

BENEFITS

CHALLENGES

...liveing throughout the
...
...local

- Building trust in the
community
→ This takes time + hone

funding landscape reverting bac
to being centralised

... now be earned and
... been taken
... areas to learn

→ continuing this witho

A matter of time

To what extent did being a
time-limited spend-out funder
influence Local Trust and Big Local?

February 2026

Local Trust

About Local Trust

Local Trust is a national charity set up in 2011 to deliver the Big Local programme. We believe that trusting communities and giving them more power will enable local people to significantly improve their quality of life and the places in which they live.

We support Big Local partnerships by helping them to manage their grants, network with their peers and develop the skills they need to deliver lasting local change. Local Trust also provides specialist technical support to Big Local areas, as well as monitoring and evaluating the overall programme. Local Trust's work contributes to our wider aims of demonstrating the value of long term, resourced funding. Using the learnings from the Big Local programme, we're working to bring about a wider transformation in the way policy makers, funders and other agencies engage with communities.

About Shared Intelligence

Shared Intelligence is a public policy research consultancy with UK-based clients in central, regional, and local government, as well as charities and non-profits. It undertakes strategy development, research, and evaluation with a focus on peer learning and stakeholder engagement.

Local Trust is registered in England and Wales, charity number 1147511, company number 07833396.

Cover photo: Research workshop with Big Local residents
Photo: Ben Lee

DOI: 10.6084/m9.figshare.32080188



www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk

Contents

Executive summary	4
1 Why was Local Trust set up this way?	5
2 Does Local Trust show time-limited traits?	9
3 Did the effects rub off on Big Local areas?	13
4 Was it different from programmes without independence or time limits?	15
5 Rewards and risks	17
6 Conclusions and lessons	19

Executive summary

Local Trust commissioned this research to understand the implications of having been established as an independent trust with a fixed timeframe – especially for its main programme, Big Local. Their central research question was: “To what extent has the Trust model been a source, and enabler, of success within the Big Local programme and beyond?” To answer this question, we reviewed literature on time-limited trusts and held interviews and roundtable discussions with individuals with experience of both time-limited and perpetual models from the UK and US, and from public and private funding contexts. We also spoke with residents from Big Local areas and staff from The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF). Lastly, we gathered input from Local Trust staff and tested our emerging findings with them.

In our parallel report, *Better to spend out?*¹ we look at the wider landscape of time-limited trusts. In that report we identified eight common traits of time-limited trusts which also informed this work. Local Trust has demonstrated many of these traits including focusing on transformative and lasting change, and on highly engaged relationships with grantees, and viewing learning as legacy. But we also show that Local Trust is not an easy or clearcut example; its form and shape owe as much to the particular context of the early 2010s when it was created, as it does to strategic intent.

We also show how some of the effects of being time-limited seen in Local Trust also rubbed off on Big Local areas. This includes their sense of urgency, their attitude to risk and taking bigger bets, their focus on legacy, and their own supportive relationships with each other.

We make the case that the combination of Local Trust’s independence and its 15-year timespan amounted to a distinctive model compared with preceding place-based programmes. This gave rise to some unique rewards – not least its ability to remain focused. But it also brought risks, including the risk of revealing community needs that result from larger and longer-term structural issues. It has tried to address this through national policy advocacy.

We end by identifying three aspects of Local Trust’s approach made possible by its limited timeframe of 15 years, which influenced how Big Local operated.

- The ability to guarantee £1 million to each Big Local areas upfront and with no strings and to make that £1 million a sacrosanct sum.
- The fact that 15 years was longer than many other publicly-funded programmes, and short enough to bring focus and urgency.
- The huge investment in direct support for Big Local areas and wider programme of advice, research and policy development.

¹ Better to Spend Out? (January 2026) by Shared Intelligence for Local Trust

1 Why was Local Trust set up this way?

 **But when you've got a full stop, an end, I definitely feel like it's helped to get rid of complacency and helped to get rid of inertia.**

Local Trust Trustee

Local Trust commissioned this research to better understand the implications for Big Local of Local Trust having been established as a trust with a fixed timeframe. Local Trust wanted to identify learning that might help other funders, and look at how things changed over the course of the 15 years of Big Local. Their main research question was: "To what extent has the Trust model been a source, and enabler, of success within the Big Local programme and beyond?"

