

BUILDING A NEW SOCIAL COMMONS

THE PEOPLE, THE COMMONS AND THE
PUBLIC REALM

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SUMMARY

The New Economics Foundation works to build a new economy where people can really take control. To move towards that goal, we have to think about two things: the process of gaining control, and the resources over which people take control.

As part of this work, we draw inspiration from growing movements to claim and control 'the commons'. This refers to resources that are life's necessities. They include:

- **Natural resources:** land, water, air, and sources of energy
- **Cultural resources:** knowledge
- **Economic resources:** funds for investment in the public interest
- **Social resources:** relationships and activities through which we help each other participate and flourish

None of these are simply nice-to-haves. They are the means by which we meet basic human needs. That's why they should never be appropriated by those who have wealth and power, but held in common so that they are accessible to everyone, by right, now and in future.

This paper focuses on the last of these: social resources. We must build the case for a new social commons, and urgently, because we're in danger of losing what we've taken for granted for half a century. The old order of politics, including the post-war welfare settlement, is crumbling.

If we ever thought we had secure access to things like education or health care, housing or income support, that sense of security is seeping away. In the US and across Europe, the rise of populism signals new depths of anger among people who feel betrayed by the powerful and out of control of their lives. If people want to throw out the bathwater of established institutions, we must rescue the baby of pooled resources, collective action and mutual aid.

So this is a good time to claim, value and build the social commons. Our Foundation is committed to enabling people to gain control over life's necessities. The process of 'commoning' reimagines social resources, not as top-down services delivered by the state to the people, but as activities and relationships co-designed and co-produced by lay people and professionals, with control anchored at local level.

We link our vision with movements to claim common rights to natural resources including land, water and energy, which are also life's necessities. The challenge in both cases is to develop appropriate forms of shared ownership and control, forging new relationships between people, the commons and the public realm.

Our proposal recognises the transformative potential of strong, inclusive and shared local action, supported by public institutions that set standards, distribute resources and ensure equitable access. Building a new social commons, we argue, will foster solidarity, social justice and sustainability. It addresses the enduring problems of welfare reform, alongside the challenge of leaving the European Union.

Can we envisage a social commons that people can shape and control collectively, and rely upon for the future? What would it consist of? People themselves must decide. So we propose that it

is shaped through democratic dialogue – with everyday wisdom informed by evidence and expertise, and engaging with elected representatives.

We envisage a statement of shared intent, inspired by a multitude of local initiatives, developed through dialogue and accumulating support and strength over time. The process of claiming the social commons should be inclusive and egalitarian, promote wellbeing for all and aim to meet everyone's basic needs, now and in future. It should include, at least, the means by which we collectively provide education, health and social care, affordable housing, a decent job and a living income for everyone.

Together, these common resources make a huge contribution to household income. Most of us would be destitute if we had to pay for them out of earnings. Without them we cannot hope to flourish. We must claim, control and build them as a matter of right, shared by all, and secure them for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

Our proposition

The New Economics Foundation wants to open a debate about the social commons: what they are, why they matter and how they can be claimed and built. Essentially, the term describes how we act together to help each other by pooling resources and sharing risks, so that we can all meet our needs and flourish – now and in future.

It points to a new deal between people and government, in which we, the people, define and own the social commons, with shared control anchored in local communities and supported by taxation. Equal access, quality and probity are underpinned by law and protected by public institutions.

Crucially, the social commons embodies the *collective ideal* – both in form and in content. It is claimed and built by people acting together, and its benefits are equally accessible to all who need them. This matters because risks as well as privileges are distributed unequally. When certain things happen – such as falling ill, getting flooded at home or losing a job – most of us can't cope on our own. Helping each other by acting together lies at the heart of our vision. It is the key to a fair society where everyone has an equal chance to lead a good life.

Our proposition builds on the radical vision set out in [*People, Planet, Power: towards a new social settlement*](#). We recognise that top-down solutions won't work, and that change must be driven from the local level, inspired by everyday wisdom and experience. We start with the best elements of the post-war welfare settlement, and consider how these can be transformed and extended to meet current and future needs. This is not going to happen overnight. We envisage the social commons evolving through continuing local action and democratic dialogue, steadily transforming relations between people and the public realm. We hope to build a consensus in support of a clear direction of travel – towards a new kind of social endeavour that suits the challenges and conditions of the 21st century.

Why the 'social commons'?

The 'social commons' draws on thinking about natural resources, such as land, air and water, and cultural resources, such as literature, music and knowledge. In both cases it has been

argued that these should be held in common so that they are accessible to everyone and not exclusively owned.

In particular, the concept of ‘*social commons*’ recognises the vital link between natural and social resources. Just as everyone needs land, air and water in order to survive, so everyone needs education, health and social care, housing, decent paid work and an adequate living income in order to participate in society and to flourish. This implies that people have a right to such resources, which can be asserted and defended.

The ‘common’ status doesn’t exist *a priori*, but is achieved through political action and collaborative organisation. Hence the ‘commons’ is both a thing *and* a process.¹ Academic and activist Ugo Mattei puts it this way:

*The commons are not concessions. They are resources that belong to the people as a matter of life necessity. Everybody has a right of an equal share of the commons and must be empowered by law to claim equal and direct access to it. Everybody has equal responsibility to the commons and shares a direct responsibility to transfer its wealth to future generations.*²

‘Commoning’ movements are a contemporary example of people getting together to claim rights to land, water and energy, and to develop appropriate forms of shared ownership and control. Notably, Elinor Ostrom has studied the conditions necessary for effective management of ‘common pool resources’.³

There are lively debates about how far ‘the commons’ and the process of ‘commoning’ represent an ideological alternative to both markets and states, or whether democratic states are themselves held in common by the people and can become a vital support for the commoning process, rather than its antithesis. For us, what matters most is putting people in control of life’s necessities, with equal access for all as a matter of right. This requires a new approach to top-down as well as bottom-up politics, and forging a new relationship between the two.

What’s in this paper?

In this paper we draw on learning from rich intellectual debates about commons, rights, power and citizenship, as well as on practical experience in the UK, the European Union and other countries. We begin by summarising what is distinctive about this call for a new social commons. We consider: why it is urgent now; what could it look like and who would decide; and what are likely to be essential components of the social commons. We end with questions to fuel the coming debate.

