

# Returning power to the people

What community empowerment can  
do for the public and for politics



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# About this research briefing

Party conferences can often be strange places. A Westminster bubble, transported across the country.

We don't think that is right. To get to the heart of the challenges facing our country, the voices of real people – from the community level – need to be in the room. So this year, Power to Change is bursting the conference bubble by bringing a cohort of community businesses into the centre of the political debate, offering their expertise and partnership to government to help make good things happen in their local areas.

This research briefing illuminates some of their stories and hopes for the future of their communities. But it also shows, through new polling by More in Common, that backing policies that give communities more power over decisions that impact their lives and local areas is a sensible and popular way for government to address the lack of control felt by many, which has contributed to division in our communities and disillusionment with politics and institutions.

The era of national renewal the government seeks can be grasped – if we empower communities to deliver it.

**Power to Change**  
September 2025



*Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth*

# The state of our nation



*Hendon, Sunderland*

The government came to power with a mandate for change. A year on, change is not yet being felt in people's everyday lives.

In many places, on a walk through the town centre, people see shuttered shop fronts and litter on the floor. There are fewer of the places people love, like pubs, libraries, and community hubs than there used to be, so it is harder to feel connected to one another. At the same time, people don't feel like they are listened to or in control of their own lives.

Visible decline without a sense you can do anything about it is driving alienation with politics and institutions. It is not surprising, then, that language about growth rings hollow when there is not a sense things are getting better, or will do so soon.

The government understands these challenges and has made promising signals of its intent to tackle them. But how it does so needs a fundamental reset. Too often, the expertise of community leaders is ignored in favour of top-down solutions which are copied and pasted in very different places across the country. What works for Grimsby might not work for Great Yarmouth, and treating places like they're all the same does little to restore the agency people feel they sorely lack.

But we know that even when distrust is high and approval of politics low, people often hold on to a feeling of hope for their communities and trust in local people. Community businesses are showing that change is possible, when it is driven by local people who care passionately about the places where they live and want to make life better for themselves and their neighbours. These are the people and organisations that can help deliver the promise of a decade of national renewal, by creating change that can be felt tangibly in people's everyday lives, and that makes us all feel that our lives are getting better – not worse.

To achieve this potential, government must give communities more control over the decisions that affect them, the tools to transform local assets and their neighbourhoods, and a meaningful role in growing our economy, in a way that benefits us all.



*Granby 4 Streets, Liverpool*

# What does the public think about community empowerment?



*Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth*

Ahead of the party conferences of autumn 2025, we commissioned **More in Common** to find out what the public thinks about community empowerment policy and the government's track record on it so far.

In the past year we've seen the government introduce a series of policies aimed at giving more power to communities.<sup>1</sup>

Through the establishment of Great British Energy, the government has set the ball rolling on its manifesto commitment to back local and community ownership of renewable energy, to ensure our communities benefit from the transition to net zero.

Alongside provisions to advance regional devolution, the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill contains an important corrective to the 2011 Localism Act in the form of a new Community Right to Buy for local assets. It also contains provisions to introduce a layer of effective neighbourhood governance and, on a rhetorical level, is significant for being the first bill in the history of our parliament to contain the words 'community empowerment' in its title.

Meanwhile, the government hopes that its Plan for Neighbourhoods will be part of the solution to growing polarisation and declining trust in political institutions, by delivering improvements in people's lives and their communities.

Each of these policies has a part to play in restoring the sense of control over what happens in our lives that many people feel is sorely lacking. But as our research indicates, many people still feel that the energy and agency of communities is being overlooked in favour of centralised and top-down decision-making. And despite their popularity, these policies remain under-recognised by a public with significant appetite for greater community empowerment.

This indicates that government must go further and faster in its efforts to unlock the power in our communities.



*Future Wolverton, Milton Keynes*

# People are more optimistic about the state of their local area than the state of the country

Overall, Britons have a more positive view of their local areas than the state of the country, which they describe as ‘broken’.

While the top words used to describe their local areas were ‘good’, ‘peaceful’ and ‘safe’, indicating a greater degree of contentment with the state of things locally than nationally, the appearance of words like ‘poor’, ‘depressed’ and ‘rough’ reflect a feeling of local decline.

