

NEON Working Paper

WHAT UNITES US?

Building a Common Agenda

“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.”

AUDRE LORDE

Summer 2015

The short version

What is the Common Agenda?

An attempt to find out what unites our struggles across NEON.

Whether you organise to shut detention centres, end austerity or for publicly owned green energy, we know that we need to change this broken system. Despite this, we often end up fighting individual battles and losing the wider war (a new austerity led government being a case in point). Amongst many other reasons this is partly because we're still not telling a bigger story about how society could be organised differently. We know that people in NEON will all have their own answers to this question. This project is about listening to those answers and finding the common ground on which we can fight for systemic change together – the 'next ten steps' we can take together, irrespective of where we each want to end up.

What's this paper?

This paper is the first report back on what a Common Agenda in NEON might look like. We've spent the last six months speaking to 80+ people across NEON about the society they want to see and how we can get there. This paper is a straw man for us all to kick around together over summer – to say what works, what doesn't and what else is needed. We want lots of feedback on what we've found: what's good, what's bad and what next?

So, what have you found?

So far, we've found a lot more commonality than we expected (which isn't to say that people in NEON don't disagree on important things). We've grouped the results into three areas **Values**, **Principles** and key **Battleground Issues**.

Values:

We've found common values that a new economy and society could be based on:

- » **Equality and human dignity**
- » **Solidarity and community**
- » **Respect for the environment**

Crucially this means challenging the overwhelming dominance of money and markets in our system (aka neoliberalism) – and defining economic progress as enabling everyone to have a good and fulfilled life, not just in terms of growth and consumption.

Principles:

How do we put those values into practice through new ‘rules of the game’ for how the economy and politics should work? This can’t just be about correcting market outcomes through redistribution and regulation, although these will still be needed. Instead we need more fundamental changes to how wealth is owned and produced.

We identified six principles that sum up the recurring themes of our conversations so far, which we’ve divided into three old principles to reclaim (1-3), and three new principles to develop (4-6):

- 1. Collective provision of basic needs** (outside the market)
- 2. Common ownership of public goods** (like land and energy)
- 3. Mutualism, co-operation and sharing** (not just competition)
- 4. Redistributing power, not just wealth** (through economic democracy and active liberation)
- 5. Redistributing paid and unpaid time** / reducing working hours
- 6. Respecting environmental limits** (as a non-negotiable rule of all decision-making)

Together these provide a pretty coherent platform for how you might start to describe a structurally different system. Not as complete answers, but as a big enough tent for us to work together, whether we’re organising outside, against or within formal political structures.

Battleground issues:

Politics is bought to life by battles on the street, in the media and where people live their lives – so we also talked to people about where they think real change could happen now – and what would open up the space for further change. The answers ranged from lifting the pressures on those who are hit hardest by our current system (e.g. the housing crisis, fair wages, migrants’ rights) to fixing our broken political system (e.g. electoral reform or tackling corporate capture) to giving people lived experience of doing things differently (e.g. workplace organising or community energy).

Over the next few months we want to explore this question further: what are the critical issues where we need to fight and win together?

We’ve also begun collecting inspiring examples from across our community and beyond of how the principles are being made a reality – starting to paint a picture which shows that another world is not just possible, but happening.

Where can we use the Common Agenda in NEON (and beyond)?

This isn't going to be a manifesto. Or even necessarily a public document. The aim is to turn it into practical training and resources for groups to work out how they can advance one another's struggles and help change the system. Here's the three main areas we're thinking about:

- » A big framing project working with groups across NEON to develop practical tools to talk about key issues (basically Framing the Economy 2, for those who read the first paper)
- » Training and political education work (including sessions with all NEON members who want them as well as MPs and others interested in this work)
- » Applying these frames across our work from the podcast to the spokesperson network, new NEF research or even new groups in NEON set up to organise around key issues

This will never be a finished document. It's a dialogue between all of us and is meant to provide a starting point for us all to begin punching through the public debate better together. What tools would you like to see?

So how can I get involved?

Join the conversation.

We want as much feedback as possible however good or bad, big or small - by email, over the phone or face to face; individually or in groups (contact christine.berry@neweconomics.org). Whether you want to convene a workshop for the people you organise with, or a discussion on a particular theme, or a hackday exploring whether this helps your organisation think about its work - or if you'd like us to come along to events you're planning already - we're here to help, support and listen.

Ultimately this project needs to be owned by our community if it's going to succeed. There's already a group of us helping to steer the process but we're on the look out for more people to join in - let us know if you're interested.

The full version

About the project

Introduction

The UK general election result was appalling and showed us what happens when people aren't being offered a compelling alternative to a neoliberal economics which presents itself as the only plausible way to run society. At the same time, results in Scotland – not to mention Greece, Spain and Latin America – have shown what can be achieved when people are offered a positive alternative to politics and economics as usual, rooted in grassroots movements. Now more than ever, our movement needs a compelling shared story about what's going wrong with our economy and society, who's responsible and how we can change it.

This project is about the third pillar of that story. It can be easier to talk about what we're against than what we are for – but if we want to change the UK political landscape, we need to do both. We've been talking to members of NEON from many different perspectives about their answers to the question 'what's our alternative?', trying to identify the common themes and principles which unite our movement, and which could become the basis for a new story.

This isn't about trying to create a new ideology or a political manifesto which NEON members are expected to 'sign up' to. Members of NEON come from many different ideological traditions and this diversity is part of our strength. But we think it is necessary and possible to find common ground between these traditions – and it's on this common ground that we can develop a powerful and compelling story to help us fight and win against the dominant neoliberal consensus.

Crucially, it is also the starting point for developing a new language about the change we want to see which can resonate more widely in society – rather than falling back on generic labels like 'radical' or 'progressive', which at best may not mean much to most people, and at worst may be actively alienating. Of course, talking to people in NEON can only give us the building blocks of a wider story – we'll need to do more work on the streets and some more framing testing to turn this from a story that resonates with all of us into one that can resonate more widely. A project intimately tied as much to how we organise as to what we say.