WHAT IS DISTINCTIVE ABOUT OUR VISION OF A NEW SOCIAL COMMONS?

- *Forwards not backwards.* We aim to reimagine and build on essential elements of the UK welfare system without being purely defensive. The process and content of building a new social commons are geared to the present and future, not the past.
- *People in control.* The idea of the social commons starts with the ambition of putting people in control, claiming what should be theirs by right, rather than simply receiving (or hoping to receive) public services and benefits.

- *Promoting collective action.* Our proposal gives priority to the collective ideal. This was embodied in the post-war settlement, but has weakened over time. We aim to strengthen our shared capacity for collective action to help and support each other.
- *A common good, shared by all.* The 'social commons' do not represent a safety net or a conditional privilege, but a common good in which everyone has a stake. The value rests on everyone sharing in the benefits, both directly when they need support, and indirectly because this helps to generate a flourishing society and prosperous economy.
- *Shaped through democratic dialogue.* People themselves will decide the purpose and content of the social commons: what it includes and why, and where resources should come from. They will do this through deliberative dialogue that includes local councillors and MPs, bringing together participatory and representative democracy.
- *With the state, not instead of it.* This is about transforming relations between people and the public realm. Public authorities, at national and local levels, have a crucial role to play in facilitating and supporting the social commons. We want to transform them, not side-step or replace them, so that they guarantee shared ownership and equal access, as well as setting standards and managing resources.
- *Flexible and evolving.* The social commons can embrace multiple forms of shared ownership and draw on a range of resources, from locally based voluntary action to national institutions such as the NHS. We envisage a dynamic process where people decide incrementally what they need, then issue declarations of intent, demonstrate what's possible through practical experiment, identify what rights are required, and work out how best to develop and enforce them.
- *Grounded in whole systems.* This approach recognises that social, environmental and cultural resources are not separate but interdependent: they are – or should be – common goods, held in common, for the common good. They are subject to similar claims and expectations.

WHY IS IT URGENT NOW?

The case for claiming and building a social commons has never been more urgent. Far too many people feel dispossessed and betrayed by the established political order. That generates anger and desperation for change. Public institutions no longer inspire much confidence. The collective ideal – which for 60 years has been expressed in terms of public services, funded through taxation, 'for each according to need' – is so closely associated with the old order that it is in danger of being swept up in the general opprobrium. If people want to throw out the bathwater of established institutions, we must rescue the baby of shared risks, pooled resources, collective action and mutual aid. And we must make sure that 'the baby' can survive and thrive today and in future. This calls for a transformation of the ways in which social resources are defined, controlled, supported and secured.

Beyond this political imperative, there are four main reasons why it is urgent to build a new social commons. First, it is an expression of social solidarity and collective action. Secondly, it can support social justice and the reduction of inequalities. Thirdly, it can underpin the development of a secure and sustainable welfare system, able to meet the needs of future as well as present generations. Fourthly, it can help to anchor progressive social policies against the shock of leaving the European Union and the growing appetite for radical disruption.

Solidarity and collective action

In the UK and most mature democracies, public resources, contributed by taxpayers, are used to fund services that are universally available and free at the point of use. By sharing resources and helping each other, through institutions that belong to us all, we make all our lives possible. We are protected from catastrophe when problems beset us that we can't control. The post-war welfare settlement consolidated the model of free, universal services and through the second half of the 20th century the collective approach became the norm. It was a highly redistributive system, because only a few people could afford to buy the whole package privately, while others would struggle to afford most of it and most of us would be unable to afford any of it. As such, it was an expression of social solidarity - a broad understanding that we flourish better together than simply as autonomous individuals. And as a shared, state-level institution, it embodied an inclusive solidarity between different groups and across generations.

This key principle of the post-war settlement has since been overshadowed by notions of individualism and competition associated with an increasingly dominant neoliberal politics. Critics have argued that providing services and benefits through the state undermines people's capacity to fend for themselves and generates a 'culture of dependency'. Others have pointed out that public authorities, however well intentioned, can behave in ways that disempower people and fail to respond to diverse individual needs. It has also been argued – forcefully, but without much supporting evidence – that problems like these can be solved by introducing market rules such as competition for contracts and customer choice.

With strong ideological currents running against it, the collective ideal has grown weaker and the welfare package has shrunk. Hefty portions of the public realm have been contracted out to private corporations whose profit-seeking tendencies are largely incompatible with social solidarity. People who were once legitimate beneficiaries of a system that shared risks and resources have been recast as individual consumers in a quasi-marketplace or – worse – as skivers and scroungers. Since 2009, the government has insisted that 'austerity' – meaning deep cuts in public services – is the only way to build a strong economy. Post-school education is no longer free; adult social care, housing for the homeless, and income support for those who cannot earn have become insecure, highly contingent and stripped down to a minimum. Things we took for granted for half a century are no longer secure.

Meanwhile, public support has been steadily eroded – both by regular experience of failing quality and narrowing accessibility, and by a constant battery of negative messaging, apparently endorsed by all elements of the political establishment.

Many commentators point to the 'resilience' of the public welfare system, especially free schooling and the NHS. It seems unlikely that any government would find it politically viable to abolish welfare services altogether. However, saving schools and hospitals is not enough. A stripped-down, commercialised safety net won't do. What's really at stake here is the character and scope of the collective ideal. Our proposal for building a new social commons is a call to embrace, value and defend that approach: pooling resources, sharing risks, looking after each other, and making sure that every one of us has an equal chance to flourish and participate – not just now, but into the future.

This means transforming the way services and other activities are designed and delivered, re-building from the bottom up and forging new kinds of relationship between people and government.

Social justice and inequality

Not all forms of solidarity and collective action advance the cause of social justice. In some settings, when people get together to share resources and look after each other, they exclude others, by default or intentionally. Those who are better off may be more confident and find it easier to fend for themselves and their own families, friends and networks. These tendencies widen rather than reduce inequalities. Populist politics can bind large groups together, but also lead to scapegoating and intolerance towards minorities. Our vision of a social commons is for everyone on equal terms. Its purpose is to promote social justice and reduce inequalities. This is why we envisage it not simply as a combination of self-generated, locally controlled initiatives, but as a new deal between people and government, which promotes inclusion and equal access.