Research by Power to Change and others suggests that visible local decline is fuelling declining trust in mainstream politics and growing support for right-wing populism. Of the 100 places with the greatest increase in persistent high street vacancy between 2015 and 2023, ahead of the general election, Reform UK’s electoral performance was greater than in the rest of England to a statistically significant degree.<sup>2</sup>

In a word, how would you describe \_\_\_\_\_ in 2025?

Britain

Your local area



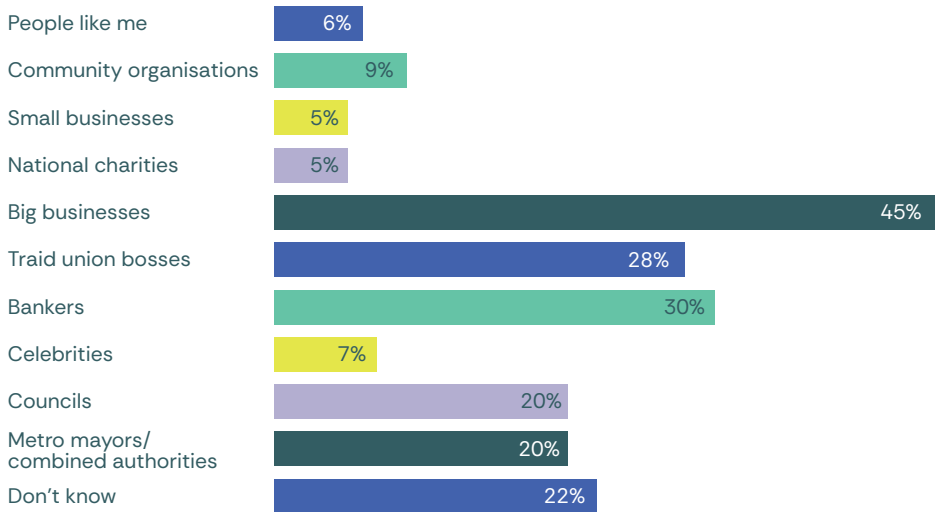
Source: More in Common and Power to Change, August 2025



# The public thinks government respects the opinions of big business and bankers most when making decisions about governing the country

From this list, whose opinions do you feel the government respects the most when making decisions that affect the country?

Select up to three



Multiple answers selected; values do not equal 100%

Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 August – 1 September 2025)

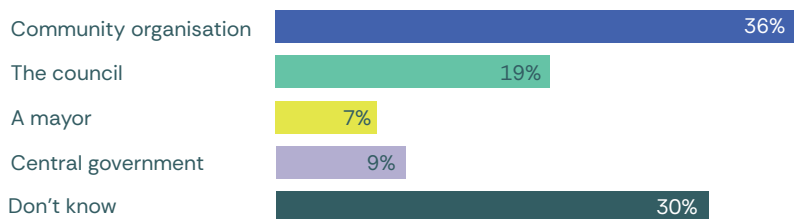
Sample size = 2,042



## The public trusts community organisations most to deliver positive change in their local areas, but thinks government trusts itself

The public are most likely to see community organisations as the changemakers best placed to create a positive impact in their area. But by comparison, they think government trusts itself most to deliver change, followed by local councils. The low response for mayors in both questions is at odds with government rhetoric in relation to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, where mayors are positioned as actors trusted to “drive forward the delivery of people’s priorities”.<sup>3</sup>

### From the following list, who do you trust the most to deliver positive change for your local areas?

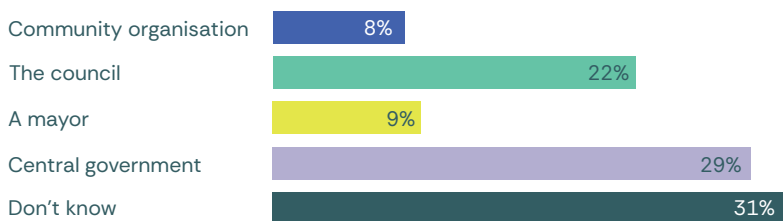


Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 August – 1 September 2025)

Sample size = 2,042

Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

### And from the same list, who do you think the Government trusts the most to deliver positive change for your local areas?



Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 August – 1 September 2025)

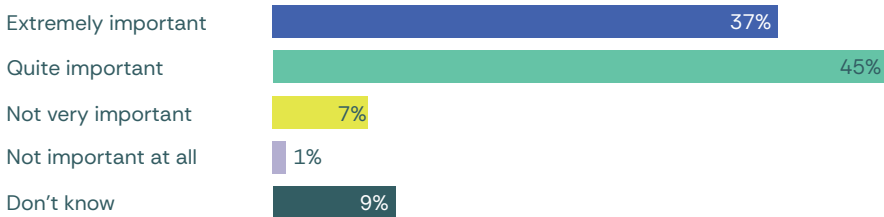
Sample size = 2,042

Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

## People want more control over decisions that affect them and greater community empowerment

When it comes to the devolution agenda, people want to see community empowerment become a more central part of the government’s approach, with 82% of Britons thinking it’s important for government to give local people more control over what happens where they live.

### How important to you, if at all, is it that your government gives you and other local people more control over what happens in your local area?



Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 August – 1 September 2025)  
Sample size = 2,042  
*Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.*

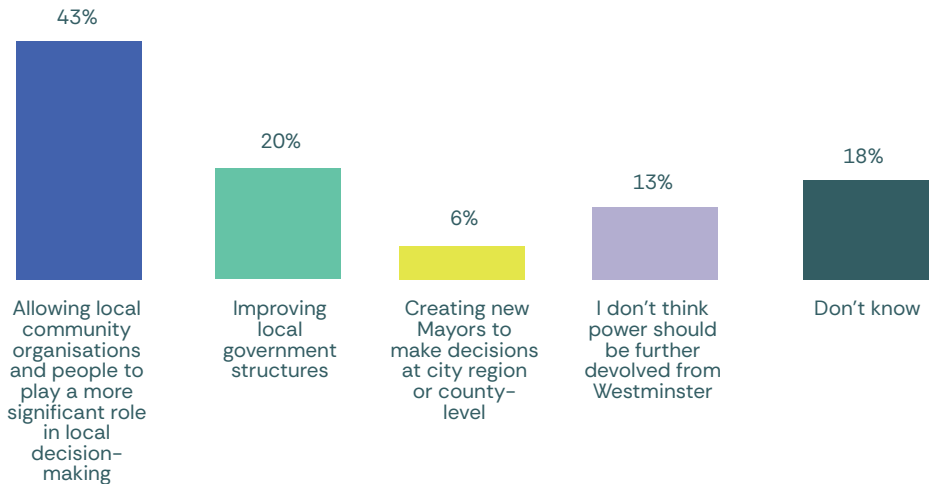
This supports findings from a poll by Opinium for We’re Right Here, the campaign for community power, earlier this year, which found that the public’s top priority for the devolution agenda is to enable local people and community organisations to play a greater role in local decision-making.<sup>4</sup>

The We’re Right Here poll also shows that the public would prefer communities to have a greater say in how smaller amounts of funding are spent, rather than a lesser degree of control over a bigger pot of cash.



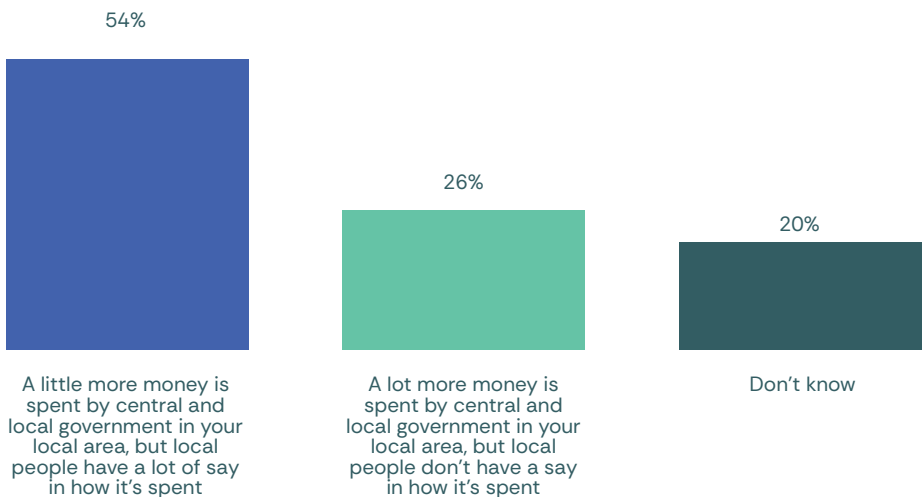
*Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth*

## Which if the following, if any, do you think is the most important goal for government to prioritise when devolving power from Westminster?