Local Trust's origins and Trust Deed

Big Local has been the UK's largest ever non-state, place-based funding programme. It was created and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), the UK's principal National Lottery distributor. The programme gave 150 communities £1 million each to spend over 15 years. TNLCF established Local Trust² to operate the £150 million programme and provided Local Trust with an additional £67 million (taking the total endowment to £217 million) to fund support, training, networking and other advice to help the 150 Big Local areas.

Under the Trust Deed, the £217 million endowment from TNLCF had to be fully spent by February 2027. Although Local Trust was not legally required to close once funds were spent, in 2022 its Trustees decided to close operations after spend-out.

Local Trust was one of six new organisations established by TNLCF between 2010 and 2015, each with an endowment that had to be spent within 10 to 20 years.

² The official name of the charity that holds the Big Local endowment from TNLCF in a Trust Fund is Big Local Trust. The name of the organisation that employs staff to deliver Big Local and does the practical management and distribution of the Trust Fund is Local Trust. However, in day-to-day business the name Local Trust is used interchangeably to refer both to the charity that holds the Trust Fund and the organisation that employs staff and does the work.



W12 Together hero aerial. Photo: W12 Together Big Local

Motivations for time-limited models in the private and public spheres

As we explain in our parallel report, *Better to spend out?*³ in the private philanthropy sphere, time-limited or spend-out trusts are often established to bring focus to a problem and to generate 'moonshot' energy and momentum – by making big grants in a short period of time. In the public sphere however, the aim is not to create a *shorter* programme, but to create a *longer* timeframe than the typical three or five years of a government programme. What is interesting however, is how public and private time-limited trusts, set up for different reasons, end up in the same place displaying similar traits – including goal focus, risk-taking, and intensive support for grantees.

Why Local Trust was set up as a time-limited, and not perpetual, trust?

From interviews with Trustees and some of the original team from The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), we have built a picture of the issues at play around the time Local Trust was created.

One reason for creating a time-limited trust rather than a perpetual one was the desire to win the confidence of residents in Big Local areas. If the Trust Fund had been perpetual, and only able to spend each year's investment income, then Local Trust would have been unable to commit £1 million to each community within a fixed timeframe. It could have made annual allocations depending on investment gains, but it couldn't have committed £1 million upfront and guaranteed communities that they could access it at any point over 10 years, with no strings and no catches. Another reason was expediency; TNLCF believed that to the general public, a perpetual endowment – despite money leaving TNLCF's books – would still be seen as another version of 'unspent' Lottery money. Whereas money going to a Trust, and then immediately committed to 150 communities, was easier to understand as having been spent.

That said, the story of why Local Trust was set up as a spend-out model does not fit a simple narrative. It was established this way for a host of reasons.

3 *Better to Spend Out?* (January 2026) by Shared Intelligence for Local Trust

A longer timescale

At a strategic level, there was a recognition from previous programmes like the TNLCF-funded Fair Share Trust, and government place-based programmes, that community-focused funding requires longer to achieve lasting change than previous programmes had tended to allow. Fair Share Trust ran for 10 years in England and Wales, and seven years in Scotland. Programmes like City Challenge, the Single Regeneration Budget, and New Deal for Communities provided funding over three to five years, and sometimes up to seven. There was also a recognition that longer timescales were especially important for enabling residents to have real influence, rather than acting as sounding boards or merely window-dressing. This formed the rationale for Big Local being established as a programme giving Big Local areas a full 10 years to spend their money.

Ensuring communities got the funding they were promised

It also seems TNLCF recognised the need for 'safety-locks' around the money to prevent the funding commitment to communities being eroded. According to TNLCF staff and others who worked on setting up Big Local, this had been an issue with the £50 million Fair Share Trust. In this case, the amount that TNLCF hoped would benefit communities was not what reached them once costs had been incurred for consultants, advisors, and organisations acting as local bankers.

Related to this, the Local Trust model also addressed another perceived shortcoming of Fair Share Trust – which was the lack of a strong national organisation to lead the programme. Fair Share Trust as a programme did not have a well-resourced organisation around it. This is part of the reason why Local Trust was given a significant additional budget to deliver support and pay for other programme costs, in addition to the money earmarked for individual communities.

Building community trust

TNLCF also believed, according to staff present at the time, that making an upfront 'no strings' commitment of £1 million to each community would help build trust in Big Local areas because the money belonged to each community from the outset. This was especially important in communities who had been promised things before and had low confidence in the reliability of public bodies.