Social justice is defined in various ways, but we take it to mean that *everyone should have an equal chance to enjoy the essentials of a good life, to fulfil their potential and to participate in society*.⁴ To realise this goal, people must be able to claim things to which they feel they are entitled. Our concept of a social commons therefore embodies an understanding of social rights.

Social justice implies certain liberties, for example, freedom from coercion, unfair discrimination or violence, and being able to vote for representatives in local councils and national parliaments. These are well-established civil and political rights that underpin modern democracies. But as Marshall, Sen and many others have pointed out, they don't amount to much, especially in terms of social justice, unless people also have social and economic resources that render them able to enjoy life, fulfil their potential and participate in society.⁵ This points to a need for positive *social rights* as well as civil and political rights.

There is mounting evidence of widening inequalities, as wealthy elites accumulate political influence as well as resources. Economic inequality in the UK is at dangerously high levels with the richest 1% of the population owning more wealth than the poorest 50% put together.⁶ Households in the bottom 10% of the population have on average a net income of £9,277, while the top 10% have net incomes over nine times that (£83,897).⁷ Most people who have power and resources also have a sense of entitlement to what (they think) they need to live a good life, and they can use their existing assets to make sure they get it – good schools and healthcare, decent homes, rewarding employment, a secure income. Beyond the comfortably well off, any such confidence is either very fragile, or absent altogether. Social justice cannot be achieved when that sense of security is so unevenly distributed.

Collectively provided and funded services that people can rely on amount to a huge cushion against poverty and inequality. They function as a substantial 'virtual' contribution to household income – valuable to all, but especially to those with lower incomes. As Oxfam notes, on average across OECD countries, public services are worth 76% of the post-tax income of the poorest groups, and just 14% of the richest; this 'social' income reduces income inequality by 20%.⁸

'Social security' is often taken to mean income support and of course it is vital for people to have an adequate financial income. But this 'virtual' income is every bit as important. Shared access to collectively provided services and activities, as well as a realisable entitlement and sufficient capacity to utilise them, make it possible for people to participate in society on an equal footing with others. It makes sense of having freedoms in the first place. What is the point of being technically 'free' to do something if you lack the capacity to do it in practice?⁹

Sustainability and security

Next, our proposal addresses the future viability of enabling everyone to participate and flourish. Central to the idea of building a social commons is that it endures *over time* – at least for foreseeable decades (say, 25-50 years). It is not a thing given to people by governments, which can also be taken away, but a process of claiming, controlling and setting in motion a system that evolves through continuing democratic dialogue and design. As we have noted, our vision of a social commons is linked with the concept of the ‘commons’ as natural resources, including land, water, air and energy, which are increasingly the focus of movements claiming rights of shared ownership and democratic control.¹⁰

Sustainable development has been defined as meeting ‘the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.¹¹ It indicates a shared understanding (to the best of our current knowledge) of rights or entitlements that are not only important now, but can endure in the longer term and – crucially – within the resources of a finite planet. The principles of sustainable development challenge an underlying assumption of the post-war settlement, which was that the economy would continue to grow and expand, taking no account of planetary boundaries. This can’t go on. The social commons must be sustainable.

The overwhelming weight of scientific evidence shows that if the last decade’s trends in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions continue, they will lead to a perilous rise in global average temperatures – well beyond the goal of 2° centigrade set by the 2015 Paris Agreement, let alone its more ambitious target of 1.5°.¹² Calculations of the ecological footprint, which measures the pressure of human production, consumption, and waste on finite natural resources, find that the global footprint needs one and a half planets to support current activities, or three and a half planets if everyone were to live like the average US citizen. The Stockholm Resilience Centre warns that the exponential growth of human activities could trigger ‘abrupt or irreversible environmental changes’ that are potentially ‘catastrophic for human wellbeing’.¹³ No wonder this has been described as ‘the single most important challenge facing society today’.¹⁴

There are three main ways in which the process of building a new social commons could contribute to a sustainable system for human flourishing: by helping to reduce emissions and resource-intensive consumption, by improving value for money provided by services and by preventing further escalations of need.

Moving to a low-carbon (or zero-carbon) economy that uses natural resources sustainably calls for very substantial changes in patterns of consumption, both by individuals and households, and by organisations. Inequalities help to drive up resource-intensive consumption. Not only do those on high incomes consume more than their fair share of planetary resources, but the consumption habits of the better-off drive up aspirations among lower-income groups and generate resource-intensive living standards that come to be seen as ‘normal’.¹⁵ Our proposal aims to reduce inequalities and to promote solidarity and inclusion. There is evidence that more equal and inclusive societies are better able to achieve carbon reduction and avoid depletion of natural resources.¹⁶

Second, publicly funded services that are provided collectively through democratic institutions generally give better value for money than for-profit services *and* have lower emissions, as comparisons of the UK and US healthcare systems regularly demonstrate. A recent analysis of

US experience in the *British Medical Journal* found that market forces drove up prices at the expense of inclusiveness and quality, with significant transaction costs incurred through billing and marketing functions, and inflated salaries of senior personnel. The authors concluded that evidence from the US ‘should warn other nations from the path.’¹⁷ The NHS, for all its flaws, remains an example of public sector efficiency, with healthcare in the UK costing half as much per capita as it does in the US. As a result it achieves equal or better results in terms of healthy life expectancy and patient satisfaction *and* its direct carbon emissions account for less than half the share of those recorded in the US.¹⁸ Other services have also been found to deliver better value for money in public rather than private hands.

A third key aim of our proposal is to promote services and other activities that prevent problems (such as chronic health conditions, social isolation, unemployment or anti-social behaviour), rather than coping with the consequences. As the New Economics Foundation has argued elsewhere, this can not only improve people’s quality of life but also reduce demand for services over time as well as the ecological footprint.¹⁹ Services that are forged through dialogue and in the public interest are more likely to give priority to this prevention agenda than commercial services, which tend to put short-term shareholders’ interests before the longer-term requirements of communities

A system that can deliver more and better services for the same or less money will be essential for a sustainable economy – where success is measured not by growth, but by the capacity to support a flourishing society within planetary boundaries.

