

Working for the Fenland Dollar: An Evaluation of Local Exchange Trading Schemes as an Informal Employment Strategy to Tackle Social Exclusion

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ABSTRACT This article argues that in the current context of rising unemployment and growing exclusion from the traditional locus of social cohesion and income distribution, a new approach to social policy and employment is required. The scope of informal employment strategies to tackle social exclusion needs to be examined. One such initiative, which has been attracting increasing attention from policy-makers, is the Local Exchange Trading Scheme (LETS) local grassroots community currency which operates as a cashless trading network for members. LETS have been growing throughout the UK in recent years. Findings are presented from a case study of a LETS scheme. LETS was found to be successful at delivering new informal employment opportunities to socially excluded groups, boosting their income, and providing a forum for social interaction and community-building. However, there is scope for much greater participation. LETS's small size restricts its usefulness in the labour market for informal employment, and current state policy towards benefit recipients working on LETS is an obstacle. Possibilities for mainstream incorporation into welfare strategies are limited by the informal, non-commercial and deeply personal value regime enacted within LETS. Yet professionalisation would threaten this nascent socially embedded economic geography. State support for LETS, while highly desirable, should not be considered an unproblematic advocacy issue.

In the context of high levels of long-term unemployment and exclusion from traditional, secure employment for growing numbers of people in the UK (OECD 1994), alternative strategies for income generation and social inclusion demand consideration (Bayliss 1998; Macfarlane 1997). This article considers the role of Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS) as a self-help informal employment¹ initiative to tackle social exclusion by providing income, working opportunities, social cohesion, and access to financial services to the unemployed and people living on low incomes. It presents findings from a recent case study of one scheme, the King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS which is located around the fenlands of Cambridgeshire and West

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Norfolk, and discusses the implications of these findings for LETS development and social policy in general.

A LETS is a type of cashless trading organisation, a grassroots-level community-run initiative that allows members to trade goods and services among themselves in exchange for payment in a local currency (Croall 1997). This income defines LETS as a type of informal employment, though not in the usual sense of remuneration in conventional money. Instead, payment is in a token local currency that is purely notional (existing only as a set of accounts, rather than as notes or coins) and cannot be used outside the scheme. These currencies are frequently named and constituted in locally significant ways (hence the Totnes 'acorn', the Brecon 'beacon' and the Manchester 'bobbin'). In many schemes, the local unit is equivalent to a pound sterling, but this is not always the case, and even so, different value regimes often apply within LETS.² The LETS movement has grown phenomenally from just a handful of schemes in the early 1990s to over 350 in the UK today, with approximately eighty-six members in each, and with individual members trading an average of £73-worth a year (estimated to total more than £2 million a year overall) (Williams 1996a). The majority of transactions are for consumer services, for example gardening, babysitting, property maintenance, health services, training, and also for the hire of goods (e.g. car lifts, washing machines etc.), and the sale of local produce and crafts.

LETS are an intriguing subject for study: they are, technically, simply mechanisms for facilitating trade within cash-poor localities, yet their significance for community-building and social cohesion has been argued to be substantial (Lee 1996; Pacione 1997a, 1997b; Seyfang 1998, 1999). While much analysis of LETS has concentrated on its political and social aspects, there has been relatively little specific study of LETS as a provider of informal employment opportunities. The principal exception is Williams (1996a, 1996b), who outlines the ways that LETS potentially affords great opportunities for informal employment, enabling the jobless to develop skills and build contacts, earn income and contribute to society, overcoming many of the barriers to informal employment faced by those on low incomes and out of work. These claims for LETS are re-examined here in the light of new empirical evidence.

Methodology

While others have conducted national surveys and case studies with limited membership participation (Williams 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Lee 1996; North 1999), the present study gathered information from a variety of interlocking methods and sources, allowing triangulation and claims of higher validity to be made. A case study presents research opportunities not afforded by general overviews, highlighting particular social interactions in situ, while maintaining 'the holistic and meaningful characteristic of real-life events' (Yin 1989:14). Though depicting the very specific

realities of one, unique, situation, it nevertheless reveals much about underlying structures, dynamics and values, which may be applicable in other similar situations (Sayer 1992), and this is even more the case in the example of innovative socio-economic phenomena such as LETS.