Par Bay community garden. Photo: James Ram

Expediency

Lastly, there was also an issue of expediency for TNLCF which had accumulated a comparatively large cash reserve. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis, it could not be seen to be hoarding unspent Lottery income when so many communities were facing financial distress.

All these factors – recognition of the need for a longer-term programme, the idea that a safety-lock was needed around the money, the need to win the confidence of Big Local areas, the need for leadership, and the need to get cash out the door and off TNLCF's balance sheet – combined to make a spend-out endowment to a newly established trust a strong option. The result was that the funding was safety-locked in four ways:

- TNLCF promised that each Big Local area would receive £1 million and this was non-negotiable. In other words, it was a sacrosanct sum to be spent only by the areas themselves. This would tie the hands of Local Trust by preventing them from using Big Local areas' funds to meet other costs; those costs would have to come from elsewhere.
- TNLCF decided to create a new trust with independent governance to receive the endowment, thereby putting it out of reach of TNLCF and insulating the money from any future changes in priorities or financial context within TNLCF itself.
- An additional £47 million was provided on top of the £150 million, to ensure that a comprehensive 'funder plus' support programme could be delivered without eating into the £1 million per area. This extra endowment was later increased by a further £20 million to £67 million (taking the total endowment to £217 million) to enable the initial 10-year lifespan of Big Local to be extended to 15 years so all areas had a full decade to spend, even if it took them several years to get started.⁴
- The endowment would be made as an upfront lump sum with a spend-out requirement. Making an upfront endowment rather than a series of grants over the duration of the programme meant the trust could generate investment income on the endowment which TNLCF itself could not. Furthermore, making it a spend-out endowment meant that not only would each area be guaranteed £1 million each, but each area could be guaranteed £1 million by a specific date.⁵

In addition, TNLCF also appointed a legal 'Protector' to sit on the board of Local Trust and to ensure that Local Trust was at all times acting in accordance with the Trust Deed.

For TNLCF, this approach required a high level of risk tolerance. Concerns had to be addressed about losing control of the funds, about who these yet-to-be-created local groups would consist of, what they might spend the money on, and whether Local Trust's proposed requirement for 51% resident control would reduce the risks or create new ones.

4 The extension of the timescale from 10 to 15 years, accompanied by an increased endowment of £20 million, was in recognition of the fact that some areas would need several years to set up a partnership and create a Big Local plan. Without the extension, some areas might not have had the full decade to spend their money.

5 A perpetual endowment of the same size would have been unable to offer the same upfront commitment without tying allocations to future investment performance. While every area might still have received £1 million *eventually*, the length of time needed could not have been guaranteed; it could have taken more than 20 years or even 25, depending on the wider economic climate.

2 Does Local Trust show time-limited traits?

Can the typical effects of time-limited trusts be observed in Local Trust? Our parallel report, *Better to spend out?*, explores the wider landscape of time-limited trusts and identifies eight common traits:

- Goal driven funding – having specific objectives rather than broad themes.
- Focus on transformative system change – to disrupt and establish new models.
- Greater appetite for risks and ‘bigger bets’ – setting fewer but bigger and riskier goals.
- Engaged and supportive grantee relationships – building capacity beyond its lifetime.
- Focused on lasting change – leaving a legacy and a changed landscape.
- Investment strategies focused on impact over longevity – not having to protect the endowment or Trust Funds forever.
- Taking care over closing the gap behind them – to avoid a cliff edge for grantees and stakeholders.
- Viewing learning as legacy – using learning both as a form of accountability and to cement achievements.

Has Local Trust demonstrated these traits?

Goal driven funding: *Not straightforward.*

Local Trust did not choose which communities to fund – that was decided by TNLCF before it was created and enshrined in the Trust Deed. Secondly, the outcome sought by Local Trust was about a process – resident-led change and empowerment – rather than a specific deliverable; it was focused on ‘how’ rather than ‘what’.

On one level, therefore, Local Trust required no specific outcomes from beneficiaries at all. It was very clear about the ‘no strings’ nature of the funding – deliberately the opposite of a prescriptive goal. However, if viewed from a process perspective, Local Trust was very prescriptive. Local decision-making about spending had to be 51% resident-led and had to benefit the specified geographic areas, and the money had to be spent within a fixed timeframe.