Brexit and the growing appetite for radical disruption

The rise of populism across Europe and the US is fuelled by anger and despair among people who feel betrayed and excluded, who want to overturn a system that seems to be run by powerful elites for their own benefit. In the UK, people voted to leave the European Union because they felt it was not in their interests to belong to it, and they could not control it. Our proposal aims to focus the growing appetite for radical disruption on dialogue, shared control and social justice, rather than on plebiscite, intolerance and isolationism.

The Brexit vote makes the case for building a new social commons all the more urgent, because, as we have noted, there is a danger of throwing the collective baby out with the bathwater of established institutions. Of course, the EU grew out of a free trade agreement; but it developed over more than half a century a new vision of transnational citizenship that conferred on Europeans a range of shared social and economic entitlements. With no written constitution, and without EU membership, people in the UK will be left with a more fragile and tenuous set of expectations about how public institutions will meet their needs and protect them from harm. The point is not to reinstate the pre-Brexit *status quo*, but to reclaim social benefits that derive, directly or indirectly, from EU membership.

EU directives in the social field cover –among much else – equal pay and equal treatment for women and men, discrimination on grounds of race and ethnicity, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation; parental leave and working hours; sexual harassment; health and safety at work; education of the children of migrant workers; and a range of provisions supporting free movement across the European Union. Countries belonging to the EU have been required to follow these directives, with details of implementation determined at national level and varying between member states.

These measures would not be swept away by Britain leaving the EU, as most have been incorporated into national legislation. But any future UK government would have no external restraint if it chose to dilute or abolish any EU-backed laws or regulations. Nor would it be under any external pressure to improve or extend its welfare system, by virtue of belonging to group of nations with a shared commitment to 'improving the social protection and freedom from discrimination required to ensure a better quality of life for citizens and residents.'²⁰

Through successive treaties, directives and declarations of principle and intent, as well as through strategic funding, the EU has achieved more than a range of rights for workers: it has created a climate of opinion and built a political consensus in favour of enhancing and protecting the quality of people's daily lives. The primary purpose was to strengthen Europe's economy, but over time, the social means have come to matter almost as much as the economic ends, and have gathered a momentum of their own.

The UK remains (until 'Brexit' is implemented) part of a Union of nations that are, by a very large majority, committed to a shared set of rights. This commitment is expressed not just through national governments and EU funding, but through dialogue between civil society organisations, across member states, that is encouraged and supported by the EU. It includes formalised dialogue with trade unions and business representatives, as well as less formal support for dialogue between a wider range of non-government organisations, for example through the Platform of European Social NGOs. This enables civil society organisations to meet each other and develop common policy positions, and to lobby their own governments accordingly.

However rigid and rule-bound Brussels may be, however jagged and contested lines of convergence have become, the EU has played a vital role in building peer-group pressure, across governments and civil society, in favour of progressive social policies. Our proposal seeks to build a shared commitment to the principle of equal access to social resources, including protections and benefits that developed through the UK's membership of the European Union.

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE AND WHO SHOULD DECIDE?

We envisage a new social commons being built incrementally. It could begin with an expression of shared intent that could gather support over time so that the idea and its practical implications become 'normal', with a consensus in favour of strong institutional underpinning. First and foremost, however, it depends on widespread public and political support, so we propose that the scope and structure of a new social commons are shaped through democratic dialogue.

An expression of shared intent with accumulating force

The process of claiming and building the social commons would, in the first instance, be a powerful expression of what people living in the UK and participating in society should expect in order to flourish. As such, it is a way of building a political consensus in favour of protections and benefits shared by all. It can be a touchstone for local activists, campaigners and progressive policy-makers. It can inspire innovation and practical change – locally and nationally. It can

raise public awareness, invite scrutiny and debate, and act as a first-line defence against encroachment.

However, an expression of shared intent is neither practically realisable nor technically enforceable until it is securely resourced and underpinned by legislation. Our vision of a social commons therefore implies a range of linked rights and entitlements shared by all. In generic terms, these would include '*negative*' *rights or freedoms*, such as the right to protection from unfair treatment on grounds of gender or ethnicity, as well as *political rights* to participate in decisions about shaping and allocating services and benefits. These are established in UK law, although often limited in practice.

At the same time, crucially, a social commons would embrace '*positive*' or '*synthetic*' *rights* to services and resources: these are not well-established in UK law, but they are vital because they make it possible to participate fully in society. It would also include '*procedural rights*', that is, systems and protocols that enable people to know and claim what they are entitled to by means that are fair, accessible, timely and affordable. These are essential for a social commons that is shared by everyone on equal terms: they are the means by which people take control of the very things that enable them to participate fully in society.

We envisage, then, that the latter two categories would be key institutional underpinnings for building the social commons: entitlements to services and resources, and to procedures for appropriate and equitable access. This begs the question of how things that are claimed can acquire the force of law.

EU experience, noted above, suggests how 'soft law' can lay foundations for political negotiations that in turn lead – incrementally – to legislation, regulation and practical provision to realise its intent. In addition, some EU member states have enshrined social entitlements in their constitutions. For example Finland's constitution 'guarantees economic, social and cultural (ESC) rights', such as the right to work, education, indispensable subsistence and care, social security and adequate social, health and medical services, which the authorities are required to guarantee and promote.²¹ The Swedish constitution declares: "It shall be incumbent upon the public institutions to secure the right to health, employment, housing and education, and to promote social care and social security."²² The Belgian constitution declares that 'Everyone has the right to lead a life in keeping with human dignity' and binds most laws and regulations to 'guarantee economic, social and cultural rights', which include fair employment and pay, healthcare, housing, social security, the protection of a healthy environment and the right to cultural and social fulfilment.²³

We can be cynical about the distance between what's written in a constitution and what happens in practice, but declarations of this kind set out what is *agreed to be desirable*. As such they can serve as a touchstone and support for progressive policy makers, local initiatives and social movements.