Source: Opinium from We're Right Here (February 2025) Sample size = 2,000

## Which of the following scenarios would you prefer?



Source: Opinium from We're Right Here (February 2025) Sample size = 2,000

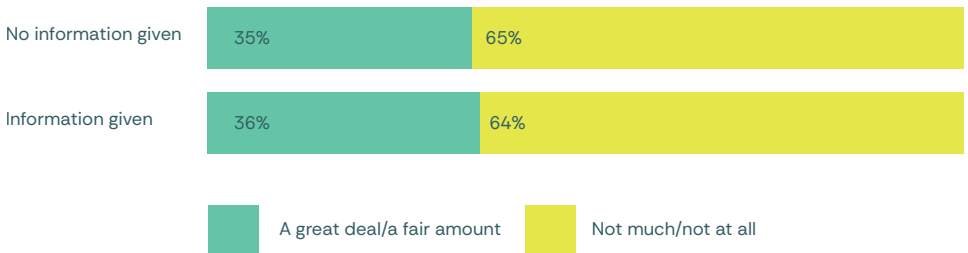
## The public has mixed views on whether government wants to empower communities

However, despite a spate of recent policies with positive implications for community power, the public's view of whether government shares its belief that community empowerment is important is mixed.

Around 35% of Britons think the government is fairly or greatly interested in giving more power to local communities. When prompted with a list of recent community empowerment policies introduced by the government (the Plan for Neighbourhoods, the Community Right to Buy and the Local Power Plan) before the question, this increased by only one percentage point.

### To what extent do you think this government is interested in giving more power to local communities around Britain?

Before this question, half the sample was given information about three of the government's flagship community empowerment policies (the Plan for Neighbourhoods, the Community Right to Buy and the Local Power Plan), and the other half was given no information. The information (thereby greater awareness) did not seem to drive a substantial difference in opinion – two thirds felt the government was not very, or not at all, interested in giving more power to local communities.



Source: More in Common for Power to Change (29 August – 1 September 2025)  
Sample size = 1,020 (no policies) and 1,022 (with policies)

## Despite a favourable view of community empowerment, the public's awareness of the government's policies so far remains low

In comparison with other policies introduced in the last year, the three community empowerment policies have a favourable rating but low recognition among the public.

Going further to elevate the community empowerment agenda is vital if government wants to show that it is making a difference in people's lives and the places where they live ahead of the next election. Giving local people more power and resources (even through relatively small-scale investments) can help create change that is tangibly felt in our everyday lives and show that things are improving. Enabling them to take ownership of local spaces and services that matter to them helps bring people together around the things we all care about, not the ones that drive us. Community businesses can help achieve the change government – and the public – are seeking.



*The Annexe (Wharton Trust), Hartlepool*



Source: More in Common for Power to Change August 2025 • Net % saying this reflects positively = % saying incident either reflects very or somewhat positively

# What communities can achieve



*Fordhall Farm, Market Drayton*

Up and down the country, community businesses are already working to build stronger, more connected communities and better places to live and work. They use business as a tool to put more money into the local economy, to secure the future of community spaces people care about, and create good, stable jobs. This helps to make growth real for ordinary people, where we can see and feel the effects of change in our everyday lives, and live good lives alongside one another.

There is talent and expertise in every community but opportunity is not evenly spread – government should make sure communities have the tools to make a difference themselves. To do so, they might learn from community business themselves who time and time again, in the words of Vidhya Alakeson, Deputy Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, have demonstrated “ambition that seemed almost outlandish, delivered by incredible people working with their communities, building on what was there, not focusing on what was missing”.<sup>5</sup>

Communities can't do everything alone and some issues will demand more leadership from the central or local state than others. But it's essential that communities are part of the conversation about how and where change happens.