Focus on transformative change:

Yes. Local Trust has emphasised transformation at the local and national level. In the final five years, the emphasis on transformation of national systems has grown stronger. Policy and legacy initiatives, including the Community Wealth Fund and the Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods, are directly aimed at creating new models of community empowerment with impact well beyond the Big Local programme in time and geography.



North West Ipswich community garden. Photo: Local Trust

Greater appetite for risks and ‘bigger bets’: *Not straightforward, almost paradoxical.* Local Trust has taken risks in its role as a champion of community development but less so as a grant distributor. As a grant distributor, it has shown a mix of caution and risk. It has been cautious about ensuring the money gets spent and has pushed Big Local areas to spend. It has also focused on helping or even directing slower-spending areas to take decisions to avoid running out of time. But we also heard very clearly from staff that Local Trust encourage areas to take risks – so long as the risk is through deliberate action rather than simply not spending, and that it is okay if areas’ projects do not go to plan.

As a grant distribution programme, the biggest bet was TNLCF committing £1 million each to 150 communities without knowing what they were going to spend it on, or even who was going to decide how to spend it. This was the largest ever TNLCF endowment, and the largest non-state place-based programme – so in that sense a definitive ‘big bet’. But that decision was TNLCF’s and not Local Trust’s.

In programme leadership, Local Trust demonstrated risk-appetite by being patient with Big Local areas as partnerships formed, stalled, formed again and finally got plans agreed and began spending.

Local Trust’s decision to ask TNLCF to extend the original 10-year time-limit to 15 years came from a desire to ‘keep their word’ that all areas would have a full 10 years to spend their £1 million, even if it took several years to get going. But this can also be viewed as risk-tolerant because it gave un-tested partnerships even more freedom.

As a champion of community development and community-led change on the national stage, Local Trust became more risk-tolerant as time went on. The arrival of the second chief executive was a pivot point, reflected in the change to the Trust Deed, which provided a stronger legal basis for spending beyond Big Local areas on policy, influence, research and wider learning. This was also a response to the original endowment generating more investment income than forecast. But it meant Local Trust could put organisational and financial weight behind many different projects – often highly novel and/or speculative ones – which Trustees saw as a positive approach to risk-taking. Again, the Community Wealth Fund and Parliamentary work through the Commission on Neighbourhoods and APPG on Left-Behind Neighbourhoods demonstrate an appetite to invest widely with a strategic goal of influencing policy – but by backing multiple ideas to see what sticks.

Engaged and supportive ('funder plus') grantee relationships: Yes. Local Trust has put significant resources into support that goes beyond grant funding – but having a fixed end-date was probably not the main reason for this. The driving rationale was the ethos of community development brought to Local Trust by its founders and reinforced by the Trust Deed.

However, the comprehensive support programme has been mission-led as well as demand-led. A lot of support has been demand-led or needs-led – such as providing community development advisors for every Big Local area, and technical support in response to the needs and requests of individual Big Local areas (some areas wanted advice about investing in building and assets). But support also included providing inspiration and ideas that align with Local Trust's goals but which were not specially requested by Big Local areas. For example, there has been support which has encouraged areas to consider joining national networks and movements around social enterprise, sports, art and creativity. There has also been support to encourage areas to capture impact evidence, document stories and leave a visible legacy – again not because areas asked for this, but because it supports Local Trust's mission. Over the past five years, a significant amount of support has also been tied specifically to supporting Big Local areas to plan for the time when Local Trust is no longer around.

Focused on lasting change: Yes. This has been both a statement of mission and a practical reality for Local Trust from the outset. "Creating lasting change" has been an emblematic statement of purpose directed towards Big Local areas ever since the first few years of the Trust's existence. The Trust Deed itself has a virtuous circularity that bakes in the lasting change mission. The formulation obliges Local trust "to develop the capacity and skills of the members of socially and economically disadvantaged communities, for the benefit of the public, in such a way that they are better able: (a) to identify, and help meet, their needs; and (b) to participate more fully in society." This is a classic example of a lasting solution instead of short-term alleviation. It echoes the statement of the founder's wishes, also in the Trust Deed, which requires Local Trust specifically to build on: "flexible, long-term and locally determined approaches, which support local people and committed agencies to make a difference, over the longer term."