The UK does not have a written constitution. The 1998 UK Human Rights Act (HRA) incorporates the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law and includes a range of measures to protect civil and political freedoms. The nearest it gets to a positive right is the right to education (Article 2, Protocol 1), although this does not require any new or different provision, simply establishing a right of access to what is already there. The Act suggests how the kind of intent expressed in the Finnish, Swedish and Belgian constitutions could be given

legal status, with detailed implementation devolved to democratically controlled public authorities at different levels. The Conservative government announced plans in 2016 to replace the Act with a new British Bill of Rights, but it remains uncertain what this would entail or how far, if at all, it would serve to promote or extend social rights.

Shaped through dialogue

The structure and content of a new social commons would be determined through democratic dialogue. This is a key feature of our proposal. While we expect it to embrace essential elements described below, we suggest that the detail of how this is achieved – the extent and character of provision – is a matter for public debate.


The precise form of the dialogue should itself be subject to wider discussion and we don't intend to prescribe it here. To give it the best possible chance of success, we would favour a process that ranges from the local to the national, bringing together formal expertise and evidence, everyday experience and wisdom, and political negotiation. Indeed, the social commons would need to be *co-produced* by those who lay claim to it and inspired by countless local initiatives where people are already deciding what they need and taking action accordingly. Crucially, the process must be inclusive, reaching out and engaging disadvantaged and marginalised groups. This is a significant challenge, but experience shows it can be done, with methods designed for the purpose.²⁴

We envisage a dialogue that combines lay people along with professionals (in service delivery, for example) and other experts, and with democratically elected representatives. It would thus combine elements of participatory and representative democracy, rather than forms of direct democracy or plebiscite.

The dialogue would be informed by the best available evidence, but not enslaved by it: this is a bold innovation that requires imagination and even risk-taking. Some 'experts' will say that it can't be done, or it won't amount to much, or that there are insufficient data to support the case, but in the end it is a political process to be undertaken by and for people whose lives and futures will be affected by it. And because it eventually requires buy-in from those who control public budgets, it cannot – without profoundly altering prevailing arrangements in the UK – float above real politics, but needs to be knitted into formal systems of decision-making, by involving elected representatives.

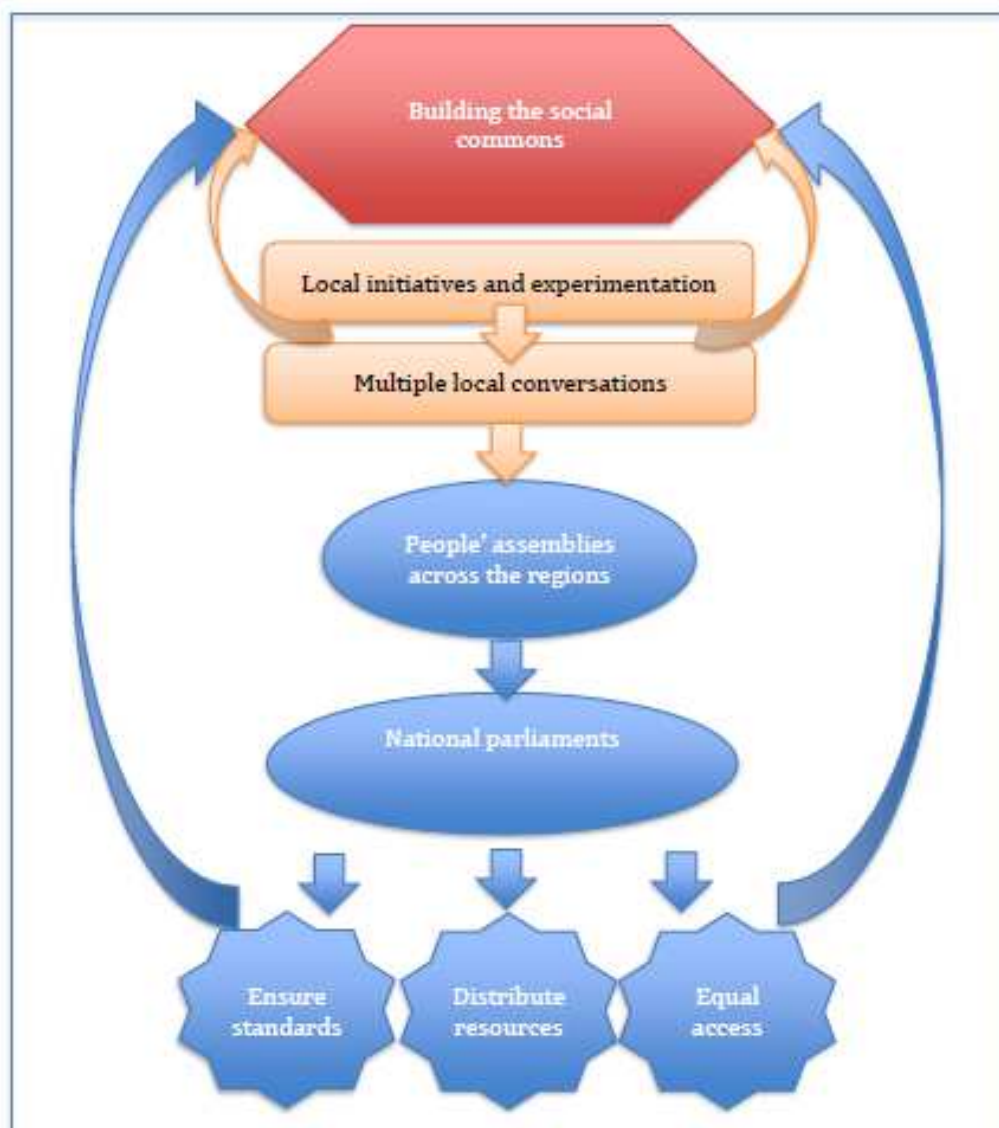
The main mechanism for dialogue could be a spread of people's assemblies (or citizens' forums or juries) across the UK, where lay members consider evidence and discuss relevant questions with experts, as well as amongst themselves. Their deliberations would be informed by a wider range of local discussions; their findings would be presented to and negotiated with councillors and parliamentarians, aiming to arrive at a broad consensus.