The findings presented are from an intensive case study of a LETS scheme (King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS). First, a postal questionnaire was sent to the whole current membership (107 members), and achieved a valid response rate of 60 per cent (64 respondents). The survey respondents were broadly representative of the whole scheme in terms of the length of membership and people who left the scheme during the research period. Survey respondents tended to be more active than average, though there was still good representation of very new members and those who had not traded at all. Members were asked about their experiences on the scheme, their motivations, feelings, values and visions for the future of LETS. Second, the trading records of the entire scheme were analysed (for the first time in LETS case-study research) to uncover patterns in the distribution of trade and the social characteristics of respondents. Third, additional questionnaires and unstructured interviews with the scheme's coordinators provided richer information on their rationales and values for the scheme, their experiences of running it, the rules and regulations they used and the intentions behind these. Fourth, the scheme's publicity, handbook, directory, newsletters and minutes offered further insight into the values and development trajectory of the scheme. In the following discussion, survey responses and trading analysis are indicated as such; coordinators and members quotations are given from both survey and interview material, and these, along with the documentary material inform and contextualise the quantitative data.

Evaluating LETS

King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS covers a very large rural area around the East Anglian working port town of King's Lynn, and spreading down towards the Cambridgeshire fenlands. This group was eighteen months old at the time of first contact, and had 107 members then, growing slowly and steadily. Its members spent the local currency (on this scheme called 'shells' or 's') equivalent of around £8,700 on about 600 transactions a year, which represents a turnover (i.e. income plus expenditure) of £17,400, nearly three times the typical UK LETS turnover of £6,000. On average, they had an annual turnover of £145 per capita,³ over twice the national average of £70 worth (Williams 1996a).⁴

The membership: who joins the scheme and why?

To assess the performance of LETS in providing informal employment opportunities for social groups excluded from formal employment, the first matter to be addressed is the question of who joins LETS schemes and why.⁵ The

demographic profile of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members is compared with the local population in Table 1 to demonstrate the membership biases.

The most striking characteristic of the scheme's members is that four-fifths of them are women. A female bias is found in the other LETS for which information is available, but this is more usually around two-thirds of members. King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members also differed from the local population in terms of employment and economic status. Almost half of the survey respondents (45 per cent) are not currently in formal employment,⁶ considerably higher than in some other LETS. Of the constituent groups in this category, there is a higher than expected (for the local population) number of unemployed members, and people

Table 1
Economic status of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members compared with the local population

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>% of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members</i>	<i>% of King's Lynn and West Norfolk population</i>
Male	13	20	49.4
Female	51	80	50.6
Employed or self-employed ^a	34	55	53.3
Full-time employed	8	13	34.4
Part-time employed	13	21	10.3
Self-employed	13	21	8.6
Not in employment ^a	28	45	46.7
Unemployed/govt scheme	5	8	5.4
Domestic	8	13	13.0
Retired	10	16	22.3
Permanently sick	5	8	3.2
% from low-income households (<£175/wk £9,100/yr.) ^b	30	54	35
% from high-income households (>£375/wk £9,100/yr.) ^b	6	11	36
Mean annual household income ^b	56	£11,752	£17,992

Source: Author's survey of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members, the LETS accounts, Office of Population and Census Statistics (1991), Office on National Statistics (1996)

Notes:

^aThere were 2 non-respondents to the employment status question on the survey (3.1%).

^bThere were 8 non-respondents to the household income question on the survey (12.5%).

• 2.9% of the local population are students; none of the LETS members were students.

registered as permanently sick. Those who do have formal employment are twice as likely to be in part-time positions, or self-employed, than average for the local population. Overall, LETS members are from the less well-off groups in society. The average gross weekly household income of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members is £226, a third less than the regional average household income of £346. Of East Anglian households, just over a third have a gross weekly income of under £175 a week (here defined as 'low income'), but over half of the LETS members fall into this household income bracket. At the other end of the income scale, more than a third of households in the region have an income of more than £375 a week, while only one in nine LETS members do so. This is a broadly similar income profile to the other LETS membership studies available.