Investment strategies focused on impact over longevity: Yes. The original endowment was subject to an investment strategy designed to exploit the potential for higher income in the early years – when Big Local partnerships were still forming and deciding their plans – and shifted to a more cautious strategy in the final few years to ensure areas could access their money without the risk of investment losses or lack of liquid cash.

As a result, the TNLCF endowment of £217 million has generated almost £60 million in additional income (an extra 27%) over the 15-year period. That said, this was achieved through a relatively conservative approach to investment risk, including switching all investments to cash (from shares and other investment assets) seven years before spend-down.

Taking care over closing the gap behind

them: Yes. The close-down strategy published in 2023 and the “closing out and moving on” workstream have been aimed at ensuring a soft landing or smooth transition for Big Local areas and other partners like Locally Trusted Organisations, as well as headquarters staff and other programme workers. For Big Local areas, there is a specially tailored support package delivered by Local Trust staff that becomes available as they hit spend-down milestones. Learning events and resources have been produced to deal with specific close-down issues like communications, fundraising, setting up new local legacy bodies, and the legal and financial nuts and bolts of drawing down final funds. Local Trust has also invested in a number of learning networks that will continue beyond its own lifetime. This includes Amazing Communities Together which is focused on community-led partnerships, and the 3ni network aimed at local public service professionals in councils, health and social care and others working at the neighbourhood level.

At a national level, Local Trust has also sought to close the gap it will leave as a national voice for community-led change by investing in the Community Wealth Fund Alliance, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Left Behind Neighbourhoods and, most recently, the Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness. These networks and organisations will not just provide vessels for the learning produced by Local Trust, they will also carry out their own work inspired by Local Trust. They provide a way for those who have supported Local Trust’s mission to continue to play an active role in championing its approach at the local level, as well as identifying the larger structural issues nationally.

Viewing learning as legacy: Yes.

Throughout its lifetime, Local Trust has invested heavily in research, learning and evaluation. It aims to leave a research legacy about the Big Local programme itself (through research into different aspects of delivery like the role of Big Local partnerships during the pandemic), and use Big Local as a platform for broader explorations of community empowerment and the needs of left-behind communities (such as the Communities in Control research and the Community Needs Index). Towards the end of the programme, Local Trust has also invested in producing learning that will continue to have influencing power beyond its lifetime by anticipating future policy questions:

- The Independent Commission on Neighbourhoods – looking ahead to the next generation of devolution.
- The Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness – a collective of researchers, practitioners, policy makers, funders and residents collaborating to deliver an ambitious vision for better connected communities across the UK.

Lastly, Local Trust has also made concrete plans for ensuring that learning from Local Trust and Big Local remain accessible – because even the best research has a limited purpose if no-one can access it. This is being done through the new Learning from Big Local website and the work just mentioned with the Centre for Collaboration in Community Connectedness.

3

Did the effects rub off on Big Local areas?

To answer this, we spoke with members of Big Local partnerships at a Local Trust event for Big Local partnerships in October 2025. We also spoke with Local Trust staff from the Policy and Communications, and Delivery teams and held interviews with senior managers and trustees.

For local residents, the timeframe of Big Local and Local Trust was more notable for being longer than usual, than for being time-limited. The timeframe of Big Local and Local Trust (compared to other programmes local partnership members knew of) has provided greater stability during major disruptions like Brexit and Covid-19, enabling communities to build strong networks and shared learning. Some Big Local partnership members recall a degree of surprise when Local Trust confirmed in 2022 that it would be closing – but it was viewed more as a surprise than a challenge.

In this context, the risk appetite of individual Big Local areas has evolved over time. There was initial caution and underspending followed by faster spending later on, especially during the crises of the pandemic and the inflation shock. Looking beyond 2026, some areas plan to follow Local Trust's lead and close down, while others aim to continue, despite the challenge of "hunting for money".

Many of the specific traits and behaviours associated with time-limited trusts have rubbed off on local areas. What is less clear is whether this is because *they* as local groups are time-limited or because their funder Local Trust is. Would they have behaved the same if the Big Local programme were ending but Local Trust were continuing?

Focus and urgency

Although the 10 (and then 15) year timespan was always known, it seems to have been in the back of the minds of Big Local areas. The time period was long enough to think big – proportionate to the £1 million which seemed a large amount – but it was not forever. The process of creating and reviewing the local Big Local plans also meant they could break down their work into manageable chunks. We also heard how some partnership members are relieved the programme has an end point. They never wanted this to last forever, but want a point in time when they can walk away with a sense of achievement and without guilt. Some also say they have found the last four years re-energising. The looming deadline has injected momentum and prevented a potential dilution of effort that might occur with an unending timescale.