Aims of the project

- » To work out what alignment there is within NEON on the nature of the big changes needed in the next 5-10 years to advance social and environmental justice
- » To use this to train large numbers of key organisers, giving them confidence to argue for radical change beyond individual campaigns/issues and to avoid an exclusive focus on short-term or ameliorative action.
- » To provide the basis for more work on both developing a new set of frames on the economy that resonate with the public and building up a library of inspiring solutions that exemplify our common agenda.

We hope this project will be useful for NEON members by helping us to:

- » Communicate our work on individual issues, campaign asks or models in a wider framework for systemic economic change
- » Draw out connections between campaigns
- » Draw on a library of inspiring solutions which show that another world is possible
- » Identify next steps and priority areas: what do we need to change today so that we can change more tomorrow?

What we did

Over the past six months, we have been gathering views from across our community and beyond on the change we want to see, and the touchstone issues which could start to bring that change to life now. Key elements of the research have been:

- » 16 in-depth individual interviews with NEON members, chosen to reflect a cross-section of the community in terms of areas of focus, ideological perspectives and identities
- » 7 roundtables and group discussions with organisers who share a perspective (e.g. feminist campaigners, democracy activists, trade unionists, health campaigners).
- » Invitations to feed in by email via the NEON list – resulting in 30+ people sending us their views.
- » Reviewing key documents from other groups grappling with similar issues here and overseas, including Common Weal, the Kilburn Manifesto and the Next System Project; of manifestos or ‘solutions’ documents produced by campaigners in NEON; and of relevant conversations on the NEON list.
- » Testing our provisional conclusions with various groups, including the first Introduction to NEON session, the Spokesperson Network and the NEON Organisers Retreat.

All of this has been a first phase of the process. This paper summarises where these conversations have led us to – using direct quotes from the interviews (in dashed boxes) and examples of how NEON members are putting all this into action (in grey boxes) wherever possible. The next stage will be all about discussions and contributions to refine these ideas – and to start thinking about how we can put them into practice. We’re planning various opportunities for NEON members to feed in their thoughts on the ideas in

this paper, including two plenaries at the NEON Summer Gathering in London, and workshops in Manchester and Bristol. We also hope that the paper will spark more discussions through the avenues listed above – so now's the perfect time to get involved in shaping things.

Power & privilege issues

Issues of power and privilege have been at the front of our minds in carrying out this project. In selecting individual interviewees, we've done our best to emphasise the voices of those who work with or come from marginalised groups. Where possible we've also tried to take on board the perspectives of those they organise with, even if they are not (yet) members of NEON.

However, we are very aware of the limitations of our approach: the wider group of participants has inevitably been somewhat self-selecting and this has two important implications. Firstly, this process reflects the biases inherent in NEON's membership: we've focussed on finding the alignment within NEON, and can't claim to represent the wider movement, let alone wider society. Secondly, even within the NEON membership, participation will tend to be skewed towards those with the time and resources to talk to us – which is likely to under-represent or exclude the most oppressed and marginalised communities.

Properly addressing these issues has been beyond the scope of this project, but it must be part of the next phase of building our movement. It requires a sustained effort to talk to people at the times and places that work for them, rather than expecting them to come to us; to make NEON relevant by showing solidarity with their struggles; and to make our spaces genuinely accessible and inclusive. This is labour intensive, and making sure this work is properly resourced is a priority for the NEON team. If you have ideas about how we can improve our practice as we go into the next phase of this project, please get in touch.

Tackling power and privilege

The blind spots in the politics of the past - around redistributing power and liberation from oppressions - threaten to be our own blind spots, if we are not able to take on the enormous challenge of changing the power and privilege dynamics in our own structures and organisations as part of this process. It's the responsibility of every NEON member to be working on this, challenging it in their own behaviours and their institutions, and building relationships that will allow us to expand our scope to include the voices of the marginalised and oppressed.

Natasha Nkonde

'Naming the enemy': what are we up against?

Why talk about neoliberalism?

Why "neoliberalism"? It's an ugly word, but the best we have found to summarise the core strategic issue we face. The logic behind saying we oppose "neoliberalism" looks like this. Campaigners, union members, and activists face a myriad of issues: from the humanity-wide, like climate change, to the local, like the campaign for decent social housing provision in London. We can all see one part of the picture. Equally, we all have some sense of a bigger picture: that something we call "the system" is at fault. Many of us would say this system is capitalism: the relentless exploitation of humanity and nature for the production of profit. Others amongst us would vary that description, or find it a different name. But there is a shared consensus about the systemic nature of the problem.

We have seen, for a generation or more, a persistent effort across much of the world to shape society and the economy in a particular direction. UK politics now seems to be locked in a narrow set of parameters in which, whatever the question posed - from climate change, to housing, to healthcare - there are a familiar set of answers, all of which work to the advantage of those in power: carbon trading; social housing sales; private company involvement in the NHS.

The rules of the game

This is neoliberalism in action: a set of *rules of the game* which also provide a clear strategy for some, at least, to ensure they always win. The "game" is capitalism, with its winners and losers. The "rules" tell you how the game should be played, and, of course, for the game to be played properly it is essential that everyone knows the rules, wherever they find themselves. It's no use playing football if you have to ask the referee for the rules. Everyone just knows how to play, and what the rules are.

Neoliberalism's rules are simple and very widely understood:

- » Markets are the ideal way to organise the economy, and society.
- » Where government intervention cannot be removed, governments must behave as much like a market participant as possible.
- » Competition is good, with the corollary that inequality is necessary.
- » Corporations and private interest are, in almost all circumstances, right.
- » And people should define their interests as closely as possible in accordance with these rules.

It's important to bear in mind that neoliberalism doesn't always follow its own rules. Neoliberalism in practice has tended to defend the interests of the powerful (aka the 1%), following the rules when it suits those interests and breaking them when it doesn't. A classic example of this is trade rules: in the 1980s and 1990s, rich countries imposed free trade on developing countries but used subsidies and other mechanisms to protect their own industries from overseas competition – even though this was counter to the ideology they imposed on others. Another example might be the unwillingness of the UK government to challenge the banks or energy companies, even though many thinkers on the right argue that these companies are so big and powerful that they have destroyed market competition.