This scheme, in common with other LETS, largely attracts members who are not engaged in full-time employment but who also have economic needs to be met and have the time available to offer their skills – in other words, the groups in society who need access to informal employment opportunities the most. This is confirmed by examining the motivations of people who join the scheme. Of those who responded to the survey, a majority of 60 per cent of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members (65 per cent of participants from low-income households and 64 per cent of those not in employment) joined the scheme explicitly for economic reasons. They wanted to engage in work and earn credit that would not have been possible with cash, and gave their motivations as, for example: 'to save money', 'to trade my skills', 'to improve my standard of living' and 'because I needed help that I could not afford to pay for'. These participants were clearly looking for income-boosting and informal employment opportunities. How successful have they been at achieving these aims?

LETS trading: who uses the scheme and what difference does it make?

On average, survey respondents spent the equivalent of £100 a year each on LETS (representing a turnover of £200, higher than average for the whole scheme). This is roughly typical of annual per capita trading figures found in other LETS case studies ranging from £40 in Calderdale LETS (Williams 1996a), £52 in Diss (Seyfang 1997), £71 in Skye (Pacione 1997b) and £82 in West Glasgow (Pacione 1997a), to £132 in Manchester (Williams 1996b) and £153 in Totnes (Williams 1996c).⁷ The trading patterns on King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS show that on average, members made thirteen transactions each, with 6.5 *different* other people. Trading is not evenly distributed, however, and a minority of members perform the majority of trading (though the participation is wider than that uncovered in other case studies of LETS), while around a third do not trade at all, which is similar to that found in other schemes. Clearly, most trades are of low economic value (this is particularly the case on trading days), yet members place a very high value on their trade (see below), which indicates that price is a poor indicator of the derived benefit of trading on LETS.

Table 2 reveals the economic significance of LETS earnings for different members with different social characteristics. Jobless members were the most active participants, and gained the most in relative terms too. While earnings on LETS represent 0.9 per cent of members' average household income, this is highest for unpaid domestic workers (amounting to 2.6 per cent of their income) and for the unemployed (1.6 per cent), and the lowest for members in full-time employment (0.3 per cent). Thus the largest benefits are gained by those who do not normally have access to formal employment – the jobless, the sick and disabled, and those whose domestic work is unpaid who are among the most economically disadvantaged LETS members.

These figures appear small, but what is the significance of this economic activity? In 28 per cent of informal employment transactions on LETS,⁸ the person stated they would not have supplied the work or goods at all outside the scheme. Furthermore, for those who joined with explicitly economic motivations, 46 per cent of their income-earning trades would have been foregone, demonstrating that these participants are successfully meeting their objectives of finding opportunities for informal employment on the scheme: typical comments were: 'it kept me employed', 'it increased business', 'it helps on a low income' and 'it gives me access to what I can not buy for money'. While 48 per cent of all survey respondents reported new opportunities to earn income, those from low-income households benefited the most (60 per cent reported new working opportunities). Furthermore, these members gained greater reward: while 34 per cent of all respondents reported being paid more highly than they would have been in the mainstream economy, 43 per cent

Table 2
The economic significance of LETS income to King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members

	<i>No. of respondents</i>	<i>Annual average income on LETS (£ equivalent)</i>	<i>Annual average household income (£)</i>	<i>LETS income as a proportion of household income (%)</i>
All survey respondents	55	100	£11,752	0.9
Employed or self-employed	31	82	£14,404	0.6
Full-time employed	6	71	£20,384	0.3
Part-time employed	13	89	£16,172	0.6
Self-employed	12	83	£9,568	0.9
Not in employment	24	126	£8,216	1.5
Unemployed/govt scheme	5	73	£4,860	1.6
Domestic	6	233	£8,840	2.6
Retired	8	59	£9,256	0.6
Permanently Sick	5	141	£9,568	1.5