Risk and ‘bigger bets’

Big Local partnerships, particularly in the early years, showed caution about spending. But this evolved over time and in different ways, depending on the nature (and personalities and skillsets) of each partnership. Many partnerships were “used to living on benefits and spending small amounts of money” which made them “greatly risk adverse, waiting for a risk worth taking”. They saw the £1 million as a major opportunity, but at the same time were afraid of wasting it or making a mistake. Big Local areas have taken risks and made mistakes, although some proudly assert that they never made the same mistake twice. Eventually, many residents came to see the 15-year timescale as long enough to try things and see what worked, and to learn and adapt. Residents on Big Local partnerships also suggested that if Local Trust had not been time-limited, both they and Local Trust might have been more risk-averse – because instead of acting in the present they might have forever held back for something better in the future.

Although Local Trust has been cautious in some regards, consciously avoiding complacency about the ability of areas to spend, the approach has also allowed areas to make mistakes, try novel approaches and take risks. Partnerships and Local Trust staff take pride in the speed at which local partnerships were able to mobilise and spend quickly during the Covid-19 pandemic, and then the inflation and cost-of-living crisis. Although not the same as risk-taking, this can be seen as an example of working through risks and choices quickly, not laboriously, to overcome a major challenge.

Focus on legacy

Big Local partnerships have adopted the language and mindset of lasting legacy. Some of this is no doubt due to strong messaging from Local Trust and the closure strategy. But it can also be seen in the issues they have focused on in their plans and how they spent their money – often pre-dating the closure strategy. For example, those who spent money on capital assets were already working towards lasting legacy, whether or not they said this overtly. Those who bought or built housing, community halls, shops and pubs had a specific goal of converting the £1 million into something lasting for their communities. They have also had to think about how these assets can become self-sustaining. Where those assets are likely to grow in value, there is also long-term community wealth creation.

In some cases, the idea of legacy for future generations is very sophisticated, notably where an area has invested in renewable energy production.

Supportive relationships with each other

In the same way Local Trust put time and money into supporting its grantees, individual Big Local areas have also devoted time to engaging with that support and supporting each other. Some areas feel that the community of 149 other areas have become their “extended family” and that their relationship with Local Trust is not an “us and them process”. There is also a strong sense among areas of being “in a similar boat” and Local Trust’s decision to stick to its own closure date has created a sense of equality in experience. One telling example of this is that Local Trust staff say residents now often ask them what *they* will be doing next in terms of work.

So in summary, yes, some Big Local areas have mirrored or emulated what they have seen in Local Trust’s behaviours, and Big Local areas have demonstrated some of those characteristics not because they have followed Local Trust’s example, but because they themselves are time-limited.

4 Was it different from programmes without independence or time limits?

It is hard to make comparisons with programmes that took place before Local Trust in different political, fiscal, and social landscapes.

We know that when designing Big Local and establishing Local Trust, TNLCF was mindful of lessons from Fair Share Trust – that it was too short, that too much of the money promised to communities was sliced-off before it reached them, and that the organisation running the programme lacked scale and clout. The Local Trust model did not suffer from these problems because each of these lessons had been addressed. It had a longer timeframe (especially after it was extended to 15 years), and treated the £1 million per area as sacrosanct, adding significant resources on top to pay for programme costs. It was also run by an organisation with the scale and budget to be far more than a grant administrator.

Was the independent time-limited model the reason these issues were addressed?

In many ways yes. The time-limited model made it easier to commit £1 million per area upfront in the way a perpetual trust could not have done. The time-limited model also generated more investment income than either a perpetual or a TNLCF-managed fund could have done. This in turn provided even more financial power to deliver the additional support, plus policy and research activity which provided intellectual support and leadership. TNLCF could in theory have transferred £1 million upfront to each of the 150 communities, but would it also have been able to sustain support for spending an additional £120+ million over 15 years on wraparound support, policy and research? We don't know, but it is easy to imagine the challenges that would have been faced.



White City W12 Together. Photo: W12 Together Big Local

What if Big Local had been managed directly by a public body?