Changing the rules

Rules, however, are written, and can change. What makes neoliberalism distinctive is that it emerged as *the* set of rules after a long gestation period, and in conflict with an alternative set of rules. In the years after WW2, what became known as “Keynesianism” became the leading rules of the game, at least in the West. Keynesianism stressed the reduction of inequality, the need to support public activity and social life, and the ability of governments to intervene in the economy for specific purposes. It was the reappearance of crises, globally, in the 1970s, that provided the neoliberals with their chance to argue for their own alternative. By offering a clear set of directions to elite actors, and successfully popularising at least some of these – for example, in campaigning against the perceived “excesses” of trade unions – neoliberals were able to win elite support and, to a much weaker extent, at least the acquiescence of the general population.

Neoliberalism can tolerate only *one* set of rules. At the national level, this embedding of the rules has taken place only through long struggle against the alternatives. Neoliberal rules are also strongly embedded in the institutions of the international economy: free movement of capital helps enforce them on one side, whilst formal organizations (such as the older World Trade Organisation or the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, TTIP) ensure legal structures comply.

Who benefits from this? Hiding in plain sight

These changes happened for a reason. Neoliberalism positions itself as ‘just common sense’, as a technical set of rules for running the economy which produce good outcomes for everyone. In doing so, it has been very successful at shutting down democratic debate about the kind of economy we want. And yet, with its insistence that market outcomes are right, that competition is necessary, and that state interference in either of these is bad, neoliberalism seems extremely well-designed to transfer wealth and income from many hands into fewer and fewer. As Thomas Piketty’s bestseller documents, across the developed world wealth inequality has reached levels last seen towards the end of the Victorian era.

Moreover, the ability of the wealthy to buy political influence creates a self-reinforcing cycle of growing economic and political inequality. The UK public instinctively recognises this, with growing levels of disenchantment with politicians and elites. But until now, it has largely been parties of the extreme right – such as UKIP – that have capitalised on this anti-establishment feeling. Any new story we tell about the economy has to address the question of where the power lies, and whose interests the system is really serving.

“Wealth circulates within an elite, the 1%, the establishment, and they all know each other and watch each other’s backs”

“There’s a bit of the narrative that does have to be negative: ‘what you want is not on the agenda’; you either have to run things, or have them run for you by corporations.”

The UK economy

The UK has gone further and faster in this direction than most others. Margaret Thatcher's government systematically (if not completely) dismantled the key elements of the post-war, Keynesian settlement. Successive governments allowed the financial system, centred on the City of London, to balloon itself to extraordinary proportions. Money-trading both domestically and internationally became enormously profitable, to the point that two-thirds of the richest 1% in the UK are employed in financial services.

Wealth inequality rose enormously, with the UK moving from one of the most equal societies in Western capitalism in the 1970s to amongst the most unequal today. Public corporations were privatised and, later, public services themselves offered out for private profit. Meanwhile, the mantra of 'flexible labour markets' made our jobs among the most insecure in Europe.

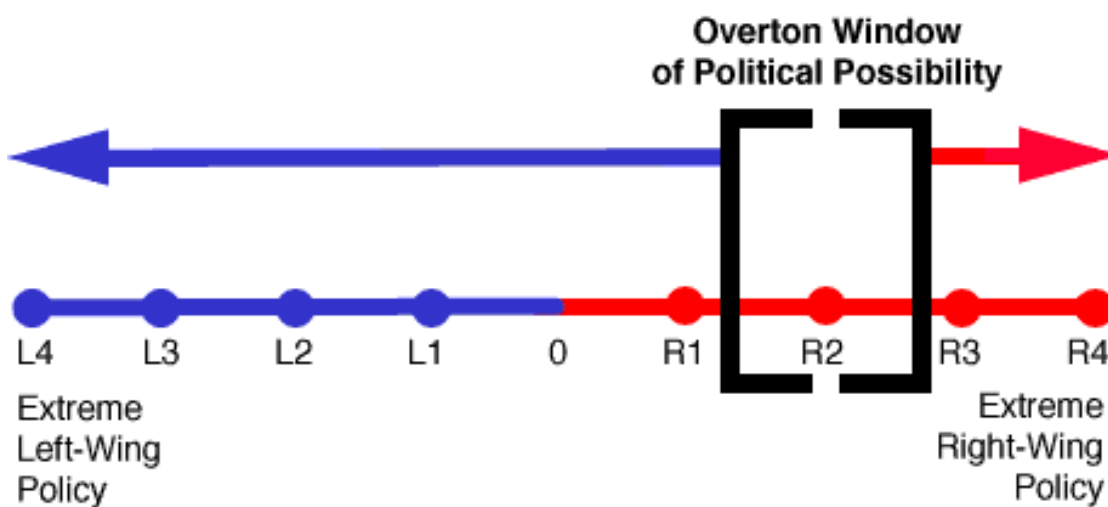
When the debt bubble finally popped, over 2007-8, the UK paid the largest sums of any developed economy to bail out its banks. The recession we suffered was exceptionally severe, its impact lessened only by some decidedly "Keynesian" measures undertaken by the then-Labour government.

But far from this transforming the economic argument, the crisis has seemingly entrenched it still further – at least in the political mainstream. Austerity is an extreme expression of this. The austerity argument denies any useful role for government in the economy. It is highly ideological – and highly strategic, protecting the interests of finance even at the expense of wider society. The logic is brutal. If finance is not reformed (and it is not) and it is still bloated (total financial system liabilities in the UK amount to 1,300% of GDP), it will fail, and the failure could be exceptionally expensive. To keep this show on the road, it is necessary to clear some space in the public finances, in case of the next failure. Neoliberalism is so embedded here that it has forced a choice between protecting the disabled, and protecting bankers – and the bankers won.

How can we change the rules of the game?

NEON is built on our understanding that the system we have is held up by a particular set of interests, and that to overturn it we need more than good ideas – we need a strong and powerful movement capable of replacing those interests.