Source: author's survey of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members, the LETS accounts.

of those from low-income households did so. LETS also acts as a source of interest-free credit, by allowing members to spend local currency, and have a 'negative' balance sheet, without incurring charges for being in 'debt'. It therefore offers access to a financial service from which certain socio-economic groups are normally excluded in the mainstream economy: and while 19 per cent of all respondents said they had used the scheme as such, 23 per cent of members from low-income households, and 25 per cent of jobless participants did so. This credit was used to access a wide range of life-enhancing services that members could not have afforded otherwise, for example, a forty-year-old part-time employee from a low-income household had a car engine fitted, a carpet laid and some plumbing done, while a young disabled woman had employed someone on LETS to lay a patio for her and do some decorating. These simple examples demonstrate how LETS enables participants to access help in improving their quality of life, and their standard of living, which make a real difference. This evidence supports Pearce and Wadhams' (1998) findings that LETS offers a niche market for preventative maintenance services whose significance to participants (in terms of improving quality of life) is far greater than the economic activity suggests. The LETS is therefore delivering more significant economic benefits to the groups facing the strongest social and financial exclusion, demonstrating a socially equitable impact.

In tandem with the economic opportunities available, LETS also enables people to make contacts and friendships, meeting another need of the jobless and those on low incomes, and leading indirectly to greater participation in informal and formal employment. A desire to widen social networks and get more involved in community life was one of the motivations for 40 per cent of King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members when they joined the scheme (and correspondingly for 48 per cent of jobless members and 54 per cent of those from low income households). The social aspects of membership are therefore important, and provided the widest spread of benefits. For nearly three-quarters of the survey respondents (74 per cent), LETS was a way of meeting people and making new friends, and for the jobless and low income respondents, it addressed their needs for widening social networks to an even greater degree, being reported by 82 per cent and 87 per cent respectively. For 43 per cent of respondents, it had helped them to get more involved in community life: 'such organisations help tackle country area isolation' said one man. Another member, an unemployed woman, felt that 'LETS means I do not feel isolated, it is always something to fall back on'. A woman living on low income, and caring for an invalid relative found the social side of LETS was the most important for her. She explained 'I find my lifestyle very rushed and stressful ... working in someone else's garden where I can talk to someone, takes the lid off the pressure for an hour or so. I find it better than official respite time.'

Social gatherings and trading meetings were effective means of fostering community feeling and stimulating trading. Members who combined social goals with

economic motivations for joining were the most successful at finding new working opportunities on LETS (67 per cent had done so). This confirms Thorne's finding that a key factor for success is a desire for both 'social integration and the exchange of goods and services; if only one aspect is emphasised the system will be dysfunctional' (1996:1372).

Several King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS members were disabled, sick or infirm: 8 per cent of respondents described their economic status as 'permanently sick', and a similar number again referred to illness or mental health problems. Nearly a quarter of all respondents (23 per cent) felt LETS had helped them build their self-confidence: 'it "gently" increased interactive social skills and renews confidence to move towards future employment' explained a middle-aged woman from a low-income household, and a founder member remarked that 'it provides a setting for self-worth to grow'. Another member explained that 'I am able to earn [shells] with my administrative skills, whilst in the cash economy I am unemployable because of my physical disability ... LETS enables me to continue to feel a useful working member of society.' These opportunities for personal development and renewing self-confidence were most strongly felt by those outside formal employment (28 per cent reported them), and as such the LETS scheme clearly contributes towards 'employability' in terms of self-esteem and improving inter-personal skills: 'occupational therapy for the nation', as one coordinator explained.