The model of a constitutional convention could be adapted for the purpose. The New Economics Foundation and others have proposed this as a mechanism for opening up a debate on devolution. It is described as 'a process for involving members of the public in making decisions', where they are usually selected in order to give a representative sample of people from across a geographical area in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, class and other characteristics. The model provides 'opportunities to consider expert opinion and evidence, as well as time for personal reflection, deliberation, and discussion', and concluding by 'making recommendations through consensus decision-making'.²⁵ We can learn from practical experience in the UK, such



as the Scottish Constitutional Convention, which paved the way for the creation of the Scottish Constitution, and from other countries including Ireland, Iceland, Canada and the Netherlands.²⁶ We can learn from Common Weal's wide range of suggestions for open, inclusive, democratic decision-making.²⁷

The diagram below suggests how locally-generated initiatives and multiple local conversations could feed into people's assemblies at regional level, which would in turn inform and shape parliamentary action to facilitate and support the process of building the social commons across the country. Control is anchored locally. Decisions about local needs and ways of meeting them are generated through deliberative dialogue, with local conversations informing people's assemblies. Resources are distributed, standards set and rights of equal access are ensured through legislation and public institutions. The state works with and for the people to enable us all to work together, share risks and pool resources, in order to claim, build and secure access to life's necessities.



WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIAL FEATURES?

As an opening contribution to the dialogue, we propose that the social commons would have certain key features regarding its reach and scope: who is intended to benefit: and broadly what should it cover and why.

Who will benefit?

We propose that all who live in the UK would have a stake in the social commons: as we have said, it is for everyone, on equal terms. Whether there should be conditions attached to certain benefits is a matter for public debate and there are undoubtedly trade-offs between promoting unconditional universal access and winning broad support. It may be decided that access to some components should be qualified, for example, by specific needs and/or by certain kinds of contribution.

It is worth considering Atkinson's suggestion of entitlement based on participation. This can be broadly defined as making a social contribution – for example by full or part time waged employment or self-employment, by education, training or active job search, by home care for children or the elderly or disabled, or by regular voluntary work in a recognised association, or a portfolio of activities equalling around 35 hours per week.²⁸ This marks an important departure from the idea of entitlement by means of formal citizenship, which excludes non-nationals, even when they are active participants, and tends to exacerbate rather than reduce inequalities.

The concept of the participating resident acknowledges, firstly, the fact that qualification does not depend on being a wage earner, secondly that people not in paid employment (and many who are) make a hugely valuable contribution – largely overlooked – to society and to the formal economy through unpaid and reproductive work (what the New Economics Foundation calls the 'core economy'²⁹) and, thirdly, the substantial contribution, not least in terms of tax, made by non-British nationals living in the UK. However, people who are *not* making a contribution may be among those most in need of support – for example, people with severe disabilities: this must be taken into account.

We should also distance our approach from the notion of the consumer-citizen that emerged in the early 1990s and featured in the Citizen's Charter introduced by John Major's government. This cast the citizen as an individual service user, seeking product quality in various personal capacities (as passenger, traveller, parent, jobseeker, tenant, patient etc.).³⁰ Where the Citizen's Charter sought to improve standards of customer care, our proposal for a social commons aims to promote local control, reduce inequalities, strengthen social solidarity and promote a collective model of sharing risks and resources.

We see this as a move towards a reimagined social citizenship, based on plural identities and rights conferred on residents rather than on passport-holders. Who's included should be determined through dialogue, but no qualifying criteria should be accepted that would have the effect of widening socio-economic inequalities.

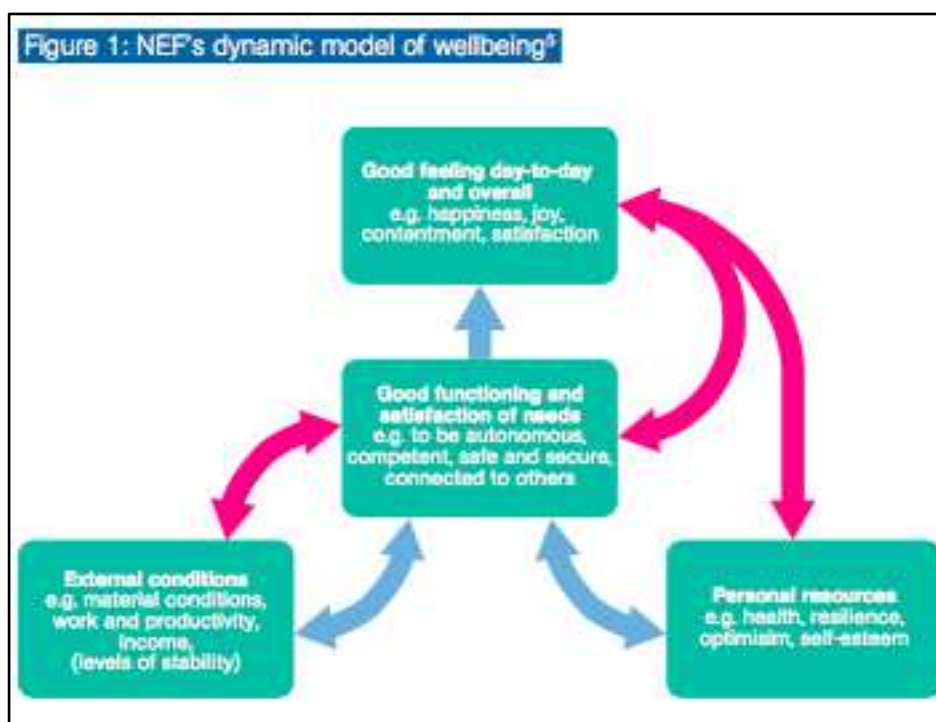
Broadly, what should be the scope of the social commons, and why?

We propose a social commons that consists of a range of collectively resourced and provided services and benefits – as well as other activities and facilities – which enable people to have an equal chance to flourish. As noted above, the detailed structure and content should be

determined through democratic dialogue. Here, we offer ways of thinking about key concepts likely to feature in that dialogue.

Guiding principles. We have set out what we consider to be the main reasons for introducing a new social commons: solidarity and collective action; social justice and equality; and sustainability and security. These serve as guiding principles. The social commons should, we argue, foster collective means of sharing risks and resources, serve to reduce inequalities, and promote sustainable ways of meeting needs now and in future.