But we also need to make sure that our movement doesn't get trapped within the parameters of the existing debate – and for that we need to have some shared understanding of how things can be different. The 'Overton Window' is a useful tool for this kind of strategic thinking. It refers to the 'window' of political possibility within which an idea is taken seriously by the mainstream of political debate. Ideas outside the Overton Window are usually treated as crazy or unworkable (even if they are very popular with the public in principle – like renationalising the railways).



Neoliberalism has been very successful at shrinking the Overton Window and moving it further to the right – so for instance, the mainstream debate about austerity is not about whether we need it but about how far and how fast to cut. This means that campaigning strategies focussed on making a winnable demand of those in power – i.e. one that falls inside the Overton Window – are forced into a smaller and smaller space, which in turn strengthens the neoliberal boundaries of debate. So for example, NGOs argue that the government shouldn't cut this or that bit of spending, rather than that they shouldn't be cutting at all – reinforcing the idea that every sensible person agrees we need to make cuts.

To achieve systemic change, we will sometimes need to create or advocate things that fall well outside the Overton Window – even if we know this means we won't win everything straight away, or that we will be dismissed by some people. By doing so we can change the parameters of the debate, demonstrate that there are possibilities outside of the narrow window which our politics normally offers, and help to drag the window in the direction we want it to go.

Of course, this isn't to say that there is no place for incremental change: sometimes it's necessary to start from where things are to achieve immediate wins on urgent issues, or to make the space for further change. Our movement needs both incremental and systemic

approaches to be successful. However, we think it's useful to be able to distinguish between actions that are fundamentally about improving the current system, and actions that are moving us towards a new system – and to identify the common ground within which we may disagree on the exact shape of that new system. Thinking about incremental changes as steps towards more fundamental change – rather than as the end goal – can also help to make sure that we are genuinely challenging the current system rather than being subsumed by it.

The point of identifying our common agenda is to help give us a shared sense of what these new possibilities might look like – and ultimately, how we can start talking about them in a way that enables real systemic change.

Building an alternative: What are we for?

Challenges to neoliberalism: alternative ways of thinking

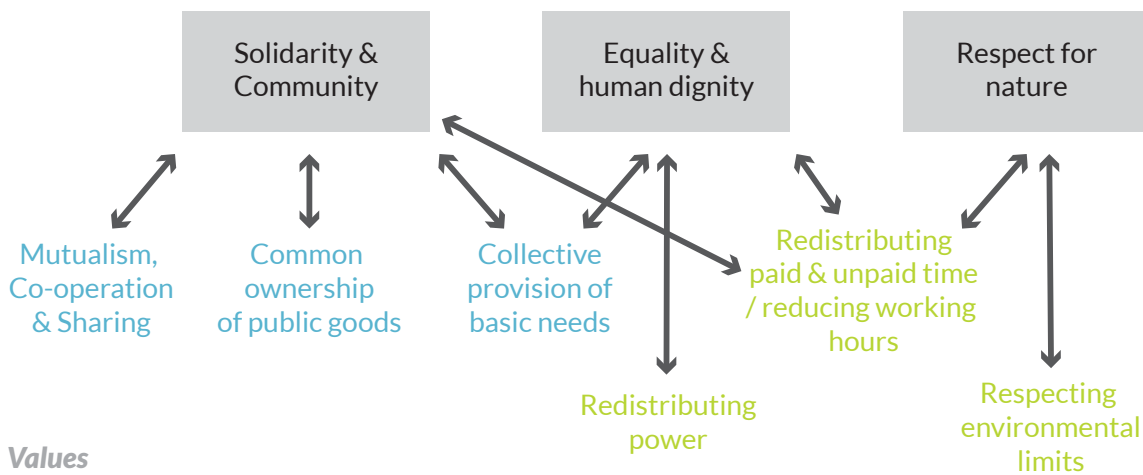
Challenges to neoliberalism come in different forms and from different starting points. NEON unites anti-neoliberals from a variety of ideological backgrounds, with different ideas about the society they ultimately want to get to – from revolutionary socialists to anarchists and left-libertarians to social democrats, left liberals and deep green environmentalists – and many who would not identify as any of these. It also includes thinkers from many schools of thought which challenge the economics that underpin neoliberalism – from ecological economists (who put ecological systems back at the heart of the analysis), to feminist political economists (who focus on gender inequalities and the unpaid work of caring which takes places in homes and communities), to Marxists and post-Keynesians (who, in different ways, focus on the power relations between labour and capital, and on inequality as a driver of economic outcomes), and many more besides.

This project is not about trying to replace or endorse any of these schools of thought. Rather it is about finding the common ground between these perspectives in the here and now: the 'next ten steps' which we can all take together to move our politics beyond neoliberalism, even if our ultimate destinations might be different. Sometimes there will be fundamental disagreements between people in NEON – for example, on the role of the state, or of the market, or whether we should even have either of these things. At other times there will just be differences of emphasis, or of detail. We've found that it does seem to be possible to identify some high-level principles on which we can all agree – and which represent a meaningful change from the status quo.

We've also tried to respect the different approaches to achieving change which exist in NEON – whether building the new society from the ground up, or campaigning and demanding changes from those in power. All of the values and principles we talk about should be relevant to both these approaches, which are complementary and should be mutually reinforcing.

There are three levels we've separated the outputs into:

- » Values
- » Principles
- » Battleground issues



Values

Old Principles

New Principles

Values

Neoliberalism's rhetoric places a high value on individual freedom (defined negatively as being free from interference by others, rather than positively as being free to fulfil your potential). Its emphasis on markets also means that its value system is money-driven – and this benchmark for valuing things is increasingly spreading to all areas of social life.

There's a strong case to be made that we need to reclaim and redefine values like freedom from their neoliberal trappings. On the one hand, individualism is clearly a problem and we do need to find ways to reassert the value of community and collective action. But on the other hand, neoliberalism in practice is very far from liberating for individuals who lack privilege, or who want things which are at odds with its expectations. Values like freedom are important to our movement and we should not give neoliberalism the credit of assuming it has a monopoly on these values.