One programme that offers some sort of comparison across a similar political and economic cycle is Building Schools for the Future (BSF), launched in 2004 and relaunched in 2014 as the Priority Schools Building Programme (PSBP), which ran until 2024. BSF was run by Partnerships for Schools, a government agency controlled and funded by the Department for Education (DfE). It was initially created with one purpose, to deliver BSF. In 2014, it was merged with other bodies to become the Education Funding Agency.

Two aspects of this seem relevant:

- **Reduction in ambition.** BSF was an ambitious transformation programme based on improving education by building better schools. Its successor, the PSBP, was essentially a repairs backlog programme. The drop in ambition was brought about by the change in fiscal climate after the 2010 election.
- **Tendency for roles and attention to dilute.** Partnerships for Schools began with a single task – to deliver BSF – but it subsequently had additional functions added. Then, when it was merged with the Education Funding Agency, that new agency had multiple non-adjacent roles. This is usual for government agencies which frequently have their functions shuffled around.

While we cannot know how Big Local would have fared if managed by a public agency, the BSF example illustrates how difficult it is to maintain funding levels or to maintain focus on a single programme, or community of stakeholders, over several political and fiscal cycles.

5 Rewards and risks

Rewards

The Local Trust model of an independent trust with spend-out endowment can be effective when a funder or founder has specific, urgent and ambitious objectives.

This could be an objective to deliver innovation that will lead to step-change, or to deliver statutory changes that enshrine something in law or use a time-window of opportunity to set an ambitious goal. It could be an objective where consensus about urgency easily translates into a time-limited goal (and mitigates the risk of that consensus weakening over time).

The potential rewards of the model are:

- **Strong governance and independence:** The Local Trust model provided insulation from changes in TNLCF's priorities. Independence also enabled Local Trust to develop its profile as an independent national voice in support of its community development objectives, and its grantees. We also heard how the fixed closing date has enabled Local Trust to be seen as an honest broker in the policy field, because it is not trying to perpetuate its existence. This authority can be powerful. As has been said many times in the writings about trusts in the private sphere, a limited lifespan also protects against mission drift.

- **Financial scale and impact:** The Local Trust model was able to spend an additional 27% on top of its endowment due to investment income, and far more per year than if it had been a perpetual trust. It was also able to commit £1 million upfront to every Big Local area that contributed to trust and confidence and backed up the pledge that the money belonged to each community, with 'no strings'. At the same time, the programme gave each community much longer than previous programmes had, including Fair Share Trust, City Challenge, the Single Regeneration Budget, and New Deal for Communities. This enabled partnerships to be formed and plans to be developed at each community's own pace, ie patient funding.



Hackney wick award event. Photo: Wick Award

- **Operations and relationships:** As a consequence of having £67 million of the original endowment plus another £60 million of investment income to spend on area support, research and policy development, Local Trust has been able to create a supportive environment for Big Local partnerships. This includes access to peer networks and advisors and wider policy influence. This has created a wider supportive environment – for example building support for Big Local within local government networks like New Local and 3ni. Local Trust itself has also been able to experiment due to its independence and level of resources and has set an example through novel approaches to research, reporting, knowledge sharing, and advocacy. Lastly, while other trusts devote significant leadership energy to chasing new funding and reinventing themselves, Local Trust has been able to focus all of its leadership time and energy on a single set of activities with a fixed end date.

Risks

The time-limited trusts model seems *less well suited to filling gaps in infrastructure or dealing with persistent long-term needs.*

Yet, this is also part of what Big Local has been trying to address. The areas funded by Big Local did not become left behind overnight. The problems they face – financial hardship, lack of trust, and depletion of social and physical assets – are symptoms of large structural problems that took more than 15 years to develop and will take more than 15 years to solve. There is a paradox in that Big Local as a catalytic programme has stimulated action and animated communities in a way that has also highlighted the need for long-term support.