Wellbeing. The New Economics Foundation's dynamic model of wellbeing can help us think through the concept of 'flourishing'. Wellbeing can be understood as the state produced when people lead a good life, i.e., when they *function* well, on both a personal and a social level. Functioning well depends on the satisfaction of physical as well as psychological needs, which in turn depends on external conditions such as income, housing, education, on social relationships and connectedness, and on personal resources, such as physical health and degrees of optimism. The factors that contribute to wellbeing interact dynamically, so that they can reinforce each other, as the figure below illustrates.



Need Theory. Another, related, analytical tool is offered by need theory, since wellbeing depends on people's needs being met. According to Doyal and Gough, every individual has certain basic needs that enable them to participate in the world around them. These are defined as social participation, health and autonomy. How they are met will vary – often widely – between countries and over time. However, certain things (known as 'generic satisfiers') are universal and unchanging – including adequate housing, healthcare and education, a safe physical and work environment, a secure childhood, significant primary relationships, and physical and economic security. Need theory offers objective, evidence-based, and philosophically grounded criteria to guide decisions, and provides a basis for understanding what future as well as present generations will need.³¹ Works by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on human capabilities,

and by Manfred Max-Neef on human scale development and fundamental needs are also relevant and overlap with this approach.

The 'Five Giants'. What it takes to flourish inevitably changes over time, but the 'five giants' of the Beveridge Report (Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness) are a useful benchmark. Along with major challenges to have emerged in recent years – widening inequalities and growing insecurity, not least from the threat of catastrophic climate change – they point to essential conditions that the New Economics Foundation and others have identified for achieving wellbeing and meeting basic needs. The post-war welfare state was supposed to vanquish them and yet they still loom large. Income support, health and social care, education, housing and employment could therefore constitute basic elements of a social commons. But this is merely a starting point for dialogue: they need not limit the scope of it.

Where will the necessary resources come from?

We envisage a social commons that is funded mainly through taxation. This is not a proposal for massive hikes in public spending, but for transforming the way we understand, design, deliver and control the things that make it possible for us to participate in society and to flourish. We want to shift investment and action upstream to support 'early action' that helps to prevent problems arising or becoming more acute – which can not only improve the quality of people's lives, but also curb future expenditure. We want to build on assets that already exist in people's everyday lives and relationships (time, energy, wisdom, love, care, creativity and so forth), because we are convinced that this will greatly expand the pool of resources needed for the social commons. But it must be seen as adding to, but not substituting for, public funds raised through taxation.

It is certainly possible to find more money for social provision, by raising taxes and cracking down on tax avoidance, for example. Sovereign wealth funds could be another promising source of funds. But public resources are urgently needed for developing renewable energy, cutting emissions and strengthening 'green' infrastructure. So we would rather build a social commons that uses collective resources more wisely, instead of one that calls for more and more.

Services and income: getting the balance right

We envisage the central focus of the social commons being equitable access to collectively provided services, activities and resources, because these are what make it possible for people to enjoy civic freedoms and political rights, to meet their needs and to flourish as fully participating members of society. In this section, we briefly consider the relationship between collective activities, including services, on the one hand, and income support on the other.

Collective activities as 'virtual income'

In particular, we want to focus on collectively provided activities (which includes not only traditional public services, but also a wide range of activities through which people help each other.) There are three main reasons for this primary focus on activities rather than on money. Firstly, as we have noted, they make up a very substantial 'virtual' income that is highly redistributive and provides a crucial defence against hard times, especially for those in lower income groups.

Secondly, collectively provided activities offer the best hope for developing a welfare system that is both effective and sustainable over the longer term. As evidence mounts that market-based

‘solutions’ tend to make matters worse, driving up costs and widening inequalities, we urgently need better strategies for meeting people’s needs and aspirations. We are not seeking to save the welfare state, but to transform the whole system so that the people who need it are really in control of it and it serves to narrow inequalities.

This is where the potential of co-production can be realised, so that services are designed and delivered *with* those who are intended to benefit from them, not simply provided *to* them by professionals. Co-production taps into human and social assets that are always present in people’s everyday lives and relationships, expanding the resources that can be used to meet needs. In place of the post-war system, where top-down services focused mainly on treatment and cure, and relied on a growing economy to remain viable, co-production can form the basis of a more flexible, creative and sustainable system that shares power, uses resources more wisely, and breaks down barriers between groups who used to be described as ‘providers’ and ‘users’.³² It only works well if it really is for everyone, not just those with deeper pockets and sharper elbows. At its best, co-production broadens and enriches the collective approach, through which we pool resources, share risks and help each other to flourish.

Thirdly, this approach helps to bind people together and to build resourceful communities; the more that services are localised and co-produced, the greater the effect. Connected, resourceful communities have been identified as central to local preventative strategies: these are designed to shift the balance of investment and action from coping with avoidable problems (such as chronic health conditions and social isolation) to preventing those problems from occurring in the first place. Successful early action has the double advantage of improving people’s quality of life and reducing public spending on costly curative interventions.³³ More broadly, the New Economics Foundation argues that the collective approach holds the key to democratic renewal, transforming local economies, and enabling people to take control of their lives and circumstances.³⁴

Income as money

Questions about how to ensure that people have enough money should, in our view, be set against this background. Certainly no-one should be allowed to fall below a broadly acceptable minimum. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s work to determine – through public dialogue – a Minimum Income Standard (MIS) is helpful. For 2016 they found that ‘single people need to earn at least £17,100 a year before tax to achieve the MIS, and couples with two children at least £18,900 each.’³⁵ The JRF has also supported work to explore how far changes to ‘greener’ forms of consumption may be seen by the public as compatible with preserving a minimum acceptable standard of living, using MIS as a baseline. In this exercise, researchers identified areas where changing behaviour could substantially reduce carbon emissions; they found that people whom they engaged in dialogue were reluctant to change diet or modes of travel, but were willing to reduce the amount of heat and power they used at home.³⁶ Such attitudes may change over time. For the longer term, the challenge is to decide how much money people need to live to a standard that is both acceptable *and* sustainable. In the meantime, an entitlement to income consistent with the MIS should be our goal.