But in addition, many people we spoke to emphasised that a new economy also needs to be based on a distinctive set of values:

- » **Equality and human dignity:** recognising that we all have equal worth as human beings, and an equal right to a good life - and that our value as people does not depend on our ability to work, or on the price of our labour.

"We need to change the way we value people, so that your worth is not based on your job which is based on the free market."

"Politicians are happy to talk about the Work Capability Assessment till the cows come home, but if you ask whether they're saying the only value you can put on a disabled person is via the economic value they generate, they want to change the subject."

- » **Solidarity and community:** recognising that we depend on each other, and are not just isolated individuals; and rejecting the politics of division (migrants versus citizens, strivers versus skivers) which leaves people to sink or swim in the market.

“People still want to volunteer their time, help their neighbours, build a better society, despite all the messages telling them they don’t need to worry and all they need to do is spend more. It’s inherent in people – that sense of belonging.”

“There is no room for an ‘other’ in conditions of interdependence - you need a politics that brings people together well beyond the scale we have natural capacity for.”

“We need to highlight the contributions of everyone in the economy.”

- » **Respect for the environment:** stewardship of the planet, for future generations and because the economy ultimately depends on it – but also for its own intrinsic value.

These values also give us a different yardstick by which to judge economic success. Many people spoke about the need to **move beyond growth and consumption (measured through GDP) as arbiters of progress** – and to resist the growing commodification of our lives. Money should not be fetishized or allowed to control us. Instead, we should focus on the ultimate goal of the economy: giving everyone the chance to live a good and fulfilled life. This was raised in relation to a whole range of issues, from controls on advertising to building a ‘caring economy’, to organising work around human needs, not just the profit motive.

Rules of the game: How should the economy work?

If these are the values on which our politics is based, then how does the economy need to change to put those values into practice? Neoliberalism gives a very clear set of principles, or rules of thumb, for running the economy: free markets, limited government and private ownership. Its great success has been in cementing the idea that there is no alternative to this way of organising economic life – except perhaps Soviet-style Communism, which is cast as a historical failure.

Of course, one of the damaging things about neoliberalism is the way it dogmatically applies one solution (marketization) to every situation and every part of life. Some people we spoke to questioned whether this is something we should want to emulate. This is a valid concern: our shared principles should not be a restrictive blueprint or dogma. However, identifying some potential new ways of organising economic life is a necessary step towards systemic change, and provides a useful framework for situating campaign asks, refining our messages and thinking about how we are challenging neoliberalism through our work – or whether our arguments are being dragged onto neoliberal territory.

We identified six principles that sum up the recurring themes of our conversations so far, which we divide into three old principles to reclaim (1-3), and three new principles to develop (4-6):

1. **Collective provision of basic needs** (outside the market)
2. **Common ownership of public goods** (like land and energy)
3. **Mutualism, co-operation and sharing** (not just competition)
4. **Redistributing power, not just wealth** (through economic democracy and active liberation)
5. **Redistributing paid and unpaid time** / reducing working hours
6. **Respecting environmental limits** (as a non-negotiable rule of all decision-making).

This is our attempt to summarise the common ground in conversations with people from many different perspectives. In some cases, people might have very different ideas about what they mean in practice. This is fine – providing a common framework within which we can disagree on detail is part of the purpose of having a set of principles.

“We can be anti-neoliberal in our methodology as well as our content”

“One of the reasons the left isn’t good at saying what it wants is that it celebrates dissent and difference”

When we campaign for immediate or incremental change, we are often talking about leaving the economic system basically intact and intervening at the margins to correct its outcomes – for example, by **redistributing wealth** to reduce economic inequality, or by **controlling and regulating markets** (e.g. rent controls or caps on carbon emissions). These are important tools – and are likely to remain key battlegrounds for the foreseeable future, given the increasingly extreme form of neoliberalism which the UK is governed by, and the imbalances of wealth and power which this creates. However, for most people in NEON, achieving systemic change is about much more than this.

Firstly, there is widespread agreement that there are some principles that have been abandoned or forgotten in the transition from social democracy to neoliberalism, and that we need to reclaim. For example:

- » **Collective provision of basic needs**, outside the market – the idea that there should be a basic floor which nobody is allowed to fall below. For some people this might mean things like social housing or defending the welfare state. For others, it might mean more radical ideas like a citizen’s income.

“Nobody should be dependent on the market in order to survive”

“This isn’t just about co-ops or community banks, it’s something more fundamental about relieving the pressure on people to survive in the open market.”

- » **Common ownership of public goods**, such as land, energy and public transport – as opposed to the neoliberal emphasis on private ownership. For example, this might mean resisting privatisation of the NHS, or campaigning for renationalisation of the railways. People may disagree about what model should be used for this (for instance, state ownership, community energy co-ops, community land trusts), but there was broad agreement that these things should be in public/community hands in some form or another. This is one example where there is a real disconnect between the political ‘reality’ created by neoliberalism and popular opinion: for example, polls show consistent majorities in favour of public ownership of essential public goods.
- » **Mutualism, co-operation and sharing** – i.e. acting together to achieve our goals, pooling our resources freely in a spirit of reciprocity as opposed to the neoliberal emphasis on competition. This translates into a range of practical solutions, from co-operative enterprise to mutual aid networks. It also offers a different perspective on the purpose of economic institutions: for instance, several people spoke about the need to overturn the idea that the purpose of education is to enable individuals to ‘get ahead’ in the marketplace.

“[We need to reclaim the idea that] we can achieve things together through the application of will – neoliberalism abolishes this by saying our will can never be better than the market”.

Secondly, there is also a feeling that we need to build on this heritage and go further. As one person put it, it isn’t just about nationalising capitalist production processes or redistributing their proceeds, but more fundamental changes to how our economy works and how wealth is created in the first place. We saw three key themes emerging about what puts the ‘new’ in the new economy. These can be roughly summed up as being about power, care/time and natural resources.

- » **Redistributing power – economic and political democracy.**

The need to end unequal concentrations of political and economic power, and liberate people from structures of exploitation and oppression, was one of the strongest recurring themes in the conversations we had. Often, but not always, this was linked to democracy as a guiding principle: **making decisions together about things that affect us, through institutions and spaces where everyone has an equal voice**, is one of the key alternatives to leaving things to the market.

