Bolton

Emily Bolton is the CEO and founder of Our Future, an organisation that supports leaders in deindustrialised communities to build a flourishing future. She does this work because it fills her with hope to collaborate with others who are rolling up their sleeves to make the country a better place.

Emily has a long record in social innovation founding or co-founding several organisations and partnerships that have created lasting widespread change. This includes setting up the first Social Impact Bond in Peterborough Prison and The Drive Project which government has scaled as a national response to perpetrators of domestic abuse. She has a deep understanding of the strategic, financial and operational requirements of delivering change both on the ground and systemically.

She was formerly Executive Director and board member at Social Finance, trustee at The Henry Smith Charity one of the UK's largest foundations, trustee at Safe Lives, a national domestic abuse charity and board member of Matthew Bourne's New Adventures, an organisation bringing joy, connection and wonder through dance.

Acknowledgements

This essay is the culmination of many years of both doing and reflecting. In this work I have been inspired by friends and partners from every sector who are rolling up their sleeves and creating the world they want to live in. This learning is very much a collective effort. Most important of all are the Our Future coalitions in NE Lincs and in Rochdale who we work alongside to build a flourishing future, learning along the way. I am so thankful to them for the generosity with their insights, willingness to get stuck in and for their friendship and belief in what could be possible.

The formal and informal Our Future team are central to making all of this happen: Angela Frances, Barbara Wheatley, Ben Robinson, Crystal Ness, David Robinson, Derrick Anderson, Dominic Richardson, Ed Robinson, Florence Miller, James Perry, Jet Powell, Jose Davies, Killian Troy- O'Donovan, Dr Majdi Osman, Lucia Keijer-Palau and Trupti Patel are all bringing their expertise, networks and love.



About Our Future

Our Future is an organisation that unlocks the potential and power of leaders in communities across our country to build a flourishing future.

Our Future believes the people who live in a town are best placed to shape its future. Their role is to back their leadership, connect them to national networks, and create the funding and conditions that make long-term change possible.



An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood, likely in the UK, showing rows of brick houses, streets, and green spaces. The image has a warm, reddish-pink color cast. Overlaid in the center is a large white logo consisting of the word 'OUR' in a stylized, rounded font, with the 'O' and 'R' having a circular cutout, and the word 'future' in a lowercase, sans-serif font below it.

OUR future

www.our-future.io

Photographs: Through My Eyes Photography, by Kelly McLaughlin,
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