This party conference season, we're bringing community business leaders into the heart of the action, to share the message that a different – and better – way of working between communities and the state is possible. Together, government and communities can build trust and a sense of reciprocity, drive innovation and deliver change.

## Stories of community-led renewal

These stories come from community business leaders travelling to the Labour Party Conference 2025 to ask government for its support and partnership. They represent just a fraction of the passion, ambition and potential in our communities, and have all experienced their share of the challenges and frustrations holding our communities back.

Growth that people can see and feel:

# SAFE Regeneration, Bootle

SAFE believes that everyone deserves to live in a happy, healthy neighbourhood. Based in Bootle, in an area in the top 10% most deprived areas in the country, they are a community business focused on building resilient communities through empowerment, equality, and sustainable business.<sup>6</sup>

Their work is guided by people with real experience of the problems they seek to address, including poverty, crumbling social and cultural infrastructure, a lack of affordable quality housing, and unemployment and low paid, insecure work.

## Supporting inclusive business growth

SAFE Regeneration provides business startup and growth support to entrepreneurs in Bootle, which has supported the creation of more than 250 small businesses, helped 278 start-ups achieve growth, and helped to create over 500 jobs and more than 90 apprenticeships.

Key to their work is the regeneration of local buildings and spaces that have fallen into disrepair and out of productive use. In 2012, they bought St Mary's Art Complex, a former school building which now houses their business support offer as well as 13 tenant organisations. SAFE has also founded an ethical development non-profit that helps communities across the North West to improve their own lives by building community-led homes, businesses and neighbourhoods.



## Their message to government

“ Trust us to know our communities. Trust us to empower our communities to be the drivers of change. Trust us to work in partnership for the greatest impact. We have the passion, commitment, expertise and lived experience and we’re right here.

”

**Jane Dawe, SAFE Regeneration**



Caring for people and the planet:

## Fordhall Community Land Initiative, Shropshire

Fordhall Farm is one of England's oldest organic farms. It was faced with industrial development pressures in the early 2000s due to a distant landowner wanting to capitalise on their asset. The Hollins family, who had been tenants and farmed the land for generations, fought back. With support from the local community and 8,000 others world-wide, the farm was saved from development and placed into community ownership in perpetuity, operating as a community benefit society. Now celebrating almost 20 years in community ownership, it is testament to what can be achieved when a community comes together for positive action.

### A healthy, connected community

Fordhall Farm's mission is to restore connections between people and the land, to create change that builds health and resilience for both people and the planet.

With a tenant farmer managing the farm, the community benefit society runs programmes to promote good health and wellbeing, including green social prescribing for people with a cancer diagnosis, projects for vulnerable young people, and a care farm for adults with learning disabilities. They also offer volunteering and apprenticeships for the unemployed or retired, helping build skills and confidence, with a sense of purpose and belonging in their community. The site collectively employs over 100 local people.

With support from Power to Change, Fordhall Farm is helping to develop a new community and family hub in Market Drayton by piloting a community covenant as a vehicle for shared decision-making between the local community and Shropshire Council. The aim of the community covenant is to enable the council and community to find better solutions, problem solve together, pool resources and ensure they are serving local people in the best way possible.<sup>7</sup>



## Their message to government

“ Those of us who work on the ground, within our communities, understand them best. We are part of the fabric of our community. We are embedded within it and we have a vested interest in helping our communities to thrive. When organisations like us are empowered, both through the ownership of local assets and through sharing decision-making powers with local authorities, we can pool resources, make better decisions, work effectively and achieve greater impact for the benefit of our community and natural environment.

”

**Charlotte Hollins, Fordhall Community Land Initiative**

Turning local pride into potential:

# Future Wolverton, Milton Keynes

Wolverton has long been considered as an area in need of regeneration. Over the years there have been numerous regeneration strategies based on improvements to the built environment and changes to the public realm. All of these plans have ignored the very special thing about the place – the cohesive nature of the community and pride that local people feel. Future Wolverton harnesses the passion that local people have for their place, and focuses it on projects which meet local need. Future Wolverton supports and showcases the skills, talents and creativity of the local community, providing an organisational framework within which local ambitions can be realized and big change can happen.