Neoliberalism has always claimed to be pro-democracy, but ultimately, markets operate on the principle of ‘one pound one vote’ – while democratic institutions operate on the principle of ‘one person one vote’. This means that over time, neoliberal policies have systematically sucked power upwards to the already wealthy – exactly the opposite of what their architects claimed they would achieve. One illustration of this is the promise of ‘shareholder democracy’ that was made when utilities like British Gas were privatised: in

practice, over time people's shares were sold to large institutions, and individual share-ownership is now lower than when Thatcher came to power.

But this is not just about putting power back in the hands of existing democratic institutions: it's also about recognising the ways in which those institutions are flawed and corrupted (e.g. corporate capture, hierarchies, replicating structures of oppression). This means three things – with different people placing emphasis on different ones:

- » **Fixing our broken politics** – breaking the grip of elites and corporate interests on democratic institutions. This might mean electoral reform; promoting greater transparency and accountability from representative institutions; or reform of party funding.
- » **Building new structures based on participation and empowerment** – giving people a direct say in decisions that affect them, for example through co-operatives, co-production of public services, etc. While people may want public goods and services to be *owned* collectively, that doesn't mean they necessarily want them to be *run* from Whitehall.
- » **Liberation from oppressions** – redistributing power is not just about giving people equal formal rights to participate, but also about practising active liberation, creating spaces which empower everyone to contribute, and correcting imbalances of power which systematically privilege some groups and identities over others.

"We need a substantial break with the power systems that we have now, and the pressure this puts on people who are not privileged, crushing their potential and putting them in a constant state of struggle."

Some people also link this to reclaiming the idea of **innovation and creativity** from the neoliberals - but recognising that this comes from co-operation in groups which celebrate individual diversity and liberate people from hierarchies and oppressive structures, and not just from competition and the profit motive as in the neoliberal story.

Democratising money creation

Our financial sector has become bloated and self-serving. In theory, it exists to allocate credit to support productive economic activity but in reality it has extracted wealth from the wider economy and accumulated power for its own ends. A central cause of this is that successive governments have ceded control of the money supply to private banking institutions. Because banks are able to lend out more money than is held in their reserves, they have the power to create money when they make loans. This process accounts for over 97% of money in the UK economy, and most new bank lending goes towards socially useless activities such as property deals and speculation on the financial markets. Positive Money campaigns for the public interest to be reasserted over our financial system by returning the power to create money to the Bank of England. Instead of new money being created as debt to private banks, it should be spent into the real economy in a transparent and accountable way.

David Clarke & Fran Boait, Positive Money

Links to principles: Common ownership of public goods; redistributing power

» Redistributing paid and unpaid work / reducing working hours.

Unpaid work, particularly care work, is one of the blind spots of neoliberalism – and historically was also a blind spot of UK social democracy. This exacerbates gender inequalities as well as privileging the market sphere of wage-labour over other ways of caring and providing for each other.

Lots of people we spoke to felt that this was important; to the extent that a single principle came out strongly, it was the idea of reducing working hours and spreading paid and unpaid work more evenly across society. In addition to the feminist perspective, this was linked by people to many of our other objectives – for example:

- » *Democracy*: people need the time to participate in civic life, and at the moment the most marginalised and oppressed groups often work punishing hours and are excluded from participating in co-operative and democratic institutions, however well designed.
- » *Financialisation and marketisation*: Excessive working hours lead to the marketization of other areas of life, such as childcare – as people have to pay others to do things they do not have time to do themselves.
- » *Good lives*: Although improving the quality of work and people's control over their own work was a key theme, it was also suggested that we should not be defined by our work: the purpose of the economy should be, at least in part, to enable work to be a smaller part of our lives.

- » **Sustainability:** reducing working hours means that we turn productivity gains into more leisure time, rather than more consumption – reducing the pressure we place on natural systems.

"We should celebrate leisure ... we should have our own power over our work and our careers" .

Building a caring economy

"Paid and unpaid care work are the foundations of our economy, yet are routinely ignored and undervalued. Feminist economics asks what impact aspects of our economy have on gender equality. For example, what does local devolution mean for gender equality? Local government tends to be the provider of support services: reductions or increases in budgets will impact carers who are more likely to rely on these services. Women make up the majority of local government employees but, as in all areas of democracy, are unrepresented as elected representatives. However there are opportunities: the Scottish referendum brought discussions of a 'caring economy', and the need to match investment in physical infrastructure (like energy and transport) with social infrastructure (like hospitals and schools), to the fore in Scotland."

Polly Trenow – Women's Budget Group

Links to principles: Redistributing paid and unpaid time; redistributing power; collective provision of basic needs

» **Respecting environmental limits.**

Respecting the earth's carrying capacity – both in terms of the resources we extract, and the pollutants we emit – is another key blind spot of our current and previous systems. This differs from the neoliberal approach, which treats environmental degradation as an 'externality' (i.e. something which market prices don't account for) with the solution being to ensure that this is priced in (e.g. through taxes) or to create new markets (e.g. tradeable carbon permits). The neoliberal approach has no inherent mechanism for keeping within environmental limits: rather, these become something to be monetised and weighed up against other costs and benefits, or incorporated into people's decisions about how much of something gets produced, bought and sold.

By contrast 'respecting environmental limits' implies that sustaining the natural systems on which we rely is a non-negotiable rule of decision-making, and other decisions are then made within this constraint. For example, this might mean carbon budgets or hard caps on our use of natural resources, rather than just manipulating the price of carbon or resources. Some people we spoke to also specifically mentioned '**circular economy**'

principles, whereby products are repaired, recycled or in other ways re-used as economic inputs, rather than being produced, used and thrown away.

In practice, the mechanisms for achieving this are a mixture of the other principles discussed above: for example, implementing caps on resource use or pollution levels requires regulation, at least in the short term; we also need to look at the ownership and governance of our energy systems and of key resources such as land and fisheries. However, having a separate principle on environmental limits feels important because the reverse is also true: i.e. in implementing the other principles, or campaigning on other issues, environmental sustainability has to be part and parcel of any solutions we advocate.