The potential risks of this model are therefore:

- **Not providing long-term societal scaffolding:** Time-limited models are less well suited to filling gaps in infrastructure or dealing with persistent, long-term needs that are symptomatic of structural problems.
- **Exposing but not addressing long-term need:** As a result of this, the model can create dependency – despite the effort to plan for closure – and leave a gap in funding available for communities that have relied on Local Trust. Local Trust has helped some communities develop skills and capability to get a fairer share of existing funding and made some in-roads to increase economic activity and enterprise. But there is a risk that the programme has also exposed a greater level of need without providing the additional resources required to meet it. It may also have missed opportunities to use its policy platform to do more around the larger structural issues and to make the case that, as a senior staff member at Local Trust put it, “decades of decline need decades of support to fix it.”
- **Re-opening decisions to close:** Since 2022, Local Trust has stuck absolutely to its pledge to close in 2027, and this has enabled it to be seen as an honest broker, with no ulterior agenda. But for other organisations following this model, there is clearly a risk that a time-limited trust might make a late decision to switch to a forever model and divert leadership attention just when beneficiaries need it most.

6

Conclusions and lessons

To what extent has the Local Trust model been a source, and enabler, of success within the Big Local programme and beyond?

To answer this, the first distinction to make is between the influence of its status as an independent trust, and its 15-year timeframe.

Remaining focused was due to its independence

Local Trust's independence has clearly been a major factor in its ability to remain focused on delivering Big Local, to advocate for community-led decision-making, and to develop deep expertise in these areas. The example we gave of Building Schools for the Future, although not a perfect analogy, demonstrates the challenges of maintaining programme focus over a period of 15 years without the same degree of independence.

What was due to its time-limited nature?

How much of what Local Trust has done has resulted from it being a time-limited spend-out funder, as opposed to its independence? We suggest three ways in which Local Trust's time-limited model did make a material difference to how it operated and its ability to deliver Big Local:

- **The ability to guarantee the £1 million to each Big Local area upfront and with no strings and to make the £1 million a sacrosanct sum.** As we have tried to show, only a time-limited trust model could have made the upfront commitment to all 150 Big Local areas. We know this was important to build trust with communities and give them confidence that this was *their* money, which they controlled, and no-one else could touch it.
- **Fifteen years to spend the money, which was not too short, but not too long either.** The challenges and frustrations of short-term public funding are well rehearsed, and the 15-year timespan of Big Local addressed this. But we also heard how Big Local areas felt the timeframe was long enough to do something significant, and also short enough to provide urgency towards the end and avoid drift. Again, this shows how a fixed 15-year timespan hit a sweet spot in relation to the pace of community-led action.

- **The huge investment in direct support for Big Local areas and wider programme of advice research and policy development.** By the time it closes down, Local Trust will have spent almost £130 million on top of the £150 million originally pledged to Big Local areas. Around half of this came from the income generated by the endowment (of which £23 million was distributed to each area to add to their original £1 million). But most of this additional money paid for an intensive programme of support – notably the Big Local ‘Reps’ and community development workers who supported each area, plus learning and knowledge sharing support and annual ‘Big Local Connects’ events that built capacity and networks. It also paid for a major programme of research and policy influence that has left a legacy of evidence and real-world policy achievements like the Community Needs Index. It is hard to envisage how this scale of additional funding would have been possible under any other model.

Wider lessons from Local Trust’s time-limited model

Looking more broadly, we also suggest three wider lessons from the Local Trust model:

- **Good endings.** There are many aspects to consider when closing down something as large as Local Trust – from supporting grantees and planning how to keep the learning accessible, to ramping up policy impact, going out with a bang, and supporting a staff team who will all leave their jobs at around the same time. Local Trust’s learning about these challenges might be some of the most useful pieces of practical learning in the short-term to be shared with its TNLCF siblings – FiMT, BCT, and the Centre for Ageing Better.
- **Timing and judgement.** As much as the Local Trust story is inspiring, it is not a clearcut example of a time-limited trust. The goals were not practical – it was about ‘how’ rather than ‘what’, and about catalytic change as much as it has been about revealing the need for societal scaffolding. It is hard to tease apart how much of the model was planned and intentional, and how much was driven by timing and context – for example TNLCF’s need to be seen getting money out the door.
- **Understanding the time-limited model.** The time-limited model is distinctive, with patterns and lessons dating back more than a century. But it took several years for Local Trust to recognise this aspect of its own design and identity, and it has only recently begun to identify with other time-limited trusts and use that perspective to guide action. If Local Trust could go back in time, would it have made different choices had Trustees and senior managers been equipped from the outset with the writings of The Atlantic Philanthropies or similar learning about time-limited trusts?



Arley and Ansley Flight Festival. Photo: Arley and Ansley Big Local

Local Trust



Shared Intelligence



www.learningfrombiglocal.org.uk