The LETS was largely seen as an informal social support network rather than as an economic system comparable with the conventional economy. Most members (72 per cent, and 80 per cent from low-income households and 79 per cent of those not engaged in formal employment) enjoyed the ways that doing business on LETS was unlike the cash economy: the most commonly reported benefit of the scheme was that people were 'more friendly and informal', 'more helpful', 'trusting' and 'patient', 'more cooperative and equal', and LETS interactions were thought to have 'fewer social barriers' and 'a caring element, with more communication' than trading in the cash economy. The LETS then became a cherished space for the expression of compassionate and human-centred values normally crowded out of the competitive conventional economy: 'There is an assumption of values other than money', 'earning a shell means more than earning a pound'. LETS was perceived as filling a niche between existing informal support structures and the cash economy: 'There are "jobs" we can ask each other that we could not ask in the "open market"'. In other words, LETS complemented formal employment rather than either displacing it or directing participants into it.

Local money systems like LETS offer a unique opportunity for experimentation with different value systems and re-embedded local economic geographies. Three-quarters of respondents (75 per cent) (and 83 per cent from low-income households) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that LETS was a practical expression of an economy based on fairer and more socially just principles than the conventional

economy. Respondents explanatory comments revealed that this was mainly due to a common hourly rate of payment adopted by the coordinators as a regulatory policy to reduce the wage disparities experienced in the formal labour market: they claim that ‘everyone’s skills are equally valuable’, ‘every member begins and remains on an equal footing’, and so on. This demonstrates commitment to a socially equitable distribution of benefits, and those who participate the least in the conventional economy are gaining the most on LETS from the opportunity to re-define their economic practices and values, even on such a limited scale.

In addition to providing income-supplementing opportunities through informal employment, LETS could also boost employability, and provide training and welfare options for the unemployed. Of all past and present trading members, 13 per cent have purchased educational or retraining services on the scheme (for example computer lessons, car mechanics tuition, etc.), and survey respondents stated that in every case, their ‘training’ would have been foregone in the absence of LETS. Enhancing ‘employability’ covers a combination of growing self-confidence, learning skills, gaining experience and building social contacts, and LETS is effective at each of those things. However, the evidence from King’s Lynn and West Norfolk LETS indicates that LETS is not being used directly as a bridge into formal employment: only three respondents not in formal employment said they found LETS helpful in coping with unemployment, and only two people said they had acquired training and work experience on the scheme which was specifically useful for mainstream employment.

The Limitations of LETS: obstacles to be overcome

Despite these large social and economic benefits, there are serious obstacles and difficulties faced by disadvantaged LETS members in finding informal employment opportunities on LETS. Income generation opportunities on LETS *can* be flexible and varied, but are not always so in practice (Seyfang 1997). The main internal obstacles relate to the size of the scheme, and the relatively limited market for services. The widely dispersed LETS population limited the accessible market even further, and trading was much more active among geographically located membership ‘clusters’. Problems of poor information flow and inefficient operations were raised, along with some complaints about the personal effort and inconvenience required to trade on LETS, compared with using conventional money. However, it was predominantly the formally employed participants who made these complaints, or who felt their LETS wages were too low or there were not enough mainstream businesses involved; jobless and low-income members did not find these factors such a problem.

The main external obstacle to LETS as a mainstream welfare-supplement or intermediate labour market, after the need for financial assistance for administrative and publicity costs, remains the government’s rules on LETS and social security

benefits. LETS earnings are counted as though they were cash income, against means-tested benefits (LETSlink UK 1998). Consequently King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS organisers felt they could not actively promote the scheme to the very groups of people who could make the best use of the scheme, for risk of anybody losing cash benefits. However, even if state benefit regulations were overhauled, there remain structural limitations to the extent to which LETS, in its current state, can deliver services and informal-to-formal employment opportunities to a broader range of socially excluded members. The operational difficulties described above (of size, scope, the limited market, informality and inefficiencies), in combination with a very different value regime expressed within LETS, present large obstacles to the widespread use and commercial accessibility of LETS. Some of the scheme's coordinators would have liked to recruit more professionals and businesses, but the few who did offer such services found it problematic to integrate their cash and LETS accounts, and struggled with the discrepancy between the casual, friendly approach to LETS trading and the commercial logic of running a business.