"Climate change is going to cause a revolution whatever we do, and people in power can see that - there's a danger we end up with 'green neoliberalism'. We need to fight that - things like Back Balcombe [community owned energy fighting fracking] are key to doing that."

Community energy

Our energy system has endured a failed experiment with neoliberal economics. Privatisation and competition have not delivered low prices and high customer satisfaction, as was promised. The Big 6 energy companies are failing to invest and innovate. And the main achievement of our system of green levies seems to have been its own unpopularity.

Crucially, unlike at present, an alternative system must embody true energy democracy, where citizens face genuine choices and exercise genuine agency over the various ways they consume energy. Creating conscious energy citizens is both an outcome and a driver of more democratic energy systems, and community energy projects are starting to make this a reality.

Community energy is founded on the understanding that energy is a basic need and providing it is unavoidably collective in nature. Rather than just pulling the plug on a private coal plant and re-attaching it to a private wind turbine, community schemes recognise that ownership matters. Unmotivated by turning a profit, these groups own their energy assets in common and deliberately employ them in the interests of their members and the environment. In Germany, the non-profit energy revolution is already undermining the profitability of conventional energy companies. The success of these initiatives belies the notion that markets are the best possible intermediaries for essential goods and services. We know this assumption is false, and community energy proves it.

Stephen Devlin, New Economics Foundation

Links to principles: Common ownership of public goods; mutualism, co-operation and sharing; collective provision of basic needs; respecting environmental limits; redistributing power

Making change happen: What does this mean in practice?

So far this may all seem very abstract. So what is the point of articulating principles like this? How can it help us to make change now, and how can it be useful for campaigners? We asked people about the specific issues which they thought had the potential to make change now – where we could start bringing some of these principles to life and pushing for more radical change. In this section we also outline how we plan to use this material within NEON activities.

Key battleground issues for systemic change

Our principles will be useful to the extent that they help us tackle the issues that matter in a way that moves us closer to the systemic change we want to see. When we asked about immediate priorities for action, we received many responses on everything from debt relief to climate change to education. It's impossible to do justice to all of them here, and a long 'shopping list' of issues is unlikely to be helpful anyway. Instead we've focussed on the question of how we can identify the key battles that need to be won now: 'what do we need to change today so that we can change more tomorrow?' In other words, what needs to be done to create the *conditions* for more radical change - in terms of the big systemic issues that need tackling, the shift in the public debate needed, and our ability to organise in these areas.

Some common themes emerged from our conversations which can help us think about this:

- » **Shifting the balance of power (e.g. labour rights, financial reform).** Redistributing power is not just a feature of the world we want to build, it is also critical to our ability to get there. We need to prioritise interventions that weaken the power bases of neoliberalism and strengthen the alternatives. This might mean things that weaken the power of finance capital (like monetary or banking reform, or controls on corporate lobbying and party funding); defending and strengthening the rights of labour, for example to organise and strike; or building our movement from the grassroots up.
- » **Freeing people from insecurity and pressure to survive (e.g. fair wages, decent housing).** Empowering and improving the lives of those who suffer most from neoliberalism isn't just a moral imperative – it's also vital to achieving further change. Whether it's Living Wages, tackling insecurity at work, defending the rights of benefit claimants or addressing the housing crisis, we won't be able to build a mass movement unless we alleviate the pressure and anxiety which consumes the time and energy of the least privileged among us – and creates conditions of fear which aren't conducive to systemic change. (A similar principle could be applied to forms of financialisation that 'lock people in' to neoliberalism further up the income scale – like mortgages and other forms of debt, or private pensions which depend on strong returns to capital.)
- » **Addressing urgent existential threats (e.g. climate change, resource depletion).** We are currently deep in 'ecological overshoot' – our economic activity is exceeding the earth's carrying capacity on many different measures. The climate crisis – and more generally the crisis of biodiversity and resource use – will impact on almost everything else we care about if things do not change course drastically in the very near future. Whatever issues we work on, bringing human systems back into balance with the natural systems on which we depend has to be an urgent priority.

- » **Defending what we have (e.g. NHS, social protections).** Although this project is all about getting us out of ‘firefighting mode’ and raising our eyes to the world we want to build, it’s still important that we defend what we have – especially where it has system-wide implications for our ability to achieve other things. For instance, the ongoing drive towards deregulation is eroding governments’ ability to control corporations on everything from employment rights to carbon emissions. And the privatisation of the NHS threatens to undermine one of the key achievements of post-war social democracy.
- » **Shifting values and norms (e.g. education, advertising).** This is far from easy, but some people raised specific areas of intervention that shape social values and norms and are important battlegrounds for that reason. For instance, the role of education in shaping social values is partly why the commodification of education is so important – instilling the assumption that the point of an education is to ‘get ahead’ of others in the labour market, rather than personal fulfilment or contributing to the common good. Likewise, controls on advertising could help to defend public space against the onslaught of consumerist messages and values.
- » **Building lived experiences of the alternative (e.g. workplace organising, community energy).** Whether it’s building the new economy through things like community energy co-ops, or making demands of those in power through things like workplace organising and street campaigns, giving people the experience of working and winning together, or of living differently, is seen by many as a vital first step in breaking the power of neoliberalism. In particular, given that the breaking of the unions has removed many people’s key experience of collective empowerment, some people said we should focus on things which give people this experience.
- » **Creating political space for the alternative (e.g. electoral reform, corporate lobbying).** Given the huge imbalances of power we face and the inability of our current political system to redress these, some people in NEON feel that we need to prioritise democratic reform – particularly electoral reform, but also dealing with corporate capture – as a precondition for more radical change.

Over the next few months we want to explore this further: can we identify some critical issues where NEON members can and should be organising together right now? What can we do to support the community to work together more effectively on these issues, and to build mutual support between people working on different issues?

“At the moment everything about the current system perpetuates itself, and we don’t have anything to counter that. Solidarity and cooperation are muscles you develop – at the moment everything individualises and atomises. What are we building that enables people to commune together, build empathy and compassion, and develop these muscles?”