The New Economics Foundation has set out proposals elsewhere for reform of the social security system. These emphasise a rounded, preventative approach, linked to a higher living wage and addressing the system as a whole as well as the whole individual, and encompassing much more than transfers of money. They are summarized in the table below.³⁷ We support Atkinson’s

proposal for Child Benefit to be raised to a rate that is sufficient to ‘make a significant contribution to reducing child poverty’, and to be subject to taxation.³⁸ It is also worth considering time banking principles to enable people who care for others to earn credits that can be redeemed as pension contributions. The main point we want to make here is that it is not enough to think about how much money should be received by whom. This must be part of a rounded approach to system change. Access to employment with rights to decent pay and conditions is just as important as income support for those who cannot earn and should be seen as part of the social commons (although beyond the scope of this paper).

Component	Policy priority
Create the conditions for security	Tackle inequality across the board – with affordable childcare, fairer pay and investment in well-designed new jobs
Invest in upstream benefits	Open up access to benefits which intervene before harm occurs such as Child Benefit and support for staying in education and progressing in work
Inclusive participation	Support paid and unpaid labour through social security and in Jobcentre arrangements
Tackle labour market in the round	Ensure the right sorts of employment are actually available, through investment in ‘good jobs’
Co-produced support	Transform Jobcentres so they are more transparent institutions, rooted in the local area and providing meaningful support that people want to access
Democratic dialogue and decision-making	Give people more direct say in social security policy – at the level of Jobcentres, regions and nationally

Several groups are proposing a universal basic income (UBI) as the foundation of a new social security system. This would be an unconditional payment made to everyone. The proposal has some strong appeal, especially among economists, as it seems simple, calculable and apparently radical. It has enthusiastic supporters on the right and the left of the political spectrum.

In theory, a universal basic income would create rights-based social security, altering the logic of the system and ascribing a different meaning to benefits by providing them as a right for all. In theory again, it could support unpaid activities: with a guaranteed income, people could feel able to spend more time on unpaid activities, such as care and local collaboration, making a contribution to the core economy. By guaranteeing a minimum income, it could help tackle the withdrawal effect of losing unemployment-related benefits (however incrementally) when starting a job.³⁹ It entails no official enquiries into a person’s activities, household arrangements, or level of wealth, compared with present-day means-tested benefits.

When it comes to putting theory into practice, however, the idea has weaknesses and even its protagonists describe it as a ‘mightily difficult political sell’.⁴⁰ First and foremost, all citizen

income schemes are either inadequate or unaffordable. A full citizen's income providing every person with an adequate income at least at current levels would cost a huge fraction of national income.⁴¹ As a strong indication that the idea is impracticable, it is worth noting that almost *all* existing proposals envisage a partial income well below the poverty line (at which level advocates claim that costs can be covered by withdrawing other benefits and tax relief.) Thus, a range of additional, selective benefits will be required to bring income levels even up to the current minimum standards (in addition to housing benefit and additional disability benefits). This undermines the alleged simplicity of the basic income scheme, reintroducing many of the eligibility criteria and entitlement terms that the proposal seeks to do away with. It will only change the income base on which selective benefits will sit.

No less important for this discussion, is that UBI is an individualised measure, not a collective one, focusing resources on providing money to individuals rather than on pooled risk-sharing mechanisms that provide help for everyone when they need it. It's about buying things, not doing things. It serves to atomise and monetise people's needs, fitting neatly with the prevailing economic paradigm – rather than promoting social solidarity, collectively funded services, and shared solutions. It confers enormous power on the state, which can give and take away. Its growing popularity among high-tech business leaders suggest an interest in making sure that people can keep on shopping as automation drives them out of work: a tame pool of consumers on which their profits depend.

Advocates of UBI usually agree that services are important to people. But they have less to say about the potentially negative impacts on the prospects for collective services of campaigning for UBI, let alone the impact of putting the idea into practice. The campaign distracts attention from the need for holistic reform of social security (as indicated in the diagram above) and from the need to safeguard and strengthen collective provision. Realising the UBI goal – even as a minimal payment – would claim and divert resources from other public goods, such as education and healthcare, as well as from urgently needed investment in green infrastructure and eco-maintenance. The complex underlying causes of inequalities, ill health, social conflict, unequal access to the labour market, and non-financial barriers to social participation require upstream systemic changes, rather than a single monetary intervention.

The current popularity of the campaign for UBI reflects a desire for radical change. We would like to see the energy and passion of that campaign harnessed to the cause of building a new social commons. From our perspective, the idea of a guaranteed minimum income for people who are not employed, backed up by more generous universal and taxable child benefit, and a time credit system for carers, seems a stronger option: more ethical, more strategically effective, more efficient and more sustainable. It lacks the elegance of a 'silver bullet' solution, but in our view it will make a better contribution to a new social commons. That said, it is not for us to decide and we offer these arguments to the coming public debate.

5 SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Our aim is to open a debate. The New Economics Foundation is inviting responses over the coming months to questions raised by the ideas and options explored in this paper.

Some questions are set out below. Others are bound to emerge as the debate develops.

- Is the concept of a social commons useful as a way of reimagining shared social responsibility and support?

- Who should have a stake in it – and why?
- What is the best way to manage the relationship between control anchored in local communities and support from public institutions?
- In the key areas identified (education, housing, health and social care, income), what could be different about the ways in which services and other activities are shaped and delivered?
- What else could be included and why?
- How should essential elements be underpinned by enforcing mechanisms (laws and regulations)?
- In practical and political terms, how can a transition be made from a statement of shared intent, to a truly popular consensus that is realised in practice?
- Which sectors, groups and organisations are likely to support the proposal and take an interest in developing it further?

What's the best way of conducting a public dialogue to determine the detailed content of the entitlement?

Our final question is this: *if not this, then what?* If we don't build a new social commons, broadly as described here, what are the alternatives? There is no evidence that market solutions can fix a broken welfare state. Top-down welfare reforms invariably leave people with a diminished sense of control. Is it enough to support *ad hoc* defensive campaigns against cuts in services and benefits? Or should we expect communities to fend for themselves, through a combination of philanthropy and local civic action? If so, we must be prepared to retreat from the collective ideals of the post-war settlement and abandon the pursuit of sustainable social justice.

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