## Helping young people into paid employment

Through their first community asset, the Old School, Future Wolverton supports young people who are not in education or employment through programmes of work-related learning. Young people work within the community business, mentored and supported by Future Wolverton's staff team who help them develop skills and work out their future direction. Over 60% of the young people they have supported go back to education or onto paid employment.





## Their message to government

“ The community business sector holds the answers to many of the issues that political leaders are grappling with today, so why do we feel ignored and undervalued?

Every MP will know the pride that people feel in their town and city. It is an untapped resource which already delivers thousands of volunteer-led events and activities in every constituency. Every MP will also know the people in their constituency who get things done, often with few resources, and against all odds.

Imagine what could be achieved if local pride and local people were supported to address local issues by the engine of government?”

**Marie Osborne, Future Wolverton**

”

Transforming the high street through  
community ownership:

## Nudge Community Builders, Plymouth

Nudge was set up by local residents to bring empty buildings back into use for lasting local benefit on Union Street, the main street that cuts through the Stonehouse neighbourhood. When Nudge started, 25% of the land was standing empty. Now, they have secured a quarter of that and are bringing spaces back into use for a wide range of activities that create jobs, homes and opportunities for local people.

Nudge's ambition is to create change that doesn't gentrify the area but, through community ownership, love and care, makes a lasting difference for people that can benefit the most. They want to secure more buildings along the street and show how place based change can have more impact and be more effective and creative when it grows from the grassroots.

### Creating space for community

Nudge are bringing buildings back into use that have been empty for 10 years or more and have secured over 4000sqm of land – 2 buildings that are leased and three into community ownership. These have stood empty due to complete market failure on the street, neglectful private ownership and have had significant impacts in the community including high levels of crime and antisocial behaviour.

Nudge has also provided two homes for local people and we have created space for 25 small businesses with more to come. Through these spaces they have been able to support people back into work from living in homeless accommodation or with criminal records. They have worked with over 100 volunteers, many of whom have made improvements in their wellbeing and health through delivering for their community. But they also want to do more: Nudge has plans for a scheme that would bring forward supported accommodation for 24 people in the local area who need it, but as a community land trust, they can't access capital at the scale needed to get building and need government's help to open these doors.



## Their message to government

“

People trust communities to make the changes needed but the systems in place do not. You have the power to enable local councils and services to better support organisations like ours – encourage them to see community led solutions as the first resort and not the last. We can create economic, social and environmental improvements that communities see and experience in a really direct way. It’s preventative, effective and long term.

”

**Hannah Sloggett, Nudge Community Builders**

# How we work to create change

The economy is failing to deliver for everyone in our society, and too many communities feel powerless to make where they live better. We need a different way of doing business that puts more power into communities' hands and better serves people and their place.

We are bringing together the innovation, evidence and networks needed to grow the contribution of community business to our economy and society. By driving changes in policy, changing institutional mindsets and behaviours, unlocking finance, and bringing partners together to plan and deliver across sectors, we are unlocking the potential of community business to address the big challenges facing the nation.

## Practically, this means we have a focus on three strategic priorities:

- Growing community led local economies
- Creating community powered places and spaces
- Building community centred services

## To do this, we:

- Innovate and test ideas in practice
- Undertake research and learning
- Shape policy development and advocate for change
- Connect people and organisations
- Advise and partner with others

We also work side by side with community business leaders, to remain grounded in what's really happening in communities up and down the country. The message from community business is loud and clear – they want more power over the decisions that affect them, and your support to make good things happen where they live. Join us in helping them to create more resilient communities and places and renew our nation from the bottom up.

For more information, please visit [www.powertochange.org.uk](http://www.powertochange.org.uk) or contact [lucy.symington@powertochange.org.uk](mailto:lucy.symington@powertochange.org.uk).

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**Power to  
Change**

## About Power to Change

Power to Change is the think-do tank that backs community business.

We back community business from the ground up. We turn bold ideas into action so communities have the power to change what matters to them.

We know community business works to build stronger communities and better places to live. We've seen people create resilient and prosperous local economies when power is in community hands. We also know the barriers that stand in the way of their success.

We're using our experience to bring partners together to do, test and learn what works. We're shaping the conditions for community business to thrive.

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