“The key priority is to get people organised: the current system is a genie and we hold the lamp, but the genie has got so good at smoke and mirrors that we’ve forgotten the lamp is even there”

Workplace organising

For me, workplace organising and the right to organise including recognition rights and the right to strike are vital tools to trigger systems change. With transformational workplace organising you are taking people on a journey or realisation; that things are not supposed to be like this and that changes however small or large are made by groups of people - not impressive individuals in isolation. In workplace organising, people find that building power continually escalates into something far bigger and that the answers to their problems are systemic.

David Braniff-Herbert, equality and trade union organiser

Links to principles: Mutualism, co-operation and sharing; redistributing power

How could NEON use these principles?

We hope these principles can provide a framework within which to think about the work we do, how it contributes to systemic change, and why it makes sense for us to work alongside others in NEON from very different backgrounds and areas of focus.

We also hope it will give us a bigger picture to help us avoid being too constrained by the parameters of the existing debate (see the section on the 'Overton Window' above). Let's take the example of housing. At the moment, the neoliberal response to the housing crisis is to say that we need to get rid of planning laws so it's easier for private interests to build more homes. About the most radical alternative that usually gets a hearing in the mainstream debate is rent controls. This sets the boundaries of the debate – to the extent that Ed Miliband advocating rent control gets presented as an extreme left-wing position by the Conservatives and the mainstream media.

But rent control, however necessary it might be in the short term, is still only a sticking plaster on a broken system. In terms of the framework we've just set out, it is clearly about correcting market outcomes through regulation. If we want to build a new system, we'll ultimately need a way of providing homes that doesn't just take this market as a given. This might mean looking at who owns the land (common ownership of public goods), at the financialisation of housing (redistributing power), at our ability to provide housing collectively through local and national government (collective provision of basic needs), or at new models like housing co-operatives (mutualism, co-operation and sharing).

This isn't to say that groups might not carry on calling for rent controls – but we can think of this as a transitional demand, and not the solution to the problem. This opens up space for us to start talking and thinking about the system we really want – and how we can clear a path from here to there.

Obviously, going outside the Overton Window means our messages risk not connecting with people, so this needs a lot of careful thought. So far we have only been identifying the 'untranslated story' – more work is needed to identify how we can communicate this to people outside NEON in a convincing way, and we have plans to work on this over the next year.

Having this kind of common framework can also help us to **draw connections between our struggles**. For example, some of the biggest concerns expressed by young migrants were around poor working conditions – and conversely, we heard about the need to campaign on issues like housing, work and benefits in a way that builds solidarity and challenges the demonisation of migrants. We spoke to unionists who felt care work was one of the biggest priority areas, but who were new to feminist analyses about how this intersects with unpaid care work – and why unpaid work should be considered part of the economy. Conversely, campaigners advocating for reduced working hours recognise that these kind of wins have historically only been achieved by strong labour movements. We've also heard housing campaigners and climate activists discussing the links between their

struggles – for instance through issues of fuel poverty – and the best ways to show solidarity. By mapping some of these connections and identifying the principles we share, we hope we can help to build a more cohesive and mutually supportive movement.

The Common Agenda will only be useful if it helps people to organise – becoming a framework that members use to help talk about and unite their work over coming months and years. So the aim is to turn it into practical training and resources for groups in NEON, rather than any kind of manifesto. Here are some of the first ways NEON members have suggested we apply it:

- 1.** In the autumn we'll release an updated version of this paper alongside case studies of existing solutions; helping to bring the principles to life and spread them amongst members
- 2.** A major piece of framing work on how we can effectively communicate these ideas. NEF is currently preparing a funding bid for a sizeable project to include:
 - » 'Framing the Economy 2' – a more systematic analysis and testing of the frames which influence how people think about the economy, testing the alternatives and delivering practical stories, tools and ways of talking about these issues that strike through
 - » Participatory framing workshops with NEON members in relation to specific issues (e.g. housing or deregulation), drawing on these ideas and principles to explore how these issues can be communicated in a way that facilitates systemic change and challenges neoliberal frames.
 - » Framing guides for the NEON Spokesperson Network and other rapid response political framing opportunities and groups
- 3.** New training and learning materials providing a framework for thinking about alternatives to the current system. These will be used across NEON's training and political education work, including:
 - » The 'introduction to NEON – a new induction session made available to all new NEON members.
 - » Campaign Lab – our six-month programme skilling up activists and campaigners.
 - » Workshops for current and prospective MPs and politicians across parties
 - » Through the spokesperson network, podcasts and other political education materials
 - » Application to wider political education groups/processes beyond the network
- 4.** Workshop materials for campaigners to take into their organisations – allowing them to think through how the principles apply to their issues, situate their campaign asks within a broad shared framework, think about how their work connects to other parts of NEON, and feed back on whether the principles are useful
- 5.** Issue-specific work bringing together campaigners to map (and hopefully align) their messaging and demands, and draw connections to other campaigns; as well as

potentially aligning NEF research to complement and build the case behind cornerstone issues (e.g. around housing or banking)

What other areas do you think we should or shouldn't apply this to? How could you see yourself using these principles?

What next?

The summer is all about getting feedback on what we've found so far, including:

- » A session at the NEON Summer Gathering for people to share their thoughts on the above and on how we can align our efforts more effectively in the coming years.
- » Parallel sessions in Bristol and Manchester.
- » More group discussions and opportunities for members of NEON to discuss, debate and feedback on these ideas.
- » Revised version of this paper to be published in the Autumn.

So how can I get involved?

Join the conversation.

We want as much feedback as possible however good or bad, big or small - by email, over the phone or face to face; individually or in groups (contact christine.berry@neweconomics.org). Whether you want to convene a workshop for the people you organise with, or a discussion on a particular theme, or a hackday exploring whether this helps your organisation think about its work – or if you'd like us to come along to events you're planning already – we're here to help, support and listen.

Ultimately this project needs to be owned by our community if it's going to succeed. There's already a group of us helping to steer the process but we're on the look out for more people to join in – let us know if you're interested.