Conclusions

The future of LETS, as an informal employment strategy, can be seen as advantageous from a wide variety of political positions. Some argue it may function as a bridge to formal employment (Williams 1996b), as an entrepreneurial self-help project to supplement declining (or withdrawn) state welfare payments (Fung, 1996), or within a 'social economy' perspective, can provide opportunities for social contact, reward and recognition, self-esteem and skill development, plus social capital regeneration and cohesion equal to or greater than that offered by formal employment (Offe and Heinze 1992; Cahn, 1994).

This paper has shown that the case study LETS has some success at delivering informal employment opportunities to people on the margins of the formal economy, with the membership being largely of the poor and unemployed, seeking access to income and services they could not otherwise afford. LETS overcame many of the barriers faced by the jobless when attempting to undertake informal employment: it offered access to interest-free credit, made goods and equipment available to hire, provided a forum for social interaction, and enabled skills development and training. For many of these people, the alternative to working for a fenland dollar (or more accurately, a 'shell') on LETS would have been not working at all. Local money schemes like LETS could therefore potentially play a significant role within a social policy agenda that seeks to empower the socially excluded to engage in economic activity to help themselves. However, LETS are currently relatively small in scale, and while the evidence presented here suggests that internal organisational improvements would facilitate expansion, so attracting a wider membership, and offering scope for much greater participation in informal

employment, the value dynamics uncovered here remain powerful obstacles preventing LETS from mainstream integration and bridging the gap between informal and formal employment.

A constructive social and economic policy would therefore seek to aid LETS development to overcome its internal barriers of size and scope, and at the same time foster a supportive external environment which provides material assistance in the running of LETS schemes, and enables those on benefits to participate without threatening their welfare payments, as has been the case in Australia.⁹ However the value-conflicts and internal dynamics shown in this case study inform wider debates about LETS and social policy: upscaling LETS and incorporating it into mainstream welfare strategies is not unproblematic. There is much to lose from a naive advocacy of mainstreaming LETS as a pluralistic policy tool: it might be technically possible to re-create LETS along more professional and businesslike lines, but the evidence suggests that to do so would be counter-productive. The majority of LETS members enjoy LETS precisely because it *is* different. Mainstreaming LETS risks crowding out the social values which make it a distinctive economic and social sphere for informal employment.

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NOTES

1. The term 'informal employment' in this study refers to all kinds of paid work done for someone else, which is undertaken outside state regulation for tax, labour law or social security purposes, but is in all other respects legal.
2. Indeed, among some LETS members in other schemes, a standard fee (for example, one 'bobbin' in Manchester) is payable regardless of the job undertaken (Croall 1997). In some ways, then, LETS is akin to unpaid community exchange, but such categorisations are neither sharply distinguished nor mutually exclusive in real life, and there is much to be gained from conceiving of LETS as a tool for informal employment and examining its capacity in those more policy-relevant terms.
3. These trading figures are calculated from the accounts, and cover all past and present members.
4. A common source of error and confusion in other studies when reporting even straightforward quantitative measures as these is to talk about 'trading' and 'turnover' interchangeably. Since turnover is a measure of incomes *plus* outgoings, it is twice as high as a measure of earnings or expenditure. Care must be taken when comparing studies: Williams (1996a) refers to 'turnover'.
5. Other case studies of LETS which analyse demographic profiles of members from membership surveys include those of West Glasgow (Pacione 1997a), Skye (Pacione 1997b); Manchester (Williams 1996b), Totnes (Williams 1996c) and Calderdale (Williams 1996a). It

is impossible to go into detail here; where comparable information is available from these case studies, it is referred to in the most general terms. For a full comparison with King's Lynn and West Norfolk LETS, see Seyfang (1998).

6. This 'not in employment' or 'jobless' category comprises the unemployed, the permanently sick, the retired, and those engaged in unpaid domestic work.
7. Data limitations due to the issues described in footnote 6 apply here too.
8. This analysis requires more detailed, qualitative data to that which is available from trading records alone: from the membership survey, 179 examples of income-generating trades were given by 81% of respondents. This excludes income from KwinLETS for administrative work.
9. To date there has been no research in the impact of this social policy on LETS participation and trading.

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